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Settler Cannabis by Kaitlyn Reed

Danielle Lopez
University of New Mexico School of Law (Student)

BOOK REVIEW

Settler Cannabis by Kaitlyn Reed (University of Washington Press, 380 Pages; 2023)

Settler Cannabis examines a wide range of culturally significant subjects relevant to the historical and present-day landscape of natural resources in the United States: settler colonialism, genocide, continued violence, natural "resource rushing,"[1] as well as the environmental and cultural impacts of excessive resource extraction. Kaitlyn Reed describes the historical events leading up to the modern-day "green rush" and its impacts on Indigenous peoples through a unique and passionate lens—one shaped by her lived experiences as a member of the Yurok Tribe in Northern California. Although the book focuses on the experiences of Native Americans in California, it contains insight that will enrich and inform any reader interested in natural resources.

Settler Cannabis opens with a description of the overlooked historical context of settler colonialism and the genocide and violence perpetuated towards Native Americans. Reed explains how the violence continues today with each rush to extract natural resources. Throughout the book, she weaves together several lines of reasoning that lead back to one powerful theme: environmental healing and justice cannot be reached until lands are returned to the Indigenous people from whom they were stolen.

The author compellingly articulates how Indigenous people and their lands have suffered at the hands of colonialism. Generational indoctrination into the celebration and belief in the United States' "manifest destiny" to acquire lands that belonged to Native Americans for time immemorial result in what Reed categorizes as lost history. The author depicts profitability as the settler's highest purpose for obtaining lands once belonging to Indigenous peoples. In contrast to her depiction of early settlers' quest for profit, Reed illustrates the deep, spiritual ties and belief in a system of reciprocity and sustainability that Indigenous communities have with their lands. In stark contrast to normative American thought, she argues the concept of "natural resources" is unnatural and harmful, as the land does not exist solely to provide for humans. As portrayed by Reed, settlers believed that both the land and Indigenous people needed development, which would be fueled by the future exploitation of resources and destruction of natural landscapes. Fortunately, most Native traditions and knowledge of the land passed down through generations. Still, their voices are often unheard or overlooked in discussions surrounding environmental preservation. Reed's historical background is crucial because it helps the reader understand that although resource rushing is detrimental to Indigenous lands, extraction is also harmful to the Indigenous way of life.

Readers quickly realize the ugly truths of large-scale resource extraction. The first natural resource rush began in 1848 with gold–before California became a state. Although the gold rush was mostly extractive, Reed depicts it as a "process of

1. "Resource rushing, guided by the rush mentality, is a violet settler-colonial pattern of resource extraction that has been repeatedly played out." KAITLYN REED, SETTLER CANNABIS *xiv* (2023).

creating a settler home that was already home to Indigenous peoples."[2] Legal mechanisms were put in place to help settlers acquire rights to the land and water as well as forced labor from Indigenous peoples. Readers will shudder at the recollection of horror stories in which settlers got away with murder to dispossess Indigenous lands. Reed also illuminates the forgotten treaties between the U.S. Congress and Native Americans at the peak of the gold rush. After treaty negotiations, the U.S. suddenly and unexpectedly backed out of prior agreements and left thousands of Indigenous people vulnerable to ongoing violence and denial of their property rights. The continuous reminder of American history invites the audience to reject any remaining notions that the United States saved Native Americans when it dispossessed and rapidly changed their land.

Reed repeatedly emphasizes that rushes to extract natural resources are not—and never will be—sustainable. Reed depicts two phases of resource extraction: (1) exploitation at rapid rates and (2) management to maintain a continuous stream of supplies. After California was stripped of all its gold, settlers found a way to capitalize on the state's abundant forests in the 1850s. The timber rush increased forest fires and destroyed natural habitats and food sources. It did not take long for the inevitable collapse of the timber industry in the early 1900s. Soon after, the government began selling parcels of forest land at inexpensive rates, kickstarting yet "another wave of settler-colonial dispossession during the back-to-the-land movement and ultimately birthed the green rush."[3] Reed's detailed recitation of different resource rushing tragedies is more than just a history lesson. She points out a pattern that started in the 1800's is still prevalent today.

The back-to-the-land movement began in the 1960s and 1970s, was comprised mainly of white Americans wanting to escape their regular lives. Deemed "hippies," these people moved to Indigenous territories to begin communal lifestyles, thus appropriating sacred Indigenous practices. Meanwhile, Indigenous children were sent to abusive, culture cleansing boarding schools across North America. The many ways in which hippies absorbed Indigenous life while Indigenous people were forbidden from engaging in their own ancestral practices exemplify an appalling deprivation far beyond stolen land. Due to their reliance on currency to survive, they began illegally cultivating cannabis.

Many years later, California stands as the largest producer of cannabis in the country. However, Indigenous people in California are unable to benefit from the marijuana boom as legal native operations have often been the targets of federal raids and seizures. Those uninterested in the cannabis market risk their lives to protect their sacred lands from this "weed greed."[4]

Although cannabis is legalized in California, strict regulations motivate unscrupulous growers to seek economic advantage in the illicit unregulated market. Illegal grow operations, many on Native American reservations, often source needed water from surrounding rivers and streams. Moreover, growing marijuana has wreaked havoc on fish populations sacred to Indigenous ways of life. "[D]ammed Rivers and water diversions, habitat destructions, and fish kills" along the Klamath

2. *Id.* at 41.

3. *Id.* at 66.

4. Similar to the gold rush, people are rushing to extract weed to make their fortune. *Id.* at 122.

River have impacted more than the environment, as the "Yurok's relationship with salmon is established in [their] creation story."[5] Reed makes a strong, impactful statement: "to settlers, Salmon is *a* thing, but to Indigenous peoples in this region, Salmon is *everything*."[6] Readers grow to understand that protecting fish is a way of protecting their cultural roots and traditions.

Along with the heavy strain on already scarce water resources, illegal marijuana growing destroys our planet through chemical pollution, reduction of soil quality, and abandonment of cultivation equipment and infrastructure in the wilderness. Research, still in its infancy stages, suggests that large scale legal cannabis growth is also detrimental to the environment. As several states and many people across the United States celebrate the legalization of cannabis, including those who recognize the ability to capitalize off the plant, Native people remain concerned. Ultimately, Reed characterizes the "green rush" as a "continuation of extractive environmental relationships that disproportionately benefit settler populations at the expense of Native American stewardship, health, and culture."[7]

Reed's writing in *Settler Cannabis* is thoughtful, and eye opening. Still, marijuana activists may highlight that she does little to acknowledge the medicinal properties of cannabis. Additionally, Reed does not speak to the history of Indigenous uses of cannabis. While Reed mentions that one particular tribe does not consider the plant sacred, she does not clarify whether this is the outlook of all Indigenous peoples. The book may benefit from a better overall explanation of how various tribes around North America view the topic.

Settler Cannabis educates an audience who may have chosen to read simply because they are interested in learning more about cannabis and the industry. A reader who chose this book for the aforementioned reason is sure to be delightfully surprised and educated. Although the book does not focus on the history or future of cannabis policy, Reed examines underexplored cultural underpinnings behind the patterns and practices of the green rush today. Certainly, learning about settler colonialism through the lens of the cannabis industry is a far greater gift than learning about cannabis alone.

Danielle Lopez
JD Candidate, Class of 2025
University of New Mexico School of Law

5. *Id.* at 77, 97.
6. *Id.* at 90.
7. *Id.* at 124.