
Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Stevenson, Lisa, *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, 251 pages.

*Reviewer: Elizabeth Cassell
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In *Life Beside Itself*, Lisa Stevenson raises a question that all those working in the caring professions should ask themselves: What do my standards of care mean for the person who I am treating? Drawing on historical records and her own ethnographic work with Inuit people living in Nunavut, Stevenson examines the effects of Canadian approaches to two epidemics: the tuberculosis epidemic that afflicted many Inuit communities from the 1940s to the 1960s and the epidemic of suicide, which seemed to take its place and still persists today. Drawing on material from all over the world, she examines care as a product of colonialism – measuring success by the prevention of death, regardless of the effects of such efforts on the lives of the people concerned.

By examining the gap of understanding between how the dead are situated in the minds of the Indigenous peoples in Iqaluit and Igloolik as well as in other Arctic communities and the way in which deaths are perceived and recorded by workers for the Canadian state, Stevenson demonstrates how Inuit mistrust of the Canadian provision of health and welfare arises. When the hospital boat arrived in port, many Inuit would hide until its departure lest they were found to have tuberculosis and taken aboard and then south to the sanatorium, which in this case was in Hamilton, Ontario. If the Inuit survived their treatment, often they could not be sent home because no record had been kept of their next of kin and the village to which they belonged. In the end, patients were given a tag with an identification number, another manifestation of the impersonal nature of the treatment they received.

Lisa Stevenson tells us that her book suggests “a mode of anthropological listening that makes way for hesitation” (2). Within this space, the Inuit need to know much more than that their loved ones have died; they need to hear their names spoken. The names of the dead live on in the mouths of the living. The presence of a raven who stays around the cabin suggests that a beloved uncle, recently deceased, is “still there.” Babies are not only named after someone recently departed – they take on that person’s role so that when a grandfather

dies, the baby receives the respect and the love that that person had in his own lifetime – the child becomes parent to its own parent. Thus, when the dead live on among the living in these ways, the saving of life has less meaning. The very impulse to save lives, she tells us, effaces the identity of the patient. The bio-political approach of the state cares for a population rather than for individuals. This approach has the continuing psychological impact of colonialism and results in the anger expressed by the Inuit over state care.

The writer maintains that the anonymous care provided – in that all individuals must be treated alike – is a murderous form of care and that the Canadian North has been a laboratory for a massive social experiment, an experiment in assimilation. Inuit have endured longer stays in southern hospitals long after modern medicine made this unnecessary so that they could be taught to live in the Canadian way. Stevenson believes that Inuit death, especially suicide, is seen by Canadians as an indicator of the failure of the system. She describes the state’s system of impersonal care as “soul blindness.”

Turning to the suicides of so many young Inuit, Stevenson points out, that in northern Indigenous communities, suicide is normal. There is no one who has not felt suicidal, attempted suicide, or knows someone who has killed themselves. Again, she suggests that suicide help lines and caregivers also offer something that is impersonal and that their work is suicide prevention, rather than trying to listen and to understand the wish to die of the person at the other end of the line.

Stevenson examines the dreams of the living where the dead appear and can offer wisdom or warning. While they may be dead in real life, they live on in dreams. There are so many ways in which life and death are blurred in the minds of the Inuit that the mere attempt to save a life must be accompanied with the understanding on the part of the caregiver of what that life means.

Life Beside Itself advocates that carers rethink their humanitarian efforts. At no time does Stevenson suggest that the people on the front line of care work in the North are insincere in their considerable commitment. What she does suggest is that their bio-political approach should be replaced with a greater understanding of individual needs and that the saving of life itself may not be the best solution for the patient and the surrounding community. Perhaps more important, death has many more dimensions than those working in Canada’s health and welfare industries are prepared to consider or even admit.

As well as giving a very necessary perspective on how these services are perceived by the Indigenous peoples the book goes a long way toward explaining the frustration of so many care workers that their efforts are unrecognised and mistrusted by those they perceive to be in their charge. Most important, it provides a sound solution to the need to increase mutual understanding in this field. This gap in understanding, which Lisa Stevenson so ably describes, is familiar to many who have conducted their fieldwork in the North. She writes with great sensitivity on a topic that many have shied away from since it is too controversial or too difficult to pin down. She uses her material, drawn both from her own interviews and from archival recordings in such a way that the thoughts of those who have suffered greatly from the insensitivity of those whose work is bound by bureaucracy can finally be heard. The book has a freshness and vitality as well as an excellent grounding in academic rigour. It is an invaluable contribution to the literature.

Sider, Gerald M., *Skin for Skin: Death and Life for Inuit and Innu*, London: Duke University Press, 2014, 312 pages.

*Reviewer: Carol Brown-Leonardi
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This book presents an insightful examination of the colonialism experienced by the Inuit and Innu and the historical challenges presented in death and life on the coast and in the Subarctic interior of Canada. The consequences of colonisation encapsulated in this book are significant as they are relevant to many other Indigenous groups and diasporas around the world. Anthropologist Gerald M. Sider's refreshing book, *Skin for Skin: Death and Life for Inuit and Innu*, about the Innu and Inuit peoples of Labrador, Canada, presents a scholarly examination of the relationships between the colonised and the colonisers.

Sider unlocks this history to facilitate an understanding of the foundations that lie at the heart of the contemporary problems, and a re-evaluation, of Innu and Inuit suffering. This book reflects on the struggles of Inuit and Innu people under British and Canadian rule. Upon reading this book, I felt exposed to an evocative account of Innu and Inuit resilience in adverse circumstances. This work is particularly potent as Sider's (a non-Indigenous author) method of study is to understand and critique the process of colonisation, not through the narratives of Indigenous peoples but, rather, through his own awareness of the surroundings, without using the standard anthropological methods of observation during his visits to numerous Indigenous villages.

The construction of Indigenous culture and rituals can be located in biographies and travellers' diaries. Books written about Inuit and Innu peoples by authors such as Emile Petitot (1883), George Henriksen (2009), and Carol Brice-Bennett (1991) describe various aspects of Inuit life, ranging from oral narratives to the topography of the land. Sider's unique research approach, which is beyond the conventional structure

of the anthropological discipline, creates a powerful and intense description of the oppressive domination of Indigenous peoples by the state and the religious elite (mainly the Moravian missionaries). His academic essay-writing style offers sobering and insightful perspectives on the power over the Inuit and Innu from Nain, Davis Island, Goosebay, Regolets, Hopedale, Sheshatshiu, and Natuashish, which enables the reader to grasp an understanding of the driving forces for British and Canadian domination and how the consequences of this kind of power impacts on Indigenous communities in contemporary society. The book conveys the uncomfortable social hardships of Indigenous peoples through the spread of diseases, violence, the dispossession of land, and the oppression of Indigenous culture as a result of strict government, political, and economic policies. It captures the raw emotions involved in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, as well as the moral principles of the British and Canadian authority in the occupation of land and the acquisition of resources.

The book shows that Innu and Inuit domination and abuse by Europeans started at contact several hundred years ago and that there is fluidity in the Indigenous approach to surviving chaos and hardship, which transforms over time. Sider's study exposes the use of silence and observation by Indigenous individuals. He writes: "This silence runs much deeper than two men sitting together and not saying anything. It is framed, in the material context of provisioning their lives ... and the importance of social relations shaped and reshaped by not saying anything or nothing much. This silence is how people stay together as a whole and simultaneously separate from each other with a minimum of hurt feelings" (148). Sider describes how silence appears as a subtle, important action among the Indigenous peoples and is an instrument that shapes their emotions and has facilitated the continuation of their knowledge and traditions. Colin Samson (2003) describes the Innu as being squeezed by state and capital, so that they were trapped between an unliveable yesterday and a destructive tomorrow. The book tells of the Indigenous peoples and their hardships, but their voices are never really heard until the very end. The popular narrative of the porcupine hunter articulates the transformation of Indigenous lives with the introduction of the fur trade system, which depleted renewable resources and destroyed Indigenous communities during the period of starvation and disease.

At the centre of the fur trade system and the modern-day land claims policy is the seizure of land and resources. Sider and the literature of others demonstrate that at the heart of many Indigenous communities is their connection with the land, which is critical for their independence of the colonisers. Sider uniquely uncovers the Indigenous peoples' tenacity to survive through the almost invisible transference of traditional knowledge and skills in adverse and uncomfortable living conditions. Sider's account of the Innu and Inuit legacy of suffering is presented in the violence, alcoholism, high suicide rate, drugs, and solvent abuse in and among modern Inuit and Innu communities. The fur trade practised by the British and the Moravian missionaries brought extreme suffering and debt and little benefit to the Indigenous peoples. Similarly, the negotiation of territorial lands through the land claims system elevated Canadian state interests and created a generation of "landless" Indigenous peoples.