
Reviewed by Brenden W. Rensink (Brigham Young University)

Published on H-Diplo (November, 2019)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

On May 10, 2019, US federal officials, Utah state officials, local dignitaries, representatives from business and commerce, leaders from regional Native American nations, descendants of Chinese railroad workers, and tens of thousands of the interested public gathered at Promontory Point, Utah, to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the transcontinental railroad’s completion. Apart from anniversary interest, the transcontinental railroad has been a popular topic for historians and the public for generations. While much has been hagiographic in nature, many recent works have interrogated the enterprise and presented its history more critically. Richard White’s *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (2012) investigates the oft-messy and corrupt economic and political worlds of the railroads. Gordon Chang and Shelley Fishkin’s recent anthology, *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad* (2019), gathered materials from across the globe to document the lives of Chinese rail workers.[1] Just this fall, the Union Pacific Railroad Museum hosted a multiday symposium, “Railroads in Native America: Reflections on the 150th Anniversary of the Transcontinental Construction,” featuring cutting-edge and unflinching academic research on the railroad’s impact on Native peoples across the continent.[2] There is significant scholarly interest in moving beyond celebratory mythologies and picking apart the transcontinental enterprise and its history in critical fashion. Manu Karuka’s *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* fits into this movement but challenges existing scholarship and fields of study in profound ways. He transforms what, on its surface, appears to be a national American story into one of international, imperialist, and colonial history by reading contingency against assumed outcomes; decentering national creation myths; and foregrounding alternative Indigenous, Chinese, and other voices. In this, Karuka offers a case study for scholars of diplomatic history or international relations to turn inward to *national* histories they might otherwise overlook and consider new ways of bringing their expertise to seemingly domestic stories.

Karuka reads transcontinental railroad history through the lens of American capitalist development and grounds it explicitly in racial and gendered American projects of conquest and exploitation. *Empire’s Tracks* recasts American economic development as imperialist in nature. Here, national creation myths, Manifest Destiny, and American territorial identity are undercut by foreign bodies used by a military-industrial complex to build them and existing Indigenous sovereignties that challenge(d) them. The sovereign Native nations with which the United States negotiated and contended and the foreign labor with which it built a continental empire are too often swept aside by nationally minded historical memories. In Karuka’s reconstruction, the history of railroad construction that might otherwise appear *national* in context and scope becomes international and transnational, imperialist and colonial.

Karuka centers his analysis around themes of continental imperialism, “countersovereignty,” and modes of relationship. First, he asserts that the “continental” United States should be viewed as colonized territory, not
a manifestly destined national geography with inherent authority or authenticity of its own. Second, American claims to land and belonging are in opposition to existing Indigenous sovereignties, non-Anglo communities, the natural environment, and diplomacies with competing empires. At every step, these countersovereignties belied what America often cast as a story of triumphal and inevitable continental expansion. Third, the ways capitalism evolved in relation to existing and incipient economies complicates understanding of the transcontinental enterprise. More profound than these three thematic elements is Karuka’s stated goal to decenter the story of two railroads racing toward one another at Promontory Point. Instead, he emphasizes the contin-ental enterprise. More profound than these three thematic elements is Karuka’s stated goal to decenter the story of two railroads racing toward one another at Promontory Point. Instead, he emphasizes the contin-

Empire’s Tracks is organized into nine chapters, a preface, and epilogue. In chapter 1, “The Prose of Countersovereignty,” Karuka presents the problem of how US archives and historiography have normalized colonialism. To write against the grain of archive and historiography, with their “fossilized pretensions to truth grounded in colonial authority,” Karuka introduces Native voices and interactions with Chinese laborers that challenged American expansion and development (p. 19). These complicate the standard narrative of railroad construction. Privileging Native and Chinese perspectives complicates the standard narrative of railroad construction, and in the process, the familiar American narrative becomes “peripheral” in its own story (p. 12).

Chapter 2, “Modes of Relationship,” uses Native writings of Ella Deloria, Sarah Winnemucca, and Winona LaDuke to explore political economies as the production of relationships rather than just capital. Deloria’s writings exemplify how capitalist development affected Dakota modes of social, cultural, and economic relationships. Colonialism destroyed human relationships as it built others. Through Winnemucca, Karuka explores how colonialism transformed Paiute worlds from “abundance to scarcity” (p. 28). As colonial development was predicated on the breaking of Paiute land, bodies, and relationships, decolonization would require their restoration. Through LaDuke, Karuka considers the linkages of colonial imperialism, environmental exploitation, and violent rupturing of Native relationships to land and resources.

Chapter 3, “Railroad Colonialism,” surveys the international and transnational economic context of the North American story. Linking to industrialized colonial rail projects in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Karuka offers a glimpse of the global relationships between railroad development, warfare, the colonization and subjugation of Indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of natural resources. Together, these three chapters establish the anti-imperialist and decolonizing frameworks that undergird the entirety of Empire’s Tracks.

Chapters 4-7 feature Lakota, Chinese, Pawnee, and Cheyenne voices and experiences, respectively. The mid-nineteenth-century contest between the expanding United States and Lakota over the northern Great Plains may be familiar to many. Discussing their lands, environmental relationships, and treaty making with the United States as it cast a transcontinental gaze across their lands, however, Karuka foregrounds Lakota perspectives. Shifting away from the American view that Lakotas were surrendering rights and lands, Karuka displays the inverse Lakota view that they had defeated the United States and were simply making peace. This is a simple but powerful example of Karuka’s reading against the grain of inherited triumphal colonial narratives.

The preponderant reliance on Chinese labor has become a staple of the transcontinental historic narratives, but Karuka’s reframing introduces the broader labor worlds existing in California and the Pacific that the US inherited, relied on, and altered. Linking this with efforts of racial control and eventual conflict between the Chinese and other labor forces, Karuka reveals how American capitalist development readily accepted the work of foreign bodies but proved resistant to accepting their owners’ cultural, social, or independent economic presence.

Through Pawnee experience, Karuka traces how the transcontinental project altered and destroyed existing Pawnee lifeways, introduced disease, and restricted physical movement and economic activity, while simultaneously depending on their existing agricultural and economic traditions, exploiting their labor, and relying on their protection and geographic knowledge. Against this, he notes twenty-first-century Pawnee reclaiming of agricultural traditions as pointing to a “decolonized future” (p. 125). From Cheyenne experiences, Karuka shows how military infrastructure and warfare were imposed on Cheyenne lands to support railroad and mining development. The military-industrial complex Cheyenne contended with is a near-universal presence in Empire’s Tracks—the marriage of finance and violence, imperialist capitalist development and violent conquest.

Chapter 8, “Shareholder Whiteness,” links the eman-
cipation of slaves with concurrent transcontinental railroad construction and development of modern capitalist economies. They were structured along racial lines that carefully policed white inclusion in corporate and industrial hierarchies and racially excluded African Americans, the Chinese, and Natives from the same. Corporations grew in sovereignty and negotiated legal relationships with government and citizenry. This hints at additional work to be done in considering US economic histories in anti-imperialist frameworks.

Chapter 9, “Continental Imperialism,” is perhaps the most fascinating and profound. Pulling from the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Vladimir Lenin, and Frederick Jackson Turner, Karuka dissects how the United States rhetorically constructed, justified, and claimed continental lands as American “homelands,” rather than colonized territories. Acknowledging the interconnected nature of America’s military conquest of the continental interior and industrial and financial capitalism—the “war-finance nexus”—means acknowledging the troubling foundations upon which American national geographic identity is built. This undercuts hagiographic narratives of American expansion, daring, and tenacity. Those exploits came at the cost of colonized populations. The extension of this conclusion is that marginalizing colonized peoples was (and is) central to American claims of authenticity on, and authority over, continental landscapes. In an epilogue, “The Significance of Decolonization in North America,” Karuka introduces modern events that intersect American empire (military, economic, and cultural) and global capitalism. Decolonization, he argues, is essential for the continued health of global economies, cultures, environments, and peoples.

What do Karuka’s historical investigations and contemporary reflections say to scholars of diplomacy and international relations? It is not the most obvious title or topic for scholars in those fields but presents a profound template to consider. Sub-narratives of international commerce, transnational networks, sovereign Indigenous diplomacy, and broad colonial and imperialist structures are hiding within seemingly “national” American stories. When reframed as Karuka does, antinational Indigenous or Chinese perspectives force historians to read against accepted traditions. Transcontinental railroad history becomes international diplomatic history if one decenters the narrative from that which the American state (and, by extension, archives and historiography) has constructed as a national creation myth. When read from the perspective of countersovereignities, the supposedly national American story becomes one of international negotiation, conquest, and colonization. This approach might be replicated by others. Moreover, Karuka’s discussion of imperial capitalism could be exported by scholars elsewhere to reexamine innumerable histories. Karuka has taken a fundamental strand of America’s national story of continual triumph and transformed it into a revelation linking violent imperialist colonialism and military-industrial expansion. He challenges us to do the same. Where else in national creation myths and stories are histories of international, imperialist, or colonial conflict not just hiding but being actively hidden?

Notes
[1]. Also see the associated digital project, Chinese Railroad Workers in North America, Stanford University, http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/website/.


Brenden W. Rensink (PhD 2010) is associate director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies and an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University. He is author of the award-winning book Native but Foreign: Indigenous Immigrants and Refugees in the North American Borderlands (2018); author, coauthor, and coeditor of multiple books and articles; project manager and general editor of the Intermountain Histories (https://www.intermountainhistories.org/) digital public history project; and host and producer of the Writing Westward Podcast (http://reddcenter.byu.edu/pages/writing-westward-podcast), on which he hosted a conversation with Karuka for the November 2019 episode (http://reddcenter.byu.edu/Blogs/redd-center-blog/Post/writing-westward-podcast-015---manu-karuka---).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54313

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.