

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

American Indians and the American Dream: Policies, Place, and Property in Minnesota

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8c47z798>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 47(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Kugel, Rebecca

Publication Date

2024-07-10

DOI

10.17953/A3.24878

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS



American Indians and the American Dream: Policies, Place, and Property in Minnesota. By Kasey R. Keeler. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 246 pages. \$25.00 paper.

This wide-ranging, innovative book brings together two fields of study not often put in dialogue with each other: American federal Indian policy and federal housing policy. Kasey R. Keeler argues that the chronic housing crisis faced by Native Americans, especially their inability to purchase homes in off-reservation localities, cannot be understood apart from settler colonialism's generalized push to eradicate Native peoples. But the devil being, as ever, in the details, the mechanisms by which Native dispossession occurred in the past and continues in the present are to be found in obscure places and in the intersection of acts of state policymaking that we don't often think of as having any relationship to each other. Identifying linkages between these two disparate sets of federal policies, Keeler clarifies how successive policy decisions continue to keep Native peoples shut out of one of the basic mechanisms by which Americans obtain economic security and build intergenerational wealth, namely home-ownership. Alongside her analysis of national policymaking, Keeler also explores the agency of Native peoples who began moving to the expanding cities and suburbs of southern Minnesota as early as the late nineteenth century, a phenomenon as real as it was largely unrecognized by policymakers and the general American public.

The book opens by discussing the germinal act of land appropriation and Native expulsion in Minnesota, the American seizure of the Dakota people's lands in retaliation for the Dakota War of 1862. Blaming Dakotas for the violence, Americans forced them to cede their lands in disadvantageous treaties and remove from the state. Only weeks earlier, Congress had passed the Homestead Act of 1862, ironically revealing the connection between Native peoples' forced removals from their lands and the conversion of those lands into property for purchase by non- Native settler-colonists. The Homestead Act made millions of acres of formerly Indigenous land available to settlers at low cost and few requirements. Homesteaders had to live on their land for a short number of years, generally five, and they had to farm the land and build a home. They also had to be American citizens. Native peoples were not American citizens when the Homestead Act was passed, but its citizenship provision foreshadowed the contradictory legal statuses Native people would inhabit in subsequent decades when they sought to purchase land and homes. The contested nature of American citizenship for Native persons is a recurring theme of this work, demonstrating how a fundamental American ambiguity about Native peoples' relationship to land found expression across the decades.

Contradictions and confusion would continue even after the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 was passed by Congress. Native citizenship in the era when the United States

described Native nations as “wards of the government” and claimed a settler-colonial authority over them was at best conditional and riddled with unstated exceptions. Since voting rights had been turned over to the states with the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896, most states with large Native populations, including Minnesota, denied Native people the right to vote once they were granted citizenship, blocking their access to the political system and rendering them powerless to contest their disenfranchisement. This settler paternalism also redefined the Indian Citizenship Act to serve as a form of surveillance and oversight of those Native individuals deemed eligible, by federal officials rather than tribal citizens, for enrollment in reservation-based tribes. This had the further effect of keeping federal attention focused on reservations as the places where Native people lived. There is great irony in this, since the population of Native individuals and families moving from reservations to the cities and suburbs of southern Minnesota commenced in earnest in the years following World War I. Keeler estimates “hundreds if not thousands” (64) of Native people moved to urban areas in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. Her efforts to give definition and visibility to these Native people is one of the book’s great strengths. Through painstaking analysis of censuses, marriage and death certificates, employment and other records, she sketches portraits of suburban Native families and individuals. Certainly many struggled, but many also thrived. Some, seemingly against all odds, managed to buy or build homes of their own. Others sought the suburbs to help balance the need for steady wages with ongoing participation in larger reservation-based families. Just as there was no one Native experience of city living, there would be no single Native experience of life in the suburbs.

Even as the federal government enacted policies providing greater economic security for the American populace, beginning with the New Deal of the 1930s, Native peoples continued to be viewed as a separate category of citizens. Separate legislation, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, attempted to reestablish the original government-to-government relationship between Native peoples and the United States, but congressional opposition stripped tribes of some of their most important powers of self-governance while also mandating continued Bureau of Indian Affairs oversight of reservation lands. Native peoples thus obtained only limited self-government. This imperfect understanding of where Native peoples lived and where tribal nations were empowered to provide for their citizens’ housing and other social service needs would continue to inform federal government policies. The ambiguity present in the Indian Reorganization Act has given it considerable flexibility, enabling its reinterpretation in the reactionary Termination Era (1950s–1960s) as supporting the end of the government-to-government relationship and the dissolution of reservations. In the Red Power decades (1970s–1980s), it was reimagined as facilitating a new federal policy of self-determination and, ultimately, a reacknowledgment of tribal sovereignty.

Over the last fifty years, the renewed recognition of tribal sovereignty has guided relations between tribal nations and the United States. While old perceptions have persisted (despite their eligibility for GI loans after World War II, Native veterans were told to apply to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for funding assistance), new understandings of what a government-to-government relationship entails have also emerged.

Efforts to address the lack of Native homeownership have also seen attention as a result. In the 1990s, the Department of Housing and Urban Development set aside funds for increasing homeownership among Native peoples, creating the Section 184 Indian Home Loan Guarantee Program (IHLGP). Yet it would not be until 2004 that the IHLGP expanded to include off-reservation housing, coinciding, interestingly, with the increased movement of Native people into suburban areas, where one-quarter of Native people in Minnesota lived by 2000. Keeler considers this population shift an unfinished story, and rightly so. Native movement to cities, and more recently to suburbs, has so often happened because of Native volition, and often in tacit opposition to federal policies, that it remains very much an ongoing, Native-centered narrative.

Rebecca Kugel

University of California, Riverside