Second Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians

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—Antonio de Nebrija, 1492

I know that there is a great many lies written in your books respecting us.
—Cornplanter, Seneca leader, 1794

They [the Indians], poor wretches, have no Press thro’ which their grievances are related; and it is well known, that when one side only of a Story is heard, and often repeated, the human mind becomes impressed with it, insensibly.
—George Washington, 1795

Reason must struggle to break the bonds of ideology so long established and so firmly fixed. . . . The very words used to express thought give it shape and direction as well as symbolic substance.
—Francis Jennings, 1975

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4 Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest (1975; repr., New York, 1976), 12 (see also v).

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4 Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest (1975; repr., New York, 1976), 12 (see also v).
Such [re]phrasings [of common terms describing 1492 and after] are awkward and may raise some eyebrows. They may even annoy some readers. But both the awkwardness and the fact that the entire issue can be dismissed as trivial quibbling suggests that it is not easy to subvert the very language describing the facts of the matter.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995

ONE score and three years ago the *William and Mary Quarterly* brought forth on its pages a review essay, conceived in dyspepsia and dedicated to the proposition that Native peoples merit more attention in early American studies. Entitled “Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians,” the jeremiad featured a young(ish) fellow chiding his elders and betters for neglecting Natives; it was intent on “broadcasting” the “sobering news” that recent “research on Indians, far from overturning long-held notions about America’s colonial age, has done little to change the cast of mind that frames—and, by framing, limits—our view.” The result? A few nice notes, a memorable chat with one historian whose book the piece had taken to task, and a secondhand report of how the author of another work given some thoughts had grumbled that “Merrell wants us to see an Indian behind every bush.”

Perhaps—the rashness of youth?—I spoke too soon. It is hard to measure new scholarship’s shelf life (here meaning how long a book must be available on the shelf before it animates fresh approaches), but maybe in 1989 it was premature to expect every (or perhaps any) early Americanist to have a eureka moment on Indians. For one thing, the list of people reconstructing the Native experience was still pretty short then, and many of their books still fairly new. For another, a work on this or that aspect of colonial history published in, say, 1988 would have been conceived, researched, and written over the course of many years before that; with such a long gestation, no project could use the latest word on Indians to realign its avenue of inquiry.

But whether it was too early then, it is not too early now. Whatever new literature’s shelf life, surely twenty-some years ought to be enough for scholarship on Indian history to reshape the larger field’s contours. It is time to

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7 In 1989 I considered, and dismissed, the possibility that “it is too soon to expect the latest scholarship on Indians to have any real impact on the larger school of colonial studies” (ibid., 113).
take another look, to offer some second thoughts on colonial historians and American Indians, to measure how much has changed—and how little.8

It would be impossible today to assert, as Bernard Bailyn did twenty-five years ago, that “we know as yet relatively little about” Indians in early America.9 If not behind every bush, Indians do seem ubiquitous. Publishing houses and scholarly journals alike have taken an aboriginal turn, their books and articles earning rave reviews and winning prestigious prizes.10 These developments seem to herald the return of the Native. "Look How Far We’ve Come," Ned Blackhawk exclaimed in 2005, before going on to delineate “How American Indian History Changed the Study of American History in the 1990s.” Students of Indian life at many points in time had developed “arguments that were increasingly incongruent with existing paradigms,” Blackhawk asserted, but “nowhere was this more


10 For the William and Mary Quarterly, the figures are: 1970s, 16 articles; 1980s, 15; 1990s, 36; 2000s (January 2000–October 2009), 31. For the New England Quarterly: 1970s, 14; 1980s, 6; 1990s, 23; 2000s, 18. For Early American Literature: 1970s, 5; 1980s, 10 (including 5 on Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative); 1990s, 21; 2000s, 31. For the Journal of the Early Republic (JER): 1980s (it first appeared in 1981), 2; 1990s, 13; 2000s, 16. Since 2000 JER has published more articles devoted to Native Americans as actors rather than objects of white policies, attitudes, or missionary endeavors, common fare in the 1980s and 1990s. It can be argued that both of its 1980s articles and one-third of its 1990s articles are more about whites than about Natives. Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, which began in 2003, offers another congenial home for new work on Native America, having published 8 articles on Native history from 2003 through 2009. These counts include articles, Notes and Documents (later Sources and Interpretations) pieces, and review essays but not book reviews. I have been generous in deciding what counts: articles on colonial attitudes or policies toward Indians are included; so is work on the frontier and the backcountry. Substantial contributions to a WMQ Forum were each counted as an article, but if each contribution was short (for example, “Forum: ‘Why the West Is Lost’: Comments and Response,” WMQ 51, no. 4 [October 1994]: 717–54), the Forum counted as one contribution. See also Claudio Saunt, “Go West: Mapping Early American Historiography,” WMQ 65, no. 4 (October 2008): 745–78.
apparent than in the study of early America.” In fact, “colonial Indian historians have now resoundingly demonstrated the centrality of Native peoples to early America in a way that seemed nearly inconceivable a generation ago.”

Scholars of various stripes have indeed begun to weave indigenous peoples into their interpretive fabric. Retrieving what denizens of those days—newcomers and Natives alike—said or smelled, what they dreamed or heard, how they coped with livestock or dirt, and how they thought about gender or death, historians have demonstrated that Indians are vital to making sense of that strange land called colonial America. Even classic (and, arguably, tired) topics—Salem witchcraft, the New England town, the New England family—have taken on new life by including Indians. At the same time, brave souls setting forth once more on the ancient quest for the creation of an American identity are giving Natives a more prominent role in that origin story. And some of those intrepid enough to offer tours of the entire early American world have aspired to put Indians front and center.


12 Ned Blackhawk has also used weaving fabric as a metaphor (Blackhawk, OAH Magazine 19: 16).

Even avatars of traditional approaches to traditional subjects show signs of changing their tune. Though Gordon S. Wood has argued that there are serious side effects to the regnant “fashionable” scholarly penchant for “recovering the lost voices of ordinary people,” he recognizes that “one of the most important consequences of the upheaval in the writing of American history that has taken place over the past generation has been the new attention paid to the Indians.”  

“Through the efforts of a squadron of scholars,” Wood writes, “the Indians have made their presence felt in early America.” Sensing that presence himself, he sometimes composes in a different key: just as “the European invasion” led to Indians being “lied to . . . and cheated of their land and their furs by greedy white traders and land-hungry migrants,” so the new Republic “continually violated” Native “treaty rights” and “killed or displaced tens of thousands of Indians.”

Wood is not the only unlikely one to channel Jennings. Joseph J. Ellis—like Wood, a best-selling author of international repute and a defender of “old-fashioned” history—has also proven susceptible to new strains of thought. One symptom is that he too occasionally sounds different. The United States had “blatantly imperialistic” dealings with Indians, Ellis points out; the country’s “gloss of reassuring rhetoric” deepens our understanding of attitudes toward Indians. See Gordon M. Sayre, *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005). For surveys, see for example Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001); Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Brave New World: A History of Early America*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, 2006).


Wood, *Purpose of the Past*, 212.


Jennings, *Invasion of America*.

friendship] . . . covered a crude reality of outright confiscation” of Native lands. Another is his recognition, in a biography of George Washington, that modern “historical scholarship . . . has altered the landscape around Washington.” “Most significantly, the burgeoning scholarship on slavery and the fate of Native Americans have [sic] moved topics that were formerly in the background into the foreground. . . . Coming to terms with Washington means making them . . . central concerns.” Certainly Washington, as president, made them “one of his highest priorities,” giving “Indian affairs . . . his personal attention amidst a cacophony of political and constitutional pressures.” Ellis has also given Indian affairs his personal attention. Invited to contribute a chapter to a book on “dramatic events that changed America,” he added to the farrago—Salem, Harpers Ferry, the Scopes trial, the March on Washington—the 1790 Treaty of New York, when President Washington hosted a summit meeting with a delegation of Creeks.

If Ellis and Wood have begun to notice Natives, it seems fair to say, with Blackhawk, that we have indeed come a long way. The days of “academic apartheid,” which segregated Indians from other Americans, seem to be past. Perhaps a new age—more inclusive, more sensitive to Native perspectives and experiences—has now begun.

Or perhaps not. Ned Blackhawk himself can be gloomy about the state of play. “A glaring absence remains at the heart of the field,” he admitted a year after calculating how far we have come. “Still missing from most narratives of American history are clear and informed analyses of our nation’s indigenous peoples.” Nor is he the only pessimist. For all the success scholars have had in “foregrounding indigenous peoples and their intentions in the story of early America,” agreed Pekka Hämäläinen in 2008, “the alterations have been cosmetic rather than corrective. . . . [T]he broad outlines of the story have largely remained intact.”

19 Ellis, American Creation, 131 (“blatantly imperialistic”), 128 (“gloss”).
20 Ellis, His Excellency, xiii.
21 Ellis, American Creation, 129 (“highest priorities”), 138 (“cacophony”); see also ibid., 147.
Cosmetics cannot hide what lies beneath, however. It is hardly a shock that Joseph J. Ellis and Gordon S. Wood are only occasionally in touch with their inner Francis Jennings. More surprising is that John Demos, who did pathbreaking work on witchcraft and the family before heading into Indian territory to tell another family story, turned next to “certain very basic elements in the experience of virtually everyone in . . . colonial America”—then defined “virtually everyone” as European colonists.26 Even recent syntheses, having “acknowledge[d] the historians’ new paths of enquiry in areas such as African American, native[,] and gender studies”—surely “some of the most exciting scholarship in recent years”—still tend to keep Indians on the sidelines.27

But the real reason we have a ways to go in understanding Indians and others has little to do with how deftly or clumsily indigenous peoples have been stitched into the American tapestry. It is not that we need still more work on Natives (though we do). Nor is it that others should pay closer attention to that work (though they should). The root of the problem lies in the very words used to tell stories about olden times.

“Historians have sanitized vocabularies” to some extent, of course.28 No one today besides the National Football League uses redskins, just as almost everyone avoids squaw and primitive people.29 Nor is anybody echoing the Declaration of Independence in calling Natives “merciless Indian Savages”; joining George Washington to say that they are like wolves, “both being beasts of prey tho’ they differ in shape”; or endorsing Andrew Jackson’s talk of their “savage habits” and “rude institutions.”30 So, too,


27 Eric Nellis, An Empire of Regions: A Brief History of Colonial British America (Toronto, 2010), xviii (“new paths”), xix–xx; J. H. Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1850 (New Haven, Conn., 2006), xviii (“most exciting”); and see Steven Sarson, British America, 1500–1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire (London, 2005), xiii–xiv. One could also argue that even the most successful synthesis, Alan Taylor’s American Colonies, bears traces of earlier habits of thought. As the title suggests, European colonies occupy center stage. The decision to add a subtitle—The Settling of North America—to the paperback edition reinforces that tilt. One recent work that is more successful in this regard appeared after a draft of this article was composed: Daniel K. Richter, Before the Revolution: America’s Ancient Pasts (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

28 Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 6.


some of the phrases penned in the nineteenth century by early America’s first great historian, Francis Parkman—“primitive America, with her savage scenery and savage men”; “wretched tribes of the forest”—are now, to put it nicely, passé.31 As Wood has often observed, where “a century ago historians of early America” routinely wrote about “virgin soil,” “unexploited wilderness,” and “unoccupied territory,” “no historian of early America would write that way anymore.”32

It turns out that Wood himself sometimes writes that way. Talking of “the wilderness” and “the unsettled lands of the interior,” he observes that “both the Scots and the [colonial] North Americans . . . were acutely aware of the contrast between civilization and the nearby barbarism of the Highland clans and the North American Indian tribes.”33 Ellis is even more likely to call the American interior a “western wilderness” of “unexplored forests occupied by hostile Indian tribes,” a “virgin land” boasting “virgin soil.”34

It is unfair to single out Wood and Ellis, though; they have lots of company. Decades after Jennings called attention to “the cant of conquest” and James Axtell warned about “our loaded vocabularies,” early Americanists are still shackled to a lexicon crafted by the victors in the contest for America, one fashioned to explain, even justify, how things turned out.35 Some of the difficulties stem from careless use of those loaded

1789–1897 (Washington, D.C., 1900), 2: 457 (“savage habits”); Jackson, Second Annual Message, Dec. 6, 1830, ibid., 2: 520 ("rude institutions


33 Wood, Purpose of the Past, 253 (“wilderness”); Wood, American Revolution, 73 (“unsettled lands”; see also 119); Wood, Revolutionary Characters, 20 (“both the Scots”). On the same page of Revolutionary Characters, Wood quotes without comment a scholar discussing “contact between a backward world and a modern one” on what Wood terms the “peripheries” “of European culture.” Two pages later, however, Wood writes: “to what they [European colonists] regarded as savagery and barbarism” (ibid., 22, emphasis added).

34 Ellis, His Excellency, 12 (“western wilderness”), 53 (“virgin land”), 268 (“virgin soil”); Ellis, Founding Brothers, 6 (“unexplored”). He also terms it “the far edge of civilization’s progress” but sometimes qualifies such talk with “anything that Europeans called civilization” and “Virginia’s version of civilization” (Ellis, His Excellency, 11, emphasis added).

words, which makes voice, whether something is a historian’s opinion or a colonist’s, hard to pin down. (Consider Wood’s writing “nearby barbarism”: is that his view or the view of those eighteenth-century folks?) But whether use of a vestigial vernacular is careless or careful, the fetters are in place all the same. Slipping them requires facing up to this pervasive, pernicious language problem. A look at recent work—not a comprehensive look, certainly, but not a casual one either—can begin to measure the dilemma’s dimensions.

This safari through the literature on early America is, like any tour, necessarily incomplete. I gave the herd of textbooks a wide berth, for example, and I went right on by most of the savanna’s teeming population of monographs. I also steered clear of books published before the turn of the millennium, to give new work on Indian history time to make its way onto the scholarly veld and get noticed. Within that chronologically bounded domain, my eye was drawn toward synthetics and surveys, but I did pause at more specialized studies that caught my attention for their relevance, their quality, or their influence on the academy or the wider world. Even thus confined, the sightseeing excursion turned up abundant evidence of an archaic but still living discourse that keeps American history tethered to the very “European structures of thought” faced by America’s indigenous peoples centuries ago.36

To start with American history’s conventional beginning reveals at once how the most ordinary words get the mind seeing things the winners’ way. The very measure of time’s passage, gathering together and then parceling into “periods” the uninterrupted flow of one day into the next, is thus inflected. Precontact invariably denotes America’s inhabitants before people from beyond the sea’s horizon showed up. The term persists despite its being common knowledge that for millennia indigenous groups had contact aplenty with strangers from distant lands. It is less well known, but still true, that for many Indians meeting odd-looking people who came in odd-looking craft did not immediately change everything. As Daniel K. Richter puts it, North America was “a place where diverse peoples had long struggled against and sometimes worked with one another, where societies and political systems had long risen and fallen, and where these ancient trends continued right through the period of colonization.” Conventional wisdom

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notwithstanding, he insists, “1492 did not rend the fabric of the continent’s time. The sixteenth century remained rooted in all that had gone before.”

Nonetheless, precontact and its cousin postcontact are still the standard refrain. Given that alternatives—precolonial, pre-Columbian—are available, precontact should by now have been dispatched to a knackery.

Surprisingly, even scholars aware of “the inherent cultural assumptions embedded in all language,” who know that “some of the standard terms once taken almost for granted . . . now seem somewhat loaded, skewed to the particular perspective of Euro- or Anglo-Americans,” who chronicle “inter-group contact among Indian people long before their contact with Europeans”—even they cannot get precontact out of their system. They give tours of “the pre-contact era,” visit “precontact burial sites,” and talk of “Native America on the Eve of Contact.”

Quotation marks do the same inoculative work to discovery—“the ‘discovery’ of America”—calling attention to its dubiety as a synonym for Europeans making landfall. But for every book thereby rendering the term problematic, many more follow precedent, noting that “North America was

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37 Richter, Facing East, 8 (“diverse peoples”), 39 (“1492 did not”). See also Steven Conn, History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 2004), 228.

38 For Native history before Europeans’ arrival in America, see Salisbury, WMQ 53: 435–58 (although Salisbury uses precontact; see 436, 449). Discussion of contacts among Native peoples before 1492 has made its way into surveys (Gregory H. Nobles, American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest [New York, 1997], esp. 25–28; Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., chap. 1) and a bestseller (Mann, 1491). Francis Jennings was not averse to precontact and all it implies; James Axtell rejected prehistory in favor of precontact (Jennings, Invasion of America, 42; Axtell, “Forked Tongues,” 42–43). Less common, prehistory is no better than precontact. A word (and concept) invented in the mid-nineteenth century, when the “boundaries of historical studies hardened . . . to exclude much . . . nontextual material,” it lingers on, a vestigial term in an age that has come to embrace all sorts evidence in pursuit of the past. Conn, History’s Shadow, 23 (quotation), 11, 211–16. For arguments that Indians “had a history,” see Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 13–14 (quotation, 14); Hoffer, The Brave New World: A History of Early America, 1st ed. (Boston, 2000), 13; Taylor, American Colonies, 4.

39 Nobles, American Frontiers, xiv (“assumptions”), 13–14 (“standard terms”), 25 (“inter-group contact”; see also 26–27), 41 (“pre-contact era”); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 33 (“burial sites”), 35 (“Native America”; see also 16), vii–viii, 4.

40 For quotation marks, see Seeman, Death in the New World, 12. Erik R. Seeman elsewhere makes a good case for European contact being the most significant. Even if true, this need not mean that contact ought to refer solely to this episode. It might be the most significant, but, as Seeman points out, “cross-cultural interactions have been an aspect of the human condition for millennia.” Ibid., 46.

41 For an example, see Daniel Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848 (New York, 2007), 26. Peter Charles Hoffer questions it: “the Age of Discovery, as this era of European history is often termed.” But he also uses the phrase in its conventional form as a chapter heading: “Europe in the Age of Discovery, 1400–1500.” See Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 42 (“this era”), 41.
discovered first by the Cabots” or talking of “the discovery and exploitation of the Americas.” Sidestepping this trap need not require donning a T-shirt (“Indians Discovered Columbus”) or making up an American’s diary entry for October 12, 1492 (“At long last, someone has arrived to discover me!”). It requires only keeping in mind that discovery works both ways—that this was also “the era of the Native discovery of Europe.”

Indiscriminate use of discovery puts us on board ship with John Cabot or Christopher Columbus, peering out at shores unknown; the ever-popular New World keeps us there. Even today, many accept direct descent from Amerigo Vespucci, who announced in 1503 that “these new regions which we found and explored . . . we may rightly call a New World.” Vespucci and his shipmates could rightly call it new; to them, it was. From our perch, (“Europe”). John Demos uses “the Age of Discovery” on one page and questions it with quotation marks (“when Columbus ‘discovered’ America”) on the next (Demos, Circles and Lines, 25 ["Age"], 26 ["Columbus"]; see also 28). Some use quotation marks in a different fashion, to question whether the first Americans’ arrival in the hemisphere counts as “discovery” and to distinguish it from “the age of discovery” as commonly understood. See Jerome R. Reich, Colonial America, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2011), 12 ("the ‘discovery’ of America took place at least 40,000 years ago"), 20 ("age"). Alan Taylor, American Colonies, 5, suggests that "discovery" might indeed be a misnomer because these earliest migrants “had no notion that they were discovering . . . a new continent." (Of course, neither did Christopher Columbus.) The same effect of quotation marks occurs with other keywords such as wilderness (Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 48), back-country (ibid., 276, 281), and settlement (Demos, Circles and Lines, 28, 58–59).


43 Edmundo O’Gorman, The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History (Bloomington, Ind., 1961), 9 (“At long last”).


45 Amerigo Vespucci, Mundus Novus, 1503, modernized translation quoted in James D. Kornwolf and Georgiana Wallis Kornwolf, Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America (Baltimore, 2002), xi, quoted in Nellis, Empire of Regions, 3. Recalling the Pilgrims’ arrival in Holland, William Bradford wrote that everything about the place and people was “all so far differing from” what they had known in England that “it seemed they were come into a new world.” Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation (New York, 1981), 16.
Europe and America circa 1492 both look old, yet one remains forever young because Vespucci so decreed.

Oddly, the phrase is at once more common than discovery and more often challenged. J. H. Parry stated the obvious almost half a century ago: “Columbus did not discover a new world; he established contact between two worlds, both already old.” In the years since, complaints about the Old World–New World binary have only gotten louder—and still this hardy perennial stubbornly resists efforts to root it out. Books that are at pains to include indigenous peoples and perspectives will talk of “cheap land in the New World” and “the habits of the Old World.” Some put “New World” in quotation marks yet still think in terms of “old and new worlds,” though it is easy enough to add two letters and render “the New World” as “their New World.”

Having discovered a New World, European mariners five hundred years ago then splashed ashore, dried their socks, and had a look around. Historians stay right with them, seeing America in ways that made sense only to coast-hugging interlopers. A long word list—backcountry, backlands, back parts, backwoods, hinterland, marchland, periphery, trans-Appalachian—testifies to a predilection to consider matters from shore (if not from London, Madrid, or Paris).

One of these synonyms, backcountry, is so popular that it merits books and review essays of its own. Colonists liked it too. George Washington

46 J. H. Parry, The Spanish Seaborne Empire (New York, 1966), 65. I was led to Parry’s remark by Jennings, Invasion of America, 39.
47 James Axtell, “Foreword: The Columbian Legacy,” in After Columbus, 3–6, esp. 5; Axtell, “Native Reactions,” 98; Axtell, “Moral Reflections,” 244; Colin G. Calloway, New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America (Baltimore, 1997), title, xiii, 9–10; Richter, Facing East, chaps. 1–2. Like Calloway, some have written of “Many and Varied New Worlds,” “Europe’s New World,” “the Indians’ New World,” “a colonial New World,” and the like. Nellis, Empire of Regions, 3 (“Varied”); Merrell, Indians’ New World; Jane T. Merritt, At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–1763 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), 2 (“Colonial”).
48 Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 8 (quotations), 67, 171; Nobles, American Frontiers, 43, 53; Reich, Colonial America, 51–52.
49 Taylor, American Colonies, 37 (quotations marks; see also 48), 25 (“old and new”); Jennings, Invasion of America, 32 (“their New World”).
50 Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., uses backcountry (314) and backwoods (219). Eric Nellis, who uses backcountry, recognizes that it “is a tricky term that is best understood as it was in the eighteenth century: habitable space somewhat distant or remote from the main areas of [colonial] settlement” (Nellis, Empire of Regions, 269). For backlands, see Richard Kluger, Seizing Destiny: How America Grew from Sea to Shining Sea (New York, 2007), 95, 119, 184, 196, 208. See also François Furstenberg, “The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in American History,” American Historical Review (AHR) 113, no. 3 (June 2008): 647–77. Trans-Appalachian sounds neutral, but it always means west of those mountains, again reflecting an East Coast perch.
himself used the term (“there is a large Field before you, . . . an opening prospect in the back Country for . . . an enterprising Man”), but if his Native counterparts understood it at all, they would have construed it differently—to include, say, Mount Vernon. It is one thing to use backcountry and its mates when considering land speculators such as Washington or deciphering how colonists saw things when they turned their gaze westward and lit out for that territory. It is something else to produce a work that “seeks to offer a balanced and complex portrayal of” those lands, to replace “historians [who traditionally] told the story . . . from the perspective of the colonists only,” and then to throw off the balance by keeping that lopsided term. Remarkably, backwoods and the rest persist, despite there being viable (if contested) alternatives such as borderlands. Even frontier, stripped of its Turnerian baggage, carries less bias than backcountry.

As backwoods suggests, another cluster of close kin—forest, wilderness, wilds, woodlands, woods—also endorses the newcomers’ way of seeing their new land. The ancient plotline is alive and well: Europeans had “to brave the perils of the . . . American wilderness” so that they could “tame and develop the continent,” declares one account; “settlers . . . attacked the wilderness and cleared it,” intones another. All this attention to wilderness and woods is inherited from the first colonists, particularly New Englanders imbued with biblical ideas about God’s chosen people passing through a wilderness to reach the promised land. These folks outdid themselves in wilding America: a “remote, rocky, barren, bushy, wild-woody wilderness”; “one of the most hideous, boundless, and unknown Wildernesses in the world”; “a vast and roaring wilderness.” True, scholars these days who

53 Hinderaker and Mancall, At the Edge of Empire, 7.
55 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 37 (“brave the perils”), xiii (“tame”; see also 5); Demos, Circles and Lines, 28–29 (“attacked”).
singing of “deciduous forests blanketing the eastern seaboard” sound more akin to John Smith (“all the Countrey is overgrowne with trees”) than William Bradford (“the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue”), but if the lyrics are different, the tune is the same.  

The problem with all this talk of the wild is that it is just that: wild talk. There is no denying the vast stretches of forest that so impressed (and frightened) wood-starved (and woods-starved) Europeans. But there are woods, and then there are woods. “One must not visualize the New England forest at the time of settlement as a dense tangle of huge trees and nearly impenetrable underbrush covering the entire landscape,” William Cronon cautioned thirty years ago. “Along the southern coast, from the Saco River in Maine all the way to the Hudson, the woods were remarkably open, almost parklike at times.” The same was true farther south. How do we know? Because colonists said so. “It is generally conceived that the woods grow so thick that there is no more clear ground than is hewed out by labor of man,” an early New England writer informed anxious readers back home, but, he hastened to add, “it is nothing so, in many places diverse acres being clear so that one may ride a-hunting in most places of the land.”  

By the Natives: well-known Indian customs of working the land—clearing fields, burning woods to open space around their towns and improve conditions for gathering and hunting—should long ago have scrapped sce-


57 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 40 (“deciduous forests”; though on 41 McDougall notes that “the forests were often partially cleared thanks to the Indian practice of killing trees . . . and burning underbrush to plant corn or attract game”; see also 289); Philip L. Barbour, ed., The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631) in Three Volumes (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986), 1: 151 (“all the Countrey”); Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 70 (“whole country”).  


59 Edward Williams, Virginia, More especially the South Part Thereof; Richly and Truly Valued (London, 1650), 4, quoted in Timothy Silver, A New Face on the Countrystside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500–1800 (New York, 1995), 104 (quotations; see also Barbour, Complete Works, 2: 116), 59–65. That this notion has long been known beyond specialists in Native American history is clear from David Freeman Hawke, Everyday Life in Early America (New York, 1988), 12: “Wherever they landed along the American coast, none of the first settlers had to confront a forbidding wilderness—except in their minds.”
narios that had colonists taming wilds. Since it turns out that the continent bore the imprint of human minds, hands, and tools well before Europeans arrived, other ingredients of the old recipe—a “virgin land,” “a land as God made it”—can also be set aside. Just because John Smith, forgetting the Indian towns he put on his own map and the cornfields he passed en route to those towns, could call the place “a plaine wildernes as God first made it” does not mean we need to take his word for it. The same goes for Smith’s wilderness: because “wilderness was a state of mind—a perceived rather than an actual condition of the environment”—it merits the dustbin too. At the very least, it needs an adjective to identify who exactly was feeling bewildered, for it might have been a Powhatan. To her way of thinking, “Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather . . . they made one.”

Not only are wilderness, woods, and forest misnomers but, combined with others, they contain the power to perpetuate habits of mind bequeathed from Jamestown and Plymouth. If eastern North America was nothing but wilds, it follows that people there must be wild too. Many colonists certainly thought so. William Bradford was neither the first nor the last to fret that his “hideous and desolate wilderness” was “full of wild beasts and wild men.” Almost two hundred years later, another observer recalled how “so recently” America was “a rugged wilderness and the abode of savages and wild beasts.” Parkman chanted the same mantra, saying that “the Indian is a true child of the forest,” that “he and his forest must


63 Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, ix.

64 Jennings, Invasion of America, 30 (emphasis added). Francis Jennings here was discussing disease wreaking havoc, not European colonists “taming” a continent. The ellipses omit “however involuntarily.”

65 Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 70 (see also 26; Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 18).

perish together.” Hence when books in our own day mention “forest tribes,” “the woodland [and] its native inhabitants,” or “the forest, its wild animals, and its Indians,” they use a product well past its expiration date.

Placing Natives in woods rather than clearings has all sorts of unhappy consequences. One is the tendency to assume that their numbers were small. Modern scholars have moved away from colonists’ claim that “their [Indians’) land is spacious and void, and they are but few,” or its nineteenth-century equivalent, “a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians”—but not always far away. If none follow Richard Brookhiser in saying that “everything west of the Alleghenies was bison,” some describe how whites and blacks “peopled the Ohio valley,” as though Bradford was right to talk of “those vast and unpeopled countries of America.” A welcome corrective would have more books quoting John Winthrop (among others) describing Narragansett Country as “full of Indians” or mentioning that the locals’ name for what we call tidewater Virginia was Tsenacommacah, “densely inhabited land.”

Maps accompanying the new work do similar damage by making America look sparsely populated. Indeed, today’s iterations might actu-

67 Parkman, Conspiracy of Pontiac, 1: 1 (“child”), 44 (“perish together”).
68 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 50 (“forest tribes”; see also 440); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 222 (“woodland,” emphasis added); Taylor, American Colonies, 188 (“its Indians,” emphasis added).
69 Robert Cushman, quoted in Nobles, American Frontiers, 30 (“spacious and void”); George Bancroft, quoted in Taylor, American Colonies, 40 (“scattered”).
70 Richard Brookhiser, What Would the Founders Do? Our Questions, Their Answers (New York, 2006), 8 (“everything west”); Patrick Griffin, American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier (New York, 2007), 12 (“peopled,” emphasis added; see also 31, 230); Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 26 (“vast”). And see Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 49 (section headed “Peopling the Land”; see also 47, where Elliott notes that North America had “a sparsely settled but none the less ubiquitous Indian population”); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, xi, 85; Kluger, Seizing Destiny, 112, 129.
71 John Winthrop, The History of New England from 1630 to 1649, ed. James Savage, 2d ed. (Boston, 1853), 1: 146 (starred paging; entry of Nov. 5, 1634), quoted in Jennings, Invasion of America, 28 (“full”); Richter, Facing East, 70 (“densely”). Historians often use the Algonquian name Tsenacommacah without translation. See Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 12, 14, 62; Horn, A Land as God Made It, 13; William M. Kelso, Jamestown: The Buried Truth (Charlottesville, Va., 2006), 34–35.
72 My thinking on maps has benefited from works that would not have been available to many of the authors considered here. However, the idea of maps as creations and implements of imperial power is not new. See Axtell, “Beyond 1992,” 290–91; Calloway, New Worlds for All, 12, 37; Nobles, American Frontiers, 60–62; J. B. Harley, The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography, ed. Paul Laxton (Baltimore, 2001). For other work, see John Rennie Short, Representing the Republic: Mapping the United States, 1600–1900 (London, 2001); Martin Brückner, The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Short, Cartographic Encounters: Indigenous Peoples and the Exploration of the New World (London, 2009). Other relevant works are Mark Warhus, Another America: Native American Maps and the History of Our Land (New York, 1997); G. Malcolm Lewis, ed., Cartographic
ally be more misleading than their ancestors, since colonial cartographers—relying on Native informants, keen to pinpoint potential Indian customers, allies, or enemies—often made sure that “the Native-American presence was a major focus of attention.”73 Renderings composed lately often lose that focus. Were there any Natives in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake or New England, the middle colonies or the Southeast? Not according to some recent maps.74 Nor, apparently, were they to be found anywhere in “North America in the Late Seventeenth Century,” “The Atlantic Seaboard, c. 1700,” “Eastern North America, 1690–1748,” “Northeastern North America, c. 1755,” and “Ohio River Valley: 1763–95.”75 This would

have been news to the Abenaki, Delaware, Shawnee, and the rest still living there—not to mention those from Europe and Africa who spoke, prayed, fought, swapped, and slept with them.76

Maps that do find room for Native peoples—even depictions confined to eastern North America—can still play into timeworn notions about there being just “a few scattered tribes.” One has no Indians near the coast between modern Florida and North Carolina and only one nation in the entire territory once called the pays d’en haut (“the Old Northwest” to us). Another removes Natives from that vast realm entirely, while finding room for just five “Indian Peoples” altogether.77 A third does plant several near the Great Lakes but leaves vacant the stretch between Yamasees on the southeastern coast and the Mississippi River, lands that were home to (among others) the populous Muskogees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws.78

Obviously there are limits to what any cartographer can do; it is impossible to convey the sheer number of Native polities and populations when putting even one-third of a continent on the page. Nonetheless, today’s maps are curiously myopic. Especially with sources now available for cartography that corrects mistakes rather than repeats them, it is too bad that so many second the canard about Indians being “but few.”79

76 Maps of the new American nation are not much better. Though Paul E. Johnson, The Early American Republic, 1789–1829 (New York, 2007), 6, reminds us that “beyond the Appalachians were hundreds of thousands of free and unconquered Native Americans” who “occupied more than half of what the maps said was the United States,” those thousands are scarce on maps in recent work treating the early Republic. (See also Furstenberg, AHR 113: 659–60; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 19.) For maps, see Sean Wilentz, The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln (New York, 2005), xx; Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 413 (“The Thirteen Original Colonies” [it actually depicts North America, excludes Native peoples, and includes not only the British colonies but Spanish Louisiana, New Spain, territories “Claimed by Spain,” and the Hudson’s Bay Company]), 479 (“The New Nation,” which excludes Natives and includes British Canada, Spanish Florida and Louisiana, and lands ceded to the U.S. by individual states); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 360 (“The United States, 1803–1807”).


78 Mancall, “Native Americans and Europeans,” 329 (map 15.1). See also Elliot, Empires of the Atlantic World, 2.

Whether making Indians out to be few or many, scholarship confining them to the woods has still other ill effects. It keeps on life support the mistake that Natives first and foremost were hunters who roamed their forest homes in search of game. To be sure, we have cleaned up our language some: no one today would say, as colonists did, that Indians “do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes and wild beasts.” However, though specialists have demonstrated that hunting was a sophisticated pursuit involving entire kin groups rather than a bunch of armed guys running around, not everyone has gotten the message. Talk of Indians’ losing “the lands they once roamed freely” (2006) echoes “the wandering savage who traverses the wilds of America” (1804), just as Native men construing “liberty in terms of their ability to roam and hunt at will” (2009) sounds close to “the Indian rov’d, free and unconquered” (1822).

That Natives were hunters, not farmers, is among the most common, most destructive errors being perpetuated. The evidence to the contrary is neither new nor secret: Indian peoples in most of eastern North America (usually women) tended large, productive fields with care and skill; after contact with European newcomers, Natives added to their repertoire orchards, pigs, and cattle. Knowing all this, imperial armies invading Indian lands deliberately waged “warfare against vegetables,” taking a break from destroying crops and caches to slaughter the locals’ livestock and chop down fruit trees.
Still, some scholars parrot architects of Indian policy such as Henry Knox ("Indians derive their subsistence chiefly by hunting") and John Marshall (Natives’ "subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest"), informing readers that "in European societies . . . the cultivation of crops provided the principal sustenance of the people—rather than merely supplementing hunting and gathering, as among most Indians."84 More often, the point gets across by implication rather than declamation. It can be as simple as substituting hunting land or hunting grounds for homeland or territory. Thus when colonists started “impinging on the Indians’ hunting land” (not, apparently, their towns and houses), Natives would “fight to preserve their hunting grounds” (never, it seems, their orchards and cornfields) but in the end would usually “cede their hunting grounds” (keeping, one surmises, their granaries and graveyards).85

If Native farming does get a mention, words subtly undermine its importance. Whatever the acreage cultivated, it seems, Indians tended to work “gardens” (or a “corn patch”), colonists fields; Indians practiced “horticulture,” colonists agriculture; Indians “grew vegetables,” colonists crops.86 Here is the residue of a bygone era, when Parkman described how

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85 Sarson, _British America_, 181 (“impinging”; see also 173); Wood, _Empire of Liberty_, 123 (“preserve”; see also 124); Wilentz, _Rise of American Democracy_, 149 (“cede”; see also 136). And see Ellis, _American Creation_, 130; Walter A. McDougall, _Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829–1877_ (New York, 2008), 49; Risjord, _Jefferson’s America_, 275.

86 Hoffer, _Brave New World_, 2d ed., 110 (“cornfields” were “gardens devoted to corn”), 223 (“gardens of corn and squash, grown in relatively small fields near the village”), 29 (“horticulture”; see also 33, 37); Nellis, _Empire of Regions_, 123 (“corn patch”); Taylor, _American Colonies_, 10 (“horticulture”; see also 93, 102, 189); Wood, _Empire of
“Indian squaws turned the black mould with their rude implements . . . and sowed their scanty stores of maize and beans.”

The most striking scholarly obliteration of indigenous farming comes in descriptions of the new American nation’s “civilization” program for Indians. “We should be gratified,” the United States told Cherokees and other Natives in 1791, “with the opportunity of . . . teaching you to cultivate the earth, and raise corn; to raise oxen, sheep, and other domestic animals” “instead of remaining in a state of hunters.” Since during the Revolutionary War Cherokees had lost twenty thousand bushels of corn to one invading army and fifty thousand more to another, they might well have been puzzled by the invitation. So would their neighbors the Creeks, offered the same curriculum, for by the 1770s they already had “plenty of beef” and were raising “abundance of small cattle, hogs, turkeys, ducks and dunghill fowls.”

This is not the place to go into why American officials said that they wanted to teach Indian cattle ranchers to be herdsmen and Indian farmers to grow Indian corn. It is the place to point out how often historians

Liberty, 124 (“grew vegetables”). Peter Charles Hoffer distinguishes Roanoke Island’s agriculture from the mainland’s—“corn culture had come late to these shores” (Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 110)—but the English differentiated gardens (for tobacco) from fields (for corn), and they were, overall, impressed with the extent and productivity of local Natives’ farming. See Thomas Harriot, A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia (1590; repr., New York, 1972), 13–15, fig. 20 (68), “The Towne of Secota” (gardens and fields). Some specialists, too, use horticulture: Jennings, Invasion of America, 61; Kathleen J. Bragdon, Native People of Southern New England, 1500–1650 (Norman, Okla., 1996), 294 (index, horticulture); Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 80–81. Whatever the validity of the term’s use, applying it only to Natives, not to colonists, and not defining it accentuates a difference that not all scholars have found. Some Native peoples had both gardens (small, near a family’s house) and fields (large, farther away, and tilled by an entire community). See Saunt, New Order of Things, 40–41; Piker, Okfuskee, 115, 117. Scholarship suggesting that Native and English forms of farming were not as different as the English thought includes Nancy Shoemaker, A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America (New York, 2004), 18–21. For the terms, see Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.vv. “agriculture” (ager or agris, field), “horticulture” (hortus, garden), http://www.oed.com. Thanks to Robert DeMaria Jr. for discussion of the Latin roots.

87 Parkman, Conspiracy of Pontiac, 1: 147. Parkman, like many since, was inconsistent: elsewhere he wrote at length about the extent of Iroquois agriculture (ibid., 1: 16).
90 See Daniel H. Usner Jr., “Iroquois Livelihood and Jeffersonian Agrarianism: Reaching behind the Models and Metaphors,” in Native Americans and the Early Republic, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Va.,
many European Americans that Northerners at least had a hard time acknowledging that the Indians practiced any agriculture at all” can still write, a few lines later, that “whites expected Indians to become farmers,” a few pages later that federal officials wanted Natives to “abandon hunting and gathering” and start “becoming farmers like the whites,” and a few chapters later that “Cherokees . . . made extraordinary progress in developing white ways—living in houses and relying on agriculture and not game for their food.”

Most scholars are equally oblivious to how their words rehearse the tried and false. A pastiche cobbled together from recent work on the subject exposes the problem. Federal officials keen “to help [Natives] make the transition to farming” dispatched “teachers and missionaries [who] exhorted Native Americans to embrace agriculture.”92 Cherokees and other nations that did “abandon their hunter-gatherer economies” and “shifted from hunting to settled agriculture,” the chorus continues, finally “became farmers.”93 On the other hand, those “finding great difficulty in shifting from an economy of hunting and trapping to planting and cattle raising,” like Catawbas, “entered a long period of decline.”94

“Farmers like the whites” could mean “farmers in the way whites practiced farming” or “farmers, which the whites were (and Indians were not).” See also Ellis, American Creation, 139, 157.

91 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 124 (“notion”), 127 (“abandon”), 398 (“Cherokees”). Farmers like the whites” could mean “farmers in the way whites practiced farming” or “farmers, which the whites were (and Indians were not).” See also Ellis, American Creation, 139, 157.

92 Johnson, Early American Republic, 154–55 (“transition,” 155); McDougall, Throes of Democracy, 48 (“teachers and missionaries”). See also Ellis, Founding Brothers, 159; Jon Meacham, American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House (New York, 2008), 92–93; Walter Nugent, Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion (New York, 2008), 43; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 375. Sometimes the problem is a failure to spell out that the views expressed are those of a Henry Knox or John Marshall, not the historian’s: when Eliga H. Gould wrote that “George Washington warned the Cherokee . . . the Indians’ only hope for survival . . . was to abandon nomadic hunting for settled agriculture,” was it Gould, Washington, or both calling Natives nomadic hunters? See Gould, “The Question of Home Rule,” WMQ 64, no. 2 (April 2007): 255–58 (quotation, 257).

93 Ellis, Founding Brothers, 159 (“abandon”); Sean Wilentz, Andrew Jackson (New York, 2005), 67 (“shifted”; see also Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 149, 323; Wilentz [ibid., 149] also terms this “yeoman-style agriculture”); Louis P. Masur, 1831: Year of Eclipse (New York, 2001), 117 (“became farmers”). Norman K. Risjord uses the words “persuade them to take up farming,” though on the same page he writes that Cherokees were “already a comparatively settled agricultural people” (Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 375).

94 Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars (New York, 2001), 11.
Catawbas, having joined the colonists’ rebellion against Britain in 1776, did enough “planting and cattle raising” during the next several years to supply their allies with roast beef and a side dish of corn—but it does express the pervasive notion that Indians needed instruction to grow crops and coaxing to keep livestock.\textsuperscript{95}

A hidden variable in this pair of equations (Indians equal hunters, Europeans equal farmers) is settled, as in “from hunting to settled agriculture.” The word and its relatives—settlement, settlers, settler societies, settler colonialism (associated with European colonists)—can be traced back to the likes of John Winthrop. “As for the Natives in New England,” the Massachusetts Bay governor wrote, “they inclose noe Land, neither have any setled habytation, nor any tame Cattle to improve the Land by.”\textsuperscript{96} Other colonists were impressed by Native agriculture (Winthrop’s own son reported Indian farmers “loading the Ground with as much as it will beare”), and studies since have confirmed “very high yields per acre.”\textsuperscript{97} Still, the idea that settled means European customs—fences, plows, livestock, monoculture, dwellings occupied year round—endures.\textsuperscript{98}

Confining settler and its varietals to colonists derails efforts to understand early America. It makes European colonial thinking normative, denigrating and dismissing Native ways of ordering—settling—the land, thereby rendering Indian territories unsettled, with all the errors of that default mode (as with wilderness). In addition, it joins Winthrop and others to artificially widen the distance between Native and colonial practices (if not their values). In fact, both were farming folk who worked fields near towns.\textsuperscript{99} Both supplemented their diet with meat, and while hunting and herding seem far apart, scholars have shown that the difference gets exaggerated. On the


\textsuperscript{96} [John Winthrop], \textit{Winthrop Papers} ([Boston], 1931), 2: 141, quoted in Berkhofer, \textit{White Man’s Indian}, 121. See also Cronon, \textit{Changes in the Land}, 56; Elliott, \textit{Empires of the Atlantic World}, 53–54.


\textsuperscript{98} For colonists (mis)reading the Native landscape, see Jennings, \textit{Invasion of America}, 32; Cronon, \textit{Changes in the Land}, chap. 4; Anderson, \textit{Creatures of Empire}, 79–81.

\textsuperscript{99} Sometimes these were the same fields and towns, since newcomers headed for what colonists commonly called “Indian old fields” and set up villages on abandoned indigenous sites. See Jennings, \textit{Invasion of America}, 30; Cronon, \textit{Changes in the Land}, 127–28; Richter, \textit{Facing East}, 6, 53–57; Taylor, \textit{American Colonies}, 165; Anderson, \textit{Creatures of Empire}, 153. Robert Appelbaum has noted that “archaeological evidence suggests that many Algonquians were far more sedentary than [colonists’] ethnographic accounts would lead us to believe.” See Appelbaum, “Hunger in Early Virginia: Indians and English Facing Off over Excess, Want, and Need,” in Appelbaum and Sweet, \textit{Envisioning an English Empire}, 195–216 (quotation, 197).
one hand, Indians shaped the landscape in a way that drew game to cer-
tain places at certain times, so “in an important sense, they were harvest-
ing a foodstuff which they had consciously been instrumental in creating” and “practicing a more distant kind of husbandry of their own.” On
the other, colonists usually let cattle and hogs fend for themselves in the
woods, hunting for their own at particular seasons—and often discovering
that their supposedly domesticated creatures “behaved just like deer and
other wild beasts.”

That they were chasing down rather than penning up livestock is only
one indication that transplanted Europeans had a hard time living up to
their (and our) notions of “settling” their “wilderness.” In many respects,
Virginia DeJohn Anderson argues, early on “they acted more like native
farmers than English husbandmen.” If Indians’ old planting grounds,
the first choice, were scarce, colonists “simply adopted native methods for
clearing new fields,” girdling trees and planting among the dying trunks.
Once they had thus readied plots, they continued for a time to ape Indian
customs, grubbing with a hoe rather than striding along behind a plow.
At dusk they likely left the fields and headed home to hovels, for in New
England at first and in the Chesapeake much longer, most lived in dilapi-
dated shacks, with dirt floors, few or no windows, and precious little by
way of the furnishings and household goods that spelled civility to them
(and to us).

For a century “the material improvements signifying English
settlement were . . . visible mainly on small portions of Chesapeake planta-
tions and near the centers of New England towns.”

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100 Cronon, Changes in the Land, 51 (“important sense”), 52 (“practicing”), 129;
Jennings, Invasion of America, 63–65.
101 Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 171 (“behaved”), 111–23, 163–64.
102 Ibid., 116.
103 Silver, New Face on the Countryside, 105. See also Hawke, Everyday Life in Early
America, 33–34.
104 Around 1650 Virginia (with a population of twelve thousand colonists) had
about 150 plows. Approximately 5 percent of Maryland planters in the seventeenth
century owned a plow. See Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 111. In New England the
transition to plow agriculture took place earlier, but farming there, too, was a long way
from the English ideals (ibid., 145–46, 163–64, 171). See also Hawke, Everyday Life in
Early America, 36, 37. For colonial farming, see Demos, A Little Commonwealth, pt. 1;
Hawke, Everyday Life in Early America, chap. 4; James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz,
The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony (New York, 2000),
chaps. 5–6; Taylor, American Colonies, 145–48. For recent work that somewhat revises
this dim view on early Chesapeake housing, see Willie Graham et al., “Adaptation and
Innovation: Archaeological and Architectural Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century
Chesapeake,” WMQ 64, no. 3 (July 2007): 451–522.
105 Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 171 (quotation). See also John R. Stilgoe,
Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845 (New Haven, Conn., 1982), 52, 53; Taylor,
American Colonies, 171. The widespread scholarly agreement on lack of “settlement” in
the settled parts—Virginia, New England, the “backcountry”—can further be seen in
Gloria L. Main, Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720 (Princeton, N.J.,
Complicating matters further is the fact that even when a region did become, to newcomers, satisfactorily settled, what happened to it was profoundly destructive—in a word, unsettling—not just to Natives but to the land itself. Colonists’ “farming and lumbering,” remarked Colin G. Calloway in 1997, “wreaked havoc on the environment.” Clear-cutting forests changed the very climate: “sunnier and hotter in the summer,” “colder in the winter,” it was also muddier come spring because “soil froze[n] to greater depths than before” meant more frequent floods. Single-crop plow agriculture, when it came, “created even deeper ecological transformations,” raising flood risk and robbing soil of nutrients.106 Calling this settlement requires the same mindset that labels as development the making of a mall from a meadow or a parking lot out of the prairie.

Mired in this semantic swamp, early Americanists cannot help but spout oxymorons such as “settlers invaded,” “settlers destroyed,” “settlers” chose “to attack, plunder, and kill . . . Indians.”107 Some people dubbed settlers seem especially unlikely contenders for the title. The English who invaded Tsenacommacah beginning in 1607 died by the hundreds of disease, despair, malnutrition, even starvation; survivors seemed to spend what strength they had scheming against their fellows, bullying their neighbors, and—perhaps—dining on one another. Yet they are settlers still.108 So,
some 150 years later and a few hundred miles north, are the Paxton Boys, who “butchered” Conestoga Indian men, women, and children “with a genocidal mania.” Even scholars on the alert for the “discursive occlusion of colonizing’s violence, theft, exploitation, and enslavement” cannot escape settler for long. It somehow finds its way into works bent on dismantling “modern American history’s liberal metanarrative” and intent on interrogating loaded terms—such as, well, “settled.”

A word and concept so pervasive will be difficult to discard, but there are already substitutes aplenty and possibilities galore. Colonists certainly works, as do provincials, newcomers, immigrants, invaders, intruders, and reavers. Alternatively, it is simple enough to neutralize the positive word by adding an adjective so that “European settlers” share the page with “Tuscarora settlers.” Another option, taking up terms Native Americans themselves coined for these peoples from across the sea, has the advantage of reversing the polarity of perspective, but not everyone will be happy calling transplanted Europeans “Cloth makers” or “Knife men,” not to mention Kristoni (“I am a metal maker”), Agnonha (“Iron People”), or ouemichtigouchiou (“men in a wooden canoe or boat”). Keeping to an indigenous point of view, perhaps some feature distinguishing Europeans from Native Americans might come in handy, such as what Indians would call people who spent their days in a clearing, tending crops: women.
The wordplay masks a deeper seriousness of purpose and of consequence; it is not mere semantics. This collection of concepts—hunters, settlers, roam, woods, and the like—had real effects for Native peoples and for the course of American history. They were and are tools in the imperial project of relieving Indians of their sovereignty and their land.115

The close connection between the talk of hunting and roaming on the one hand and of imperiling Native territories and rights on the other is evident in some of the colonial authorities already visited. Thus John Winthrop’s denigration of Indian agriculture—“they inclose noe Land, neither have any setled habytation”—was prelude to his assertion in the next phrase that “soe [they] have noe other but a Naturall Right to those Countries,” a right left over from the day “when men held the earth in common” and one “superseded when individuals began to raise crops, keep cattle, and improve the land by enclosing it” (a “civil right”).116 So, too, John Marshall’s assertion that Indians’ “subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest” underpinned his argument that “to leave them in possession of their country, was to leave the country a wilderness.”117

115 My thinking on these issues is indebted to many scholars. The fullest treatment of Indian land rights is fairly recent—Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land—but many others before Banner have considered this subject. See Jennings, Invasion of America, chap. 8; Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 120–34; Russel Lawrence Barsh and James Youngblood Henderson, The Road: Indian Tribes and Political Liberty (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), chaps. 1–5; Dorothy V. Jones, License for Empire: Colonialism by Treaty in Early America (Chicago, 1982); Cronon, Changes in the Land, chap. 4; Williams, American Indian in Western Legal Thought, pts. 2–3; Anthony Pagden, Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500–c. 1800 (New Haven, Conn., 1995), chap. 3; David Armitage, The Ideological Origins of the British Empire (New York, 2000), 49–50, 93–99; Wilkins and Lomawaima, Uneven Ground, esp. introd. and chap. 1; Gregory Evans Dowd, “Wag the Imperial Dog: Indians and Overseas Empires in North America, 1650–1776,” in Deloria and Salisbury, Companion to American Indian History, 46–67, esp. 46–48; Sidney L. Harring, “Indian Law, Sovereignty, and State Law: Native People and the Law,” ibid., 441–59; Taiaiake Alfred, “Sovereignty,” ibid., 460–74; Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, esp. chaps. 1–2, 4. A recent illuminating comparative work on sovereignty is Lisa Ford, Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836 (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). Though I here combine treatment of sovereignty and land rights, I recognize that the two are by no means the same thing. As Stuart Banner has noted, “the acquisition of property in land” is “not the acquisition of sovereignty over territory. Property means ownership; sovereignty means the right to govern” (Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 6–7 [“property,” 6, “sovereignty,” 6–7]). However, Banner also has pointed out that, while the two are “separate issues,” they are often conflated, both in early America and since (ibid., 7–8 [quotation, 8], 14).

116 Cronon, Changes in the Land, 56 (“they inclose” [quoted from Winthrop, Winthrop Papers, 2: 140–41], “superseded”). See also Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 121.

But such talk runs counter to other contemporaneous views, not to mention the custom of negotiating treaties with Indians. Here the fledgling United States followed Britain’s lead. “The independent nations and tribes of Indians ought to be considered as foreign nations, not as the subjects of any particular state,” wrote Secretary of War Henry Knox to President George Washington in 1789 as the two began drafting federal Indian policy. Moreover, “the Indian tribes possess the right of the soil of all lands within their limits.” Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, too, concluded that when it came to Indian lands the United States claimed nothing “as amounting to any dominion, or jurisdiction, or paramountship whatever” beyond the exclusive right to buy any territory Natives might want to sell; “the Indians had the full, undivided and independent sovereignty as long as they choose to keep it, and . . . this might be forever.”

Indians—surprise!—concorded. From before the day Powhatan refused an invitation to Jamestown to accept gifts (and a vassal’s crown) from James I—“If your king have sent me presents,” he told John Smith, “I also am a king, and this my land. . . . Your father [Virginia leader Christopher Newport] is to come to me, not I to him”—Natives scoffed at European pretensions to rule. Rarely were these declarations of independence louder than after treaties in Paris in 1763 and 1783, when empires passed around eastern North America without consulting Indians. Are these peoples subjects of King George who had made “Submissions” to Britain? Rubbish, Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Johnson told his superiors in 1767. Indians call “themselves a free people” and say that they are “no more than our friends and Allies.” “Whoever should undertake to go further on the subject with them,” Johnson warned, “must have a good army at his back.”

A Cherokee speaker two decades later, after a couple of those armies had invaded his nation, still scolded U.S. commissioners: “were we to inquire by what law or authority you set up a claim [over us], I answer, none! Your laws extend not into our country, nor ever did.”


120 Barbour, Complete Works, 1: 236, quoted in Horn, A Land as God Made It, 105.

121 E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York (Albany, N.Y., 1856), 7: 958 (quotations; see also Taylor, American Colonies, 437).

With many colonists, America’s founders, and Natives (not to mention historians) concurring that indigenous peoples were sovereign nations, it is remarkable how often ordinary usage reinforces a contrary view, how it echoes—and thus lends credence to—colonial ambitions and imperial fictions. True, not everyone falls for the bluff and bluster. Some point out that “European claims to control extended only as far as the nearest Indians,” that such claims “existed only on paper,” and that to think such “fantasy” true is “somewhat ludicrous.” But many scholars, mistaking would-be conquerors’ blather for fact, still turn dream into reality and Indians into subjects.

One way this happens is by accepting European (and, later, American) talk of ruling peoples and territories. The alchemy is perhaps easiest to detect in treatments of the contest for eastern North America during the second half of the eighteenth century. To hear many books tell it, these struggles began over “the question of whether the Ohio River valley belonged to British North America or French Canada”—but not to any Indians. The answer, according to accepted interpretations, came in 1763, when “France and Spain ceded all their territory east of the Mississippi to Great Britain.” This “gave Britain undisputed dominance


123 Scholarly treatments of Natives and nationhood include Nobles, American Frontiers, 34; Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, introd., chaps. 1–2; Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, chaps. 1–2. Steven C. Hahn has defined “nationhood” as “the drawing of territorial boundaries, the creation of institutions of national leadership, and the invention of ideologies that legitimize the existence thereof.” Hahn, The Invention of the Creek Nation, 1670–1763 (Lincoln, Neb., 2004), 8. This is not to say that every Native people was, at the time of European contact, a nation in this sense. Many—including Creeks—developed that sort of identity in the course of their shared history with European imperial powers. For the complexity of Native identities and nations, see for example Michael Witgen, “The Rituals of Possession: Native Identity and the Invention of Empire in Seventeenth-Century Western North America,” Ethnohistory 54, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 639–68 (thanks to Jean O’Brien for alerting me to Witgen’s work); Brooks, Common Pot; Jon Parmenter, The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534–1701 (East Lansing, Mich., 2010).

124 Nobles, American Frontiers, 83 (“European claims”), 92 (“existed”); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 289 (“fantasy”); Ellis, His Excellency, 4 (“ludicrous”; see also Parkman, Conspiracy of Pontiac, 1: 170). See also Nugent, Habits of Empire, 3, 5, 9, 16, 39, 43; Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 7; Witgen, Ethnohistory 54: 639–68.

125 Sarson, British America, 207.

126 Hinderaker and Mancall, At the Edge of Empire, 5.
over the eastern half of North America”—dominance that in fact Native powers would dispute for decades to come.127 In Paris twenty years later, the fable continues, it was Britain’s turn to hand over its territories (not its claims) to the United States, which meant that the new nation’s “western border at the time was the Mississippi,” even that Americans had “nearly an entire continent at their disposal.”128

Simply leaving Indians offstage certainly elides their territorial sovereignty, but there are plenty of other ways to accomplish that task. Freighted words can quietly question sovereignty. A vital ingredient in the lexical elixir dissolving Indian independence is claimed, as in “tribes that claimed status as independent nations” and “natives’ claims to sovereignty over their own land.”129 One book, on the same page, concocts a spurious equivalency among “Amerindian claims to western lands,” “western land companies that claimed vast tracts of trans-Appalachian territory,” and various colonies’ “land claims that stretched all the way to the Pacific Ocean.” To be sure, many non-Natives get it, talking of “Indian land,” “their territory,” or “their Country.”130 But it remains common to say that Creeks had “legitimate claim to a large slice of land,” to write of “lands that Native Americans regarded as their own,” to mention (quotation marks at work again) that “the [Ohio] country . . . ‘belonged’ to them.”131

127 Wood, American Revolution, 4. See also Reginald Horsman, The New Republic: The United States of America, 1789–1815 (Harlow, U.K., 2000), 1, 8; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 71. For better phrasing, see Taylor, American Colonies, 432. Maps reinforce these wrongheaded notions, depicting lands between the Appalachians and the Mississippi as “British Territory from France” (sans Indians) and labeling as “disputed territory” only places disputed by European or American empires. See Nellis, Empire of Regions, 308 (map 10.1: “The Proclamation Line of 1763” [“British Territory from France”]); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 266 (“French and Spanish Occupation of North America to 1750” [“disputed”]); Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 22 (“North America in 1818” [“disputed”]).

128 Ellis, American Creation, 5 (“western border”; but see 130, where Ellis clarifies the limits of American sovereignty); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 4 (“entire continent”; see also 114–15, 117, 131–32); Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 200–203.

129 David S. Reynolds, Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson (New York, 2008), 91 (“claimed status,” emphasis added), 59 (“claims to sovereignty,” emphasis added). See also Masur, 1831, 93. Still another way is to undermine such claims by treating U.S.-Indian relations not as foreign policy but as part of “the domestic front” (Reynolds, Waking Giant, 59; see also Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 171).

130 Sarson, British America, 184 (“Amerindian claims,” emphasis added), 185 (“Indian land”; see also Parkman, Conspiracy of Pontiac, 2: 307; Meacham, American Lion, 54); Johnson, Early American Republic, 19 (“their territory”; see also 46); Griffin, American Leviathan, 42 (“their Country,” a remark by a colonist, quoted from George Croghan to William Johnson, Jan. 18, 1767, Croghan Papers, Letters and Documents, file 5, 4, 6). See also Ellis, American Creation, 147; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 414.

131 Ellis, American Creation, 153 (“legitimate,” emphasis added; see also Ellis, His Excellency, 19); Griffin, American Leviathan, 205 (“regarded,” emphasis added), 69 (“belonged”; see also 62). And see Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 275. For belonged, see Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 7: “We often say colloquially that a particular
Controlled, too, is a handy tool for prying land loose. Pondering the made-up sentence “In 1700 English colonists controlled the lands bordering the Chesapeake Bay” makes it easier to appreciate the hidden power of a sentence such as “the Five Nations of the Iroquois . . . controlled a broad swath between the Hudson River and the lake of the Eries.” Occupied further eats away at Indian sovereignty, suggesting land whose inhabitants do not quite seem to belong. Thus in the 1760s “the Cherokees . . . occupied much of [South Carolina’s] western and northwestern area,” just as after the Revolution “most of Georgia was still occupied by Creeks and Cherokees . . . and the Iroquois occupied western New York.” Such turns of phrase are only innocuous if we also start saying that in 1700 English colonists still occupied Tsenacommacah.

From claimed, controlled, and occupied, it is easy to start taking at face value transplanted Europeans’ “ludicrous” “fantasies” about America. Those Five—later Six—Nations did not “occupy” or “control” “western New York”; they lived in and ruled Iroquoia, as anyone venturing uninvited into that realm would find out. Nor can it be said that they “relinquished western New York and Pennsylvania”; if they relinquished anything, it was Iroquoia, not New York. We tend to forget this, but some colonial cartographers

zone of land ‘belongs’ to this or that country without specifying whether we mean to speak of property or sovereignty.”

132 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 101 (“Five Nations,” emphasis added). I made this point earlier (Merrell, WMQ 46: 109), but it bears repeating, since the word is widespread. See Sarson, British America, 185; Ellis, American Creation, 128; Johnson, Early American Republic, 18; Nellis, Empire of Regions, 91.

133 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 9 (“Cherokees . . . occupied,” emphasis added); Horsman, New Republic, 105 (“most of Georgia,” emphasis added). For the way this word works with controlled, see Reynolds, Waking Giant, 59: “In former times, Creeks had controlled nearly all of Georgia.”

134 See Frederic W. Gleach, Powhatan’s World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures (Lincoln, Neb., 1997), chap. 4 (“The Birth of Virginia in Tsenacommacah”). The lopsided way occupy can work is evident even when Americans as well as Natives occupy someplace. “The Treaty of Paris in 1783 had given to the United States territory far beyond its actual settlements,” writes Gordon S. Wood. “The people of the original thirteen states occupied only about half of the territory of the newly enlarged country. Not only was this new territory occupied by Indians, but the borderlands . . . were dominated by Great Britain and Spain.” Wood, Empire of Liberty, 112 (emphasis added). What might look like evenhanded treatment—both Indians and Americans occupied territory—turns out otherwise on closer inspection. Though U.S. citizens only occupy a portion of the lands east of the Mississippi and Natives occupy the rest, nonetheless the new Republic rules all of it. Like discovery, continued use of occupied, occupancy, and occupy has the added deleterious effect of eroding Native sovereignty over land, recalling as it does Chief Justice John Marshall’s opinion in Johnson v. McIntosh (1823), where he helped construct “the . . . principle, that the Indian inhabitants are to be considered merely as occupants . . . in the possession of their lands” when Europeans arrived (“Johnson v. McIntosh: Opinion,” Feb. 28, 1823, in Hobson et al., Papers of John Marshall, 9: 294 [quotation], 292, 296).

135 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 289 (“relinquished”). See Christopher Vecsey and William A. Starna, eds., Iroquois Land Claims (Syracuse, N.Y., 1988);

Many New Yorkers might have thought that Iroquoia lay “within their borders” or wished that it did; those familiar with the lay of the land knew better.

Even small words can cause big trouble. It is getting well ahead of the story to declare that Tuscaroras were “living in North Carolina” rather than in Tuscarora territory or that Shawnees were “in western Ohio and northern Indiana” before Ohio or Indiana existed. Another preposition—of—conveys the same message about sovereignty and subordination. Asserting that in New England “the leading tribes were the Mohegan and Pequot of Connecticut, the Narragansett of Rhode Island, the Patuxet and Wampanoag of the Plymouth colony, and the Nipmuck, Massachusetts, and Pennacook of the Massachusetts Bay colony” slips the colonial yoke over these nations far in advance of any actual submission. From there, it is a short step to making Native capitals out to be American towns such as “Onondaga, New York” (in 1754!) and “Etowah, Georgia” (1793).

The irony here is that common parlance has phrases aplenty to suggest the realities of sovereignty and territory, power and perspective. “Present-day Georgia,” “what is now South Carolina,” “modern New York,” and “what would become Pennsylvania” are clumsier, but they are also better, albeit imperfect.

Eschew them, and the Iroquois peoples end up living

Laurence M. Hauptman, Conspiracy of Interests: Iroquois Dispossession and the Rise of New York State (Syracuse, N.Y., 1999).


137 Ellis, American Creation, 134 (quotation; but see 142, 147); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 36 (see also McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 119, 258).

138 Taylor, American Colonies, 234 (“North Carolina,” emphasis added); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 123 (“western Ohio,” emphasis added; placing other Indian nations in this sentence, Wood does say “what is now eastern and central Ohio”). See also Horman, New Republic, 12, 105; Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 9; Middleton, Colonial America, 321; McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 119; Sarson, British America, 53; Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 24; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 262; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 342–43, 345 (but see 126); Johnson, Early American Republic, 18–19; Meacham, American Lion, 91; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 103, 161, 375.

139 Taylor, American Colonies, 189 (emphasis added). See also Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 219–20, 380; Reynolds, Waking Giant, 7, 93.

140 Ellis, His Excellency, 5 (“Onondaga”); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 359 (“Etowah”). Another way of accomplishing the same thing is to suggest that Native refugees migrating to Iroquoia to become one of the props of the Iroquois’ metaphorical longhouse were going not to the Iroquois but to Pennsylvania. See Taylor, American Colonies, 269; Sarson, British America, 181.

141 Stephen Aron, American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State (Bloomington, Ind., 2006), xv, xvii. Many scholars employ qualifiers, just not consistently.
“in New York” some fifty (or, in one case, five hundred) years before that spot of ground was actually the Empire State anywhere other than some speculator’s dream and some mapmaker’s mind. ¹⁴²

Cartographic mind games are still played today, further fogging the lens through which we try to make out early America. Most fail to heed warnings by Gregory H. Nobles and others that maps “often represented the world not as it really was but as the mapmaker (or, more to the point, the mapmaker’s sponsor) wanted it to be. Thus maps became important instruments of imperial policy.”¹⁴³ Think of borderlines. Colonists knew that “Natives are very exact and punctual in the bounds of their Lands, belonging to this or that Prince or People, (even to a River, Brooke) &c.,” yet few scholarly works mark or remark these.¹⁴⁴ Renderings nowadays make up for a lack of Indian borders by an excess of enthusiasm for colonial and state lines, evidently unaware that “even in the Europe of the later seventeenth century, the concept of territorial demarcation through precisely defined linear boundaries was not yet fully established.”¹⁴⁵ No matter: long before the divide between New York and Pennsylvania was fixed or the western boundaries of Pennsylvania and South Carolina surveyed, there they are on our maps, confidently marching across the page. This is not just historically inaccurate; it also exaggerates the contrast between European polities (fixed straight lines) and their Native American counterparts (no lines at all).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² For “Iroquois lands in central New York” before 1492, see Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 36.

¹⁴³ Nobles, American Frontiers, 60. On colonial cartography as an arm of empire, see ibid., 60–62; Calloway, New Worlds for All, 12; Short, Representing the Republic; Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, 16–18; Tomlins, “Law’s Wilderness,” 34–37; Brückner, Geographic Revolution; Day, Conquest, chap. 2; Preston, Texture of Contact, 12; Short, Cartographic Encounters.

¹⁴⁴ Roger Williams, A Key into the Language of America . . . (Providence, 1643), 93, quoted in Alden T. Vaughan, New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620–1675, rev. ed. (New York, 1979), 105. For other examples, see Jennings, Invasion of America, 67; Cronon, Changes in the Land, 60; Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, 17; Taylor, Divided Ground, 36. An exception to their omissions is Middleton, Colonial America, 318, map 10: “The American Indian Nations, ca. 1750.”

¹⁴⁵ Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 265 (quotation); see also Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, 21–22; Edwards, “Between ‘Plain Wilderness’ and ‘Goodly Corn Fields,” 217–35.

¹⁴⁶ Sarson, British America, vii (map 1: “Eastern North America, 1690–1748” [modern borders of Pennsylvania and South Carolina; repr. from Johnson, “Growth and Mastery,” 278]); Taylor, American Colonies, 249 (“The Middle Colonies, c. 1690” [Pennsylvania–New York]); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 143 (“English Colonies” [Pennsylvania–New York; Pennsylvania’s western border]). That the modern lines are included to help orient the reader seems unlikely, given the distinctive outline of eastern North America. Absent, too, is any hint of the border wars endemic in this era; as David L. Preston has noted, “Pennsylvania’s evolving boundaries, for example, were contested by the Six Nations, Ohio Indians, Virginia, Maryland, Connecticut, and New York” (Preston, Texture of Contact, 12). And see Michael Kammen, People of
Placement of names has the same unfortunate effect. A map titled “New England, c. 1650” that centers the “Massachusetts” label on the Connecticut River is only slightly less anachronistic (a few English towns were there then) than one of the Southeast ca. 1710 that plants “Virginia” 200 miles west of Williamsburg and “South Carolina” 125 miles northwest of Charleston, or another of “The Atlantic Seaboard, c. 1700” that stretches “Pennsylvania” between the upper Susquehanna River and Lake Erie while stringing “New York” through Iroquoia. Such “wishful thinking” is enhanced by making names of European colonies larger than those of Native nations, putting the former in capital letters and the latter in lowercase (NEW YORK/Iroquoia), rendering names of colonies bold, or confining names of indigenous peoples within parentheses. Some early modern mapmakers used these tricks of the trade to claim and conquer a continent. Why their sleight of pen endures is harder to fathom, but the result is clear: we rely on faulty charts to find our way into the past.

The misnomer miasma brewed by talk about Indian farming (or lack thereof) and Indian sovereignty (or lack thereof) grows even more toxic when mixed with another compound common in European and American thought: savagery. The belief that Indians were savages often accompanied the conviction that they were hunters. Just as John Marshall confidently declared that Indians’ “subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest,” so in the same sentence he wrote that they “were fierce savages, whose occupa-

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148 Tomlins, “Law’s Wilderness,” 36 (“wishful thinking”); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 169, “New England Colonies” (font size, bold, gray); Taylor, American Colonies, 163, “New England, c. 1650” (font size, bold vs. italics); Wood, American Revolution, xix (bold vs. gray); Eric Nellis, The Long Road to Change: America’s Revolution, 1750–1820 (Peterborough, Ont., 2007), 52, map 2.1: “The Thirteen Colonies and the Proclamation of 1763” (font size, parentheses). As Gregory H. Nobles has noted, “Consider the effect if . . . . the names of Indian groups were printed in large letters and the names of European colonies in small: the power of the Europeans would no longer seem quite so imposing” (Nobles, American Frontiers, 61–62).
tion was war.”

“So good a Countrey, so bad a people,” wrote another self-styled expert on Indians two centuries earlier; “more brutish than the beasts they hunt, more wild and unmanly then that unmanned wild countrey . . . captivated also to Satans tyranny in . . . busie and bloody wickednesse.”

Like Puritans conjuring a wilderness, early American authors outdid themselves in detailing that wickedness. “Savage and brutish men,” shuddered William Bradford, who are “cruel, barbarous and most treacherous”; “most furious in their rage,” they “delight to torment men in the most bloody manner that may be.” They are a “perfidious and inhumane people,” exclaimed one of Bradford’s contemporaries while recounting the “barbarous Sauagenesse” of the Powhatans’ 1622 attack on English intruders into Tsenacommacah. These “beasts” and “hell-hounds” “massacred them [colonists], without remorse or pitty,” then went about “defacing, dragging, and mangling the dead carkasses into many pieces, and carrying some parts away in derision, with base and brutish triumph.”

Our language has become more, well, civilized when it comes to savage. Books that still talk about hunters in a wilderness would no more use the s-word than they would call Natives hellhounds. Still, even without branding Indians savages, the deeper message from times past—that Native Americans were warriors above all, that they fought colonists relentlessly (and, yes, savagely) until finally defeated—can still be heard.

One way the message comes across is to associate Indians with rage and a loss of self-control. If few call them “bloodthirsty” or their attacks “savage

150 Samuel Purchas, “Virginia’s Verger; or, A Discourse shewing the benefits which may grow to this kingdome from American English Plantations . . .,” in Hakluytus Posthumus, 19: 231, quoted in Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 21. See also Jennings, Invasion of America, chaps. 5, 9.
fury” anymore, many are partial to making them “furious,” “angry,” “restive,” “hostile,” or “seething.” Not only that: “hostiles” seem endlessly agitated, ever at war or on the brink of war, always warriors. In fact, a generation of scholarship has shown that among Natives warrior was neither a career nor a chronic condition; it was a temporary state, marked off from daily life before a man set out and after he returned home by rituals (abstaining from sex, fasting, purging) designed to enable him to effectively enter and safely leave that dangerous alterity. Nonetheless, in our histories an Indian adult male is rarely just a man or an Indian. The first thanksgiving? Pilgrims hosted Wampanoag leader Massasoit and “ninety of his braves” (the 1622 original says “nintie men”). Should Native men farm? “Indian warriors did not believe they should actually work tilling fields.” Nine hundred Creeks coming to talk peace with U.S. officials? “Warriors.” A delegation of twenty-seven headmen, bound for the new nation’s capital to confirm that peace? “Warriors whose intentions were entirely peaceful.”

Making every Native man a warrior tints Indian-colonial relations red. So does the implication that there was no path forward in North America after Europeans arrived save battle and bloodshed, sorrow and surrender, because the continent’s original inhabitants would fight to the bitter end. For millennia, says Andrew Jackson biographer H. W. Brands, “the struggle for North America” has been violent. “Conflict was a regular feature of life among the [Native] North Americans. They fought for forests . . . , for rivers . . . , for bottomlands . . . . Great warriors were the heroes of their


155 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 25 (“hostiles”; see also 27–28, 39, 76, 79).


158 Wood, American Revolution, 118.

159 Ellis, American Creation, 146 (“Warriors”; see also 142), 151 (“intentions”). See also Middleton, Colonial America, 316; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 103.
tribes, emulated by other men, sought by women, hallowed in memory.” Hence “the arrival of the Europeans” merely “added new elements to the competition” for the continent, opening another chapter in a gory saga. Yes, “the palefaces got pushy,” but mostly the American chronicle recounts Natives’ “campaign of terror” and accompanying “reports of the Indian atrocities—with the torture of prisoners and the mutilation and cannibalism of the murdered recounted in excruciating detail—[which] caused hearts to clutch.”160

Few would dispute that “conflict was a regular feature of life among the North Americans”—as it was (and is) among human societies generally. But characterizing Natives as warmongers, arguing that “diplomacy” merely “complemented military force,” ignores work showing how (for example) “people of the Five Nations [Iroquois] prized peace far more than war” and how—to linger in Iroquoia—culture heroes were not just fighters but Hiawatha (“he who combs” out tangled hair and soothes troubled minds—in other words, seeks peace) and Deganawidah (“the Peacemaker”).161

Hiawatha, Deganawidah, and others who made peace rather than war have not toppled the trope of an implacable Indian foe locked in a life-or-death struggle against European intruders. “One can find political and economic white-native cooperation dating from the Jamestown experiment all the way to the Revolution,” allows a 2010 survey of early America, “but, for the most part, natives encountered whites in wars of resistance.”162 Another synthesizer gives equally short shrift to Natives who were traders and missionaries, diplomats and guides, neighbors and spouses, servants and slaves, arguing that the way indigenous peoples “shaped Euro-American colonization” was that they “fought against” it.163

In fact, many fought for the colonizers, not against them; they were allies in wars of conquest, not enemies in wars of resistance. The label French and Indian War is symptomatic of the chronic, crippling inability to grasp that simple truth. The title stands firm against a wave of work showing that many Indians—Cherokees, Catawbas, Mohawks, and Wappingers, to name a few—fought alongside British and colonial forces in that conflict. The

160 Brands, Andrew Jackson, 3 (“struggle”), 4 (“arrival”), 6–9 (“reports,” 8).
162 Nellis, Empire of Regions, xxi (quotation). See also Reynolds, Waking Giant, 91.
163 Sarson, British America, xiv (quotations). Steven Sarson does grant that Indians were among those who “profoundly shaped ‘everyday life’ in early America,” but he does not spell out the difference between “shaped ‘everyday life’” and “shaped Euro-American colonization of their lands.” Ibid., xiii (“profoundly”), xiv (“colonization”).
anti-imperial rebellion that erupted soon after French Canada fell could be called “the British and Indian War,” so often do scholars omit Natives who sided with the resistance. In the southern theater, Catawbas not only supplied American forces with food, scores of their men joined the rebels to fight the crown on battlefields from coast to piedmont to mountains.\(^{164}\) In the north most Iroquois ultimately remained loyal to Britain, but Oneidas, Tuscaroraras, and others who fought for Congress rather than king get lost in talk of how “members of the Iroquois Federation had sided with the British during the Revolution.”\(^{165}\)

Stressing “Indian support for Britain against U.S. independence” is bad enough.\(^{166}\) Worse, it excludes all Natives from the ranks of the angels in America’s creation story, marking them indelibly as the Declaration’s “merciless Indian Savages.”\(^{167}\) Indians thanked by American officials because “you . . . fought and Bled with your white Brothers of America”? Native men whom their non-Native neighbors “called Revolutionary soldiers”?\(^{168}\) Such accolades got drowned out by insistence that Natives had been “aggressors in the war, without even a pretence of provocation,” as a congressional committee concluded in 1783.\(^{169}\) Twenty-five years later Jackson

\(^{164}\) The literature on Indians who allied with this or that European empire (including Britain’s) is vast. A recent treatment of it is Claudio Saunt, “‘Our Indians’: European Empires and the History of the Native American South,” in The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2007), 61–75. James Axtell noted the term’s problems more than twenty years ago. See Axtell, “Forked Tongues,” 43. For the Catawbas’ experience in the Revolutionary War, see Brown, Catawba Indians, 261–73; Merrell, Indians’ New World, 215–22. Little of that experience has found its way into modern histories of combat in those parts. See Hendrik Booraem, Young Hickory: The Making of Andrew Jackson (Dallas, Tex., 2001), chaps. 4–7 (Booraem mentions Catawba allies but downplays their numbers [“several,” 56, a “dozen or so,” 69] and their involvement); Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 16–18; Wood, American Revolution, 81; John W. Gordon, South Carolina and the American Revolution: A Battlefield History (Columbia, S.C., 2003), 40, 108; Brands, Andrew Jackson, 24–26, 29; Middlekauff, Glorious Cause, 458–65 (for this revised edition Middlekauff added a section on Catawba service [577], but it is not integrated into treatment of the war). An exception is Jim Piecuch, Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775–1782 (Columbia, S.C., 2008).

\(^{165}\) Johnson, Early American Republic, 19 (quotation). See also Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 133, 146–49; Ellis, American Creation, 128; Ellis, “The McGillivray Moment,” 56; Ellis, His Excellency, 123. At other points Joseph J. Ellis does note the Confederacy’s split (ibid., 124). See also Wood, Empire of Liberty, 119. Gordon S. Wood too is aware that not all Natives sided with Britain: ibid., 125; Wood, American Revolution, 118. For Iroquois history during this era, see Graymont, Iroquois in the American Revolution; Calhoun, American Revolution in Indian Country, chaps. 4–5.

\(^{166}\) David Reynolds, America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States (New York, 2009), 82.

\(^{167}\) See Calhoun, American Revolution in Indian Country, 272–301.

\(^{168}\) Quoted in Merrell, Indians’ New World, 218 (“fought and Bled”), 219 (“called”).

(a Catawba neighbor and comrade-in-arms) joined the many Americans painting all Indians with a brush dipped in scarlet, recalling how “during the revolutionary war” they had “raised the scalping knife and tomahawk, against our defenseless women and children.” 170 By then it was conventional wisdom any time blood spilled. “I can with truth say, that . . . the Indians have always been the aggressors,” one Kentuckian insisted, “that any incursions made [by whites] into their country have been from reiterated injuries committed by them.” 171

Historians these days tend to agree. For every mention that newcomers were at fault—that America’s original inhabitants, provoked, then retaliated—there are more when Indians get blamed. 172 From the moment Europeans disembarked, we are told, the Natives were restless. Explorers ran into “aggressive Indians,” were “repelled by Indians,” “killed” by Indians, all (if the books can be believed) for no discernible reason. Early colonists, too, found that “hostile Indians,” “Indian attacks,” and “Indian troubles”—the causes again unexplained—competed with “disease” and “food shortage” for the honor of being Public Enemy Number One. 173 Thereafter the script is largely unchanged. From the Pequot War (“to avenge the murder of a white trader”) through Kieft’s War (“natives killed a Dutch settler”) and Bacon’s Rebellion (“Indian raids . . . killed dozens of settlers”), recent chronicles of conflict ignore work that makes Natives more victim than villain. 174 One of the last armed clashes east of the

170 Harold D. Moser and Sharon Macpherson, eds., The Papers of Andrew Jackson (Knoxville, Tenn., 1984), 2: 191–92, quoted in Richter, Facing East, 228 (also quoted in Calloway, American Revolution in Indian Country, 297).
172 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 10, 27; Wood, American Revolution, 9; Brands, Andrew Jackson, 14; Griffin, American Leviathan, 51–52, 59, 78, 112–13, 129, 139, 157–59, 172, 190; Reynolds, Waking Giant, 91; Wood, Empire of Liberty, 133.
173 Sarson, British America, 4 (“aggressive”; see also Reich, Colonial America, 1–2), 5 (“attacks”), 59; Brands, Andrew Jackson, 334 (“hostile”; see also McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 34). James Axtell noticed this emphasis on hostility long ago (Axtell, “Columbian Mosaic,” 238).
Mississippi River gets a similar makeover: in 1832 a “war party” led by “the Sauk warrior Black Hawk. . . . reclaimed their ancestral lands near Rock Island, Illinois, and routed the local militia.”175 Missing here is that the “war party” had perhaps twice as many women, children, and old people as fighting men and that the militia were only routed after they fired on the white flag Black Hawk had sent (to negotiate safe passage back across the Mississippi), killing one Sauk messenger and capturing two others before racing out to attack the rest.176

The way promiscuous use of war party and hostile Indians works to put the onus on indigenous aggression can be found in many ordinary phrases. Reading of “war between settlers and Cherokee raiders in 1760,” it is hard not to side with the settlers, regardless of the conflict’s complicated origins—complications that included Virginians murdering dozens of Cherokee men who were en route home after fighting for King George II against the French.177 Sympathies often stay with those “settlers” even when they went out against Indians, for many modern histories have it that Americans sent “a . . . punitive expedition against some of the renegade Indians” and set about “taking vengeance on Cherokees who scalped and burned women and children.”178 If Americans themselves scalped or burned, that too could be the Indians’ doing: “whites responded to brutal Indian atrocities with even more bloody atrocities of their own”; in other words, “they returned such behavior in kind.”179

A look at the handling of those atrocities turns up traces of savagery in the scholarly bloodstream.180 Certainly few these days call Indian attacks

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175 McDougall, Throes of Democracy, 54.
176 Roger L. Nichols, Black Hawk and the Warrior’s Path (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1992), 117 (less than “six hundred fighting men” out of perhaps two thousand people), 121–23. For an able account of this episode in a synthetic work, see Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 419.
177 Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 15 (emphasis added). For the causes, see Hatley, Dividing Paths, chaps. 8–10 (for examples of Cherokees murdered by colonists, see 100–101).
178 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 129 (“punitive,” emphasis added); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 357 (“taking vengeance,” emphasis added). See also Middlekauff, Glorious Cause, 573; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 170.
179 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 395 (“whites responded,” emphasis added); Griffin, American Leviathan, 63 (“they returned,” emphasis added).
180 Works that do explain Indian acts include Taylor, American Colonies, 102–4; Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 132, 396–98.
“spontaneous raids” or “spasmodic massacres,” and many point out that whites too committed heinous acts against innocent Natives. Others suggest, correctly, that tales of Indian brutality were often exaggerated if not fabricated. That said, books appearing in the past decade or so still have not managed to compose a balanced account of the cruel things Natives and their neighbors did to one another.

It is not always for want of trying. Working the revolutionary frontier, Patrick Griffin’s *American Leviathan* sets out to unpack “the stuff of American myth,” which has “forgotten . . . the true nature of the horrors settlers had inflicted on Indians.” Chiding early American elites who “did not attempt to make sense of” Indian attacks and sported “ideological blinders that . . . did not allow them to understand the scope of Indian resistance or . . . the forms that it took,” Griffin is candid about how often “almost feral” frontiersmen “butchered” and “slaughtered” innocent Natives. Nonetheless, the book spends more time explaining “why settlers acted the way they did” than trying to fathom Indian behavior. Yes, whites who launched “what we could call genocidal attacks on Indian communities” certainly “seemed a crazed and deluded mob,” Griffin admits, but there was method in their madness. They had long “endured all the horrors of a brutal war,” and those “years of privation and bloodshed,” “years living in dread,” years when they “lost friends and relatives,” “had conditioned settlers to perceive threats all around.” Dealing with those threats, frontier folk devised a “rationale for butchery,” “subtle justifications,” and their assaults were “incidents of politicization” that could “signal . . . an emerging sensibility” about ruling themselves. And Indians who killed? They had (unspecified) “sensibilities” too, along with “justifiable wrath” and an “agenda” (“to take back their lands” or “[settle] old scores”). But there is less emphasis on Natives also having “lost friends and relatives” to “the horrors of a brutal war.” One side, however “inflamed by Indian hatred,” has a “rationale,” “an animating ideology,” a “mind-set”; the other is mostly just “inflamed.”

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181 Brands, *Andrew Jackson*, 195 (“spontaneous”); McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, 45 (“spasmodic”). See also Nellis, *Long Road to Change*, 170: “Spontaneous and sometimes organized violence accompanied the American wave into the west,” which seems to suggest that both sides could be “spontaneous.”


As with motives, so with means. According to *American Leviathan*, colonists slaying Indians spoke in a code that can be cracked. It was “butchery,” sure, when two Pennsylvanians killed and scalped ten Natives (including children and women), but it had a “calculated nature.” Calculated, too, were the actions of an American war party that shot several Indians during a truce, seized several more, and wounded one captive with a tomahawk before putting a rope around his neck, dragging him about, then tossing him into a river and watching him “spend still a few moments of life in fruitless struggles.” All this was “theatrics,” a “spectacle” designed to make “an ‘impression.'”

to examine particular moments that reveal the ways encounters between Natives and newcomers are dyed red. What seems like a straightforward story turns out to obscure a complicated reality by rendering Indians more different and more dangerous than they were—and than their colonial neighbors thought they were.

Consider George Washington’s 1748 surveying expedition up the Potomac River. Among the teenager’s adventures, writes Joseph J. Ellis in *His Excellency*, “he . . . saw an Indian war party, returning from a skirmish with one scalp and celebrating their victory by dancing around their campfire to the music of a kettledrum.”186 This sounds as if Washington came across a wilderness bivouac (“campfire”) and kept his distance (“saw”) from this scary bunch (“war party”).187

The Virginian’s diary (the source *His Excellency* uses) tells a different story. For one thing, that encounter took place not in the woods but at Maryland frontiersman Thomas Cresap’s trading post, a popular rest stop for Natives and colonists alike. (Washington and his companion had holed up there to await better weather.) For another, Washington did more than just watch Indians dance. Probably advised by Cresap, he gave them some liquor, after which (perhaps returning the favor) the men put on a show—building a fire in the center of a large circle, sitting around the edge of that ring, then listening to one of their number make “a grand Speech telling them in what Manner they are to Daunce.”188

But these are not the most significant places where Ellis and Washington part company. What the biography implies was an ominous encounter was, to this neophyte, quite otherwise. He reported that he was “agreeably surpris’d” to see these fellows, not afraid. Most revealing of all, though, is what happened after the music stopped. *His Excellency* is silent about it, but in fact our hero ended up hanging out with his new acquaintances the following day. Not only that, he thought so little of it that his next journal entry said simply: “Nothing Remarkable on thursday but only being with the Indians all day so shall slip it. This day left Cresaps.”189 Agreeably

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186 Ellis, *His Excellency*, 11.
187 Another recent work agrees that during this trip young George “sweated out encounters with Indians” (McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, 179).
188 Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville, Va., 1976), 1: 13. For Thomas Cresap’s trading post, see Kenneth P. Bailey, *Thomas Cresap: Maryland Frontiersman* (Boston, 1944), chap. 6; Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, vol. 1, *Young Washington* (New York, 1948), 217–19. Nor was a drum the only instrument Washington mentioned: one Indian also shook “a goard with some Shott in it to Rattle & a Piece of an horses Tail tied to it to make it look fine” (Jackson and Twohig, *Diaries of George Washington*, 1: 13). What seems a trivial detail is in fact rich with meaning: its omission from *His Excellency* exaggerates the distance between Natives and colonists by obscuring how these Iroquois incorporated European material (ammunition, horsehair) into their customs.
surprised? Nothing remarkable? Only being with the Indians all day? That encounter looked different to Washington than it does to Ellis.

A similar savaging is evident in *His Excellency*’s vivid description of the next trip west Washington took. In October 1753 Virginia lieutenant governor Robert Dinwiddie dispatched Major Washington, Ellis writes, “on a dangerous mission into the American wilderness” to order the French out of the Ohio Country. The lands Washington had to traverse consisted of “mountain ranges, wild rivers, and exotic indigenous peoples,” a “frontier environment” characterized by “brutal conditions and casual savagery.” This truly was a perilous journey: if French soldiers or their Indian allies did not kill the messenger, winter and those wild rivers might. According to the biography, two instances of “casual savagery” occurred after Washington delivered Dinwiddie’s demands to the French and was, with his guide, Christopher Gist, en route back to Virginia. One day, Ellis says, the travelers “come upon a lone warrior outside an Indian village ominously named Murdering Town. The Indian appears to befriend them, then suddenly wheels around at nearly point-blank range and fires his musket, but inexplicably misses.” Later Gist and Washington “come upon an isolated farmhouse on the banks of the Monongahela where two adults and five children have been killed and scalped. The decaying corpses are being eaten by hogs.”

Except that Washington and Gist did not put it that way, and what they did say reveals a world less simple yet more explicable than *His Excellency* would have it. Of the lousy shot, Washington and Gist told different stories. Past that village “we fell in with a Party of French Indians,” Virginia’s envoy wrote, “which had laid in wait for us, one of them fired at Mr. Gist or me, not 15 steps, but fortunately missed.” Where Washington’s account had the two escaping an ambush—savagery, perhaps, but hardly casual—Gist described a protracted battle of wits with one Indian “we met with.” Though “this fellow called me by my Indian name, and pretended to be glad to see me,” the woodsman was wary, for “I thought I had seen” him earlier, among the French. Nonetheless, Gist went on, “Major Washington insisted on travelling on the nearest way to forks of Alleghany,” so “we asked the Indian if he could go with us, and show us the nearest way.” Looking “very glad” to oblige, “the Indian took the Major’s pack” and off they went.

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Eight or ten miles later, Gist’s journal continues, things began to go badly. Their erstwhile guide seemed to be heading in the wrong direction; Washington—his “feet . . . very sore, and he very weary”—wanted to make camp; the Indian, rebuffed when he offered to carry the tenderfoot’s gun as well as his pack, “grew churlish, and pressed us to keep on, telling us that there were [French-allied] Ottawa Indians in these woods, and they would scalp us if we lay out.” Come to my cabin, he urged; there “we should be safe.” On they went, until Washington announced that he was camping “at the next water” no matter what. Before they reached a stream, though, “the Indian made a stop, [and] turned about; the Major saw him point his gun toward us and fire.” The man then ran ahead, ducked behind a tree, and was reloading when the two colonists caught up with him. “I suppose you were lost, and fired your gun,” Gist remarked drily after they had disarmed him and made him build a fire. Still the Indian invited the two colonists to his lodge; still they refused. The stalemate ended, Gist recalled, when he said, “You go home; and as we are much tired, we will follow your track in the morning.” Having sent the man off with some bread, the frontiersman and his charge then “travelled all night” to be sure they were clear of their putative pal.192

This Indian is hard to figure. Why would somebody outgunned two to one (and those two already suspicious and on guard) decide to shoot?193 Perhaps he was indeed leading them into a trap, but if so, why spring it when comrades waited somewhere ahead? Or maybe this solitary traveler, coming upon two armed Britons, both of them “on foot in Indian dress”—the former strange for a colonist in those parts, and the latter perhaps stranger—was himself suspicious and on guard.194 But if it is difficult to

192 Ibid., 1: 157 n. 65 (“feet”), 158 n. 65 (“travelled”). Is it significant that Gist wrote: “the Major saw him point his gun toward us” (emphasis added)? Was he doubting Washington’s account? His journal covering these days suggests at various times that Gist thought the young Virginian both headstrong and inexperienced.

193 The risk this Indian man took was real. “I would have killed him; but the Major would not suffer me to kill him,” Gist wrote (ibid., 1: 157 n. 65). Washington said only, “We took this Fellow into Custody, & kept him ’till about 9 o’Clock at Night, & then let him go” (ibid., 1: 155). He did not explain how two men facing an enemy war party managed to take a prisoner—or why the rest of that party did not open fire.

194 Ibid., 1: 156 n. 65 (quotation). Gist reported that when they crossed paths the man “asked us several questions” right away, the first being “how we came to travel on foot”—and that later, free to go, the fellow “was glad to get away.” Ibid., 1: 157 n. 65. For their “Indian dress” and traveling “like Indians,” which both men mentioned, see ibid., 1: 155–57 (“Indian dress,” 1: 156 n. 65, “like Indians,” 1: 157 n. 65). By omitting Washington’s outfit, Ellis further tidies the messy realities of the colonial frontier. The effect is enhanced by Ellis calling the Native man they met “a lone warrior”; Washington and Gist called him “this Fellow,” “the Indian,” and the like (Ellis, His Excellency, 4 [“lone”]; Jackson and Twohig, Diaries of George Washington, 1: 155–57 [“this Fellow,” 1: 155, “the Indian,” 1: 157 n. 65]). It is further enhanced by neglecting to mention that this whole conversation was probably in English: neither colonist spoke an Indian language, and by this time they had parted company with the French interpreter they had hired.
It is easy to conclude that it was not casual savagery by a treacherous, silent Indian; it was either a routine ambush by a band that considered the two men enemies or some sort of breakdown in communication and camaraderie one winter’s day.

The casual savagery visited upon that farm family seems a more clear-cut case—until one reads Washington and finds that he did not “come upon” the grisly scene. He and Gist, having eluded their guide and survived “extrem severe” cold, were thawing out at a colonial trader’s house when they heard the horror story—from twenty frightened Indians there. These fellows, the Virginian reported,

had been going to the Southward to War [probably against their usual Catawba or Cherokee foes], but coming to a Place . . . where they found People kill’d & Scalpt, all but one Woman with very Light Hair, they turn’d about; & ran back, for fear of the [colonial] Inhabitants rising & takeing them as the Authors of the Murder: They report that the People were lying about the House, & some of them much torn & eat by Hogs; by the Marks that were left, they say they [the killers] were French Indians of the Ottaway Nation, &ca. that did it.195

Washington did not stumble across Indian carnage. What he found at that trading post was a score of scared men scurrying home because they feared that his fellow Virginians, blaming this band, would kill or capture them. Instead of coming face to face with “casual savagery,” Washington learned from those men of a planned raid by French-allied Indians who plundered an English farm for supplies and trophies, then made sure that “Marks . . . were left” so that anyone adept at reading the signs would know the authors of this deed. Savagery? Certainly. Casual? Not at all.

An analogous formula of misdirection and misunderstanding can be found in accounts of the war between the United States and Red Stick Creeks, which commenced in 1813, sixty years after Washington and Gist got back. Here savagery’s DNA can best be sequenced not by attending to one scholar’s interpretation but by visiting several books that have come out since 2000 and comparing the picture they sketch against findings by specialists on Creek (Muskogee) history then available.196

196 Confining the work on Creeks to the years before 2000 includes books that would have been available to scholars publishing in the years 2001–10. However, it
A central element in accounts of that war published in the past decade is Tecumseh’s visit to the Creeks in September 1811. For several years this Shawnee leader, with his brother Tenskwatawa (the Shawnee Prophet), had been building a coalition to resist the expansion of the new American nation. His stop in Creek Country was one of many he made during a tour of southern and western nations, seeking allies. According to some new histories, the Shawnee headman “preached his race war” that would pit all indigenous peoples against all European-Americans. In an oft-quoted speech to the Creeks, Tecumseh is said to have cried:

Let the white race perish.

They seize your lands. They corrupt your women. They trample on the ashes of your dead. Back, whence they came, upon a trail of blood they must be driven. Back! Back! Ay, into the great water whose accursed waves brought them to our shores! Burn their dwellings! Destroy their stock! Slay their wives and children! . . . War now! War forever! War upon the living! War upon the dead! Dig their very corpses from the grave. Our country must give no rest to a white man’s bones!197

Strong stuff, emblematic of an unbridgeable divide between savage and settler.198 Small wonder, then, that the speech still finds its way onto the page. The problem is that twenty-five years ago John Sugden called


198 It also fits the trope of the doomed Indian’s eloquence. See Gustafson, Eloquence is Power; Sayre, Indian Chief as Tragic Hero, esp. chap. 8.
this source “unreliable” if not “fraudulent” and “bogus.” Certainly Tecumseh—riding a horse, carrying a British musket, often sporting a British uniform given him by his allies in Canada, who had also commissioned him as a colonel—was hardly spurning everything that had ever come over “the great water.” He, “like most American Indian nativists, . . . sought not total rejection of the technological and social transformations” that had swept the Indian countries “over the past century.” They “did not oppose all things European, but they did seek to control cultural change” rather than surrender to U.S. influence and intrusion. Nor is it likely that Tecumseh was going around that fall declaring war on the United States. (His own people were not yet fighting Americans.) Rather, his “tour was a logical extension of Tecumseh’s multi-tribal confederacy, an attempt to bring the southern and western tribes into an Indian union that would resist the advance of the American land frontier and discard many of the debasing influences of the whites.” An ambitious agenda, no doubt, but it lacks the (melo)drama of “War now! War forever!”

Despite doubts about that oration, despite evidence that Tecumseh and his followers were not launching a race war and did not reject white ways, the “bogus” words endure. Maybe they are simply too good to pass up when the myth of chronic combat between the races (pace Pocahontas and Squanto) retains so powerful a hold on the imagination. Keeping the speech requires painful contortions, however. Andrew Jackson biographer Robert V. Remini mentions in a note that “admittedly the speech is ‘awfully cinematically dramatic and florid’ and difficult to swallow whole, but the evidence shows that the speech was a deliberate attempt to mobilize Tecumseh’s followers for war.”


Sugden, American Indian Quarterly 10: 281, 284; William G. McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 180; J. Leitch Wright Jr., Creeks and Seminoles: The Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People (Lincoln, Neb., 1986), 168. Those Creeks who ultimately followed Tecumseh into war were no more against all whites than he was. They solicited help from Spanish and British officials, sending letters and ambassadors to request supplies, troops, and “a commission in the British service.” Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, chap. 2 (quotation, 28).

Dowd, Spirited Resistance, 169 (quotations); Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 159–60. Joel W. Martin argued for a more thoroughgoing renewal and purging of white ways, but he too said that for Creeks “Atlantic civilization . . . was around them, it was in them, it was part of them” (Martin, Sacred Revolts, 138–49 [quotation, 149]). See also Richter, Facing East, 227–33.

Sugden, American Indian Quarterly 10: 299.
but,” he shrugs, “there it is.” Another Jackson man feels obliged to contradict himself by bracketing the words about killing all whites between talk of how “the Shawnee chief . . . hoped to unite the Indians into a force . . . armed and supplied by the British and the Spanish” and “visions of Indians colluding with London and Madrid.”

Inspired by Tecumseh, conventional chronicles continue, “rebellious Muskogee Indians” (Red Sticks) living “in Georgia and in southern Alabama,” long “a persisting Indian threat in northern Alabama Territory,” became more threatening still. In 1813, the standard story goes on, these “clashes among the Creeks themselves . . . escalated into a larger war with the United States” as they “began raiding frontier settlements.” “Angry Creeks killed several whites, and in May a Red Sticks party . . . massacred a family of seven near the Duck River south of Nashville, including five children.” Once they had “chased settlers from much of Tennessee,” “they then [on August 30] attacked a group of settlers who had taken refuge in a stockade surrounding the house of an Alabama trader named George [Samuel] Mims,” “an American settlement” situated “in southeastern Mississippi Territory.” By sundown, having “systematically butchered the white inhabitants,” Red Sticks had “massacred hundreds of Americans.”

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203 Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 283 n. 3 (quotation), 1–4.
204 Meacham, *American Lion*, 30 (emphasis added).
207 Latimer, *1812*, 30 (quotation). This attack might have been sparked by rumors reaching these Creeks of war having broken out between Creeks and Americans. See Thomas S. Woodward, *Woodward’s Reminiscences of the Creek, or Muscogee Indians, Contained in Letters to Friends in Georgia and Alabama* (1839; repr., Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1939), 36; Vaselkov, *Conquering Spirit*, 89. Claudio Saunt has interpreted this action as part of a pattern of “political protests” against Creek leaders considered too friendly to America. He also has noted that the location of this incident “is particularly significant, for it lay on the path that Tecumseh had followed on his journey to the Southeast.” Saunt, *New Order of Things*, 241–42 (quotations, 242).
208 Johnson, *Early American Republic*, 49 (“chased”); Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 6 (“American settlement”); Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 686 (“Mississippi Territory”), Kenneth C. Davis wavers on who was at Fort Mims, sometimes saying the place was “a curious melting pot” of “settlers, Creek Indians, and slaves,” sometimes implying it was just “settlers.” Davis, *A Nation Rising: Untold Tales of Flawed Founders, Fallen Heroes, and Forgotten Fighters from America’s Hidden History* (New York, 2010), 70–75 (“melting pot,” “Creek Indians,” “settlers,” “70, 74–75).
Many accounts of that day appearing lately, calling it “one of the most appalling massacres in frontier history,” include long excerpts from nineteenth-century reports that dwell on the carnage. The dead “were butchered in the quickest manner, and blood and brains bespattered the whole earth. The children were seized by the legs, and killed by battering their heads against the stockading. The women were scalped, and those who were pregnant were opened, while they were alive[,] and the embryo infants let out of the womb.” “By this action,” one modern history concludes ominously, blaming Creeks, “the Red Sticks had dared to war against the United States.”

This account of “the Fort Mims Massacre,” compiled from recent works, is as dramatic as Tecumseh’s speech to the Creeks two years earlier. It is also as bogus. Yes, Tecumseh did visit Creek Country in 1811 and call for united resistance to American incursions. Yes, Creeks were bitterly divided over their future: some favored accommodating American demands for more land while also embracing the federal “civilization program” that had women leave the field for the home and men farm (or buy slaves to farm for them); others, the Red Sticks, opposed going in this direction. Yes, Red Sticks did attack Mims’s outpost in 1813 and kill 250–300 people, including women and children. But beyond that, the event’s postmillennial chroniclers have failed to learn from scholarship

Indians in the fort who were among the victims (though the emphasis is on whites). See Brands, Andrew Jackson, 194–95; Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 25; Latimer, 1812, 220; Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686–87; Davis, Nation Rising, 71. Those who do not mention nonwhites include Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 171; Johnson, Early American Republic, 49; Meacham, American Lion, 30–31. Regarding the African Americans’ role in this incident, many scholars say that Red Sticks kept those taken captive as slaves (Brands, Andrew Jackson, 195; Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 25; Davis, Nation Rising, 75 [but see 95]). In fact, it was more complicated. African Americans were among the attackers that day as well as among the denizens of Fort Mims. Moreover, some within the stronghold apparently colluded with the Red Sticks. Finally, at least some captured blacks ended up not as slaves to Indian masters but as soldiers fighting alongside the Red Sticks against American forces. See Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 173–74; Martin, Sacred Revolt, 156–57; Saunt, New Order of Things, 269–70; Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 39–40; Davis, JER 22: 632–33.

210 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 6 (quotations). See also Risjord, Jeffersonian America, 396. For other works that dwell on the gruesome details provided by nineteenth-century accounts of survivors and a burial party, see Brands, Andrew Jackson, 195; Latimer, 1812, 220; Meacham, American Lion, 31; Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686; Davis, Nation Rising, 75. Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 25, includes detail but couches it with “reportedly” and “it was said.” Another account has it that Creeks’ violence against one another “eventually spilled over into attacks on the white American settlers” but that even before the fight at Fort Mims “hostile Creek Indians . . . were at war, both among themselves and against Americans,” and Red Sticks “wanted war” with the United States. See Davis, Nation Rising, 70.

done toward the end of the twentieth century. The result is legerdemain that leaves Indians savages in all but name.

Look at the matter of location. To their way of thinking, Creeks were not “in Georgia and in southern Alabama” or in “southeastern Mississippi Territory,” where historians put them; they were in Creek Country. Rather than Indians intruding, then, it was the other way around. Or take the issue of anger. If Creeks were angry, they had reason to be. Their 1805 Treaty of Washington was “a . . . flagrant instance of corruption” in which six Muskogees, bribed by the United States, sold 2.2 million acres and then, “despite express instructions to the contrary from the representatives in the [Creek] national council,” agreed to let Americans carve “a ‘horse path’ across the heart of the nation.” When “the ‘path’ quickly became a twenty-foot wide road,” it “aroused the anger of the very chiefs who signed the treaty permitting it.” Not only that, the thoroughfare and the cession gave fresh impetus to white encroachment on what territory Creeks still had, encroachment that the United States had promised to stop, encroachment so pervasive that Muskogees took to calling Americans Ecunnaunuxulgee (“people greedily grasping after all lands”). When Creeks withstood federal badgering about another road, in 1811 a U.S. agent finally told them that the highway was happening whether they liked it or not. Angry? You bet.

But probably not bent on fighting the United States. Some Americans, on the other hand, apparently were itching for war against Creeks. After the Duck River raid, the Nashville Clarion announced that those Natives “have supplied us with a pretext for a dismemberment of their country.” In fact, to quiet these war hawks, the Creek National Council (which favored working with the United States and won American rewards accordingly) arranged the assassination of the Duck River killers. When friends of the dead men rallied against what they considered an injustice, “what had been a series of desultory assaults and retaliations [among Creeks] became the Creek Civil War.”

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212 Fort Mims might have been in Creek territory too. See Martin, Sacred Revolt, 158; Davis, JER 22: 614, 617, 621–22; Waselkov, Conquering Spirit, 20, 278 n. 18; Hudson, Creek Paths and Federal Roads, 116, map 3.


214 Dowd, Spirited Resistance, 154–56 (quotations, 155).

215 Martin, Sacred Revolt, 120–22 (Ecunnaunuxulgee, 122).

216 Quoted in Michael Paul Rogin, Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian (New York, 1975), 147. “We are ready and pant for vengeance,” proclaimed one of Tennessee’s leading citizens, Andrew Jackson (quoted in ibid.). I came upon these words through Martin, Sacred Revolt, 154. Joel W. Martin has argued not only that Americans were determined to have war but that Red Stick leaders sought to avoid war with the United States (ibid., 150–54, 220 n. 7). See also Saunt, New Order of Things, 255 n. 32, 262.

The next episode in that civil war was the Battle of Burnt Corn Creek. On July 27, 1813, a party of Red Sticks returning from Spanish Pensacola with weapons, ammunition, and other supplies rode into an ambush, an assault that led directly to the Red Sticks’ “retaliatory strike” on Fort Mims a month later. Most treatments of Fort Mims omit Burnt Corn Creek altogether, making it look like the descent on Mims came out of nowhere. The few that do mention Burnt Corn Creek get it wrong by saying that it was “settlers” or “180 Mississippi militia” who struck Red Sticks that summer day. Yes and no: a number of attackers—including at least one officer and fighters who took a particularly “active and highly visible role”—were neither settlers nor Americans but métis Creeks, friendly to the United States and therefore opposed to the Red Sticks. One Muskogee leader even called Burnt Corn Creek “a fight between Redsticks and mestizos, not Creeks and Americans.”

So was Fort Mims. Though modern tellers of that bloody day almost all stick to the script of an Indian massacre, scholars long ago clouded that clear picture. It turns out that the strike was not aimed solely (or even primarily) against Americans, and it was no simple massacre. “Many of the victims,” concluded Claudio Saunt in 1999, “were either married to wealthy Creek mestizos or were mestizos themselves.” Moreover, those victims (including white militia) fought long and hard before they fell—and they

218 Saunt, New Order of Things, 259 (quotation). Robert V. Remini correctly calls Mims a counterattack (Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 6).
219 Meacham, American Lion, 30–31 (“settlers”; see also Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 24); Latimer, 1812, 219 (“Mississippi militia”). Those omitting Burnt Corn Creek include Horsman, New Republic; Brands, Andrew Jackson; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy; Johnson, Early American Republic; Wood, Empire of Liberty. For treatment of this battle, see Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 172; Owsey, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 30–33; Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 6.
220 Martin, Sacred Revolt, 153 (quotation), 151.
221 Saunt, New Order of Things, 259–66 (“Redsticks and mestizos,” 262); Dowd, Spirited Resistance, 185; Davis, JER 22: 629. The presence of Creeks in this militia is old news, making modern accounts’ omission of them that much more surprising. See Albert James Pickett, History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi, from the Earliest Period, 2d ed. (Charleston, S.C., 1831), 2: 256–60; Halbert and Ball, Creek War, 140–42; George Stiggins, Creek Indian History: A Historical Narrative of the Genealogy, Traditions and Downfall of the Ispocoga or Creek Indian Tribe of Indians by One of the Tribe, George Stiggins (1788–1843), ed. Virginia Pounds Brown (Birmingham, Ala., 1989), 100.
222 Saunt, New Order of Things, 263 (quotation), 264. Karl Davis has noted that Red Sticks also “wanted to punish the Mississippi militia for homesteaders’ encroachments on Creek land and for [joining] the attack on Creek warriors at Burnt Corn Creek.” See Davis, JER 22: 635. See also Martin, Sacred Revolt, 222 n. 27; Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 173. The most careful reconstruction estimates the numbers in the fort at two hundred whites, one hundred African Americans, and one hundred métis Creeks (Waselkov, Conquering Spirit, table 1, 191), but this count was unavailable to most of the scholars under consideration here.
took scores of their enemies down with them. Red Sticks struck at noon; three hours later, still taking heavy fire, the attackers withdrew to consider their options before returning to finish the job near sunset. By then the winners had lost at least one hundred men.

So far, Fort Mims seems more battle than massacre. But despite embellishments and inventions by shocked white survivors and the American press, there is no question that Red Sticks did slay and mutilate noncombatants. Even here, however, more is needed than quoting gruesome accounts and shuddering that the whole business was “horrific.” For one thing, Red Sticks did not slaughter everyone: some women and children escaped, and many more were captured and later released. For another, Indians had no monopoly on killing children and mutilating women. Americans were steeped in biblical tales of infants being “dashed to pieces” and “women with childe . . . ript up.”

Creeks, of course, drew from a different cultural well, and some scholars have begun to plumb its depths, finding there rich meaning—and real anger. As early as 1786 a Creek man said that “he wished to murder American women and children because ‘the former give birth and the latter would grow up to be warriors.'” Many years later “at Fort Mims,” Saunt suggests, “the attacks on women may have reflected the warriors’ fears about changing gender roles” that Americans were advocating (and many Creeks were adopting). “These were the actions of warriors anxious to reestablish their masculinity,” he concludes. “Horrific” it certainly was, but it also turns out to express a “vocabulary of violence.”

Having ignored more nuanced interpretations of Mims, some works then go on to compound the error while treating the American response

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223 Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 36–39. Martin, Sacred Revolt, 157, said that half of the 750 Red Sticks were killed or wounded; Saunt, New Order of Things, 261, put the figure at fifty killed out of five hundred men.

224 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686 (quotation; see also Latimer, 1812, 220).

225 Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 38. In 2006 Gregory A. Waselkov counted those whose fate he could determine, a total of 210 people: 56.7 percent of the women and 53.1 percent of the children were killed (against 71.3 percent of the men); 30 percent of the women and 42.9 percent of the children were captured (3.3 percent of the men); 13.3 percent of the women and 4.1 percent of the children escaped (25.4 percent of the men). See Waselkov, Conquering Spirit, table 2, 192. Karl Davis estimated 75–120 women and children killed and thought the figure likely was toward the lower end of that range (Davis, JER 22: 632).


227 Saunt, New Order of Things, 151 (“he wished”), 267 (“at Fort Mims”); see also ibid., 140–43, 151–53, 266–68; White, Middle Ground, 388; Perdue, Cherokee Women, 88.

228 Kate Atkinson, When Will There Be Good News? A Novel (New York, 2008), 57 (“vocabulary”).
to that bloodshed, when armies invaded Creek Country from three directions—winning, it is said, battle after battle. Comparison of these battles (won by American forces) with that massacre (won by Red Sticks) complicates things, however. The Fort Mims massacre lasted hours; one battle took all of twenty minutes. In that massacre Red Sticks killed 250–300 people while losing at least 100 of their own; at these battles the body count was far more lopsided: 300 “hostiles” dead and 17 Americans, or 64 Red Sticks and no Americans, or 299 and 14, or 800 and 45.\(^{229}\) During the Mims massacre perhaps one hundred women and children died; the total number of Muskogee women and children killed in battles topped “several hundred.”\(^{230}\) At the massacre the victors took scalps and otherwise desecrated corpses; after battles Americans sometimes “stripped the flesh from the backs of the dead and fashioned Creek skin into souvenirs” or “braided them into belts and bridles” while also stooping to slice off the noses of the fallen.\(^{231}\) It is difficult, working out the calculus of cruelty, to draw the line between massacre and battle as readily as historians have done.

One man who watched as “soldiers took off the nose” of Creek corpses also saw “the Indians take off the scalps.”\(^{232}\) The casual aside about Indians wandering with American troops across a battlefield, knives in hand, offers yet another lesson this war can teach about savagery’s staying power: the silence in much of the literature about America’s Native allies in that conflict. It is the same vanishing act that happens in histories of the French and Indian War and the British and Indian War a generation earlier. As with those contests, it is no secret that Americans had plenty of Indian help; hundreds of Cherokees and Creeks played essential roles in Jackson’s victories.\(^{233}\) Still, the latest work often omits these allies: “Jackson led his army against a band of a thousand or more Red Sticks,” “he triumphed, winning

\(^{229}\) Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 25 (quotation; see also 28, 39, 76); Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 66 (twenty minutes). For casualties, see ibid., 66 (299/14), 67 (64/0); Brands, Andrew Jackson, 200 (300/17; see also Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 66–67); Latimer, 1812, 221 (800/45).

\(^{230}\) Martin, Sacred Revolt, 163. For women and children, see McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence, 192–94; Martin, Sacred Revolt, 158–59, 163; Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 65.

\(^{231}\) Kathryn E. Holland Braund, Deerskins and Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685–1815 (Lincoln, Neb., 1993), 187 (“stripped”); McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence, 194 (“braided”; see also Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 176); Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 78–79.

\(^{232}\) Halbert and Ball, Creek War, 277, quoted in Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 79.

\(^{233}\) Martin, Sacred Revolt, 161; Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 175; Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 50, 52, 62, 67, 73, 79; Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, chap. 4. This has found its way into the general scholarship. See Brands, Andrew Jackson, 216–17; Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 25–26; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 171–72; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 74–75, 125, 343.
victories from Talladega to Horseshoe Bend,” and “his forces . . . destroyed native settlements and killed hundreds of Creeks.”

Once again, the issue here goes beyond getting the story straight. Yes, this version of the saga forgets the aid of those Creeks and Cherokees (not to mention Choctaws and Chickasaws, who also joined the Americans). Yes, it makes a complex campaign out to be a simple race war, us (or U.S.) against them. But in addition, these iterations hide the fact that after the conflict much of the land surrendered to the United States at the Treaty of Fort Jackson in August 1814 came not from defeated Red Sticks but from America’s Creek and Cherokee allies. The same accounts that talk of Jackson “having defeated the Creeks” go on to say that “he [then] forced on them a treaty by which they turned over to the United States more than twenty million acres of their land” or that he “extracted extensive concessions of Indian land.” All but one of the men who marked the treaty that summer had been Jackson’s friends, not his foes, and they were furious about his ignoring American promises that “the United States will not forget their fidelity.” Despite the impression left by many historians, the war ended not with reparations paid by a defeated opponent but with territory taken from valuable, even essential, allies.

The implications of bowdlerizing this chapter in American history run further forward still. If Tecumseh called for do-or-die destruction of


235 Reynolds, *Waking Giant*, 7 (“having defeated”; see also 59–60); McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, 442 (“extracted’’). See also Nellis, *Long Road to Change*, 263; Meacham, *American Lion*, 31. Gordon S. Wood does say that at the peace treaty “Jackson sought to punish even those Indians who were allies of the United States” (Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 687). His account of the war makes no mention of Indian allies, however. Sean Wilentz notes that “friendly Creeks and Cherokees” joined American troops, that the peace treaty’s “forfeited lands included territories held by friendly Creeks who had fought alongside Jackson,” and that “Jackson forced his allies, as well as those he had defeated, to submit” (Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 172).


238 Bowdlerizing sometimes runs in the other direction, as scholars of Native American history either omit details of Fort Mims or leave the event out altogether. See Dowd, *Spirited Resistance*; Richter, *Facing East*, 232.
the white race; if all Creeks heeded him and became America’s inveterate enemies; if, unprovoked, they massacred “an American settlement”; if no Indians were the new nation’s allies—if all this is taken as true, it becomes easier to sanction, or at least accept, what lay beyond the Treaty of Fort Jackson. It is one thing to uproot and exile recently conquered foes with the blood of American women and children on their hands, foes determined to fight whites to the death. It is something else again to do this to Lieutenant John Ross and Major Ridge, Cherokee officers commissioned by the United States. It looks different when those marched west included veterans who at Emukfaw Creek in January 1814 “saved Jackson’s dwindling army from defeat,” who two months later at Tohopeka (Horseshoe Bend) valiantly blocked the Red Sticks’ escape, who at war’s end got medals from President James Madison because, as their commanding officer put it: “You have shown yourself worthy of the friendship of your Father, the President.”

At Tohopeka that day the guns finally fell silent near dusk. “As the sun went down,” one historian solemnly intoned in 2001, “it also set on the great and proud Creek Nation.” If the sword did not finish Creeks that spring, another has suggested, the pen at the Treaty of Fort Jackson in August “foreclosed the doom of the entire Creek Nation.” Creeks are not the only Indians scholars keep killing off. Long before 1814 “the coastal tribes had either been destroyed by disease and warfare or had migrated west.” Indeed, “the remnant of a ravaged Indian population in the eastern states had been forced to move west” into territories acquired in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, a deal that itself “proved to be the death knell for any Indian presence east of the Mississippi.” For one nation after another, the bell tolls. Seminoles? In Jackson’s day the United States “uproot[ed] the remaining Florida natives from their ancestral home.” (Thousands of Seminoles are still there.) Catawbas? “Removed further and further from their ancestral lands.” (Catawbas have stayed put since at least the sixteenth century.) Mohegans? Pequots? Narragansetts? Among the “many extinct eastern tribes.”

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240 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 78.
241 Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 172 (quotation; see also 324).
242 Reich, Colonial America, 265.
243 Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, xviii (“remnant”); Ellis, American Creation, 210 (“death knell”; see also 11); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 398–99.
244 Reynolds, Waking Giant, 24.
245 Sarson, British America, 173.
246 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 271 (quotation), 232, 245.
federally recognized nations today.) As if sensing that talk of “Indian extinction” goes too far, threnodists sometimes back off a bit, writing that the American Revolution “virtually destroyed” the Iroquois and that a generation later Creeks were “nearly through as a nation.” One maintains that some “kind of extinction . . . seemed to have occurred with most Indians in the East,” while another has it that “a vital Native American existence east of the Mississippi was put on the road to extinction.”

Whether or not doomsayers hedge their bets, the outcome for Native peoples is the same: despite a wealth of work proving otherwise (to say nothing of land claims lawsuits, popular powwows, and crowded casinos), they are removed as surely as if they actually had been eliminated two hundred years ago. Those writing Indians out of history are signing off on

247 Besides the many federally recognized Native peoples east of the Mississippi River, more than twenty additional groups originally from those eastern countries now live in Oklahoma, Kansas, and other western states. (These figures exclude Native peoples recognized by states but not by the federal government.)

248 Ellis, American Creation, 133 (“Indian extinction”; see also 160–61); Ellis, His Excellency, 213 (“virtually destroyed”); Nugent, Habits of Empire, 118 (“nearly through”).

249 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 126 (“kind of extinction”; see also 123, 398–99); Ellis, American Creation, 241 (“vital”). Additional examples are Ellis, “The McGillivray Moment,” 56; Masur, 1831, 186; McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 45; Reich, Colonial America, 23. Amy E. Den Ouden hears this talk of extinction in the eighteenth century (Den Ouden, Beyond Conquest, 29, 117–18, 176–81). See also Seed, American Pentimento, chap. 9; Conn, History’s Shadow, 30, 36. For scholars resisting this doctrine, see Nellis, Long Road to Change, 170–71. For those torn between two outcomes, see Middleton, Colonial America, 319, 319 n. 3.

250 Scholarship published before 2000 includes Walter L. Williams, ed., South-eastern Indians since the Removal Era (Athens, Ga., 1979); Laurence M. Hauptman, The Iroquois and the New Deal (Syracuse, N.Y., 1981); John R. Finger, The Eastern Band of Cherokees, 1839–1990 (Knoxville, Tenn., 1984); Hauptman, The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power (Syracuse, N.Y., 1986); Hauptman and James D. Wherry, eds., The Pequots in Southern New England: The Fall and Rise of an American Indian Nation (Norman, Okla., 1990); Helen C. Rountree, Pocahontas’s People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries (Norman, Okla., 1990); Finger, Cherokee Americans: The Eastern Band of Cherokees in the Twentieth Century (Lincoln, Neb., 1991); Dowd, Spirited Resistance, afterword; J. Anthony Paredes, ed., Indians of the Southeastern United States in the Late Twentieth Century (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1992); Laurie Weinstein, ed., Enduring Traditions: The Native Peoples of New England (Westport, Conn., 1994); Colin G. Calloway, ed., After King Philip’s War: Presence and Persistence in Indian New England (Hanover, N.H., 1997), chaps. 7–10; Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau, “The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era,” Ethnohistory 44, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 433–62. Among important works published since 2000, see Den Ouden, Beyond Conquest; Brooks, Common Pot; Jean M. O’Brien, Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England (Minneapolis, Minn., 2010). The notion of the vanishing Indian, particularly as it was articulated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, has attracted the attention of many scholars: Sheehan, Seeds of Extinction; Roy Harvey Pearce, Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind (Berkeley, Calif., 1998); Seed, American Pentimento, esp. chaps. 2, 9, 10; Conn, History’s Shadow, esp. chaps. 1, 6. Exclusion of Native peoples from stories told about early America can be traced to
coroners’ reports that have long been pronouncing Natives dead. “They appear to be a race doomed to recede and disappear before the superior genius of the Europeans,” mused J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782.\(^\text{251}\) “The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States [New England],” agreed Andrew Jackson, “were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites.”\(^\text{252}\) Soon thereafter Francis Parkman composed dirges for Indian America, lamentations full of lyrics such as “doom,” “fast recede,” “dwindle away,” “waste away.” The melody lingers on. When a landmark work in 2009 says that “Indian society and culture tended to disintegrate as they came in contact with white civilization,” it sounds uncannily like Parkman talking of how “the light of civilization falls on him [the Indian] with a blighting power.”\(^\text{253}\) Look how far we’ve come.

\textbf{FROM DISCOVERY TO DISAPPEARANCE,} the list of words worth thinking twice about is long. It is also incomplete. Once we start to watch our language, other terms surface that merit a second thought. Some are more jarring than others. The racially charged \textit{half-breed} should long since have gone the way of \textit{primitive} and \textit{savage}. A kindred “historical racial relic,” \textit{mixed-blood}, also deserves a closer look.\(^\text{254}\) This bloody way of reckoning is only compounded by scholars’ continued talk of a Creek being “only one-quarter Indian” and a Cherokee “seven-eighths white.”\(^\text{255}\)
A whole catalog of less obviously noxious words still fouls everyday parlance. Colonial era endures, even though for Natives it is not yet over. Conversion has no room for the complicated ways Natives dealt with spiritual encounters. Removal (“a soft word,” said one Jackson opponent, “and words are delusive”) has not yet given way to a hard alternative, “ethnic cleansing.” Even seemingly solid terms such as marriage, trade, war, and peace can, considered up close, dissolve into many shades of meaning.

The real danger is not adding too many words to the roster of suspects but adding too few. Face it: precontact, discovery, backcountry, and the like leave us “implicated in the reproduction of colonial categories of thought, knowledge, and power.” Getting out of this lexical rut will not be easy; language lessons for grown-ups rarely are. But surely at the dawn of a new millennium we can at least aspire to other ways of talking about early America.


Plane, Colonial Intimacies, 6. On trade, see Jennings, Invasion of America, 83; White, Middle Ground, 94. On war and peace, see Reid, Law of Blood, esp. 202; John Phillip Reid, A Better Kind of Hatchet: Law, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Cherokee Nation during the Early Years of European Contact (University Park, Pa., 1976), 16; Gleach, Powhatan’s World and Colonial Virginia, chaps. 1–2.

Carson, Making of an Atlantic World, 100.

Ibid.; Den Ouden, Beyond Conquest, 6, 11; Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination, 209–11, esp. 211; Barr, Peace Came in the Form of a Woman, 7.
Do not, however, expect some new world of words to emerge, fully articulated and thoroughly vetted, from those exploring the Native American experience in times past. The hard truth is that most of us still use much of the same stale rhetoric as "traditional colonialists." The abiding power of old expressions is especially evident when we try to choose our words carefully, as David L. Preston did three years ago in *Texture of Contact*. Preston’s plan was to “shift our perspective” by developing “new vocabularies” that do “equal ethnographic justice” to colonists and Natives. “Throughout this work,” he explained, “I refer to European and Indian settler communities to emphasize the similarity of their inhabitants’ lives and aspirations. Simply put, Indians were settlers too.” For the most part, Preston succeeded, but laudable ambition can still fall heir to paleologism’s pull. Three pages after calling for “new vocabularies,” *Texture of Contact* discussed “unrestrained settlement” (presumably colonial) and the “violence of common settlers [also presumably colonial] against Indians.” Three lines down from the statement that “European and Indian settlers competed over crucial frontier resources,” we learn that “different cultural beliefs . . . made settler-Indian encounters prone to break down.”

Preston is hardly the only one unable to stop himself. Without wandering very far along the shelf from *Texture of Contact*, it is easy to come upon another scholar’s corpus polluted by adulterated terminology. Joining the ever-popular settlers in this historian’s reliquary are those old companions Old World and New World, precontact period and colonial era. Coming from that Old World to commence that contact, Europeans visit the Carolina interior generations before there even was a Carolina. Once that colony finally does get going, Tuscaroras and Yamasees are planted in the Carolinas, joining other Indian nations this misguided miscreant prematurely incarcerates in New England and in New Netherland. Wherever they are put, some Native women work patches of corn and some warriors attend peace treaties. If talks collapse and those men go to war, their chronicler serves up generous helpings of gore unleavened by enough rhyme or reason. Who is this latter-day Bradford, this Parkman in modern garb? Having cast so many stones, it is only right to confess some of my own sins.

263 For use of settlers, see Merrell, *Indians’ New World*, passim (even though I realized [171] that it is a loaded word); James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999), 123, 160, 166, 307. For the use of "settlers’ invasion," see Merrell, *Indians’ New World*, chap. 5. For Old World and New World, see Merrell, “‘The Customs of Our Countrey’: Indians and Colonists in Early America,” in *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*,...
Perhaps iniquity, like misery, loves company; in any case, I have plenty in the growing ranks of "colonial Indian historians."

Old-timers and rookies alike, an all-star lineup of experts is ensnared in a web of words spun long ago. Prehistory joins precontact. Backcountry and backwoods camp next to settler. Woodland Indians in the Eastern Woodlands conduct forest diplomacy beneath "a boundless canopy of forest." A Powhatan lad is "a young Virginian" long before anyone even dreamed of Roanoke or Jamestown. Maps abound that would make a colonial official or land speculator smile.


264 Blackhawk, OAH Magazine 19: 15.
265 Jenny Hale Pulsipher, Subjects unto the Same King: Indians, English, and the Contest for Authority in Colonial New England (Philadelphia, 2005), 1 ("boundless").
266 James Axtell, The Indians' New South: Cultural Change in the Colonial Southeast (Baton Rouge, La., 1997), 11 ("young Virginian"). For more use of colony or state names long before these entities existed, see ibid., 7–11, 15, 19–20, 23, 25. Axtell also writes of "Carolina's uplands" in the very sentence where he quotes a colonist calling it "a neighboring vast Indian Country" (ibid., 42, emphasis added).
267 Use of terms among specialists is so widespread that a sampling must suffice. See Axtell, Indians' New South, 48 (backcountry; see also 49, 71); Axtell, The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America (New York, 1985), 3 ("wooded fastness"), 149 (settlers; see also 151–52), 150 (Old World, New World); Axtell, "The Rise and Fall of the Powhatan Empire," in After Columbus, 182–221, esp. 190 (settlers; see also 192, 196, 198, 204); Blackhawk, Violence over the Land, 6 (postcontact; see also 8), 11 (colonial period), 16 (settlers); Calloway, New Worlds for All, xix ("Indian peoples of the Carolinas"), 5 (backwoods), 13 (Old World, Jamestown settlers; see also 21, 33, 40, 50, 97), 17–19 (settlers), 55–56 (backcountry); Calloway, Scratch of a Pen, xviii–xix (maps; but see 16, 21, 68), 9 ("Britain's North American possessions"); see also 11, 15, 56, 66), 15 (settlers, backcountry; see also 16, 48, 53, 57, 59, 76); Carson, Historical Journal
And so it goes. However imaginative and illuminating the work by scholars of Native history, however successfully it has helped usher Indians back to the early American theater, that theater still resounds with words drafted ages ago by people with an agenda, words that have been (and still can be) weapons. It turns out that whether we study Pequots or Puritans, Catawbas or Carolinians, Tecumseh or Thomas Jefferson, Alexander McGillivray or Andrew Jackson, we are all, in more ways than one, “colonial historians.” In the never-ending struggle to come to terms with early America, as a twentieth-century philosopher put it, “we have met the enemy and he is us.”

49: 927 (settlers; see also 929, 931), 928 (“the contact experience”; see also 931); Dowd, Spirited Resistance, xii (colonial period), xiii (Pennsylvania’s Susquehanna River; see also xvii, 29), xxii (backcountry), 16 (Eastern Woodlands; see also 25–26, 150, 171), 24 (Native nations “in” a colony or state; see also 33); Kathleen DuVal, The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent (Philadelphia, 2006), 7 (colonial period, “colonial-era Indians”), 10–11 (settlers; see also 164, 230, 232, 246; but see 162, 196); Patricia Galloway, Choctaw Genesis, 1500–1700 (Lincoln, Neb., 1993), 21 (wilderness), chap. 2 (prehistory), 170 (backcountry; see also 177); Hämäläinen, Comanche Empire, 3 (“colonial history”), 4 (“settler colonies”), 5 (“colonial era”), 15 (Old World), 332 (settlers; see also 342); Francis Jennings, Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America (New York, 1988), 157 (back settlements; see also 167, 201), chap. 9 (backwoods; see also 172, 203, 254); Nash, Red, White, and Black, 5th ed., viii (colonial period; see also 118), 4 (New World; see also 5, 14, 26–29, 36, 43, 45, 47, 50, 57), 9 (settlers; see also 89–91, 93, 105, 109), 15 (precontact; see also 75, 230–33), 20 (Old World; see also 26–27, 57), 35 (map; see also 88, 113, 124, 245, 259), 44 (“the Bay of New York in 1524”; see also 51, 111, 116, 118), 46 (settlers and early Virginia; see also 53–56, 59–61, 63, 84), 111 (“Carolina wilderness”; see also 243, 246), 114 (“Carolina backcountry”; see also 246, 251, 280), 127 (“Pennsylvania’s Susquehanna River valley”); Piker, Okfuskee, 65 (backcountry; see also 70, 74, 76, 77, 198); Pulsipher, Subjects unto the Same King, 2 (settlers; see also 3, 8), 10 (warriors), 11 (contact), 13 (map; see also 78, 151), 270 (Native nations “in Maine”); Salisbury, Manitou and Providence, 5 (settlers; see also 7, 8, 10–12), 15 (map; see also 112), 21 (precontact; see also 112); Saunt, New Order of Things, 5 (“the people who populated Alabama, Georgia, and Florida before the nineteenth century,” in the sentence after saying scholars “must adopt less biased language”); Cynthia J. Van Zandt, Brothers among Nations: The Pursuit of Intercultural Alliances in Early America, 1580–1660 (New York, 2008), 10 (colonial period), 75 (Virginia “settlers”; see also 77, 81, 86, 88), 76 (messengers called “warriors”); White, Middle Ground, xiv (backcountry; see also 316, 323, 330, 339, 345, 365, 371, 384, 418), 316 (backcountry settlers; see also 323, 340, 342, 344, 349–51, 383, 418), 318 (“in western Pennsylvania”), 319 (settlers; see also 320, 344, 349–50, 418).

268 This well-known saying appeared, among other places, in the title of a 1972 book: Walt Kelly, Pogo: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us (New York, 1972).
Such [re]phrasings [of common terms describing 1492 and after] are awkward and may raise some eyebrows. They may even annoy some readers. But both the awkwardness and the fact that the entire issue can be dismissed as trivial quibbling suggests that it is not easy to subvert the very language describing the facts of the matter.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995

ONE score and three years ago the William and Mary Quarterly brought forth on its pages a review essay, conceived in dyspepsia and dedicated to the proposition that Native peoples merit more attention in early American studies. Entitled “Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians,” the jeremiad featured a young(ish) fellow chiding his elders and betters for neglecting Natives; it was intent on “broadcasting” the “sobering news” that recent “research on Indians, far from overturning long-held notions about America’s colonial age, has done little to change the cast of mind that frames—and, by framing, limits—our view.” The result? A few nice notes, a memorable chat with one historian whose book the piece had taken to task, and a secondhand report of how the author of another work given some thoughts had grumbled that “Merrell wants us to see an Indian behind every bush.”

Perhaps—the rashness of youth?—I spoke too soon. It is hard to measure new scholarship’s shelf life (here meaning how long a book must be available on the shelf before it animates fresh approaches), but maybe in 1989 it was premature to expect every (or perhaps any) early Americanist to have a eureka moment on Indians. For one thing, the list of people reconstructing the Native experience was still pretty short then, and many of their books still fairly new. For another, a work on this or that aspect of colonial history published in, say, 1988 would have been conceived, researched, and written over the course of many years before that; with such a long gestation, no project could use the latest word on Indians to realign its avenue of inquiry.

But whether it was too early then, it is not too early now. Whatever new literature’s shelf life, surely twenty-some years ought to be enough for scholarship on Indian history to reshape the larger field’s contours. It is time to

5 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, 1995), 115.
7 In 1989 I considered, and dismissed, the possibility that “it is too soon to expect the latest scholarship on Indians to have any real impact on the larger school of colonial studies” (ibid., 113).
take another look, to offer some second thoughts on colonial historians and American Indians, to measure how much has changed—and how little.8

It would be impossible today to assert, as Bernard Bailyn did twenty-five years ago, that “we know as yet relatively little about” Indians in early America.9 If not behind every bush, Indians do seem ubiquitous. Publishing houses and scholarly journals alike have taken an aboriginal turn, their books and articles earning rave reviews and winning prestigious prizes.10 These developments seem to herald the return of the Native. “Look How Far We’ve Come,” Ned Blackhawk exclaimed in 2005, before going on to delineate “How American Indian History Changed the Study of American History in the 1990s.” Students of Indian life at many points in time had developed “arguments that were increasingly incongruent with existing paradigms,” Blackhawk asserted, but “nowhere was this more


10 For the William and Mary Quarterly, the figures are: 1970s, 16 articles; 1980s, 15; 1990s, 36; 2000s (January 2000–October 2009), 31. For the New England Quarterly: 1970s, 14; 1980s, 6; 1990s, 23; 2000s, 18. For Early American Literature: 1970s, 5; 1980s, 10 (including 5 on Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative); 1990s, 21; 2000s, 31. For the Journal of the Early Republic (JER): 1980s (it first appeared in 1981), 2; 1990s, 13; 2000s, 16. Since 2000 JER has published more articles devoted to Native Americans as actors rather than objects of white policies, attitudes, or missionary endeavors, common fare in the 1980s and 1990s. It can be argued that both of its 1980s articles and one-third of its 1990s articles are more about whites than about Natives. Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, which began in 2003, offers another congenial home for new work on Native America, having published 8 articles on Native history from 2003 through 2009. These counts include articles, Notes and Documents (later Sources and Interpretations) pieces, and review essays but not book reviews. I have been generous in deciding what counts: articles on colonial attitudes or policies toward Indians are included; so is work on the frontier and the backcountry. Substantial contributions to a WMQ Forum were each counted as an article, but if each contribution was short (for example, “Forum: ‘Why the West Is Lost’: Comments and Response,” WMQ 51, no. 4 [October 1994]: 717–54), the Forum counted as one contribution. See also Claudio Saunt, “Go West: Mapping Early American Historiography,” WMQ 65, no. 4 (October 2008): 745–78.
apparent than in the study of early America.” In fact, “colonial Indian historians have now resoundingly demonstrated the centrality of Native peoples to early America in a way that seemed nearly inconceivable a generation ago.”

Scholars of various stripes have indeed begun to weave indigenous peoples into their interpretive fabric. Retrieving what denizens of those days—newcomers and Natives alike—said or smelled, what they dreamed or heard, how they coped with livestock or dirt, and how they thought about gender or death, historians have demonstrated that Indians are vital to making sense of that strange land called colonial America. Even classic (and, arguably, tired) topics—Salem witchcraft, the New England town, the New England family—have taken on new life by including Indians. At the same time, brave souls setting forth once more on the ancient quest for the creation of an American identity are giving Natives a more prominent role in that origin story. And some of those intrepid enough to offer tours of the entire early American world have aspired to put Indians front and center.


12 Ned Blackhawk has also used weaving fabric as a metaphor (Blackhawk, OAH Magazine 19: 16).

Even avatars of traditional approaches to traditional subjects show signs of changing their tune. Though Gordon S. Wood has argued that there are serious side effects to the regnant “fashionable” scholarly penchant for “recovering the lost voices of ordinary people,” he recognizes that “one of the most important consequences of the upheaval in the writing of American history that has taken place over the past generation has been the new attention paid to the Indians.”14 “Through the efforts of a squadron of scholars,” Wood writes, “the Indians have made their presence felt in early America.”15 Sensing that presence himself, he sometimes composes in a different key: just as “the European invasion” led to Indians being “lied to . . . and cheated of their land and their furs by greedy white traders and land-hungry migrants,” so the new Republic “continually violated” Native “treaty rights” and “killed or displaced tens of thousands of Indians.”16

Wood is not the only unlikely one to channel Jennings. Joseph J. Ellis—like Wood, a best-selling author of international repute and a defender of “old-fashioned” history—has also proven susceptible to new strains of thought.18 One symptom is that he too occasionally sounds different. The United States had “blatantly imperialistic” dealings with Indians, Ellis points out; the country’s “gloss of reassuring rhetoric” [about Invasion; lied; cheated; greedy; land-hungry; violated; killed; displaced: Francis Jennings lives!17


15 Wood, Purpose of the Past, 212.


17 Jennings, Invasion of America.

friendship] . . . covered a crude reality of outright confiscation” of Native lands. Another is his recognition, in a biography of George Washington, that modern “historical scholarship . . . has altered the landscape around Washington.” “Most significantly, the burgeoning scholarship on slavery and the fate of Native Americans have [sic] moved topics that were formerly in the background into the foreground. . . . Coming to terms with Washington means making them . . . central concerns.” Certainly Washington, as president, made them “one of his highest priorities,” giving “Indian affairs . . . his personal attention amidst [a] cacophony of political and constitutional pressures.” Ellis has also given Indian affairs his personal attention. Invited to contribute a chapter to a book on “dramatic events that changed America,” he added to the farrago—Salem, Harpers Ferry, the Scopes trial, the March on Washington—the 1790 Treaty of New York, when President Washington hosted a summit meeting with a delegation of Creeks.

If Ellis and Wood have begun to notice Natives, it seems fair to say, with Blackhawk, that we have indeed come a long way. The days of “academic apartheid,” which segregated Indians from other Americans, seem to be past. Perhaps a new age—more inclusive, more sensitive to Native perspectives and experiences—has now begun.

Or perhaps not. Ned Blackhawk himself can be gloomy about the state of play. “A glaring absence remains at the heart of the field,” he admitted a year after calculating how far we have come. “Still missing from most narratives of American history are clear and informed analyses of our nation’s indigenous peoples.” Nor is he the only pessimist. For all the success scholars have had in “foregrounding indigenous peoples and their intentions in the story of early America,” agreed Pekka Hämäläinen in 2008, “the alterations have been cosmetic rather than corrective. . . . [T]he broad outlines of the story have largely remained intact.”

20 Ellis, *His Excellency*, xiii.
21 Ellis, *American Creation*, 129 (“highest priorities”), 138 (“cacophony”); see also ibid., 147.
Cosmetics cannot hide what lies beneath, however. It is hardly a shock that Joseph J. Ellis and Gordon S. Wood are only occasionally in touch with their inner Francis Jennings. More surprising is that John Demos, who did pathbreaking work on witchcraft and the family before heading into Indian territory to tell another family story, turned next to “certain very basic elements in the experience of virtually everyone in . . . colonial America”—then defined “virtually everyone” as European colonists.26 Even recent syntheses, having “acknowledge[d] the historians’ new paths of enquiry in areas such as African American, native[,] and gender studies”—surely “some of the most exciting scholarship in recent years”—still tend to keep Indians on the sidelines.27

But the real reason we have a ways to go in understanding Indians and others has little to do with how deftly or clumsily indigenous peoples have been stitched into the American tapestry. It is not that we need still more work on Natives (though we do). Nor is it that others should pay closer attention to that work (though they should). The root of the problem lies in the very words used to tell stories about olden times.

“Historians have sanitized vocabularies” to some extent, of course.28 No one today besides the National Football League uses *redskins*, just as almost everyone avoids *squaw* and *primitive people*.29 Nor is anybody echoing the Declaration of Independence in calling Natives “merciless Indian Savages”; joining George Washington to say that they are like wolves, “both being beasts of prey tho’ they differ in shape”; or endorsing Andrew Jackson’s talk of their “savage habits” and “rude institutions.”30 So, too,


27 Eric Nellis, *An Empire of Regions: A Brief History of Colonial British America* (Toronto, 2010), xviii (“new paths”), xix–xx; J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, Conn., 2006), xviii (“most exciting”); and see Steven Sarson, *British America, 1500–1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire* (London, 2005), xiii–xiv. One could also argue that even the most successful synthesis, Alan Taylor’s *American Colonies*, bears traces of earlier habits of thought. As the title suggests, European colonies occupy center stage. The decision to add a subtitle—*The Settling of North America*—to the paperback edition reinforces that tilt. One recent work that is more successful in this regard appeared after a draft of this article was composed: Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America’s Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).


some of the phrases penned in the nineteenth century by early America’s first great historian, Francis Parkman—“primitive America, with her savage scenery and savage men”; “wretched tribes of the forest”—are now, to put it nicely, passé.31 As Wood has often observed, where “a century ago historians of early America” routinely wrote about “virgin soil,” “unexploited wilderness,” and “unoccupied territory,” “no historian of early America would write that way anymore.”32

It turns out that Wood himself sometimes writes that way. Talking of “the wilderness” and “the unsettled lands of the interior,” he observes that “both the Scots and the [colonial] North Americans . . . were acutely aware of the contrast between civilization and the nearby barbarism of the Highland clans and the North American Indian tribes.”33 Ellis is even more likely to call the American interior a “western wilderness” of “unexplored forests occupied by hostile Indian tribes,” a “virgin land” boasting “virgin soil.”34

It is unfair to single out Wood and Ellis, though; they have lots of company. Decades after Jennings called attention to “the cant of conquest” and James Axtell warned about “our loaded vocabularies,” early Americanists are still shackled to a lexicon crafted by the victors in the contest for America, one fashioned to explain, even justify, how things turned out.35 Some of the difficulties stem from careless use of those loaded


33 Wood, Purpose of the Past, 253 (“wilderness”); Wood, American Revolution, 73 (“unsettled lands”; see also 119); Wood, Revolutionary Characters, 20 (“both the Scots”). On the same page of Revolutionary Characters, Wood quotes without comment a scholar discussing “contact between a backward world and a modern one” on what Wood terms the “peripheries” “of European culture.” Two pages later, however, Wood writes: “to what they [European colonists] regarded as savagery and barbarism” (ibid., 22, emphasis added).

34 Ellis, His Excellency, 12 (“western wilderness”), 53 (“virgin land”), 268 (“virgin soil”); Ellis, Founding Brothers, 6 (“unexplored”). He also terms it “the far edge of civilization’s progress” but sometimes qualifies such talk with “anything that Europeans called civilization” and “Virginia’s version of civilization” (Ellis, His Excellency, 11, emphasis added).

words, which makes voice, whether something is a historian’s opinion or a colonist’s, hard to pin down. (Consider Wood’s writing “nearby barbarism”: is that his view or the view of those eighteenth-century folks?) But whether use of a vestigial vernacular is careless or careful, the fetters are in place all the same. Slipping them requires facing up to this pervasive, pernicious language problem. A look at recent work—not a comprehensive look, certainly, but not a casual one either—can begin to measure the dilemma’s dimensions.

This safari through the literature on early America is, like any tour, necessarily incomplete. I gave the herd of textbooks a wide berth, for example, and I went right on by most of the savanna’s teeming population of monographs. I also steered clear of books published before the turn of the millennium, to give new work on Indian history time to make its way onto the scholarly veld and get noticed. Within that chronologically bounded domain, my eye was drawn toward syntheses and surveys, but I did pause at more specialized studies that caught my attention for their relevance, their quality, or their influence on the academy or the wider world. Even thus confined, the sightseeing excursion turned up abundant evidence of an archaic but still living discourse that keeps American history tethered to the very “European structures of thought” faced by America’s indigenous peoples centuries ago.36

To start with American history’s conventional beginning reveals at once how the most ordinary words get the mind seeing things the winners’ way. The very measure of time’s passage, gathering together and then parceling into “periods” the uninterrupted flow of one day into the next, is thus inflected. Precontact invariably denotes America’s inhabitants before people from beyond the sea’s horizon showed up. The term persists despite its being common knowledge that for millennia indigenous groups had contact aplenty with strangers from distant lands. It is less well known, but still true, that for many Indians meeting odd-looking people who came in odd-looking craft did not immediately change everything. As Daniel K. Richter puts it, North America was “a place where diverse peoples had long struggled against and sometimes worked with one another, where societies and political systems had long risen and fallen, and where these ancient trends continued right through the period of colonization.” Conventional wisdom


notwithstanding, he insists, “1492 did not rend the fabric of the continent’s time. The sixteenth century remained rooted in all that had gone before.”

Nonetheless, *precontact* and its cousin *postcontact* are still the standard refrain. Given that alternatives—*precolonial, pre-Columbian*—are available, *precontact* should by now have been dispatched to a knackery.

Surprisingly, even scholars aware of “the inherent cultural assumptions embedded in all language,” who know that “some of the standard terms once taken almost for granted . . . now seem somewhat loaded, skewed to the particular perspective of Euro- or Anglo-Americans,” who chronicle “inter-group contact among Indian people long before their contact with Europeans”—even they cannot get *precontact* out of their system. They give tours of “the pre-contact era,” visit “precontact burial sites,” and talk of “Native America on the Eve of Contact.” One tries to avoid contamination by quarantining “pre-contact” with quotation marks the first time it appears, then lifting the quarantine thereafter.

Quotation marks do the same inoculative work to *discovery*—“the ‘discovery’ of America”—calling attention to its dubiety as a synonym for Europeans making landfall. But for every book thereby rendering the term problematic, many more follow precedent, noting that “North America was

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40 For quotation marks, see Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 12. Erik R. Seeman elsewhere makes a good case for European contact being the most significant. Even if true, this need not mean that *contact* ought to refer solely to this episode. It might be the most significant, but, as Seeman points out, “cross-cultural interactions have been an aspect of the human condition for millennia.” Ibid., 46.

41 For an example, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York, 2007), 26. Peter Charles Hoffer questions it: “the Age of Discovery, as this era of European history is often termed.” But he also uses the phrase in its conventional form as a chapter heading: “Europe in the Age of Discovery, 1400–1500.” See Hoffer, *Brave New World*, 2d ed., 42 (“this era”), 41.
discovered first by the Cabots” or talking of “the discovery and exploitation of the Americas.”

Sidestepping this trap need not require donning a T-shirt (“Indians Discovered Columbus”) or making up an American’s diary entry for October 12, 1492 (“At long last, someone has arrived to discover me!”). It requires only keeping in mind that discovery works both ways—that this was also “the era of the Native discovery of Europe.”

Indiscriminate use of discovery puts us on board ship with John Cabot or Christopher Columbus, peering out at shores unknown; the ever-popular New World keeps us there. Even today, many accept direct descent from Amerigo Vespucci, who announced in 1503 that “these new regions which we found and explored . . . we may rightly call a New World.” Vespucci and his shipmates could rightly call it new; to them, it was. From our perch, (“Europe”). John Demos uses “the Age of Discovery” on one page and questions it with quotation marks (“when Columbus ‘discovered’ America”) on the next (Demos, Circles and Lines, 25 ["Age"], 26 ["Columbus"]; see also 28). Some use quotation marks in a different fashion, to question whether the first Americans’ arrival in the hemisphere counts as “discovery” and to distinguish it from “the age of discovery” as commonly understood. See Jerome R. Reich, Colonial America, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2011), 12 (“the ‘discovery’ of America took place at least 40,000 years ago”), 20 (“age”). Alan Taylor, American Colonies, 5, suggests that “discovery” might indeed be a misnomer because these earliest migrants “had no notion that they were discovering . . . a new continent.” (Of course, neither did Christopher Columbus.) The same effect of quotation marks occurs with other keywords such as wilderness (Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 48), back-country (ibid., 276, 281), and settlement (Demos, Circles and Lines, 28, 58–59).


Edmundo O’Gorman, The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History (Bloomington, Ind., 1967), 9 (“At long last”).


Amerigo Vespucci, Mundus Novus, 1503, modernized translation quoted in James D. Kornwolf and Georgiana Wallis Kornwolf, Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America (Baltimore, 2002), xi, quoted in Nellis, Empire of Regions, 3. Recalling the Pilgrims’ arrival in Holland, William Bradford wrote that everything about the place and people was “all so far differing from” what they had known in England that “it seemed they were come into a new world.” Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation (New York, 1981), 16.
Europe and America circa 1492 both look old, yet one remains forever young because Vespucci so decreed.

Oddly, the phrase is at once more common than *discovery* and more often challenged. J. H. Parry stated the obvious almost half a century ago: “Columbus did not discover a new world; he established contact between two worlds, both already old.”46 In the years since, complaints about the Old World–New World binary have only gotten louder—and still this hardy perennial stubbornly resists efforts to root it out.47 Books that are at pains to include indigenous peoples and perspectives will talk of “cheap land in the New World” and “the habits of the Old World.”48 Some put “New World” in quotation marks yet still think in terms of “old and new worlds,” though it is easy enough to add two letters and render “the New World” as “their New World.”49

Having discovered a New World, European mariners five hundred years ago then splashed ashore, dried their socks, and had a look around. Historians stay right with them, seeing America in ways that made sense only to coast-hugging interlopers. A long word list—backcountry, backlands, back parts, backwoods, hinterland, marchland, periphery, trans-Appalachian—testifies to a predilection to consider matters from shore (if not from London, Madrid, or Paris).50

One of these synonyms, backcountry, is so popular that it merits books and review essays of its own. 51 Colonists liked it too. George Washington


49 Taylor, *American Colonies*, 37 (quotations marks; see also 48), 25 (“old and new”); Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 32 (“their New World”).

50 Hoffer, *Brave New World*, 2d ed., uses backcountry (314) and backwoods (219). Eric Nellis, who uses backcountry, recognizes that it “is a tricky term that is best understood as it was in the eighteenth century: habitable space somewhat distant or remote from the main areas of [colonial] settlement” (Nellis, *Empire of Regions*, 269). For backlands, see Richard Kluger, *Seizing Destiny: How America Grew from Sea to Shining Sea* (New York, 2007), 95, 119, 184, 196, 208. See also François Furstenberg, “The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in American History,” *American Historical Review (AHR)* 113, no. 3 (June 2008): 647–77. Trans-Appalachian sounds neutral, but it always means west of those mountains, again reflecting an East Coast perch.

himself used the term (“there is a large Field before you, . . . an opening prospect in the back Country for . . . an enterprising Man”), but if his Native counterparts understood it at all, they would have construed it differently—to include, say, Mount Vernon. It is one thing to use backcountry and its mates when considering land speculators such as Washington or deciphering how colonists saw things when they turned their gaze westward and lit out for that territory. It is something else to produce a work that “seeks to offer a balanced and complex portrayal of” those lands, to replace “historians [who traditionally] told the story . . . from the perspective of the colonists only,” and then to throw off the balance by keeping that lopsided term. Remarkably, backwoods and the rest persist, despite there being viable (if contested) alternatives such as borderlands. Even frontier, stripped of its Turnerian baggage, carries less bias than backcountry.

As backwoods suggests, another cluster of close kin—forest, wilderness, wilds, woodlands, woods—also endorses the newcomers’ way of seeing their new land. The ancient plotline is alive and well: Europeans had “to brave the perils of the . . . American wilderness” so that they could “tame and develop the continent,” declares one account; “settlers . . . attacked the wilderness and cleared it,” intones another. All this attention to wilderness and woods is inherited from the first colonists, particularly New Englanders imbued with biblical ideas about God’s chosen people passing through a wilderness to reach the promised land. These folks outdid themselves in wilding America: a “remote, rocky, barren, bushy, wild-woody wilderness”; “one of the most hideous, boundless, and unknown Wildernesses in the world”; “a vast and roaring wilderness.” True, scholars these days who


53 Hinderaker and Mancall, At the Edge of Empire, 7.


55 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 37 (“brave the perils”), xiii (“tame”; see also 5); Demos, Circles and Lines, 28–29 (“attacked”).

sing of “deciduous forests blanketing the eastern seaboard” sound more akin to John Smith (“all the Countrey is overgrowne with trees”) than William Bradford (“the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue”), but if the lyrics are different, the tune is the same.  

The problem with all this talk of the wild is that it is just that: wild talk. There is no denying the vast stretches of forest that so impressed (and frightened) wood-starved (and woods-starved) Europeans. But there are woods, and then there are woods. “One must not visualize the New England forest at the time of settlement as a dense tangle of huge trees and nearly impenetrable underbrush covering the entire landscape,” William Cronon cautioned thirty years ago. “Along the southern coast, from the Saco River in Maine all the way to the Hudson, the woods were remarkably open, almost parklike at times.” The same was true farther south. How do we know? Because colonists said so. “It is generally conceived that the woods grow so thick that there is no more clear ground than is hewed out by labor of man,” an early New England writer informed anxious readers back home, but, he hastened to add, “it is nothing so, in many places diverse acres being clear so that one may ride ahunting in most places of the land.”  

A Virginian took similar pains to allay prospective migrants’ fears “that the Country is overgrowne with Woods.” Nonsense: “there are immense quantity of Indian fields cleared already to our hand, by the Natives.”  

By the Natives: well-known Indian customs of working the land—clearing fields, burning woods to open space around their towns and improve conditions for gathering and hunting—should long ago have scrapped sce-


57 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 40 (“deciduous forests”; though on 41 McDougall notes that “the forests were often partially cleared thanks to the Indian practice of killing trees . . . and burning underbrush to plant corn or attract game”; see also 289); Philip L. Barbour, ed., The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631) in Three Volumes (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986), 1: 151 (“all the Country”); Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 70 (“whole country”).  


59 Edward Williams, Virginia, More especially the South Part Thereof; Richly and Truly Valued (London, 1650), 4, quoted in Timothy Silver, A New Face on the Country-side: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500–1800 (New York, 1990), 104 (quotations; see also Barbour, Complete Works, 2: 116), 59–65. That this notion has long been known beyond specialists in Native American history is clear from David Freeman Hawke, Everyday Life in Early America (New York, 1988), 12: “Wherever they landed along the American coast, none of the first settlers had to confront a forbidding wilderness—except in their minds.”

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narios that had colonists taming wilds. Since it turns out that the continent bore the imprint of human minds, hands, and tools well before Europeans arrived, other ingredients of the old recipe—a “virgin land,” “a land as God made it”—can also be set aside. Just because John Smith, forgetting the Indian towns he put on his own map and the cornfields he passed en route to those towns, could call the place “a plaine wildernes as God first made it” does not mean we need to take his word for it. The same goes for Smith’s wilderness: because “wilderness was a state of mind—a perceived rather than an actual condition of the environment”—it merits the dustbin too. At the very least, it needs an adjective to identify who exactly was feeling bewildered, for it might have been a Powhatan. To her way of thinking, “Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather . . . they made one.”

Not only are wilderness, woods, and forest misnomers but, combined with others, they contain the power to perpetuate habits of mind bequeathed from Jamestown and Plymouth. If eastern North America was nothing but wilds, it follows that people there must be wild too. Many colonists certainly thought so. William Bradford was neither the first nor the last to fret that his “hideous and desolate wilderness” was “full of wild beasts and wild men.” Almost two hundred years later, another observer recalled how “so recently” America was “a rugged wilderness and the abode of savages and wild beasts.” Parkman chanted the same mantra, saying that “the Indian is a true child of the forest,” that “he and his forest must

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63 Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, ix.

64 Jennings, Invasion of America, 30 (emphasis added). Francis Jennings here was discussing disease wreaking havoc, not European colonists “taming” a continent. The ellipses omit “however involuntarily.”

65 Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 70 (see also 26; Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 18).

perish together." Hence when books in our own day mention "forest tribes," "the woodland [and] its native inhabitants," or "the forest, its wild animals, and its Indians," they use a product well past its expiration date.

Placing Natives in woods rather than clearings has all sorts of unhappy consequences. One is the tendency to assume that their numbers were small. Modern scholars have moved away from colonists' claim that "their [Indians'] land is spacious and void, and they are but few," or its nineteenth-century equivalent, "a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians"—but not always far away. If none follow Richard Brookhiser in saying that "everything west of the Alleghenies was bison," some describe how whites and blacks "peopled" the Ohio valley, as though Bradford was right to talk of "those vast and unpeopled countries of America." A welcome corrective would have more books quoting John Winthrop (among others) describing Narragansett Country as "full of Indians" or mentioning that the locals' name for what we call tidewater Virginia was *Tsenacommacah*, "densely inhabited land."

Maps accompanying the new work do similar damage by making America look sparsely populated. Indeed, today's iterations might actu-

67 Parkman, *Conspiracy of Pontiac*, 1: 1 ("child"), 44 ("perish together").
ally be more misleading than their ancestors, since colonial cartographers—
relying on Native informants, keen to pinpoint potential Indian customers,
allies, or enemies—often made sure that “the Native-American presence
was a major focus of attention.” Renderings composed lately often lose
that focus. Were there any Natives in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake
or New England, the middle colonies or the Southeast? Not according
to some recent maps. Nor, apparently, were they to be found anywhere
in “North America in the Late Seventeenth Century,” “The Atlantic
Seaboard, c. 1700,” “Eastern North America, 1690–1748,” “Northeastern
North America, c. 1755,” and “Ohio River Valley: 1763–95.” This would

Encounters: Perspectives on Native American Mapmaking and Map Use (Chicago, 1998);
Lisa Brooks, The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast (Minneapolis, Minn., 2008). After completing a draft of this essay, I came upon Juliana Barr’s fine
article “Geographies of Power: Mapping Indian Borders in the ‘Borderlands’ of the Early

73 Short, Representing the Republic, 69 (“Native-American”); see also 57–58, 61; Short, Cartographic Encounters, 37–38. Gregory H. Nobles argues the opposite: “Mapmak-
ers used maps . . . to diminish, even deny, the presence of Indian peoples on the land” (Nobles, American Frontiers, 61).

74 James Horn, “Tobacco Colonies: The Shaping of English Society in the
Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake,” in The Oxford History of the British Empire: The
Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century, ed.
Nicholas Canny (New York, 1998), 170–92, esp. 172 (map 8.1: “The Chesapeake in the
“Shaftesbury’s Darling: British Settlement in the Carolinas at the Close of the Seven-
teenth Century,” ibid., 375–97, esp. 377 (map 17.1: “The Carolinas in the Seventeenth
Century”); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 151 (no title or date), 201 (“Middle Colonies”;
curiously, ibid., 169 [“New England Colonies”] does include Indian groups); Taylor,
American Colonies, 27 (“The Atlantic, c. 1500”), 279 (“The Atlantic Seaboard, c. 1700”;
by contrast, “French America, c. 1740” [ibid., 367] includes many Native names). See also
Nellis, Empire of Regions, 5 (map o.1: “The Atlantic World of the Early Modern Imperial-
ists”). Nor is it convincing to argue that these maps are intended to represent colonial
Europeans only. For one thing, some of the labels say otherwise. For another, maps that
do feature Natives and are so captioned still find room for the names of all the European
colonies; why not vice versa? See Peter C. Mancall, “Native Americans and Europeans in
English America, 1500–1700,” in Canny, Oxford History of the British Empire: Origins of
Empire, 328–50, esp. 329 (map 15.1: “Native Americans in Eastern North America”); Fred
Anderson, Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North
America, 1754–1766 (New York, 2000), xxviii–xxx (compare map 2: “New France and
the British Mainland Colonies in the Seven Years’ War, 1754–1763,” with map 3: “Indian
Groups, Regions, and Topography of the North American Interior”).

(map 19.1: “North America in the Late Seventeenth Century” [it actually includes only
territories east of the Mississippi River and south of Hudson Bay]); Taylor, American
Colonies, 279 (“The Atlantic Seaboard, c. 1700” [the map actually runs as far west as
Lake Michigan]), 425 (“Northeastern North America, c. 1755”); Richard R. Johnson,
“Growth and Mastery: British North America, 1690–1748,” in The Oxford History of the
have been news to the Abenaki, Delaware, Shawnee, and the rest still living there—not to mention those from Europe and Africa who spoke, prayed, fought, swapped, and slept with them.76

Maps that do find room for Native peoples—even depictions confined to eastern North America—can still play into timeworn notions about there being just “a few scattered tribes.” One has no Indians near the coast between modern Florida and North Carolina and only one nation in the entire territory once called the pays d’en haut (“the Old Northwest” to us). Another removes Natives from that vast realm entirely, while finding room for just five “Indian Peoples” altogether.77 A third does plant several near the Great Lakes but leaves vacant the stretch between Yamasees on the southeastern coast and the Mississippi River, lands that were home to (among others) the populous Muskogees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws.78

Obviously there are limits to what any cartographer can do; it is impossible to convey the sheer number of Native polities and populations when putting even one-third of a continent on the page. Nonetheless, today’s maps are curiously myopic. Especially with sources now available for cartography that corrects mistakes rather than repeats them, it is too bad that so many second the canard about Indians being “but few.”79

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76 Maps of the new American nation are not much better. Though Paul E. Johnson, The Early American Republic, 1789–1829 (New York, 2007), 6, reminds us that “beyond the Appalachians were hundreds of thousands of free and unconquered Native Americans” who “occupied more than half of what the maps said was the United States,” those thousands are scarce on maps in recent work treating the early Republic. (See also Furstenberg, AHR 113: 659–60; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 19.) For maps, see Sean Wilentz, The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln (New York, 2005), xiv; Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 413 (“The Thirteen Original Colonies” [it actually depicts North America, excludes Native peoples, and includes not only the British colonies but Spanish Louisiana, New Spain, territories “Claimed by Spain,” and the Hudson’s Bay Company]), 479 (“The New Nation,” which excludes Natives and includes British Canada, Spanish Florida and Louisiana, and lands ceded to the U.S. by individual states); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 360 (“The United States, 1803–1807”).


78 Mancall, “Native Americans and Europeans,” 329 (map 15.1). See also Elliot, Empires of the Atlantic World, 2.

Whether making Indians out to be few or many, scholarship confining them to the woods has still other ill effects. It keeps on life support the mistake that Natives first and foremost were hunters who roamed their forest homes in search of game. To be sure, we have cleaned up our language some: no one today would say, as colonists did, that Indians “do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes and wild beasts.”

However, though specialists have demonstrated that hunting was a sophisticated pursuit involving entire kin groups rather than a bunch of armed guys running around, not everyone has gotten the message. Talk of Indians’ losing “the lands they once roamed freely” (2006) echoes “the wandering savage who traverses the wilds of America” (1804), just as Native men construing “liberty in terms of their ability to roam and hunt at will” (2009) sounds close to “the Indian rov’d, free and unconquered” (1822).

That Natives were hunters, not farmers, is among the most common, most destructive errors being perpetuated. The evidence to the contrary is neither new nor secret: Indian peoples in most of eastern North America (usually women) tended large, productive fields with care and skill; after contact with European newcomers, Natives added to their repertoire orchards, pigs, and cattle. Knowing all this, imperial armies invading Indian lands deliberately waged “warfare against vegetables,” taking a break from destroying crops and caches to slaughter the locals’ livestock and chop down fruit trees.

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80 Puritan minister, quoted in Taylor, American Colonies, 192; see also Anthony F. C. Wallace, Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 216; Bannister, How the Indians Lost Their Land, chap. 5.

81 Jennings, Invasion of America, 61, 67, 71–74; Cronon, Changes in the Land, 51–52, 63–64; Axtell, “Forked Tongues,” 43; Merchant, Ecological Revolutions, chap. 2; Silver, New Face on the Countryside, 52–55; Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 26–31.


83 Barbara Graymont, The Iroquois in the American Revolution (Syracuse, N.Y., 1972), 213 (quotation). Work on Indian agriculture and diet that has long been available includes Jennings, Invasion of America, 61; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640 (Totowa, N.J., 1980), 80–86; Bernard W. Sheean, Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia (New York, 1980), 99–110; Salisbury, Manitou and Providence, chap. 1; Cronon, Changes in the Land, 38–43; Merchant, Ecological Revolutions, 69–81; Silver, New Face on the Countryside, 46–51; Calloway, New Worlds for All, 17–18, 50–53; Richter, Facing East, 5, 55–57. For Natives adopting European animals, see Claudio Saunt, A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816 (New York, 1999); Anderson, Creatures of Empire; Joshua Piker, Okfuskee: A
Still, some scholars parrot architects of Indian policy such as Henry Knox ("Indians derive their subsistence chiefly by hunting") and John Marshall (Natives’ “subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest”), informing readers that “in European societies . . . the cultivation of crops provided the principal sustenance of the people—rather than merely supplementing hunting and gathering, as among most Indians.” 84 More often, the point gets across by implication rather than declamation. It can be as simple as substituting hunting land or hunting grounds for homeland or territory. Thus when colonists started “impinging on the Indians’ hunting land” (not, apparently, their towns and houses), Natives would “fight to preserve their hunting grounds” (never, it seems, their orchards and cornfields) but in the end would usually “cede their hunting grounds” (keeping, one surmises, their granaries and graveyards). 85

If Native farming does get a mention, words subtly undermine its importance. Whatever the acreage cultivated, it seems, Indians tended to work “gardens” (or a “corn patch”), colonists fields; Indians practiced “horticulture,” colonists agriculture; Indians “grew vegetables,” colonists crops. 86 Here is the residue of a bygone era, when Parkman described how

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85 Sarson, British America, 181 (“impinging”; see also 173); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 123 (“preserve”; see also 124); Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 149 (“cede”; see also 136). And see Ellis, American Creation, 130; Walter A. McDougall, Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829–1877 (New York, 2008), 49; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 275.
86 Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 110 (“cornfields” were “gardens devoted to corn”), 223 (“gardens of corn and squash, grown in relatively small fields near the village”), 29 (“horticulture”; see also 33, 37); Nellis, Empire of Regions, 123 (“corn patch”); Taylor, American Colonies, 10 (“horticulture”; see also 93, 102, 189); Wood, Empire of...
"Indian squaws turned the black mould with their rude implements . . . and sowed their scanty stores of maize and beans." 87

The most striking scholarly obliteration of indigenous farming comes in descriptions of the new American nation’s “civilization” program for Indians. “We should be gratified,” the United States told Cherokees and other Natives in 1791, “with the opportunity of . . . teaching you to cultivate the earth, and raise corn; to raise oxen, sheep, and other domestic animals” “instead of remaining in a state of hunters.” 88 Since during the Revolutionary War Cherokees had lost twenty thousand bushels of corn to one invading army and fifty thousand more to another, they might well have been puzzled by the invitation. So would their neighbors the Creeks, offered the same curriculum, for by the 1770s they already had “plenty of beef” and were raising “abundance of small cattle, hogs, turkeys, ducks and dunghill fowls.” 89

This is not the place to go into why American officials said that they wanted to teach Indian cattle ranchers to be herdsmen and Indian farmers to grow Indian corn. 90 It is the place to point out how often historians

87 Parkman, Conspiracy of Pontiac, 1: 147. Parkman, like many since, was inconsistent: elsewhere he wrote at length about the extent of Iroquois agriculture (ibid., 1: 16).


90 See Daniel H. Usner Jr., “Iroquois Livelihood and Jeffersonian Agrarianism: Reaching behind the Models and Metaphors,” in Native Americans and the Early Republic, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Va.,
today say the same thing. Even one aware that “the notion of women farm-
ing seemed so unnatural to many European Americans that Northerners at
least had a hard time acknowledging that the Indians practiced any agricul-
ture at all” can still write, a few lines later, that “whites expected Indians
to become farmers,” a few pages later that federal officials wanted Natives
to “abandon hunting and gathering” and start “becoming farmers like the
whites,” and a few chapters later that “Cherokees . . . made extraordinary
progress in developing white ways—living in houses and relying on agricul-
ture and not game for their food.”91

Most scholars are equally oblivious to how their words rehearse the
tried and false. A pastiche cobbled together from recent work on the sub-
ject exposes the problem. Federal officials keen “to help [Natives] make
the transition to farming” dispatched “teachers and missionaries [who]
exhorted Native Americans to embrace agriculture.”92 Cherokees and other
nations that did “abandon their hunter-gatherer economies” and “shifted
from hunting to settled agriculture,” the chorus continues, finally “became
farmers.”93 On the other hand, those “finding great difficulty in shifting
from an economy of hunting and trapping to planting and cattle rais-
ing,” like Catawbas, “entered a long period of decline.”94 This is wrong—

1999), 200–225; Patricia Seed, American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the
Pursuit of Riches (Minneapolis, Minn., 2001), chap. 3; Daniel K. Richter, “Believing
That Many of the Red People Suffer Much for the Want of Food: Hunting, Agriculture,
and a Quaker Construction of Indianness in the Early Republic,” in Race and the Early
Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic, ed. Michael
A. Morrison and James Brewer Stewart (Lanham, Md., 2002), 27–54; Banner, How the
Indians Lost Their Land, chap. 5.

91 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 124 (“notion”), 127 (“abandon”), 398 (“Cherokees”).
“Farmers like the whites” could mean “farmers in the way whites practiced farming” or
“farmers, which the whites were (and Indians were not).” See also Ellis, American Crea-
tion, 139, 157.

92 Johnson, Early American Republic, 154–55 (“transition,” 155); McDougall, Throes
of Democracy, 48 (“teachers and missionaries”). See also Ellis, Founding Brothers, 159; Jon
Meacham, American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House (New York, 2008), 92–93;
43; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 375. Sometimes the problem is a failure to spell out that
the views expressed are those of a Henry Knox or John Marshall, not the historian’s:
when Eliga H. Gould wrote that “George Washington warned the Cherokee . . . the
Indians’ only hope for survival . . . was to abandon nomadic hunting for settled agricul-
ture,” was it Gould, Washington, or both calling Natives nomadic hunters? See Gould,

93 Ellis, Founding Brothers, 159 (“abandon”); Sean Wilentz, Andrew Jackson (New
York, 2005), 67 (“shifted”; see also Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 149, 323; Wilentz
[ibid., 149] also terms this “yeoman-style agriculture”); Louis P. Masur, 1831: Year of Eclipse
(New York, 2001), 117 (“became farmers”). Norman K. Risjord uses the words “per-
suade them to take up farming,” though on the same page he writes that Cherokees were
“already a comparatively settled agricultural people” (Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 375).

94 Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars (New York, 2001), 11.
Catawbas, having joined the colonists’ rebellion against Britain in 1776, did enough “planting and cattle raising” during the next several years to supply their allies with roast beef and a side dish of corn—but it does express the pervasive notion that Indians needed instruction to grow crops and coaxing to keep livestock.95

A hidden variable in this pair of equations (Indians equal hunters, Europeans equal farmers) is settled, as in “from hunting to settled agriculture.” The word and its relatives—settlement, settlers, settler societies, settler colonialism (associated with European colonists)—can be traced back to the likes of John Winthrop. “As for the Natives in New England,” the Massachusetts Bay governor wrote, “they inclose noe Land, neither have any setled habytation, nor any tame Cattle to improve the Land by.”96 Other colonists were impressed by Native agriculture (Winthrop’s own son reported Indian farmers “loading the Ground with as much as it will beare”), and studies since have confirmed “very high yields per acre.”97 Still, the idea that settled means European customs—fences, plows, livestock, monoculture, dwellings occupied year round—endures.98

Confining settler and its varietals to colonists derails efforts to understand early America. It makes European colonial thinking normative, denigrating and dismissing Native ways of ordering—settling—the land, thereby rendering Indian territories unsettled, with all the errors of that default mode (as with wilderness). In addition, it joins Winthrop and others to artificially widen the distance between Native and colonial practices (if not their values). In fact, both were farming folk who worked fields near towns.99 Both supplemented their diet with meat, and while hunting and herding seem far apart, scholars have shown that the difference gets exaggerated. On the

96 [John Winthrop], Winthrop Papers ([Boston], 1931), 2: 141, quoted in Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 121. See also Cronon, Changes in the Land, 56; Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 53–54.
98 For colonists (mis)reading the Native landscape, see Jennings, Invasion of America, 32; Cronon, Changes in the Land, chap. 4; Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 79–81.
99 Sometimes these were the same fields and towns, since newcomers headed for what colonists commonly called “Indian old fields” and set up villages on abandoned indigenous sites. See Jennings, Invasion of America, 30; Cronon, Changes in the Land, 127–28; Richter, Facing East, 6, 53–57; Taylor, American Colonies, 165; Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 153. Robert Appelbaum has noted that “archaeological evidence suggests that many Algonquians were far more sedentary than [colonists’] ethnographic accounts would lead us to believe.” See Appelbaum, “Hunger in Early Virginia: Indians and English Facing Off over Excess, Want, and Need,” in Appelbaum and Sweet, Envisioning an English Empire, 195–216 (quotation, 197).
one hand, Indians shaped the landscape in a way that drew game to certain places at certain times, so “in an important sense, they were harvesting a foodstuff which they had consciously been instrumental in creating” and “practicing a more distant kind of husbandry of their own.”

On the other, colonists usually let cattle and hogs fend for themselves in the woods, hunting for their own at particular seasons—and often discovering that their supposedly domesticated creatures “behaved just like deer and other wild beasts.”

That they were chasing down rather than penning up livestock is only one indication that transplanted Europeans had a hard time living up to their (and our) notions of “settling” their “wilderness.” In many respects, Virginia DeJohn Anderson argues, early on “they acted more like native farmers than English husbandmen.” If Indians’ old planting grounds, the first choice, were scarce, colonists “simply adopted native methods for clearing new fields,” girdling trees and planting among the dying trunks. Once they had thus readied plots, they continued for a time to ape Indian customs, grubbing with a hoe rather than striding along behind a plow. At dusk they likely left the fields and headed home to hovels, for in New England at first and in the Chesapeake much longer, most lived in dilapidated shacks, with dirt floors, few or no windows, and precious little by way of the furnishings and household goods that spelled civility to them (and to us). For a century “the material improvements signifying English settlement were . . . visible mainly on small portions of Chesapeake plantations and near the centers of New England towns.”


102 Ibid., 116.


Complicating matters further is the fact that even when a region did become, to newcomers, satisfactorily settled, what happened to it was profoundly destructive—in a word, unsettling—not just to Natives but to the land itself. Colonists’ “farming and lumbering,” remarked Colin G. Calloway in 1997, “wreaked havoc on the environment.” Clear-cutting forests changed the very climate: “sunnier and hotter in the summer,” “colder in the winter,” it was also muddier come spring because “soil froze[n] to greater depths than before” meant more frequent floods. Single-crop plow agriculture, when it came, “created even deeper ecological transformations,” raising flood risk and robbing soil of nutrients.106 Calling this settlement requires the same mindset that labels as development the making of a mall from a meadow or a parking lot out of the prairie.

Mired in this semantic swamp, early Americanists cannot help but spout oxymorons such as “settlers invaded,” “settlers destroyed,” “settlers” chose “to attack, plunder, and kill . . . Indians.”107 Some people dubbed settlers seem especially unlikely contenders for the title. The English who invaded Tsenacommacah beginning in 1607 died by the hundreds of disease, despair, malnutrition, even starvation; survivors seemed to spend what strength they had scheming against their fellows, bullying their neighbors, and—perhaps—dining on one another. Yet they are settlers still.108 So,

106 Calloway, New Worlds for All, 19 (“farming and lumbering”), 20 (“sunnier”). Colin G. Calloway offered a synopsis of then-recent literature on the unsettling effects of colonization (ibid., 18–22). Fuller treatments can be found in Cronon, Changes in the Land, chaps. 6–7; Merchant, Ecological Revolutions, chaps. 5–6; Silver, New Face on the Countryside, chaps. 5–6.


108 The scholarship on early Virginia has become kinder and gentler in the past decade or so, presenting a somewhat sunnier picture than earlier scholars such as Edmund S. Morgan painted (Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia [New York, 1975]). Still, even this scholarship affirms the destructive forces at work in the colony’s early years. See Appelbaum and Sweet, Envisioning an English Empire; Horn, A Land as God Made It; Kelso, Jamestown; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, The Jamestown Project (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Peter C. Mancall, ed., The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550–1624 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007). A recent article analyzing the question of starvation and cannibalism is Rachel B. Herrmann, “The ‘tragicall historie’: Cannibalism and Abundance in Colonial Jamestown,” WMQ 68, no. 1 (January 2011): 47–74. For surveys and syntheses that convey Virginia’s chaos yet still call it a settlement by settlers, see Taylor, American Colonies, 130–31; Middleton, Colonial America,
some 150 years later and a few hundred miles north, are the Paxton Boys, who “butchered” Conestoga Indian men, women, and children “with a genocidal mania.” Even scholars on the alert for the “discursive occlusion of colonizing’s violence, theft, exploitation, and enslavement” cannot escape settler for long. It somehow finds its way into works bent on dismantling “modern American history’s liberal metanarrative” and intent on interrogating loaded terms—such as, well, “settled.”

A word and concept so pervasive will be difficult to discard, but there are already substitutes aplenty and possibilities galore. Colonists certainly works, as do provincials, newcomers, immigrants, invaders, intruders, and reavers. Alternatively, it is simple enough to neutralize the positive word by adding an adjective so that “European settlers” share the page with “Tuscarora settlers.” Another option, taking up terms Native Americans themselves coined for these peoples from across the sea, has the advantage of reversing the polarity of perspective, but not everyone will be happy calling transplanted Europeans “Cloth makers” or “Knife men,” not to mention Kristoni (“I am a metal maker”), Agnonha (“Iron People”), or ouemichtigouchiou (“men in a wooden canoe or boat”). Keeping to an indigenous point of view, perhaps some feature distinguishing Europeans from Native Americans might come in handy, such as what Indians would call people who spent their days in a clearing, tending crops: women.

11, 49, 52; Hinderaker and Mancall, At the Edge of Empire, 20–24; Elliott, Empires of the Atlantic World, 12, 14–15, 42, 55; Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 124–33.

109 Griffin, American Leviathan, chap. 2 (“butchered,” 47; “genocidal mania,” 65). See also Hinderaker and Mancall, At the Edge of Empire, 135–37; Nellis, Empire of Regions, 53.


111 For a similar exercise, see James Axtell, “The Columbian Mosaic in Colonial America,” in Beyond 1492, 217–40, esp. 225.

112 David L. Preston, The Texture of Contact: European and Indian Settler Communities on the Frontiers of Iroquoia, 1667–1783 (Lincoln, Neb., 2009), 126.


The wordplay masks a deeper seriousness of purpose and of consequence; it is not mere semantics. This collection of concepts—hunters, settlers, roam, woods, and the like—had real effects for Native peoples and for the course of American history. They were and are tools in the imperial project of relieving Indians of their sovereignty and their land.

The close connection between the talk of hunting and roaming on the one hand and of imperiling Native territories and rights on the other is evident in some of the colonial authorities already visited. Thus John Winthrop’s denigration of Indian agriculture—“they inclose no Land, neither have any setled habytation”—was prelude to his assertion in the next phrase that “soe [they] have noe other but a Naturall Right to those Countries,” a right left over from the day “when men held the earth in common” and one “superseded when individuals began to raise crops, keep cattle, and improve the land by enclosing it” (a “civil right”). So, too, John Marshall’s assertion that Indians’ “subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest” underpinned his argument that “to leave them in possession of their country, was to leave the country a wilderness.”

My thinking on these issues is indebted to many scholars. The fullest treatment of Indian land rights is fairly recent—Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land—but many others before Banner have considered this subject. See Jennings, Invasion of America, chap. 8; Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 120–34; Russel Lawrence Barsh and James Youngblood Henderson, The Road: Indian Tribes and Political Liberty (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), chaps. 1–5; Dorothy V. Jones, License for Empire: Colonialism by Treaty in Early America (Chicago, 1982); Cronon, Changes in the Land, chap. 4; Williams, American Indian in Western Legal Thought, pts. 2–3; Anthony Pagden, Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500–c. 1800 (New Haven, Conn., 1995), chap. 3; David Armitage, The Ideological Origins of the British Empire (New York, 2000), 49–50, 93–99; Wilkins and Lomawaima, Uneven Ground, esp. introd. and chap. 1; Gregory Evans Dowd, “Wag the Imperial Dog: Indians and Overseas Empires in North America, 1650–1776,” in Deloria and Salisbury, Companion to American Indian History, 46–67, esp. 46–48; Sidney L. Harring, “Indian Law, Sovereignty, and State Law: Native People and the Law,” ibid., 441–59; Taiaiake Alfred, “Sovereignty,” ibid., 460–74; Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, esp. chaps. 1–2, 4. A recent illuminating comparative work on sovereignty is Lisa Ford, Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836 (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). Though I here combine treatment of sovereignty and land rights, I recognize that the two are by no means the same thing. As Stuart Banner has noted, “the acquisition of property in land is “not the acquisition of sovereignty over territory. Property means ownership; sovereignty means the right to govern” (Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 6–7 [“property,” 6, “sovereignty,” 6–7]). However, Banner also has pointed out that, while the two are “separate issues,” they are often conflated, both in early America and since (ibid., 7–8 [quotation, 8], 14).

Cronon, Changes in the Land, 56 (“they inclose” [quoted from Winthrop, Winthrop Papers, 2: 140–41], “superseded”). See also Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 121.

But such talk runs counter to other contemporaneous views, not to mention the custom of negotiating treaties with Indians. Here the fledgling United States followed Britain’s lead. “The independent nations and tribes of Indians ought to be considered as foreign nations, not as the subjects of any particular state,” wrote Secretary of War Henry Knox to President George Washington in 1789 as the two began drafting federal Indian policy. Moreover, “the Indian tribes possess the right of the soil of all lands within their limits.” Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, too, concluded that when it came to Indian lands the United States claimed nothing “as amounting to any dominion, or jurisdiction, or paramountship whatever” beyond the exclusive right to buy any territory Natives might want to sell; “the Indians had the full, undivided and independent sovereignty as long as they choose to keep it, and . . . this might be forever.”

Indians—surprise!—concurred. From before the day Powhatan refused an invitation to Jamestown to accept gifts (and a vassal’s crown) from James I—“If your king have sent me presents,” he told John Smith, “I also am a king, and this my land. . . . Your father [Virginia leader Christopher Newport] is to come to me, not I to him”—Natives scoffed at European pretensions to rule. Rarely were these declarations of independence louder than after treaties in Paris in 1763 and 1783, when empires passed around eastern North America without consulting Indians. Are these peoples subjects of King George who had made “Submissions” to Britain? Rubbish, Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Johnson told his superiors in 1767. Indians call “themselves a free people” and say that they are “no more than our friends and Allies.” “Whoever should undertake to go further on the subject with them,” Johnson warned, “must have a good army at his back.” A Cherokee speaker two decades later, after a couple of those armies had invaded his nation, still scolded U.S. commissioners: “were we to inquire by what law or authority you set up a claim [over us], I answer, none! Your laws extend not into our country, nor ever did.”


120 Barbour, Complete Works, 1: 236, quoted in Horn, A Land as God Made It, 106.

121 E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York (Albany, N.Y., 1856), 7: 958 (quotations; see also Taylor, American Colonies, 437).

With many colonists, America’s founders, and Natives (not to mention historians) concurring that indigenous peoples were sovereign nations, it is remarkable how often ordinary usage reinforces a contrary view, how it echoes—and thus lends credence to—colonial ambitions and imperial fictions. True, not everyone falls for the bluff and bluster. Some point out that “European claims to control extended only as far as the nearest Indians,” that such claims “existed only on paper,” and that to think such “fantasy” true is “somewhat ludicrous.” But many scholars, mistaking would-be conquerors’ blather for fact, still turn dream into reality and Indians into subjects.

One way this happens is by accepting European (and, later, American) talk of ruling peoples and territories. The alchemy is perhaps easiest to detect in treatments of the contest for eastern North America during the second half of the eighteenth century. To hear many books tell it, these struggles began over “the question of whether the Ohio River valley belonged to British North America or French Canada”—but not to any Indians. The answer, according to accepted interpretations, came in 1763, when “France and Spain ceded all their territory east of the Mississippi to Great Britain.” This “gave Britain undisputed dominance

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123 Scholarly treatments of Natives and nationhood include Nobles, American Frontiers, 34; Shoemaker, Strange Likeness, introd., chaps. 1–2; Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, chaps. 1–2. Steven C. Hahn has defined “nationhood” as “the drawing of territorial boundaries, the creation of institutions of national leadership, and the invention of ideologies that legitimize the existence thereof.” Hahn, The Invention of the Creek Nation, 1670–1763 (Lincoln, Neb., 2004), 8. This is not to say that every Native people was, at the time of European contact, a nation in this sense. Many—including Creeks—developed that sort of identity in the course of their shared history with European imperial powers. For the complexity of Native identities and nations, see for example Michael Witgen, “The Rituals of Possession: Native Identity and the Invention of Empire in Seventeenth-Century Western North America,” Ethnohistory 54, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 639–68 (thanks to Jean O’Brien for alerting me to Witgen’s work); Brooks, Common Pot; Jon Parmenter, The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534–1701 (East Lansing, Mich., 2010).

124 Nobles, American Frontiers, 83 (“European claims”), 92 (“existing”); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 289 (“fantasy”); Ellis, His Excellency, 4 (“ludicrous”; see also Parkman, Conspiracy of Pontiac, 1: 170). See also Nugent, Habits of Empire, 3, 5, 9, 16, 39, 43; Banner, How the Indians Lost Their Land, 7; Witgen, Ethnohistory 54: 639–68.

125 Sarson, British America, 207.

126 Hinderaker and Mancall, At the Edge of Empire, 5.
over the eastern half of North America”—dominance that in fact Native powers would dispute for decades to come.\textsuperscript{127} In Paris twenty years later, the fable continues, it was Britain’s turn to hand over its territories (not its \textit{claims}) to the United States, which meant that the new nation’s “western border at the time was the Mississippi,” even that Americans had “nearly an entire continent at their disposal.”\textsuperscript{128}

Simply leaving Indians offstage certainly elides their territorial sovereignty, but there are plenty of other ways to accomplish that task. Freighted words can quietly question sovereignty. A vital ingredient in the lexical elixir dissolving Indian independence is \textit{claimed}, as in “tribes that \textit{claimed} status as independent nations” and “natives’ \textit{claims} to sovereignty over their own land.”\textsuperscript{129} One book, on the same page, concocts a spurious equivalency among “Amerindian \textit{claims} to western lands,” “western land companies that \textit{claimed} vast tracts of trans-Appalachian territory,” and various colonies’ “land \textit{claims} that stretched all the way to the Pacific Ocean.” To be sure, many non-Natives get it, talking of “Indian land,” “their territory,” or “their Country.”\textsuperscript{130} But it remains common to say that Creeks had “legitimate \textit{claim} to a large slice of land,” to write of “lands that Native Americans \textit{regarded} as their own,” to mention (quotation marks at work again) that “the [Ohio] country . . . ‘belonged’ to them.”\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{127} Wood, \textit{American Revolution}, 4. See also Reginald Horsman, \textit{The New Republic: The United States of America, 1789–1815} (Harlow, U.K., 2000), 1, 8; Risjord, \textit{Jefferson's America}, 71. For better phrasing, see Taylor, \textit{American Colonies}, 432. Maps reinforce these wrongheaded notions, depicting lands between the Appalachians and the Mississippi as “British Territory from France” (sans Indians) and labeling as “disputed territory” only places disputed by European or American empires. See Nellis, \textit{Empire of Regions}, 308 (map 10.1: “The Proclamation Line of 1763” [“British Territory from France”]); Hoffer, \textit{Brave New World}, 2d ed., 266 (“French and Spanish Occupation of North America to 1750” [“disputed”]); Howe, \textit{What Hath God Wrought}, 22 (“North America in 1818” [“disputed”]).

\textsuperscript{128} Ellis, \textit{American Creation}, 5 (“western border”; but see 130, where Ellis clarifies the limits of American sovereignty); Wood, \textit{Empire of Liberty}, 4 (“entire continent”; see also 114–15, 117, 131–32); Risjord, \textit{Jefferson’s America}, 200–203.

\textsuperscript{129} David S. Reynolds, \textit{Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson} (New York, 2008), 91 (“claimed status,” emphasis added), 59 (“claims to sovereignty,” emphasis added). See also Masur, 1831, 93. Still another way is to undermine such claims by treating U.S.-Indian relations not as foreign policy but as part of “the domestic front” (Reynolds, \textit{Waking Giant}, 59; see also Risjord, \textit{Jefferson’s America}, 171).

\textsuperscript{130} Sarson, \textit{British America}, 184 (“Amerindian \textit{claims},” emphasis added), 185 (“Indian land”; see also Parkman, \textit{Conspiracy of Pontiac}, 2: 307; Meacham, \textit{American Lion}, 54); Johnson, \textit{Early American Republic}, 19 (“their territory”; see also 46); Griffin, \textit{American Leviathan}, 42 (“their Country,” a remark by a colonist, quoted from George Croghan to William Johnson, Jan. 18, 1767, Croghan Papers, Letters and Documents, file 5, 4, 6). See also Ellis, \textit{American Creation}, 147; Howe, \textit{What Hath God Wrought}, 414.

\textsuperscript{131} Ellis, \textit{American Creation}, 153 (“legitimate,” emphasis added; see also Ellis, \textit{His Excellency}, 19); Griffin, \textit{American Leviathan}, 205 (“regarded,” emphasis added), 69 (“belonged”; see also 62). And see Risjord, \textit{Jefferson’s America}, 275. For \textit{belonged}, see Banner, \textit{How the Indians Lost Their Land}, 7: “We often say colloquially that a particular

Controlled, too, is a handy tool for prying land loose. Pondering the made-up sentence “In 1700 English colonists controlled the lands bordering the Chesapeake Bay” makes it easier to appreciate the hidden power of a sentence such as “the Five Nations of the Iroquois . . . controlled a broad swath between the Hudson River and the lake of the Eries.” Occupied further eats away at Indian sovereignty, suggesting land whose inhabitants do not quite seem to belong. Thus in the 1760s “the Cherokees . . . occupied much of [South Carolina’s] western and northwestern area,” just as after the Revolution “most of Georgia was still occupied by Creeks and Cherokees . . . and the Iroquois occupied western New York.” Such turns of phrase are only innocuous if we also start saying that in 1700 English colonists still occupied Tsenacommacah. From claimed, controlled, and occupied, it is easy to start taking at face value transplanted Europeans’ “ludicrous” “fantasies” about America. Those Five—later Six—Nations did not “occupy” or “control” “western New York”; they lived in and ruled Iroquoia, as anyone venturing uninvited into that realm would find out. Nor can it be said that they “relinquished western New York and Pennsylvania”; if they relinquished anything, it was Iroquoia, not New York. We tend to forget this, but some colonial cartographers zone of land ‘belongs’ to this or that country without specifying whether we mean to speak of property or sovereignty.”

132 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 101 (“Five Nations,” emphasis added). I made this point earlier (Merrell, WMQ 46: 109), but it bears repeating, since the word is widespread. See Sarson, British America, 185; Ellis, American Creation, 128; Johnson, Early American Republic, 18; Nellis, Empire of Regions, 91.

133 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 9 (“Cherokees . . . occupied,” emphasis added); Horsman, New Republic, 105 (“most of Georgia,” emphasis added). For the way this word works with controlled, see Reynolds, Waking Giant, 59: “In former times, Creeks had controlled nearly all of Georgia.”

134 See Frederic W. Gleach, Powhatan’s World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures (Lincoln, Neb., 1997), chap. 4 (“The Birth of Virginia in Tsenacommacah”). The lopsided way occupy can work is evident even when Americans as well as Natives occupy someplace. “The Treaty of Paris in 1783 had given to the United States territory far beyond its actual settlements,” writes Gordon S. Wood. “The people of the original thirteen states occupied only about half of the territory of the newly enlarged country. Not only was this new territory occupied by Indians, but the borderlands . . . were dominated by Great Britain and Spain.” Wood, Empire of Liberty, 112 (emphasis added). What might look like evenhanded treatment—both Indians and Americans occupied territory—turns out otherwise on closer inspection. Though U.S. citizens only occupy a portion of the lands east of the Mississippi and Natives occupy the rest, nonetheless the new Republic rules all of it. Like discovery, continued use of occupied, occupancy, and occupy has the added deleterious effect of eroding Native sovereignty over land, recalling as it does Chief Justice John Marshall’s opinion in Johnson v. McIntosh (1823), where he helped construct “the . . . principle, that the Indian inhabitants are to be considered merely as occupants . . . in the possession of their lands” when Europeans arrived (“Johnson v. McIntosh: Opinion,” Feb. 28, 1823, in Hobson et al., Papers of John Marshall, 9: 294 [quotation], 292, 296).

135 McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 289 (“relinquished”). See Christopher Vecsey and William A. Starna, eds., Iroquois Land Claims (Syracuse, N.Y., 1988);
never did. Maps drafted in 1747 and 1772 confined “New York” to the Hudson Valley, leaving out “western New York” as “The Country of the Five Nations.” Many New Yorkers might have thought that Iroquoia lay “within their borders” or wished that it did; those familiar with the lay of the land knew better.

Even small words can cause big trouble. It is getting well ahead of the story to declare that Tuscaroras were “living in North Carolina” rather than in Tuscarora territory or that Shawnees were “in western Ohio and northern Indiana” before Ohio or Indiana existed. Another preposition—of—conveys the same message about sovereignty and subordination. Asserting that in New England “the leading tribes were the Mohegan and Pequot of Connecticut, the Narragansett of Rhode Island, the Patuxet and Wampanoag of the Plymouth colony, and the Nipmuck, Massachusetts, and Pennacook of the Massachusetts Bay colony” slips the colonial yoke over these nations far in advance of any actual submission. From there, it is a short step to making Native capitals out to be American towns such as “Onondaga, New York” (in 1754!) and “Etowah, Georgia” (1793).

The irony here is that common parlance has phrases aplenty to suggest the realities of sovereignty and territory, power and perspective. “Present-day Georgia,” “what is now South Carolina,” “modern New York,” and “what would become Pennsylvania” are clumsier, but they are also better, albeit imperfect. Eschew them, and the Iroquois peoples end up living
“in New York” some fifty (or, in one case, five hundred) years before that spot of ground was actually the Empire State anywhere other than some speculator’s dream and some mapmaker’s mind.142

Cartographic mind games are still played today, further fogging the lens through which we try to make out early America. Most fail to heed warnings by Gregory H. Nobles and others that maps “often represented the world not as it really was but as the mapmaker (or, more to the point, the mapmaker’s sponsor) wanted it to be. Thus maps became important instruments of imperial policy.”143 Think of borderlines. Colonists knew that “Natives are very exact and punctual in the bounds of their Lands, belonging to this or that Prince or People, (even to a River, Brooke) &c.,” yet few scholarly works mark or remark these.144 Renderings nowadays make up for a lack of Indian borders by an excess of enthusiasm for colonial and state lines, evidently unaware that “even in the Europe of the later seventeenth century, the concept of territorial demarcation through precisely defined linear boundaries was not yet fully established.”145 No matter: long before the divide between New York and Pennsylvania was fixed or the western boundaries of Pennsylvania and South Carolina surveyed, there they are on our maps, confidently marching across the page. This is not just historically inaccurate; it also exaggerates the contrast between European polities (fixed straight lines) and their Native American counterparts (no lines at all).146
Placement of names has the same unfortunate effect. A map titled “New England, c. 1650” that centers the “Massachusetts” label on the Connecticut River is only slightly less anachronistic (a few English towns were there then) than one of the Southeast ca. 1710 that plants “Virginia” 200 miles west of Williamsburg and “South Carolina” 125 miles northwest of Charleston, or another of “The Atlantic Seaboard, c. 1700” that stretches “Pennsylvannia” between the upper Susquehanna River and Lake Erie while stringing “New York” through Iroquoia. Such “wishful thinking” is enhanced by making names of European colonies larger than those of Native nations, putting the former in capital letters and the latter in lowercase (NEW YORK/Iroquoia), rendering names of colonies bold, or confining names of indigenous peoples within parentheses. Some early modern mapmakers used these tricks of the trade to claim and conquer a continent. Why their sleight of pen endures is harder to fathom, but the result is clear: we rely on faulty charts to find our way into the past.

The misnomer miasma brewed by talk about Indian farming (or lack thereof) and Indian sovereignty (or lack thereof) grows even more toxic when mixed with another compound common in European and American thought: savagery. The belief that Indians were savages often accompanied the conviction that they were hunters. Just as John Marshall confidently declared that Indians’ “subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest,” so in the same sentence he wrote that they “were fierce savages, whose occupa-


148 Tomlins, “Law’s Wilderness,” 36 (“wishful thinking”); Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 169, “New England Colonies” (font size, bold, gray); Taylor, American Colonies, 163, “New England, c. 1650” (font size, bold vs. italics); Wood, American Revolution, xix (bold vs. gray); Eric Nellis, The Long Road to Change: America’s Revolution, 1750–1829 (Peterborough, Ont., 2007), 52, map 2.1: “The Thirteen Colonies and the Proclamation of 1763” (font size, parentheses). As Gregory H. Nobles has noted, “Consider the effect if . . . the names of Indian groups were printed in large letters and the names of European colonies in small: the power of the Europeans would no longer seem quite so imposing” (Nobles, American Frontiers, 61–62).
tion was war.” 149 “So good a Countrey, so bad a people,” wrote another self-styled expert on Indians two centuries earlier; “more brutish than the beasts they hunt, more wild and unmanly then that unmanned wild countrey . . . captivated also to Satans tyranny in . . . busie and bloody wickednesse.” 150

Like Puritans conjuring a wilderness, early American authors outdid themselves in detailing that wickedness. “Savage and brutish men,” shuddered William Bradford, who are “cruel, barbarous and most treacherous”; “most furious in their rage,” they “delight to torment men in the most bloody manner that may be.” 151 They are a “perfidious and inhumane people,” exclaimed one of Bradford’s contemporaries while recounting the “barbarous Sauagenesse” of the Powhatans’ 1622 attack on English intruders into Tsenacommacah. These “beasts” and “hell-hounds” “massacred them [colonists], without remorse or pitty,” then went about “defacing, dragging, and mangling the dead carkasses into many pieces, and carrying some parts away in derision, with base and brutish triumph.” 152

Our language has become more, well, civilized when it comes to savage. Books that still talk about hunters in a wilderness would no more use the s-word than they would call Natives hellhounds. Still, even without branding Indians savages, the deeper message from times past—that Native Americans were warriors above all, that they fought colonists relentlessly (and, yes, savagely) until finally defeated—can still be heard. 153

One way the message comes across is to associate Indians with rage and a loss of self-control. If few call them “bloodthirsty” or their attacks “savage

150 Samuel Purchas, “Virginia’s Verger; or, A Discourse shewing the benefits which may grow to this kingdome from American English Plantations . . . ,” in Hakluytus Posthumus, 19: 231, quoted in Berkhofer, White Man’s Indian, 21. See also Jennings, Invasion of America, chaps. 5, 9.
fury” anymore, many are partial to making them “furious,” “angry,” “restive,” “restless,” “hostile,” or “seething.” Not only that: “hostiles” seem endlessly agitated, ever at war or on the brink of war, always warriors. In fact, a generation of scholarship has shown that among Natives warrior was neither a career nor a chronic condition; it was a temporary state, marked off from daily life before a man set out and after he returned home by rituals (abstaining from sex, fasting, purging) designed to enable him to effectively enter and safely leave that dangerous alterity. Nonetheless, in our histories an Indian adult male is rarely just a man or an Indian. The first thanksgiving? Pilgrims hosted Wampanoag leader Massasoit and “ninety of his braves” (the 1622 original says “nintie men”). Should Native men farm? “Indian warriors did not believe they should actually work tilling fields.” Nineteen Creek coming to talk peace with U.S. officials? “Warriors.” A delegation of twenty-seven headmen, bound for the new nation’s capital to confirm that peace? “Warriors whose intentions were entirely peaceful.”

Making every Native man a warrior tints Indian-colonial relations red. So does the implication that there was no path forward in North America after Europeans arrived save battle and bloodshed, sorrow and surrender, because the continent’s original inhabitants would fight to the bitter end. For millennia, says Andrew Jackson biographer H. W. Brands, “the struggle for North America” has been violent. “Conflict was a regular feature of life among the [Native] North Americans. They fought for forests . . . , for rivers . . . , for bottomlands. . . . Great warriors were the heroes of their


155 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 25 (“hostiles”; see also 27–28, 39, 76, 79).


158 Wood, American Revolution, 118.

159 Ellis, American Creation, 146 (“Warriors”; see also 142), 151 (“intentions”). See also Middleton, Colonial America, 316; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 103.
tribes, emulated by other men, sought by women, hallowed in memory." Hence “the arrival of the Europeans” merely “added new elements to the competition” for the continent, opening another chapter in a gory saga. Yes, “the palefaces got pushy,” but mostly the American chronicle recounts Natives’ “campaign of terror” and accompanying “reports of the Indian atrocities—with the torture of prisoners and the mutilation and cannibalism of the murdered recounted in excruciating detail—[which] caused hearts to clutch.”

Few would dispute that “conflict was a regular feature of life among the North Americans”—as it was (and is) among human societies generally. But characterizing Natives as warmongers, arguing that “diplomacy” merely “complemented military force,” ignores work showing how (for example) “people of the Five Nations [Iroquois] prized peace far more than war” and how—to linger in Iroquoia—culture heroes were not just fighters but Hiawatha (“he who combs” out tangled hair and soothes troubled minds—in other words, seeks peace) and Deganawidah (“the Peacemaker”).

Hiawatha, Deganawidah, and others who made peace rather than war have not toppled the trope of an implacable Indian foe locked in a life-or-death struggle against European intruders. “One can find political and economic white-native cooperation dating from the Jamestown experiment all the way to the Revolution,” allows a 2010 survey of early America, “but, for the most part, natives encountered whites in wars of resistance.” Another synthesizer gives equally short shrift to Natives who were traders and missionaries, diplomats and guides, neighbors and spouses, servants and slaves, arguing that the way indigenous peoples “shaped Euro-American colonization” was that they “fought against” it. In fact, many fought for the colonizers, not against them; they were allies in wars of conquest, not enemies in wars of resistance. The label French and Indian War is symptomatic of the chronic, crippling inability to grasp that simple truth. The title stands firm against a wave of work showing that many Indians—Cherokees, Catawbas, Mohawks, and Wappingers, to name a few—fought alongside British and colonial forces in that conflict. The

160 Brands, Andrew Jackson, 3 (“struggle”), 4 (“arrival”), 6–9 (“reports,” 8).
162 Nellis, Empire of Regions, xxi (quotation). See also Reynolds, Waking Giant, 91. For the contrary view, see Richter, Facing East, 108–9.
163 Sarson, British America, xiv (quotations). Steven Sarson does grant that Indians were among those who “profoundly shaped ‘everyday life’ in early America,” but he does not spell out the difference between “shaped ‘everyday life’” and “shaped Euro-American colonization of their lands.” Ibid., xiii (“profoundly”), xiv (“colonization”).
anti-imperial rebellion that erupted soon after French Canada fell could be called “the British and Indian War,” so often do scholars omit Natives who sided with the resistance. In the southern theater, Catawbas not only supplied American forces with food, scores of their men joined the rebels to fight the crown on battlefields from coast to piedmont to mountains. In the north most Iroquois ultimately remained loyal to Britain, but Oneidas, Tuscaroraras, and others who fought for Congress rather than king get lost in talk of how “members of the Iroquois Federation had sided with the British during the Revolution.”

Stressing “Indian support for Britain against U.S. independence” is bad enough. Worse, it excludes all Natives from the ranks of the angels in America’s creation story, marking them indelibly as the Declaration’s “merciless Indian Savages.” Indians thanked by American officials because “you . . . fought and Bled with your white Brothers of America”? Native men whom their non-Native neighbors “called Revolutionary soldiers”? Such accolades got drowned out by insistence that Natives had been “aggressors in the war, without even a pretence of provocation,” as a congressional committee concluded in 1783. Twenty-five years later Jackson

The literature on Indians who allied with this or that European empire (including Britain’s) is vast. A recent treatment of it is Claudio Saunt, “‘Our Indians’: European Empires and the History of the Native American South,” in The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2007), 61–75. James Axtell noted the term’s problems more than twenty years ago. See Axtell, “Forked Tongues,” 43. For the Catawbas’ experience in the Revolutionary War, see Brown, Catawba Indians, 261–73; Merrell, Indians’ New World, 215–22. Little of that experience has found its way into modern histories of combat in those parts. See Hendrik Booraem, Young Hickory: The Making of Andrew Jackson (Dallas, Tex., 2001), chaps. 4–7 (Booraem mentions Catawba allies but downplays their numbers [''several,'' 56, a ''dozen or so,'' 69] and their involvement); Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 16–18; Wood, American Revolution, 81; John W. Gordon, South Carolina and the American Revolution: A Battlefield History (Columbia, S.C., 2003), 40, 108; Brands, Andrew Jackson, 24–26, 29; Middlekauff, Glorious Cause, 458–65 (for this revised edition Middlekauff added a section on Catawba service [577], but it is not integrated into treatment of the war). An exception is Jim Piecuch, Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775–1782 (Columbia, S.C., 2008).

Johnson, Early American Republic, 19 (quotation). See also Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 133, 146–49; Ellis, American Creation, 128; Ellis, “The McGillivray Moment,” 56; Ellis, His Excellency, 123. At other points Joseph J. Ellis does note the Confederacy’s split (ibid., 124). See also Wood, Empire of Liberty, 119. Gordon S. Wood too is aware that not all Natives sided with Britain: ibid., 125; Wood, American Revolution, 118. For Iroquois history during this era, see Graymont, Iroquois in the American Revolution; Calloway, American Revolution in Indian Country, chaps. 4–5.

David Reynolds, America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States (New York, 2009), 82.

See Calloway, American Revolution in Indian Country, 272–301.

Quoted in Merrell, Indians’ New World, 218 ("fought and Bled"). 219 ("called").

(a Catawba neighbor and comrade-in-arms) joined the many Americans painting all Indians with a brush dipped in scarlet, recalling how “during the revolutionary war” they had “raised the scalping knife and tomahawk, against our defenseless women and children.”\textsuperscript{170} By then it was conventional wisdom any time blood spilled. “I can with truth say, that . . . the Indians have always been the aggressors,” one Kentuckian insisted, “that any incursions made [by whites] into their country have been from reiterated injuries committed by them.”\textsuperscript{171}

Historians these days tend to agree. For every mention that newcomers were at fault—that America’s original inhabitants, provoked, then retaliated—there are more when Indians get blamed.\textsuperscript{172} From the moment Europeans disembarked, we are told, the Natives were restless. Explorers ran into “aggressive Indians,” were “repelled by Indians,” “killed” by Indians, all (if the books can be believed) for no discernible reason. Early colonists, too, found that “hostile Indians,” “Indian attacks,” and “Indian troubles”—the causes again unexplained—competed with “disease” and “food shortage” for the honor of being Public Enemy Number One.\textsuperscript{173}

Thereafter the script is largely unchanged. From the Pequot War (“to avenge the murder of a white trader”) through Kieft’s War (“natives killed a Dutch settler”) and Bacon’s Rebellion (“Indian raids . . . killed dozens of settlers”), recent chronicles of conflict ignore work that makes Natives more victim than villain.\textsuperscript{174} One of the last armed clashes east of the

\textsuperscript{170} Harold D. Moser and Sharon Macpherson, eds., \textit{The Papers of Andrew Jackson} (Knoxville, Tenn., 1984), 2: 191–92, quoted in Richter, \textit{Facing East}, 228 (also quoted in Calloway, \textit{American Revolution in Indian Country}, 297).

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{American State Papers: Indian Affairs}, 1: 88, quoted in Banner, \textit{How the Indians Lost Their Land}, 145.


\textsuperscript{173} Sarson, \textit{British America}, 4 (“aggressive”; see also Reich, \textit{Colonial America}, 1–2), 5 (“attacks”), 59; Brands, \textit{Andrew Jackson}, 334 (“hostile”; see also McDougall, \textit{Freedom Just Around the Corner}, 34). James Axtell noticed this emphasis on hostility long ago (Axtell, “Columbian Mosaic,” 238).

Mississippi River gets a similar makeover: in 1832 a “war party” led by “the Sauk warrior Black Hawk. . . . reclaimed their ancestral lands near Rock Island, Illinois, and routed the local militia.”175 Missing here is that the “war party” had perhaps twice as many women, children, and old people as fighting men and that the militia were only routed after they fired on the white flag Black Hawk had sent (to negotiate safe passage back across the Mississippi), killing one Sauk messenger and capturing two others before racing out to attack the rest.176

The way promiscuous use of war party and hostile Indians works to put the onus on indigenous aggression can be found in many ordinary phrases. Reading of “war between settlers and Cherokee raiders in 1760,” it is hard not to side with the settlers, regardless of the conflict’s complicated origins—complications that included Virginians murdering dozens of Cherokee men who were en route home after fighting for King George II against the French.177 Sympathies often stay with those “settlers” even when they went out against Indians, for many modern histories have it that Americans sent “a . . . punitive expedition against some of the renegade Indians” and set about “taking vengeance on Cherokees who scalped and burned women and children.”178 If Americans themselves scalped or burned, that too could be the Indians’ doing: “whites responded to brutal Indian atrocities with even more bloody atrocities of their own”; in other words, “they returned such behavior in kind.”179

A look at the handling of those atrocities turns up traces of savagery in the scholarly bloodstream.180 Certainly few these days call Indian attacks

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175 McDougall, Throes of Democracy, 54.
176 Roger L. Nichols, Black Hawk and the Warrior’s Path (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1992), 117 (less than “six hundred fighting men” out of perhaps two thousand people), 121–23. For an able account of this episode in a synthetic work, see Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 419.
177 Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 15 (emphasis added). For the causes, see Hatley, Dividing Paths, chaps. 8–10 (for examples of Cherokees murdered by colonists, see 100–101).
178 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 129 (“punitive,” emphasis added); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 357 (“taking vengeance,” emphasis added). See also Middlekauff, Glorious Cause, 575; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 170.
179 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 395 (“whites responded,” emphasis added); Griffin, American Leviathan, 63 (“they returned,” emphasis added).
180 Works that do explain Indian acts include Taylor, American Colonies, 102–4; Hoffer, Brave New World, 2d ed., 132, 396–98.
“spontaneous raids” or “spasmodic massacres,” and many point out that whites too committed heinous acts against innocent Natives.\textsuperscript{181} Others suggest, correctly, that tales of Indian brutality were often exaggerated if not fabricated.\textsuperscript{182} That said, books appearing in the past decade or so still have not managed to compose a balanced account of the cruel things Natives and their neighbors did to one another.

It is not always for want of trying. Working the revolutionary frontier, Patrick Griffin’s \textit{American Leviathan} sets out to unpack “the stuff of American myth,” which has “forgotten . . . the true nature of the horrors settlers had inflicted on Indians.” Chiding early American elites who “did not attempt to make sense of” Indian attacks and sported “ideological blinders that . . . did not allow them to understand the scope of Indian resistance or . . . the forms that it took,” Griffin is candid about how often “almost feral” frontiersmen “butchered” and “slaughtered” innocent Natives. Nonetheless, the book spends more time explaining “why settlers acted the way they did” than trying to fathom Indian behavior. Yes, whites who launched “what we could call genocidal attacks on Indian communities” certainly “seemed a crazed and deluded mob,” Griffin admits, but there was method in their madness. They had long “endured all the horrors of a brutal war,” and those “years of privation and bloodshed,” “years living in dread,” years when they “lost friends and relatives,” “had conditioned settlers to perceive threats all around.” Dealing with those threats, frontier folk devised a “rationale for butchery,” “subtle justifications,” and their assaults were “incidents of politicization” that could “signal . . . an emerging sensibility” about ruling themselves. And Indians who killed? They had (unspecified) “sensibilities” too, along with “justifiable wrath” and an “agenda” (“to take back their lands” or “[settle] old scores”). But there is less emphasis on Natives also having “lost friends and relatives” to “the horrors of a brutal war.” One side, however “inflamed by Indian hatred,” has a “rationale,” “an animating ideology,” a “mind-set”; the other is mostly just “inflamed.”\textsuperscript{183}

\textsuperscript{181} Brands, \textit{Andrew Jackson}, 195 (“spontaneous”); McDougall, \textit{Freedom Just Around the Corner}, 45 (“spasmodic”). See also Nellis, \textit{Long Road to Change}, 170; “Spontaneous and sometimes organized violence accompanied the American wave into the west,” which seems to suggest that both sides could be “spontaneous.”

\textsuperscript{182} Brands, \textit{Andrew Jackson}, 169–70; Wilentz, \textit{Andrew Jackson}, 25; Hoffer, \textit{Brave New World}, 2d ed., 229, 407; Griffin, \textit{American Leviathan}, 64, 112, 157; Reynolds, \textit{America, Empire of Liberty}, 83. For the roots of this anti-Indian atrocity literature, see Silver, \textit{Our Savage Neighbors}. Silver’s work is too recent to have had an impact on the scholarship, but Bernard W. Sheehan pointed out these tales’ exaggeration and fabrication years ago (Sheehan, \textit{Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian} [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973], chap. 7).

\textsuperscript{183} Griffin, \textit{American Leviathan}, 7 (“stuff”), 268 (“forgotten”), 66 (“did not attempt”), 69 (“ideological blinders”), 188 (“almost feral”), 47 (“butchered,” “crazed”), 52 (“why settlers,” “inflamed”), 167 (“genocidal,” “years of privation”), 62 (“endured”), 145 (“living in dread”), 4 (“lost”), 139 (“conditioned”); see also 111, 114, 141, 154 (“rationale”),
As with motives, so with means. According to *American Leviathan*, colonists slaying Indians spoke in a code that can be cracked. It was “butchery,” sure, when two Pennsylvanians killed and scalped ten Natives (including children and women), but it had a “calculated nature.” Calculated, too, were the actions of an American war party that shot several Indians during a truce, seized several more, and wounded one captive with a tomahawk before putting a rope around his neck, dragging him about, then tossing him into a river and watching him “spend still a few moments of life in fruitless struggles.” All this was “theatrics,” a “spectacle” designed to make “an impression.”

Was what Indians did to colonists similarly “calculated”? Was it “theatrics,” performed to leave “an ‘impression’”? Work on Native violence says yes. *American Leviathan* joins the crowd in saying (or at least implying) no. And it is, alas, a crowd: histories that simply quote ghastly details left by white survivors remain the rule, not the exception, in the new millennium as in the old. Most give no more explanation for those details than did the eyewitnesses being quoted. The difference is that the people two or three hundred years ago who left us those records, convinced Indians were savages, felt no need to account for the bloodshed; that, they thought, was what savages did. It is more difficult to grasp why writers nowadays follow suit.

Because scholars avoid the word *savage*, it can be hard to discern how they still construct savagery. Thus it is worth making a couple of side trips

48 (“justifications”; see also 64), 149 (“ politicization”), 78 (“sensibilities”), 59 (“justifiable wrath”), 158 (“agenda”; see also 69 [which mentions Natives’ “relations slaughtered”]), 208), 159 (“old scores”; see also 126, 172, 190), 222 (“inflamed by Indian hatred”), 178 (“animating”), 140 (“mind-set”). “Whites,” Griffin concludes darkly, “had become the savages of the West” (ibid., 249). He also mentions times when Natives were more “civilized” than their American counterparts (ibid., 154, 170).

184 Ibid., 82 (“butchery”), 144 (“spend,” “spectacle”), 146 (“theatrics”). See also ibid., 108–9, where a colonist’s murder of an Indian “served a purpose” (quotation, 109), and 115 (“calculated slaughter”).

to examine particular moments that reveal the ways encounters between Natives and newcomers are dyed red. What seems like a straightforward story turns out to obscure a complicated reality by rendering Indians more different and more dangerous than they were—and than their colonial neighbors thought they were.

Consider George Washington’s 1748 surveying expedition up the Potomac River. Among the teenager’s adventures, writes Joseph J. Ellis in *His Excellency*, “he . . . saw an Indian war party, returning from a skirmish with one scalp and celebrating their victory by dancing around their campfire to the music of a kettledrum.”¹⁸⁶ This sounds as if Washington came across a wilderness bivouac (“campfire”) and kept his distance (“saw”) from this scary bunch (“war party”).¹⁸⁷

The Virginian’s diary (the source *His Excellency* uses) tells a different story. For one thing, that encounter took place not in the woods but at Maryland frontiersman Thomas Cresap’s trading post, a popular rest stop for Natives and colonists alike. (Washington and his companion had holed up there to await better weather.) For another, Washington did more than just watch Indians dance. Probably advised by Cresap, he gave them some liquor, after which (perhaps returning the favor) the men put on a show—building a fire in the center of a large circle, sitting around the edge of that ring, then listening to one of their number make “a grand Speech telling them in what Manner they are to Daunce.”¹⁸⁸

But these are not the most significant places where Ellis and Washington part company. What the biography implies was an ominous encounter was, to this neophyte, quite otherwise. He reported that he was “agreeably surpris’d” to see these fellows, not afraid. Most revealing of all, though, is what happened after the music stopped. *His Excellency* is silent about it, but in fact our hero ended up hanging out with his new acquaintances the following day. Not only that, he thought so little of it that his next journal entry said simply: “Nothing Remarkable on thursday but only being with the Indians all day so shall slip it. This day left Cresaps.”¹⁸⁹ Agreeably

¹⁸⁶ Ellis, *His Excellency*, 11.
¹⁸⁷ Another recent work agrees that during this trip young George “sweated out encounters with Indians” (McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, 179).
¹⁸⁸ Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville, Va., 1976), 1: 13. For Thomas Cresap’s trading post, see Kenneth P. Bailey, *Thomas Cresap: Maryland Frontiersman* (Boston, 1944), chap. 6; Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, vol. 1, *Young Washington* (New York, 1948), 217–19. Nor was a drum the only instrument Washington mentioned: one Indian also shook “a goard with some Shott in it to Rattle & a Piece of an horses Tail tied to it to make it look fine” (Jackson and Twohig, *Diaries of George Washington*, 1: 13). What seems a trivial detail is in fact rich with meaning: its omission from *His Excellency* exaggerates the distance between Natives and colonists by obscuring how these Iroquois incorporated European material (ammunition, horsehair) into their customs.
surprised? Nothing remarkable? Only being with the Indians all day? That encounter looked different to Washington than it does to Ellis.

A similar savaging is evident in *His Excellency’s* vivid description of the next trip west Washington took. In October 1753 Virginia lieutenant governor Robert Dinwiddie dispatched Major Washington, Ellis writes, “on a dangerous mission into the American wilderness” to order the French out of the Ohio Country. The lands Washington had to traverse consisted of “mountain ranges, wild rivers, and exotic indigenous peoples,” a “frontier environment” characterized by “brutal conditions and casual savagery.” This truly was a perilous journey: if French soldiers or their Indian allies did not kill the messenger, winter and those wild rivers might. According to the biography, two instances of “casual savagery” occurred after Washington delivered Dinwiddie’s demands to the French and was, with his guide, Christopher Gist, en route back to Virginia. One day, Ellis says, the travelers “come upon a lone warrior outside an Indian village ominously named Murdering Town. The Indian appears to befriend them, then suddenly wheels around at nearly point-blank range and fires his musket, but inexplicably misses.” Later Gist and Washington “come upon an isolated farmhouse on the banks of the Monongahela where two adults and five children have been killed and scalped. The decaying corpses are being eaten by hogs.” A warrior’s treachery, a family slaughtered: “casual savagery” indeed!

Except that Washington and Gist did not put it that way, and what they did say reveals a world less simple yet more explicable than *His Excellency* would have it. Of the lousy shot, Washington and Gist told different stories. Past that village “we fell in with a Party of French Indians,” Virginia’s envoy wrote, “which had laid in wait for us, one of them fired at Mr. Gist or me, not 15 steps, but fortunately missed.” Where Washington’s account had the two escaping an ambush—savagery, perhaps, but hardly casual—Gist described a protracted battle of wits with one Indian “we met with.” Though “this fellow called me by my Indian name, and pretended to be glad to see me,” the woodsman was wary, for “I thought I had seen” him earlier, among the French. Nonetheless, Gist went on, “Major Washington insisted on travelling on the nearest way to forks of Alleghany,” so “we asked the Indian if he could go with us, and show us the nearest way.” Looking “very glad” to oblige, “the Indian took the Major’s pack” and off they went.


Eight or ten miles later, Gist’s journal continues, things began to go badly. Their erstwhile guide seemed to be heading in the wrong direction; Washington—his “feet . . . very sore, and he very weary”—wanted to make camp; the Indian, rebuffed when he offered to carry the tenderfoot’s gun as well as his pack, “grew churlish, and pressed us to keep on, telling us that there were [French-allied] Ottawa Indians in these woods, and they would scalp us if we lay out.” Come to my cabin, he urged; there “we should be safe.” On they went, until Washington announced that he was camping “at the next water” no matter what. Before they reached a stream, though, “the Indian made a stop, [and] turned about; the Major saw him point his gun toward us and fire.” The man then ran ahead, ducked behind a tree, and was reloading when the two colonists caught up with him. “I suppose you were lost, and fired your gun,” Gist remarked drily after they had disarmed him and made him build a fire. Still the Indian invited the two colonists to his lodge; still they refused. The stalemate ended, Gist recalled, when he said, “You go home; and as we are much tired, we will follow your track in the morning.” Having sent the man off with some bread, the frontiersman and his charge then “travelled all night” to be sure they were clear of their putative pal.192

This Indian is hard to figure. Why would somebody outgunned two to one (and those two already suspicious and on guard) decide to shoot?193 Perhaps he was indeed leading them into a trap, but if so, why spring it when comrades waited somewhere ahead? Or maybe this solitary traveler, coming upon two armed Britons, both of them “on foot in Indian dress”—the former strange for a colonist in those parts, and the latter perhaps stranger—was himself suspicious and on guard.194 But if it is difficult to

192 Ibid., 1: 157 n. 65 (“feet”), 158 n. 65 (“travelled”). Is it significant that Gist wrote: “the Major saw him point his gun toward us” (emphasis added)? Was he doubting Washington’s account? His journal covering these days suggests at various times that Gist thought the young Virginian both headstrong and inexperienced.

193 The risk this Indian man took was real. “I would have killed him; but the Major would not suffer me to kill him,” Gist wrote (ibid., 1: 157 n. 65). Washington said only, “We took this Fellow into Custody, & kept him ’till about 9 o’Clock at Night, & then let him go” (ibid., 1: 155). He did not explain how two men facing an enemy war party managed to take a prisoner—or why the rest of that party did not open fire.

194 Ibid., 1: 156 n. 65 (quotation). Gist reported that when they crossed paths the man “asked us several questions” right away, the first being “how we came to travel on foot”—and that later, free to go, the fellow “was glad to get away.” Ibid., 1: 157 n. 65. For their “Indian dress” and traveling “like Indians,” which both men mentioned, see ibid., 1: 155–57 (“Indian dress,” 1: 156 n. 65, “like Indians,” 1: 157 n. 65). By omitting Washington’s outfit, Ellis further tidies the messy realities of the colonial frontier. The effect is enhanced by Ellis calling the Native man they met “a lone warrior”; Washington and Gist called him “this Fellow,” “the Indian,” and the like (Ellis, His Excellency, 4 [“lone”]; Jackson and Twohig, Diaries of George Washington, 1: 155–57 [“this Fellow,” 1: 155, “the Indian,” 1: 157 n. 65]). It is further enhanced by neglecting to mention that this whole conversation was probably in English: neither colonist spoke an Indian language, and by this time they had parted company with the French interpreter they had hired.
make sense of this encounter, it is easy to conclude that it was not casual savagery by a treacherous, silent Indian: it was either a routine ambush by a band that considered the two men enemies or some sort of breakdown in communication and camaraderie one winter’s day.

The casual savagery visited upon that farm family seems a more clear-cut case—until one reads Washington and finds that he did not “come upon” the grisly scene. He and Gist, having eluded their guide and survived “extreme severe” cold, were thawing out at a colonial trader’s house when they heard the horror story—from twenty frightened Indians there. These fellows, the Virginian reported,

had been going to the Southward to War [probably against their usual Catawba or Cherokee foes], but coming to a Place . . . where they found People kill’d & Scalpt, all but one Woman with very Light Hair, they turn’d about; & ran back, for fear of the [colonial] Inhabitants rising & takeing them as the Authors of the Murder: They report that the People were lying about the House, & some of them much torn & eat by Hogs; by the Marks that were left, they say they [the killers] were French Indians of the Ottaway Nation, &ca. that did it.195

Washington did not stumble across Indian carnage. What he found at that trading post was a score of scared men scurrying home because they feared that his fellow Virginians, blaming this band, would kill or capture them. Instead of coming face to face with “casual savagery,” Washington learned from those men of a planned raid by French-allied Indians who plundered an English farm for supplies and trophies, then made sure that “Marks . . . were left” so that anyone adept at reading the signs would know the authors of this deed. Savagery? Certainly. Casual? Not at all.

An analogous formula of misdirection and misunderstanding can be found in accounts of the war between the United States and Red Stick Creeks, which commenced in 1813, sixty years after Washington and Gist got back. Here savagery’s DNA can best be sequenced not by attending to one scholar’s interpretation but by visiting several books that have come out since 2000 and comparing the picture they sketch against findings by specialists on Creek (Muskogee) history then available.196

for the trip. Ibid., 1: 130, 147 n. 53; Freeman, George Washington, 1: 277–278, 290, 319; Kenneth P. Bailey noted “Gist’s inability to speak the Indian language” (Bailey, Christopher Gist: Colonial Frontiersman, Explorer, and Indian Agent [Hamden, Conn., 1976], 56).


196 Confining the work on Creeks to the years before 2000 includes books that would have been available to scholars publishing in the years 2001–10. However, it
A central element in accounts of that war published in the past decade is Tecumseh’s visit to the Creeks in September 1811. For several years this Shawnee leader, with his brother Tenskwatawa (the Shawnee Prophet), had been building a coalition to resist the expansion of the new American nation. His stop in Creek Country was one of many he made during a tour of southern and western nations, seeking allies. According to some new histories, the Shawnee headman “preached his race war” that would pit all indigenous peoples against all European-Americans. In an oft-quoted speech to the Creeks, Tecumseh is said to have cried:

Let the white race perish.

They seize your lands. They corrupt your women. They trample on the ashes of your dead. Back, whence they came, upon a trail of blood they must be driven. Back! Back! Ay, into the great water whose accursed waves brought them to our shores! Burn their dwellings! Destroy their stock! Slay their wives and children! . . . War now! War forever! War upon the living! War upon the dead! Dig their very corpses from the grave. Our country must give no rest to a white man’s bones! 197

Strong stuff, emblematic of an unbridgeable divide between savage and settler. 198 Small wonder, then, that the speech still finds its way onto the page. The problem is that twenty-five years ago John Sugden called
this source “unreliable” if not “fraudulent” and “bogus.” Certainly Tecumseh—riding a horse, carrying a British musket, often sporting a British uniform given him by his allies in Canada, who had also commissioned him as a colonel—was hardly spurning everything that had ever come over “the great water.” He, “like most American Indian nativists, . . . sought not total rejection of the technological and social transformations” that had swept the Indian countries “over the past century.” They “did not oppose all things European, but they did seek to control cultural change” rather than surrender to U.S. influence and intrusion. Nor is it likely that Tecumseh was going around that fall declaring war on the United States. (His own people were not yet fighting Americans.) Rather, his “tour was a logical extension of Tecumseh’s multi-tribal confederacy, an attempt to bring the southern and western tribes into an Indian union that would resist the advance of the American land frontier and discard many of the debasing influences of the whites.” An ambitious agenda, no doubt, but it lacks the (melo)drama of “War now! War forever!”

Despite doubts about that oration, despite evidence that Tecumseh and his followers were not launching a race war and did not reject white ways, the “bogus” words endure. Maybe they are simply too good to pass up when the myth of chronic combat between the races (pace Pocahontas and Squanto) retains so powerful a hold on the imagination. Keeping the speech requires painful contortions, however. Andrew Jackson biographer Robert V. Remini mentions in a note that “admittedly the speech is ‘awfully cinematically dramatic and florid’ and difficult to swallow whole,


200 Sugden, American Indian Quarterly 10: 281, 284; William G. McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 189; J. Leitch Wright Jr., Creeks and Seminoles: The Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People (Lincoln, Neb., 1986), 168. Those Creeks who ultimately followed Tecumseh into war were no more against all whites than he was. They solicited help from Spanish and British officials, sending letters and ambassadors to request supplies, troops, and “a commission in the British service.” Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, chap. 2 (quotation, 28).

201 Dowd, Spirited Resistance, 169 (quotations); Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 159–60. Joel W. Martin argued for a more thoroughgoing renewal and purging of white ways, but he too said that for Creeks “Atlantic civilization . . . was around them, it was in them, it was part of them” (Martin, Sacred Revolt, 138–49 [quotation, 149]). See also Richter, Facing East, 227–33.

202 Sugden, American Indian Quarterly 10: 299.
but,” he shrugs, “there it is.” Another Jackson man feels obliged to contradict himself by bracketing the words about killing all whites between talk of how “the Shawnee chief . . . hoped to unite the Indians into a force . . . armed and supplied by the British and the Spanish” and “visions of Indians colluding with London and Madrid.”

Inspired by Tecumseh, conventional chronicles continue, “rebellious Muskogee Indians” (Red Sticks) living “in Georgia and in southern Alabama,” long “a persisting Indian threat in northern Alabama Territory,” became more threatening still. In 1813, the standard story goes on, these “clashes among the Creeks themselves . . . escalated into a larger war with the United States” as they “began raiding frontier settlements.” “Angry Creeks killed several whites, and in May a Red Sticks party . . . massacred a family of seven near the Duck River south of Nashville, including five children.” Once they had “chased settlers from much of Tennessee,” “they then [on August 30] attacked a group of settlers who had taken refuge in a stockade surrounding the house of an Alabama trader named George [Samuel] Mims,” “an American settlement” situated “in southeastern Mississippi Territory.” By sundown, having “systematically butchered the white inhabitants,” Red Sticks had “massacred hundreds of Americans.”

203 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 283 n. 3 (quotation), 1–4.
204 Meacham, American Lion, 30 (emphasis added).
206 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686 (“clashes”); Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 395 (“began raiding”; Risjord does note that “Creeks were unhappy with white incursions on their Alabama lands”).
207 Latimer, 1812, 30 (quotation). This attack might have been sparked by rumors reaching these Creeks of war having broken out between Creeks and Americans. See Thomas S. Woodward, Woodward’s Reminiscences of the Creek, or Muskogee Indians, Contained in Letters to Friends in Georgia and Alabama (1859; repr., Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1939), 36; Waselkov, Conquering Spirit, 89. Claudio Saunt has interpreted this action as part of a pattern of “political protests” against Creek leaders considered too friendly to America. He also has noted that the location of this incident “is particularly significant, for it lay on the path that Tecumseh had followed on his journey to the Southeast.” Saunt, New Order of Things, 242–42 (quotations, 242).
208 Johnson, Early American Republic, 49 (“chased”); Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 6 (“American settlement”); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686 (“Mississippi Territory”). Kenneth C. Davis waives on who was at Fort Mims, sometimes saying the place was “a curious melting pot” of “settlers, Creek Indians, and slaves,” sometimes implying it was just “settlers.” Davis, A Nation Rising: Untold Tales of Flawed Founders, Fallen Heroes, and Forgotten Fighters from America’s Hidden History (New York, 2010), 70–75 (“melting pot,” “Creek Indians,” “settlers,” “slaves,” 70, 74–75).
209 Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 25 (“butchered”); Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686 (“massacred”); see also Brands, Andrew Jackson, 195, who notes that they “slaughtered every white person they could reach.” Some mention (correctly) African Americans and
Many accounts of that day appearing lately, calling it “one of the most appalling massacres in frontier history,” include long excerpts from nineteenth-century reports that dwell on the carnage. The dead “were butchered in the quickest manner, and blood and brains bespattered the whole earth. The children were seized by the legs, and killed by battering their heads against the stockading. The women were scalped, and those who were pregnant were opened, while they were alive[,] and the embryo infants let out of the womb.” “By this action,” one modern history concludes ominously, blaming Creeks, “the Red Sticks had dared to war against the United States.”\textsuperscript{210}

This account of “the Fort Mims Massacre,” compiled from recent works, is as dramatic as Tecumseh’s speech to the Creeks two years earlier.\textsuperscript{211} It is also as bogus. Yes, Tecumseh did visit Creek Country in 1811 and call for united resistance to American incursions. Yes, Creeks were bitterly divided over their future: some favored accommodating American demands for more land while also embracing the federal “civilization program” that had women leave the field for the home and men farm (or buy slaves to farm for them); others, the Red Sticks, opposed going in this direction. Yes, Red Sticks did attack Mims’s outpost in 1813 and kill 250–300 people, including women and children. But beyond that, the event’s postmillennial chroniclers have failed to learn from scholarship

\textsuperscript{210} Remini, \textit{Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars}, 6 (quotations). See also Risjord, \textit{Jeffersonian America}, 396. For other works that dwell on the gruesome details provided by nineteenth-century accounts of survivors and a burial party, see Brands, \textit{Andrew Jackson}, 195; Latimer, \textit{1812}, 220; Meacham, \textit{American Lion}, 31; Wood, \textit{Empire of Liberty}, 686; Davis, \textit{Nation Rising}, 75. Wilentz, \textit{Andrew Jackson}, 25, includes detail but couches it with “reportedly” and “it was said.” Another account has it that Creeks’ violence against one another “eventually spilled over into attacks on the white American settlers . . . were at war, both among themselves and against Americans,” and Red Sticks “wanted war” with the United States. See Davis, \textit{Nation Rising}, 70.

done toward the end of the twentieth century. The result is legerdemain that leaves Indians savages in all but name.

Look at the matter of location. To their way of thinking, Creeks were not “in Georgia and in southern Alabama” or in “southeastern Mississippi Territory,” where historians put them; they were in Creek Country. Rather than Indians intruding, then, it was the other way around. Or take the issue of anger. If Creeks were angry, they had reason to be. Their 1805 Treaty of Washington was “a . . . flagrant instance of corruption” in which six Muskogees, bribed by the United States, sold 2.2 million acres and then, “despite express instructions to the contrary from the representatives in the [Creek] national council,” agreed to let Americans carve “a ‘horse path’ across the heart of the nation.” When “the ‘path’ quickly became a twenty-foot wide road,” it “aroused the anger of the very chiefs who signed the treaty permitting it.” Not only that, the thoroughfare and the cession gave fresh impetus to white encroachment on what territory Creeks still had, encroachment that the United States had promised to stop, encroachment so pervasive that Muskogees took to calling Americans Ecunnaunuxulgee (“people greedily grasping after all lands”). When Creeks withstood federal badgering about another road, in 1811 a U.S. agent finally told them that the highway was happening whether they liked it or not. Angry? You bet.

But probably not bent on fighting the United States. Some Americans, on the other hand, apparently were itching for war against Creeks. After the Duck River raid, the Nashville Clarion announced that those Natives “have supplied us with a pretext for a dismemberment of their country.” In fact, to quiet these war hawks, the Creek National Council (which favored working with the United States and won American rewards accordingly) arranged the assassination of the Duck River killers. When friends of the dead men rallied against what they considered an injustice, “what had been a series of desultory assaults and retaliations [among Creeks] became the Creek Civil War.”

212 Fort Mims might have been in Creek territory too. See Martin, Sacred Revolt, 158; Davis, JER 22: 614, 617, 621–22; Waselkov, Conquering Spirit, 20, 278 n. 18; Hudson, Creek Paths and Federal Roads, 116, map 3.
214 Dowd, Spirited Resistance, 154–56 (quotations, 155).
215 Martin, Sacred Revolt, 120–22 (Ecunnaunuxulgee, 122).
216 Quoted in Michael Paul Rogin, Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian (New York, 1975), 147. “We are ready and pant for vengeance,” proclaimed one of Tennessee’s leading citizens, Andrew Jackson (quoted in ibid.). I came upon these words through Martin, Sacred Revolt, 154. Joel W. Martin has argued not only that Americans were determined to have war but that Red Stick leaders sought to avoid war with the United States (ibid., 150–54, 220 n. 7). See also Saunt, New Order of Things, 253 n. 32, 262.
The next episode in that civil war was the Battle of Burnt Corn Creek. On July 27, 1813, a party of Red Sticks returning from Spanish Pensacola with weapons, ammunition, and other supplies rode into an ambush, an assault that led directly to the Red Sticks’ “retaliatory strike” on Fort Mims a month later. Most treatments of Fort Mims omit Burnt Corn Creek altogether, making it look like the descent on Mims came out of nowhere. The few that do mention Burnt Corn Creek get it wrong by saying that it was “settlers” or “180 Mississippi militia” who struck Red Sticks that summer day. Yes and no: a number of attackers—including at least one officer and fighters who took a particularly “active and highly visible role”—were neither settlers nor Americans but métis Creeks, friendly to the United States and therefore opposed to the Red Sticks. One Muskogee leader even called Burnt Corn Creek “a fight between Redsticks and mestizos, not Creeks and Americans.”

So was Fort Mims. Though modern tellers of that bloody day almost all stick to the script of an Indian massacre, scholars long ago clouded that clear picture. It turns out that the strike was not aimed solely (or even primarily) against Americans, and it was no simple massacre. “Many of the victims,” concluded Claudio Saunt in 1999, “were either married to wealthy Creek mestizos or were mestizos themselves.” Moreover, those victims (including white militia) fought long and hard before they fell—and they

218 Saunt, New Order of Things, 259 (quotation). Robert V. Remini correctly calls Mims a counterattack (Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 6).
219 Meacham, American Lion, 30–31 (“settlers”; see also Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 24); Latimer, 1812, 219 (“Mississippi militia”). Those omitting Burnt Corn Creek include Horsman, New Republic; Brands, Andrew Jackson; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy; Johnson, Early American Republic; Wood, Empire of Liberty. For treatment of this battle, see Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 172; Owsey, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 30–33; Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 6.
220 Martin, Sacred Revolt, 153 (quotation), 151.
221 Saunt, New Order of Things, 259–66 (“Redsticks and mestizos,” 262); Dowd, Spirited Resistance, 185; Davis, JER 22: 629. The presence of Creeks in this militia is old news, making modern accounts’ omission of them that much more surprising. See Albert James Pickett, History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi, from the Earliest Period, 2d ed. (Charleston, S.C., 1831), 2: 256–60; Halbert and Ball, Creek War, 140–42; George Stiggin, Creek Indian History: A Historical Narrative of the Genealogy, Traditions and Downfall of the Ispecoga or Creek Indian Tribe of Indians by One of the Tribe, George Stiggin (1788–1845), ed. Virginia Pounds Brown (Birmingham, Ala., 1989), 100.
222 Saunt, New Order of Things, 263 (quotation), 264. Karl Davis has noted that Red Sticks also “wanted to punish the Mississippi militia for homesteaders’ encroachments on Creek land and for [joining] the attack on Creek warriors at Burnt Corn Creek.” See Davis, JER 22: 635. See also Martin, Sacred Revolt, 222 n. 27; Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 173. The most careful reconstruction estimates the numbers in the fort at two hundred whites, one hundred African Americans, and one hundred métis Creeks (Waselkov, Conquering Spirits, table 1, 191), but this count was unavailable to most of the scholars under consideration here.
took scores of their enemies down with them. Red Sticks struck at noon; three hours later, still taking heavy fire, the attackers withdrew to consider their options before returning to finish the job near sunset. By then the winners had lost at least one hundred men. 223

So far, Fort Mims seems more battle than massacre. But despite embellishments and inventions by shocked white survivors and the American press, there is no question that Red Sticks did slay and mutilate noncombatants. Even here, however, more is needed than quoting gruesome accounts and shuddering that the whole business was “horrible.” 224 For one thing, Red Sticks did not slaughter everyone: some women and children escaped, and many more were captured and later released. 225 For another, Indians had no monopoly on killing children and mutilating women. Americans were steeped in biblical tales of infants being “dashed to pieces” and “women with childe . . . ript up.” 226 Creeks, of course, drew from a different cultural well, and some scholars have begun to plumb its depths, finding there rich meaning—and real anger. As early as 1786 a Creek man said that “he wished to murder American women and children because ‘the former give birth and the latter would grow up to be warriors.” Many years later “at Fort Mims,” Saunt suggests, “the attacks on women may have reflected the warriors’ fears about changing gender roles” that Americans were advocating (and many Creeks were adopting). “These were the actions of warriors anxious to reestablish their masculinity,” he concludes. 227 “Horrible” it certainly was, but it also turns out to express a “vocabulary of violence.” 228

Having ignored more nuanced interpretations of Mims, some works then go on to compound the error while treating the American response

223 Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 36–39. Martin, Sacred Revolt, 157, said that half of the 750 Red Sticks were killed or wounded; Saunt, New Order of Things, 263, put the figure at fifty killed out of five hundred men.

224 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 686 (quotation; see also Latimer, 1812, 220).

225 Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 38. In 2006 Gregory A. Waselkov counted those whose fate he could determine, a total of 210 people: 56.7 percent of the women and 53.1 percent of the children were killed (against 71.3 percent of the men); 30 percent of the women and 42.9 percent of the children were captured (3.3 percent of the men); 13.3 percent of the women and 4.1 percent of the children escaped (25.4 percent of the men). See Waselkov, Conquering Spirit, table 2, 192. Karl Davis estimated 75–120 women and children killed and thought the figure likely was toward the lower end of that range (Davis, JER 22: 632).


227 Saunt, New Order of Things, 151 (“he wished”), 267 (“at Fort Mims”); see also ibid., 140–43, 151–53, 266–68; White, Middle Ground, 388; Perdue, Cherokee Women, 88.

228 Kate Atkinson, When Will There Be Good News? A Novel (New York, 2008), 57 (“vocabulary”).
to that bloodshed, when armies invaded Creek Country from three directions—winning, it is said, battle after battle. Comparison of these battles (won by American forces) with that massacre (won by Red Sticks) complicates things, however. The Fort Mims massacre lasted hours; one battle took all of twenty minutes. In that massacre Red Sticks killed 250–300 people while losing at least 100 of their own; at these battles the body count was far more lopsided: 300 “hostiles” dead and 17 Americans, or 64 Red Sticks and no Americans, or 299 and 14, or 800 and 45.229 During the Mims massacre perhaps one hundred women and children died; the total number of Muskogee women and children killed in battles topped “several hundred.”230 At the massacre the victors took scalps and otherwise desecrated corpses; after battles Americans sometimes “stripped the flesh from the backs of the dead and fashioned Creek skin into souvenirs” or “braided them into belts and bridles” while also stooping to slice off the noses of the fallen.231 It is difficult, working out the calculus of cruelty, to draw the line between massacre and battle as readily as historians have done.

One man who watched as “soldiers took off the nose” of Creek corpses also saw “the Indians take off the scalps.”232 The casual aside about Indians wandering with American troops across a battlefield, knives in hand, offers yet another lesson this war can teach about savagery’s staying power: the silence in much of the literature about America’s Native allies in that conflict. It is the same vanishing act that happens in histories of the French and Indian War and the British and Indian War a generation earlier. As with those contests, it is no secret that Americans had plenty of Indian help; hundreds of Cherokees and Creeks played essential roles in Jackson’s victories.233 Still, the latest work often omits these allies: “Jackson led his army against a band of a thousand or more Red Sticks,” “he triumphed, winning

229 Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 25 (quotation; see also 28, 39, 76); Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 66 (twenty minutes). For casualties, see ibid., 66 (299/14), 67 (64/0); Brands, Andrew Jackson, 200 (300/17; see also Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 66–67); Latimer, 1812, 221 (800/45).
230 Martin, Sacred Revolt, 163. For women and children, see McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence, 192–94; Martin, Sacred Revolt, 158–59, 163; Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 65.
231 Kathryn E. Holland Braund, Deerskins and Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685–1815 (Lincoln, Neb., 1993), 187 (“stripped”); McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence, 194 (“braided”; see also Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 176); Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 78–79.
232 Halbert and Ball, Creek War, 277, quoted in Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 79.
233 Martin, Sacred Revolt, 161; Wright, Creeks and Seminoles, 175; Owsley, Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands, 50, 52, 62, 67, 73, 79; Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, chap. 4. This has found its way into the general scholarship. See Brands, Andrew Jackson, 216–17; Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 25–26; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 171–72; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 74–75, 125, 343.
victories from Talladega to Horseshoe Bend,” and “his forces . . . destroyed native settlements and killed hundreds of Creeks.”

Once again, the issue here goes beyond getting the story straight. Yes, this version of the saga forgets the aid of those Creeks and Cherokees (not to mention Choctaws and Chickasaws, who also joined the Americans). Yes, it makes a complex campaign out to be a simple race war, us (or U.S.) against them. But in addition, these iterations hide the fact that after the conflict much of the land surrendered to the United States at the Treaty of Fort Jackson in August 1814 came not from defeated Red Sticks but from America’s Creek and Cherokee allies. The same accounts that talk of Jackson “having defeated the Creeks” go on to say that “he [then] forced on them a treaty by which they turned over to the United States more than twenty million acres of their land” or that he “extracted extensive concessions of Indian land.” All but one of the men who marked the treaty that summer had been Jackson’s friends, not his foes, and they were furious about his ignoring American promises that “the United States will not forget their fidelity.” Despite the impression left by many historians, the war ended not with reparations paid by a defeated opponent but with territory taken from valuable, even essential, allies.

The implications of bowdlerizing this chapter in American history run further forward still. If Tecumseh called for do-or-die destruction of

234 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 687 (“Jackson led”); Meacham, American Lion, 31 (“triumphed”); Nellis, Long Road to Change, 263 (“his forces”). Jon Meacham does note that “the Creeks had been fighting a factional war” and later mentions Jackson’s “occasional Indian allies (he often found elements of a tribe to join him in his Indian campaigns).” See Meacham, American Lion, 30 (“Creeks”), 95 (“occasional Indian allies”). See also McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 415, 442; Reynolds, Waking Giant, 7, 59–60; Risjord, Jefferson’s America, 395–96.

235 Reynolds, Waking Giant, 7 (“having defeated”; see also 59–60); McDougall, Freedom Just Around the Corner, 442 (“extracted”). See also Nellis, Long Road to Change, 263; Meacham, American Lion, 31. Gordon S. Wood does say that at the peace treaty “Jackson sought to punish even those Indians who were allies of the United States” (Wood, Empire of Liberty, 687). His account of the war makes no mention of Indian allies, however. Sean Wilentz notes that “friendly Creeks and Cherokees” joined American troops, that the peace treaty’s “forfeited lands included territories held by friendly Creeks who had fought alongside Jackson,” and that “Jackson forced his allies, as well as those he had defeated, to submit” (Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 172).


237 For Cherokees’ participation in the war and their loss of 2.2 million acres at the Treaty of Fort Jackson, see McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence, chap. 9. Scholars mentioning the Cherokee and Creek allies (and their land loss at Fort Jackson) include Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, chaps. 4–5; Wilentz, Andrew Jackson, 142; Wilentz, Rise of American Democracy, 172; Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 75, 125, 343.

238 Bowdlerizing sometimes runs in the other direction, as scholars of Native American history either omit details of Fort Mims or leave the event out altogether. See Dowd, Spirited Resistance; Richter, Facing East, 232.
the white race; if all Creeks heeded him and became America’s inveterate enemies; if, unprovoked, they massacred “an American settlement”; if no Indians were the new nation’s allies—if all this is taken as true, it becomes easier to sanction, or at least accept, what lay beyond the Treaty of Fort Jackson. It is one thing to uproot and exile recently conquered foes with the blood of American women and children on their hands, foes determined to fight whites to the death. It is something else again to do this to Lieutenant John Ross and Major Ridge, Cherokee officers commissioned by the United States. It looks different when those marched west included veterans who at Emukfaw Creek in January 1814 “saved Jackson’s dwindling army from defeat,” who two months later at Tohopeka (Horseshoe Bend) valiantly blocked the Red Sticks’ escape, who at war’s end got medals from President James Madison because, as their commanding officer put it: “You have shown yourself worthy of the friendship of your Father, the President.”239 That officer’s name? Andrew Jackson.

At Tohopeka that day the guns finally fell silent near dusk. “As the sun went down,” one historian solemnly intoned in 2001, “it also set on the great and proud Creek Nation.”240 If the sword did not finish Creeks that spring, another has suggested, the pen at the Treaty of Fort Jackson in August “foreclosed the doom of the entire Creek Nation.”241 Creeks are not the only Indians scholars keep killing off. Long before 1814 “the coastal tribes had either been destroyed by disease and warfare or had migrated west.”242 Indeed, “the remnant of a ravaged Indian population in the eastern states had been forced to move west” into territories acquired in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, a deal that itself “proved to be the death knell for any Indian presence east of the Mississippi.”243 For one nation after another, the bell tolls. Seminoles? In Jackson’s day the United States “uproot[ed] the remaining Florida natives from their ancestral home.”244 (Thousands of Seminoles are still there.) Catawbas? “Removed further and further from their ancestral lands.”245 (Catawbas have stayed put since at least the sixteenth century.) Mohegans? Pequots? Narragansetts? Among the “many extinct eastern tribes.”246 (These three, and scores of others, are

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240 Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 78.

241 Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 172 (quotation; see also 324).

242 Reich, *Colonial America*, 265.


246 Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 271 (quotation), 232, 245.
federally recognized nations today.)\textsuperscript{247} As if sensing that talk of “Indian extinction” goes too far, threnodists sometimes back off a bit, writing that the American Revolution “virtually destroyed” the Iroquois and that a generation later Creeks were “nearly through as a nation.”\textsuperscript{248} One maintains that some “kind of extinction . . . seemed to have occurred with most Indians in the East,” while another has it that “a vital Native American existence east of the Mississippi was put on the road to extinction.”\textsuperscript{249}

Whether or not doomsayers hedge their bets, the outcome for Native peoples is the same: despite a wealth of work proving otherwise (to say nothing of land claims lawsuits, popular powwows, and crowded casinos), they are removed as surely as if they actually had been eliminated two hundred years ago.\textsuperscript{250} Those writing Indians out of history are signing off on

\textsuperscript{247} Besides the many federally recognized Native peoples east of the Mississippi River, more than twenty additional groups originally from those eastern countries now live in Oklahoma, Kansas, and other western states. (These figures exclude Native peoples recognized by states but not by the federal government.)

\textsuperscript{248} Ellis, \textit{American Creation}, 133 (“Indian extinction”; see also 160–61); Ellis, \textit{His Excellency}, 213 (“virtually destroyed”); Nugent, \textit{Habits of Empire}, 118 (“nearly through”).


coroners’ reports that have long been pronouncing Natives dead. “They appear to be a race doomed to recede and disappear before the superior genius of the Europeans,” mused J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782.251 “The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States [New England],” agreed Andrew Jackson, “were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites.”252 Soon thereafter Francis Parkman composed dirges for Indian America, lamentations full of lyrics such as “doom,” “fast recede,” “dwindle away,” “waste away.” The melody lingers on. When a landmark work in 2009 says that “Indian society and culture tended to disintegrate as they came in contact with white civilization,” it sounds uncannily like Parkman talking of how “the light of civilization falls on him [the Indian] with a blighting power.”253 Look how far we’ve come.

FROM DISCOVERY TO DISAPPEARANCE, the list of words worth thinking twice about is long. It is also incomplete. Once we start to watch our language, other terms surface that merit a second thought. Some are more jarring than others. The racially charged half-breed should long since have gone the way of primitive and savage. A kindred “historical racial relic,” mixed-blood, also deserves a closer look.254 This bloody way of reckoning is only compounded by scholars’ continued talk of a Creek being “only one-quarter Indian” and a Cherokee “seven-eighths white.”255


251 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America, ed. Albert E. Stone (1782; repr., New York, 1981), 122. Crévecoeur here was writing of Nantucket Natives, but throughout his discussion of Natives he enlarged his frame of reference to range “from one end of the continent to the other” (ibid., 119, 121).

252 Jackson, Second Annual Message, Dec. 6, 1830, in Richardson, Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 2: 521.


254 See Carson, Historical Journal 49: 928–29 (quotation, 928). For half-breed, see Ellis, His Excellency, 213; Latimer, 1812, 29, 219; Reynolds, Waking Giant, 60; Wood, Empire of Liberty, 128.

255 Ellis, American Creation, 143 (“one-quarter”; Ellis goes on to say that Creeks considered this person “a full-blooded member of the Creek Nation” [ibid., emphasis added]); McDougall, Throes of Democracy, 51 (“seven-eighths”; see also Remini, Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars, 258 [“only one-eighth Cherokee”]; Reynolds, Waking
A whole catalog of less obviously noxious words still fouls everyday parlance. *Colonial era* endures, even though for Natives it is not yet over. *Conversion* has no room for the complicated ways Natives dealt with spiritual encounters. Only one Jackson opponent said the words “and words are delusive” has not yet given way to a hard alternative, “ethnic cleansing.” Even seemingly solid terms such as *marriage* and *peace* can, considered up close, dissolve into many shades of meaning.

The real danger is not adding too many words to the roster of suspects but adding too few. Face it: *precontact*, *discovery*, and *backcountry* leave us “implicated in the reproduction of colonial categories of thought, knowledge, and power.” Getting out of this lexical rut will not be easy; language lessons for grown-ups rarely are. But surely at the dawn of a new millennium we can at least aspire to other ways of talking about early America.

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Do not, however, expect some new world of words to emerge, fully articulated and thoroughly vetted, from those exploring the Native American experience in times past. The hard truth is that most of us still use much of the same stale rhetoric as “traditional colonialists.”

The abiding power of old expressions is especially evident when we try to choose our words carefully, as David L. Preston did three years ago in *Texture of Contact*. Preston’s plan was to “shift our perspective” by developing “new vocabularies” that do “equal ethnographic justice” to colonists and Natives. “Throughout this work,” he explained, “I refer to European and Indian *settler* communities to emphasize the similarity of their inhabitants’ lives and aspirations. Simply put, Indians were settlers too.” For the most part, Preston succeeded, but laudable ambition can still fall heir to paleologism’s pull. Three pages after calling for “new vocabularies,” *Texture of Contact* discussed “unrestrained settlement” (presumably colonial) and the “violence of common settlers [also presumably colonial] against Indians.” Three lines down from the statement that “European and Indian settlers competed over crucial frontier resources,” we learn that “different cultural beliefs . . . made settler-Indian encounters prone to break down.”

Preston is hardly the only one unable to stop himself. Without wandering very far along the shelf from *Texture of Contact*, it is easy to come upon another scholar’s corpus polluted by adulterated terminology. Joining the ever-popular *settlers* in this historian’s reliquary are those old companions *Old World* and *New World*, *precontact* period and *colonial era*. Coming from that Old World to commence that contact, Europeans visit *the Carolina interior* generations before there even was a Carolina. Once that colony finally does get going, Tuscaroras and Yamasees are planted *in the Carolinas*, joining other Indian nations this misguided miscreant prematurely incarcerates *in New England* and *in New Netherland*. Wherever they are put, some Native women work *patches of corn* and some *warriors* attend peace treaties. If talks collapse and those men go to war, their chronicler serves up generous helpings of gore unleavened by enough rhyme or reason. Who is this latter-day Bradford, this Parkman in modern garb? Having cast so many stones, it is only right to confess some of my own sins.
SECOND THOUGHTS

Perhaps iniquity, like misery, loves company; in any case, I have plenty in the growing ranks of “colonial Indian historians.”

Old-timers and rookies alike, an all-star lineup of experts is ensnared in a web of words spun long ago. Prehistory joins precontact. Backcountry and backwoods camp next to settler. Woodland Indians in the Eastern Woodlands conduct forest diplomacy beneath “a boundless canopy of forest.”

A Powhatan lad is “a young Virginian” long before anyone even dreamed of Roanoke or Jamestown. Maps abound that would make a colonial official or land speculator smile.


Blackhawk, OAH Magazine 19: 15.


James Axtell, The Indians’ New South: Cultural Change in the Colonial Southeast (Baton Rouge, La., 1997), 11 (“young Virginian”). For more use of colony or state names long before these entities existed, see ibid., 7–11, 15, 19–20, 23, 25. Axtell also writes of “Carolina’s uplands” in the very sentence where he quotes a colonist calling it “a neighboring vast Indian Country” (ibid., 42, emphasis added).

Use of terms among specialists is so widespread that a sampling must suffice. See Axtell, Indians’ New South, 48 (backcountry; see also 49, 71); Axtell, The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America (New York, 1985), 3 (“wooded fastness”), 149 (settlers; see also 151–52), 150 (Old World, New World); Axtell, “The Rise and Fall of the Powhatan Empire,” in After Columbus, 182–221, esp. 190 (settlers; see also 192, 196, 198, 204); Blackhawk, Violence over the Land, 6 (postcontact; see also 8), 11 (colonial period), 16 (settlers); Calloway, New Worlds for All, xix (“Indian peoples of the Carolinas”), 5 (backwoods), 13 (Old World, Jamestown settlers; see also 21, 33, 40, 50, 97), 17–19 (settlers), 55–56 (backcountry); Calloway, Scratch of a Pen, xviii–xix (maps; but see 16, 21, 68), 9 (“Britain’s North American possessions”; see also 11, 15, 56, 66), 15 (settlers, backcountry; see also 16, 48, 53, 57, 59, 76); Carson, Historical Journal...
And so it goes. However imaginative and illuminating the work by scholars of Native history, however successfully it has helped usher Indians back to the early American theater, that theater still resounds with words drafted ages ago by people with an agenda, words that have been (and still can be) weapons. It turns out that whether we study Pequots or Puritans, Catawbas or Carolinians, Tecumseh or Thomas Jefferson, Alexander McGillivray or Andrew Jackson, we are all, in more ways than one, “colonial historians.” In the never-ending struggle to come to terms with early America, as a twentieth-century philosopher put it, “we have met the enemy and he is us.”