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A Response to Tequila Sovereign
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Tequila Sovereign (“a Native, progressive, forty-something, anti-racist, feminist, woman”) has recently reflected in a series of blog postings on her dissatisfaction with settler colonialism as an interpretative paradigm (“Why ‘Settler Colonialism’ Isn’t Exactly Right”, 13/03/11; “More Musings on Why ‘Settler Colonialism’ Doesn’t Work (For Me)”, 15/03/2011; “Reflections on the UCLA School of Law: Critical Race Studies Program; Race & Sovereignty Symposium”, 3/04/2011; “‘Settler’ What?”, 9/04/2011). As she engages with settler colonial studies as a consolidating field and methodology, a debate I am actively contributing to, I feel I should engage with her concerns.

Let me rehearse the most recognisable elements of her argument. She identifies a clearly discernible scholarly trend: after the publication of Patrick Wolfe’s Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology (1999), several books and articles have developed settler colonialism as an interpretative category. Sovereign contends that this debate displaces “imperialism”, “colonialism” and “nation-state” as paradigms and she is not ready to let them go (even though I am not sure whether anyone has asked her to do so). Settler colonialism is not unique (or “specific”, see below), the conceptual categories that were used until what could be defined as the “settler colonial turn” were perfectly capable, she argues, of appraising what happens when people move somewhere else and decide to stay and found a new political order. Sovereign is also of the opinion that anticolonial and anti-imperialist rhetorics are more effective in supporting the struggles for indigenous self-determination and empowerment. This is fair enough, except that no scholar of settler colonialism (that is, not a single one) has ever said that “imperialism” or “colonialism” should be considered useless concepts, or suggested the language indigenous militancy should or should not use (Sovereign indeed overstates settler colonial studies’ capacity to displace). If anything, the study of settler colonialism as a specific formation aims to expand the available conceptual toolbox, certainly not to restrict it.

Where things become somewhat unfair is when Sovereign attributes to settler colonial studies a determination to “anticipate” the (reparation-less) reconciliation of indigenous survivors and settler genocidal histories (“to settle”, she notes is inherently about reconciling differences). It’s like saying that studying Germany is necessarily about advocating German things. Sovereign should rest assured: studying settler colonialism does not amount to advocating its practice, and her intuition about the language of “settlement” only applies to settlers, not to the scholars of their activities and language. After this, things stay unfair. Sovereign claims that “the lack of legal responsibility and reparation in the nation-state’s violence is exactly what is made illegible in ‘settler colonial’ narratives” and I am not sure where this may come from (certainly not from the works on settler colonialism that she quotes). She may be right in noting that settler colonialism is not necessarily the term indigenous peoples want to use, but no scholar of settler colonial formations uncritically accepts typically settler colonial discursive refrains like the teleological expectation of a progression from wilderness to civilisation, or from contestation and struggle to reconciliation and “settledness”. The aim is to study these claims, not to reproduce them. Similarly, no one among the scholars Sovereign
mentions thinks that the study of settler colonialism should only apply to the past. The fact that some of these scholars are historians and that their work deals with the past should not be taken as an indication that they do not see the profound connections that link past and present. Indeed, most of those contributing to what has become a genuinely multidisciplinary debate do so in the awareness that the settler colonial situation retains an extraordinary capacity to impinge on the present. The very opposite of what Sovereign alleges.

It is not all in vain. If Sovereign’s characterisation of settler colonial studies turns out to be a complete misreading, her last posting constitutes only a partial mischaracterisation. She notes an “insistence on specificity”, which “produces an obvious question”: what is the referent against which this specificity is measured? This is a crucial question, and while different scholars have responded differently (even though Sovereign has missed it), this is where the settler colonial turn remains a multifaceted debate. I, for example, have argued that settler colonial formations are specific in relation to metropolitan and colonial ones: the metropolitan experience is characterised by indigenous ascendancy, the colonial one by exogenous one, and the settler colonial one by an ascendancy that is asserted simultaneously against indigenous and exogenous others (this is brutally summarising: I present this argument in more extended fashion in *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* [2010]). According to Lisa Ford, an author Sovereign explicitly targets while misapprehending her argument, a (precocious) settler sovereignty is specific vis a vis other forms of sovereignty. But in the context of a seemingly fortuitous convergence of scholarly pursuits (or is it?), there is no predetermined agreement on definitions. And so it should be. Different scholars from different backgrounds are proposing a variety of contributions, and while Sovereign laments a “profound confusion”, I would like to celebrate a genuine exchange between different approaches, agendas, idioms, and inherently provisional conclusions.

“So now we – the audience – are all really confused”, Sovereign asserts. While the coalescence of a particular body of scholarly literature and her confusion – the point she started with and her conclusion – are the only incontestable elements emerging from her postings, the issue of whether settler colonial studies is going to help indigenous peoples recovering their sovereignty is genuine. Her scepticism is a healthy reflex; but why should an awareness of the mechanics of a specifically settler colonial type of subjection (of indigenous alterities) be counterproductive? Why should the development of a language capable of representing a specific colonial formation and its operation be an obstacle to its supersession? Surely a better understanding of the contradictions and weaknesses of settler colonial discourse could aid indigenous struggles. At least, it should not hinder them.


