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Review of *A Separate Country: Postcoloniality and American Indian Nations* by Élizabeth Cook-Lynn

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Nobody cares about American Indian studies more than Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and her latest book makes that clear. She calls for stronger departments and a dedicated methodology, and bemoans mere interdisciplinary programs, which force scholars to produce research that caters to traditional Western disciplines and promotes what she considers unsuitable intellectual frameworks. In particular, she decries postcolonial theory, favoring decolonization
theory instead and the use of Indigeneity as a category of analysis. From that starting point, the author covers a range of important topics. A high point is the chapter discussing non-Indians who fraudulently assume Indian identity. Her overarching critique of American colonialism is also welcome, though far more common in academia than she seems to think. And that points to a larger problem.

From a scholarly standpoint, A Separate Nation is often vague and thin. When attempting to critique disciplines beyond her own, Cook-Lynn displays little knowledge of academic debates and confuses modern scholarly discourse with popular culture sentiments. A paucity of citations generally undermines the book's persuasiveness, and the text is burdened with factual errors, interpretive missteps, and unsubstantiated claims. In one glaring example, she offers no evidence for her sweeping assertion that, compared to monogamy, sororal polygyny reduces violence against women. More generally, the prose is inhibited by an overbearing and rigid tone, suggesting that no one other than Cook-Lynn is allowed to be right.

Do Indigeneity and decolonization theory suit American Indian studies better than postcolonialism, or could they better complement each other? These are vital questions, which many scholars are currently addressing. A Separate Country fails to provide any informed consideration of them. Instead, Cook-Lynn patronizingly dismisses postcolonialism as little more than wishful thinking and jargonistic gobbledygook. When applied to American Indian nations, she claims, postcolonialism is “misguided” and “dangerous” (xiii), “suspect” (31), an “outrageous fraud” (xvi), “indefensible” (xvii), “meaningless” (6), a “masking of justice” (7), a “fantasy” (8), and its supporters “massively confused” (xiii).

Curiously, Cook-Lynn never seriously discusses postcolonial theory, and her critique rarely gets beyond the litany of complaints. Aside from a few passing references to Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, no important postcolonial theorists are cited or engaged. And major American Indian studies scholars who have employed postcolonialism, such as Glen Coulthard and Kevin Bruyneel, are entirely absent. In fact, Cook-Lynn cites herself more than she does the well-established postcolonial literature she seeks to overturn. Indeed, after reading A Separate Country, one is left to wonder whether Cook-Lynn actually understands postcolonial theory. Perhaps most devastating, the author seems to labor under the delusion that the confusingly named postcolonialism is a literal, temporal term that means colonialism has ended or that, in her own words, it “can safely be placed in the past.” That is completely wrong. In fact, postcolonialism does much the opposite, attempting to free colonial studies from the “airless container of history,” as Gayan Prakash once put it. Thus, her analysis is, at best, jarringly misguided. And that her understanding of indigeneity and decolonization actually overlap substantially with real postcolonial theory, as opposed to her simplistic version of it, is the book’s final, head-slapping irony.

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