



Book Review Panel

What the World Might Look Like: Decolonial Stories of Resilience and Refusal

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Book Review Editor's Note: The following are selected transcribed excerpts from a virtual book panel convened to discuss Susie O'Brien's 2024 publication *What the World Might Look Like: Decolonial Stories of Resilience and Refusal*. The panel was part of the Department of English *Speaker Series*, co-ordinated by Hanta Henning of University of the Free State, Republic of South Africa, and took place on April 10, 2025. The excerpts have been lightly edited to facilitate textual clarity, and they appear in the order of presentation. The full recording of the event can be found on the UFS Department of English's YouTube channel.¹ It should be noted that although Dr. O'Brien (English & Cultural Studies Department, McMaster University) participated in this event, this piece centres the words of the scholars invited to provide their reflections on the book.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SULbtTH1GLM&t=555s>

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Helene Strauss: I'm delighted to welcome you to this conversation about Susie O'Brien's new book *What the World Might Look Like: Decolonial Stories of Resilience and Refusal* which was published last year with McGill Queens University Press. The book we are discussing today pulls together many of the strands of her earlier work into a study of genuinely staggering historical, geographical, and intellectual range on the concept of resilience as it works both to uphold the values of white supremacy and settler colonialism in their infinitely dextrous iterations and, in conversation with Black and Indigenous storytelling around resilience, as a means towards imagining decolonial possibility and multispecies planetary flourishing. I will leave it to the panel to say more about the substance of the book.

Zishad Lak: I decided to focus my intervention on Chapters One and Three. Chapter One takes up the common discourse of a deficiency of resilience in “kids these days,” stemming from the absence of risky “old-fashioned fun.” Susie looks closely at cultural and media discourses that advocate for fun and characterizes them as a new puritanism. “The fun morality” she writes, “represents the flourishing of a particular way of life, one that sees itself as under threat in the late 20th and early 21st century from a variety of culprits including overdevelopment of natural spaces, technology and a culture of regulation and litigation” (p. 38). Fun is no longer a taboo but an obligation. Parents are now to blame for overprotecting children or allowing them too much screen time. And because kids are not exposed to risk and therefore to injury, they do not develop the resilience to endure it.

Outdoor and nature are conflated in these discourses and are framed as a universal untamed place. That's why they create resilience, because there's no room for gentleness in these spaces. The underlying narrative is thus shaped by a kind of settler masculinist ideal that equates nature with cultivation of toughness and casts the myth of settlement as the overcoming of and adapting to an unforgiving and rough nature. Man, in this Rousseauian or Thoreauian nature, is uninhibited and free from the constraints of civilization and responsibility and relations. This North American masculinist myth constituted the main theme of a literary movement in the beginning of the 21st century known in Quebec as “néoterroirs” or “novels of the land.” Written by bearded Montreal hipsters, these stories glorified both a return to the land and masculine toughness in the woods to the extent that the movement was nicknamed “the school of chainsaw.”²

The other component of resilience that Susie takes up is the evocation of the new world myth, settler ancestors who arrived here as immigrants. As Susie writes “an implicit if not explicit corollary of settler colonial resilience is the

² This movement uses specific indices of indigeneity to consolidate settler legitimacy on the land through discursive self-indigenization and might be read as a prelude to recent claims of Indigenous ancestry and ‘métissage’ in Québec. Characteristics include centring a masculine protagonist in the woods, alluding to a kind of fur trade era masculinity, the liberal use of oral vernacular (working-class and regional) and the rejection of idealization.

capacity to challenge known limits, courting the thrill and danger of encountering new worlds” (p. 68), thus perpetrating the terra nullius ideology. But if enduring this trip and starting life in a new place builds resilience, then the comfortably-settled, supposedly-settled settler, the “we,” is again at risk of losing the competitive edge to those who are arriving. In other words, and as Susie brilliantly highlights, according to the (at times) eugenicist and supremacist undertones of these discourses, we’re losing the “Darwinian game of survival,” survival that we have invested in to justify our privilege.

The anti-resilience discourse explored in Chapter Three critiques the cheerful optimism of resilience and is inscribed in the tragic register in its classic Aristotelian sense. It is the narrative of academics, often established, who suppose themselves the authority on criticism and critical thinking and who are faced with a world that feels less recognizable to them. They see the discourse of adaptability as a sort of capitulation to neoliberal logic that Susie uses the term “left melancholy” to describe:³ “a condition of mournful attachment to a lost ideal of socialism as opposed to an engagement with contemporary conditions” (p. 106). The idea of resilience and the focus on adaptation “blunts the force of resistance and mitigates against utopian or dystopian imagination” (p. 107). Their critique of capitalism however, often obscures, as Susie emphasizes, colonization and colonialism. They see themselves as the solitary heroes who will not give in and adapt to the vulgar cheeriness of resilience. Much like the tragic hero, they would rather see the world destroyed than act against their honour.

Capitalism has co-opted our desires. I also remember feeling unease after reading the introduction to Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2021). Is she inviting us to accept our precarity? And this kind of thinking, as Susie shows, of the left melancholic thinker withdrawing from the world, is rooted in settler amnesia and denial, nostalgia for a welfare state that was inaugurated through conquest and genocide. It also shows a refusal to engage with Black and Indigenous thinkers of this territory who already have, as Susie points out, experienced the end of the world. Such an engagement could change the terms of discourse. Instead, they express their discontent through tragic romantic 19th century discourse. Susie’s book shows how easy it is for us to fall into old tropes in the ways we articulate our desperation, and to reproduce colonial myths and thoughts even if we belong to groups that have been traditionally excluded from those norms.

Tania Aguila-Way: Susie invites us to develop a “meta-resilience narrative that acknowledges the constructiveness and historical specificity of our understanding of the stakes of resilience” (p. 27). *What the World Might Look Like* develops this meta-resilience narrative through two complimentary moves. First, the book illuminates in rich historical and contextual detail the role that resilience logic has historically played as a useful alibi for settler

³ “Wendy Brown borrows the term ‘left melancholy’ from Walter Benjamin” (p. 106).

futurity, in so far as it speaks to the possibility of incorporating difference and disruption within the existing structures of late liberalism and settler colonialism without changing the “white, heteronormative, patriarchal, and colonial foundations” (p. 21) on which these structures are built.

Second, Susie’s book reminds us that while resilience has long been mobilized to uphold settler colonial systems, the concept actually predates colonialism and has long been a central component of Indigenous epistemologies. Drawing on Potawatami scholar Kyle Powys Whyte’s concept of collective continuance (2018), Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor’s ideas around Indigenous survivance (1994), and Anishinaabe writer Grace Dillon’s articulation of Indigenous futurities (2016, Dillon & Marques, 2021), Susie’s book engages in the necessary but complicated work of repatriating the concept of resilience to examine the alternative understandings of this concept that are articulated in the work of Black and Indigenous writers, emphasizing the way in which resilience has been co-opted and mobilized to perpetuate settler colonial systems. It is with the book’s treatment of the relationship between resilience and indigeneity and particularly with its reading of Alexis Wright’s novel *The Swan Book* (2016) in Chapter Six that my response is primarily concerned. The chapter begins by highlighting the paradoxical way in which settler colonial states construct Indigenous peoples as both lacking the resilience to live in modernity and yet also possessing a special kind of knowledge around resilience that might be appropriated to ensure settler colonial futurity.

Waanyi author Alexis Wright’s 2013 *The Swan Book*, is a speculative novel that Susie reads as “the story of a failed model of liberal resilience in the ruins of which another, more viable form may emerge” (p. 212). Central to Susie’s reading of the novel is a text dramatization of an emergency state that closely echoes the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response to an alleged epidemic of child sexual abuse which was framed as symptomatic of a breakdown of Aboriginal society, that is, as symptomatic of a problem of Indigenous resilience or a lack thereof. The chapter traces how the novel advances an alternative model of resilience, one that differs from the dominant version of resilience in two key ways. First, Susie argues, the novel envisions a form of resilience that explicitly infuses the ecological networks that it describes with ethical spiritual meaning grounded in Waanyi cosmology. And second, that the form of resilience that the novel envisions, necessarily depends on decolonization and on sovereignty. And here Susie quotes Emily Potter to define sovereignty specifically as “the ability to inhabit one’s own reality” (Potter, 2012, p. 255, cited in O’Brien, 2024, p. 241).

One of the key lessons that I take away from this chapter is the importance of reading for the ways Black and Indigenous narratives around resilience and Black and Indigenous worldmaking, challenge our conceptions of what constitutes narrative, of how stories are told, and how reality might be represented. Susie notes towards the end of the chapter that the novel’s narrative and temporal arrangement suggest that the project of recovering or

repatriating Indigenous resilience might exceed the bounds of the novel, that it might not be able to be contained within the novel. The chapter left me with the question both as a student and a teacher of literature, how do we become better readers of alternative forms of resilience storymaking? Susie's reading of the *The Swan Book* demands a few things from us. It demands that we think about our positionality, not just in terms of where we are situated ecologically and socially, but also in terms of our positionality as readers. It also demands that we become better readers of ongoing Indigenous presence within and against settler colonial structures. So I'm really taken by Susie's insistence, via Vizenor's work and also Dillon's, that in their articulation of the concept of resilience – although it's articulated differently in different Indigenous contexts, as Susie makes a point of highlighting – is an emphasis on an active sense of presence, an emphasis on ongoing presence and ongoing Indigenous realities.

Catriona Sandilands: My overall reading of the book is that the current wave of resilience-thinking arises largely from white, western, neoliberal anxiety about how to maintain normative hold of the idea of the human, including what about this human should persist in a world that's increasingly figured as ecologically, politically, and ontologically unstable. The question of affect and anxiety comes to the fore in resilience narratives, in the way they have unfolded as responses to a world that's figured as increasingly uncertain. This anxiety is expressed in multiple overlapping resilience discourses that continue to normalize a white Eurowestern idea of what it means to live a good life, or what it means to be human, in the world. This is very much based on Sylvia Wynter's idea of "man," in particular "Man 2," and the kind of evolutionary understanding of species-being and species fitness that underscores the overrepresentation of a bourgeois idea of *Homo economicus* as the evolutionary pinnacle of human existence (Wynter, 2003).

As Susie describes beautifully in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, there have always been other ways of thinking about resilience, ongoingness, adaptation, flexibility, and relationality, and these practices persevere. What I want to focus on in Chapter Four is that there are emergent ways of thinking about this ongoingness that materialize in spaces of violence and exclusion, following Christina Sharpe's idea of "wake work," the idea that reconsiderations of futurity and the present occur in the midst of, in the wake of, Black enslavement and ongoing anti-Black violence (Sharpe, 2016). My foray into Chapter Four has two initial elements. The first is a quote: "Black and other racialized students are cast as simultaneously too resilient and not resilient enough – a contradiction that matters in the face of the broader belief that having just the right amount of grit or resilience is an index not only of adaptability but of evolutionary fitness" (p. 147). Another passage from earlier in the chapter adds: "in the eyes of their neighbours the boys are not 'free

range' but 'feral'" (p. 142).⁴ The second quote, from the conclusion, shows resilience to be more than just a metaphor:

[It] is also, as Michael Basseler has noted (2019a), inherently conducive to narrative. Neoliberalism and settler colonialism have carved a road for resilience by privileging narratives in the vein of the "neoliberal worlding of a Eurocentric 'overrepresentation of Man,'" as Glynn and Cupples put it. However, as they go on to assert, resilience "does not originate with those narratives, nor is it reducible to them" (2022, p. 4). (O'Brien, p. 251).

And I think that Chapter Four and *Brother* – both the novel and Susie's quite brilliant reading of it – do a wonderful job of showing the way in which resilience, the ongoingness of resilience, the emergence of resilience is not confined to these destructive colonial, racial capitalist narratives.

I'm interested in the conversation between this analysis of resilience and other ways of thinking about futurity that are not necessarily coded by the language of resilience. Susie mentioned reworlding and sheltering. I think there's also the possibility of the language of re-storying. Susie also invokes Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2019) early in the book, referring to a poetics of possibility, and that these re-imaginings of ongoingness and futurity definitely do not involve expanding the dominant narrative toward greater diversity and inclusion – because of course they are built on exclusion – but actually thinking about producing a different kind of narrative altogether. What I want to suggest is that there's possibly a productive conversation between some of the questions Susie is raising in this book about resilience narratives and reworlding, and some of the work of thinkers like José Esteban Muñoz who have talked about queer utopia and queer futurity in ways that I think highlight the kind of resilience that happens in *Brother*. The quote from Muñoz that I particularly like is:

We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. (Muñoz, 2009, p. 14)

So, how do we think about resilience narratives that don't begin in the present? They begin in a possible future that has not yet been realized.

Helene Strauss: I'm going to conclude this session and once again thank the brilliant panelists and Susie for this incredibly rich discussion.

⁴ O'Brien is referencing the 2018 novel *Brother*, by David Chariandy, published in 2017 by McClelland & Stewart.

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