

Gerald Sider. *Skin for Skin: Death and Life for Inuit and Innu*. Duke University Press, 2014. 312 pp. US\$26.95 (Paperback). ISBN 978-0-8223-5536-6.

On the cover of *Skin for Skin: Death and Life for Inuit and Innu* is a depiction of the myth of Sedna, which recounts the story of a young girl tragically thrown off a fishing boat by her own father. She tries to climb back into the boat, but he cuts off her fingers. She falls into the ocean and becomes the goddess of ocean storms and creatures. Gerald Sider found this illustration on the wall of a government office lobby. He was struck by her large panicky eyes and open mouth as if in a silent scream. He asked an official what a little girl, coming to the office for help after being beaten or raped, would feel to see that picture. The response? “It is our culture” (215). Sider quotes anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs” (216). But webs are spun by spiders to catch and devour flies. Sider observes:

Whatever else culture once or now is, it is now always about inequality: transforming it, localizing it, creating it, trapping people within it, making it necessary to oppose or evade it—all this, simultaneously and sequentially, all this and much more. And meanwhile the children stand there, shivering and crying, left out in the cold. We must never make peace with that, or separate ourselves from that, whatever else we think and do about the issues such instances present us with. Children are so compelling a metaphor because they are not responsible for the world that does what it does to them. But they are only a metaphor for a much larger range of problems. (215-216)

The Inuit and Innu have one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world, as well as extremely high rates of domestic violence, alcoholism, and child substance abuse, especially gas sniffing. Several children were videoed sniffing gas, and one child was captured on camera screaming, “I want to die!” (216). Yet the problems are so much deeper beyond the lens.

Troubled by these realities, Sider felt compelled to tell the story of the extraordinary Inuit and Innu, people who were once considered to be expendable, used to serve a dominant interest, but are now treated as disposable, no longer useful unless they are gone. It is a story of darkness and death but, if you look closely enough, also of light and life. Sider explores the ways in which the historical violence of the “not-yet past” perpetuates the present. Most importantly, however, he finds hope for the future within the silence. He humanizes the unfairly dehumanized Inuit and Innu by telling their story, and in so doing demonstrates a unique understanding of not only their struggles, but also of their triumph despite great tragedy.

Sider defines historical violence as several centuries of exploitation, disease, and taking that “echo and ricochet like a steel bullet around the walls and openings of the present” (10). Historical violence began with the Hudson’s Bay Company, [one of the world’s first corporations](#), and Moravian missionaries, but continues with Canadian federal and Newfoundland provincial governments, which have left the natives with inadequate living conditions, medical care, education, and so on. Such failure led to one child having to witness sled dogs eat the corpses of her parents with nowhere to turn for help (113). The story Sider tells is largely of the haste exploitation of natives and gradual disposal of them. In one case, deaths caused by starvation stretched across two winters (200). This treatment, constant in harshness but changing in method, is a policy choice. Natives were dominated with a “rod of iron,” encompassing forced relocation,

intentional starvation, turning tribes against each other to advance the fur trade, and purposeful introduction of disease.

Throughout the course of history, the native populations were continually dispossessed and displaced. Sider describes displacement as getting high in attempt to control what is being done to you when the ground is cut out from under you—but this high often puts people on, or in, the ground (27). This history is still in the making. The natives suffer from what Sider analogizes to post-traumatic stress disorder but is more accurately captured by the phrase “continuing trauma stress” (110). Sider offers a unique appreciation for the sensitivity and limitations of understanding that we face in attempting to account for this historical violence but nonetheless attempts to illuminate the truth through partial understanding and partial coping.

Historical violence has led to present violence—an epidemic of self-destruction executed to cope but also to resist. In response to the increasing control over their lives, the natives undermined their own productive autonomy with their self-destruction in an attempt to create illusions of self-assertion. Native communities were uprooted—pushed across borders to serve the needs of Europe’s expansion. They were starved and killed off. They were promised and denied improved living conditions. They were tricked by the white people. The Innu and Inuit ultimately became “Indians” and “Eskimos”. Remedies such as rebuilding relocation communities and sending natives “back to the bush” have failed to alleviate the problem. The government fails to keep its promises.

Solutions that romanticize tradition fail to account for the struggle to survive against modernity. Traditional society—more appropriately, impoverished society—is continuously reborn. The natives ultimately reproduced and transformed the violence imposed upon them by becoming part of their own struggle. Natives once died premature deaths from imposed disasters, and they now die from self-imposed disasters. They react to the uncertainty of tomorrow by asserting themselves today. Substance abuse, on one hand supports social relations as a collective expression of autonomy, and on the other hand, destroys social relationships through the consequences. Today, Sider notes, the youth deal with the idea of tomorrow by taking their own lives, potentially with the hope that their struggles will be noticed. Nevertheless, the unity of the natives fuels their resilience. The deep social relations among the native communities have facilitated survival even in the face of many deaths. Every individual has a role in the community, whether it be hunting, teaching, or homemaking. Even in silence, unity can be found. Together they rise above the inequality imposed by “culture.”

The major takeaway from this book is that the people treated as disposable in fact have great worth. They have overcome a violent history. They still face violence, but they will overcome and, thankfully, they can find strength and resilience in their social relations. If there is anything that I learned throughout my time studying American Indian Literature during my undergraduate education, it is the redeeming power of resilience for native communities that have endured and continue to suffer from various forms of oppression. I had the privilege of reading authors such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Tomson Highway, Leanne Howe, N. Scott Momaday, and D’Arcy McNickle, among others. It was a pleasant surprise to find myself reading this book at Vanderbilt University Law School for my Crossing Borders in Law and Literature course, which focuses on immigration law. I have realized the common hardships among all displaced people, the importance of keeping hope alive, and the value of telling the stories of marginalized people that are all too often silenced within the historical archive.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of native populations, how they continue to be marginalized today, and most importantly, how they continue to survive.

Kayli Smendec, book review, Gerald Sider, *Skin for Skin*. *AmeriQuests* 14.1 (2017)

Sider believes that the complexity of this ongoing struggle and viewing it from an outsider's perspective only allows for a partial understanding. But as he shows through his writing, even a partial understanding can be incredibly empowering.

Return to the cover of the book. Sider acknowledges, that isn't how the Inuit tell the story. According to the Greenland version, Sedna turns into a bird and flies away.

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