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Author

Goeman, Mishuna

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Patrick Wolfe (February 18, 2016)

Mishuana Goeman

University of California, Los Angeles

Patrick Wolfe's sudden passing in the winter of 2016 stunned us all in Native American and Indigenous studies. I like to think of him taking his journey with other greats who also passed around that time, particularly David Bowie and Glenn Frey of the Eagles. He is singing, dancing, and educating them about the structures of settler colonialism, whether it is telling Bowie about how settler colonialism structures modern sexuality or Frey how American exceptionalism and ideas of freedom are founded on dispossession.¹ It suits his intellectual style. That is, Patrick was able to engage with a breadth of knowledge and across multiple disciplines and various groups of people, and his conversations always left a profound impact.

Before Patrick's passing, another scholar asked me why so many take up Patrick Wolfe's concept of settler colonialism when other texts and similar concepts had preceded his important book *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*.² At the time, my answer was based on the readability of his article and the geographic breadth of his work, from Australia to New Zealand to the United States to Palestine and Canada.³ It was based on his clear articulation that colonialism is "a structure not an event," reliant upon various processes of eliminating Native peoples in the name of capitalism. Perhaps it was also for his willingness to engage the messy arena of labor and race in relation to land dispossession.⁴ Or how useful his distinction between genocide and elimination was for moving the conversation out of a discussion of numbers and temporal containments, acknowledging the ongoing fight of everyday Indigenous struggles. Patrick Wolfe was a key scholar in conceiving of a settler-colonial analytic in relation to Indigenous thinking and scholarship that exists far longer than settler nations. He critically engaged our field in a respectful and nuanced manner, far beyond many scholars of his settler stature that perceive Indians/Natives/Indigenous as objects of study. His work became a place to engage Indigenous studies concerns in relation to settler colonial studies that at times leaves out Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, as well as our own political framings. Understanding the central focus of land and relationality, he attempted to bridge theories on colonialism that are about destruction and appropriation of land. But it was more than these significant theoretical interventions into multiple fields that made Patrick's passing so devastating.⁵

You see, Patrick was more than just a scholar for many of us. He had that rare quality to banter and engage in ways that are at once deeply intellectual and irreverently witty. Education scholar Sandy Grande speaks fondly of this, “I will always remember Patrick not just for being a champion for the field and our work but also for the odd and beautiful relationship he had with my mom. It spoke to how deeply he really ‘got us.’ Beyond the frames of settler colonialism, he remained committed to the continuation of the Native. Our land, our communities, our elders. Forever.” Political Scientist Kevin Bruyneel speaks to Patrick’s mentoring skills fondly: “Patrick Wolfe was a true original. He was a creative and politically engaged thinker who shaped the field of settler colonial studies, and he was unceasingly supportive of younger scholars in the field. You didn’t have to agree with him, but you made a mistake if you didn’t dance or drink with him! Rest in power, Patrick, your legacy lives on in and with all of us.” Audra Simpson remembers him as an historian of not only the comparative and global project of settler colonialism, but also of anthropology itself, and its relationship to politics. She recalls his sharp and generous mind: “When he came to give a talk at Columbia he *volunteered* to speak to my graduate seminar in settler colonial studies; what senior scholar *volunteers* to do this?” The students from that seminar, who are now professors themselves, not only remember this with fondness, but have identified this as a transformative moment for them, and for Simpson as well. What we saw there was the spirit of intellectual generosity, something that often gets lost in the shuffle and endless demands of academic life.

Patrick always kept on dancing until the end, with two new books released around the same time as his passing.⁶ He encouraged us all to do the same, whether that dance was one of friendship, of facing critical challenges, of thinking through multiple disciplines, or, most importantly, getting down to the business of making life livable for all and full of stardust. Have a peaceful journey, Patrick Wolfe. You will be missed.

NOTES

This tribute was also published in *Amerasia Journal* 42 no.1 (Spring 2016), a special issue on “Carceral States.”

1. Patrick, of course, would tell Bowie about Mark Rifkin’s groundbreaking work, *When Did Indians Become Straight?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Yet he would also make sure to direct him to Native and Indigenous Voices as well, such as the collection Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, Lisa Tatonetti, eds., *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two Spirit Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For Frey, he would go classic and begin with Vine Deloria’s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969).

2. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassel, 1999).

3. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387–409.

4. Patrick Wolfe, “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race,” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 866–905.

5. Cico3 has collected Patrick’s work here as tribute to this breadth of scholarship: <https://cico3.com/2016/02/19/rise-in-power-patrick-wolfe/>.

6. Patrick Wolfe, *The Settler Complex: Recuperating Binarism in Colonial Studies* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center/University of California, 2016), an edited volume; and his monograph *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of History* (London: Verso, 2016), on the question of race and comparative settler colonialism.