NED BLACKHAWK

THE REDISCOVERY OF AMERICA

NATIVE PEOPLES AND THE UNMAKING OF U.S. HISTORY

THE REDISCOVERY OF AMERICA

THE HENRY ROE CLOUD SERIES ON AMERICAN INDIANS AND MODERNITY

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THE REDISCOVERY OF AMERICA

Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History

Ned Blackhawk

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To Maggie,
with love

and

to the Native American Cultural Center community, with gratitude

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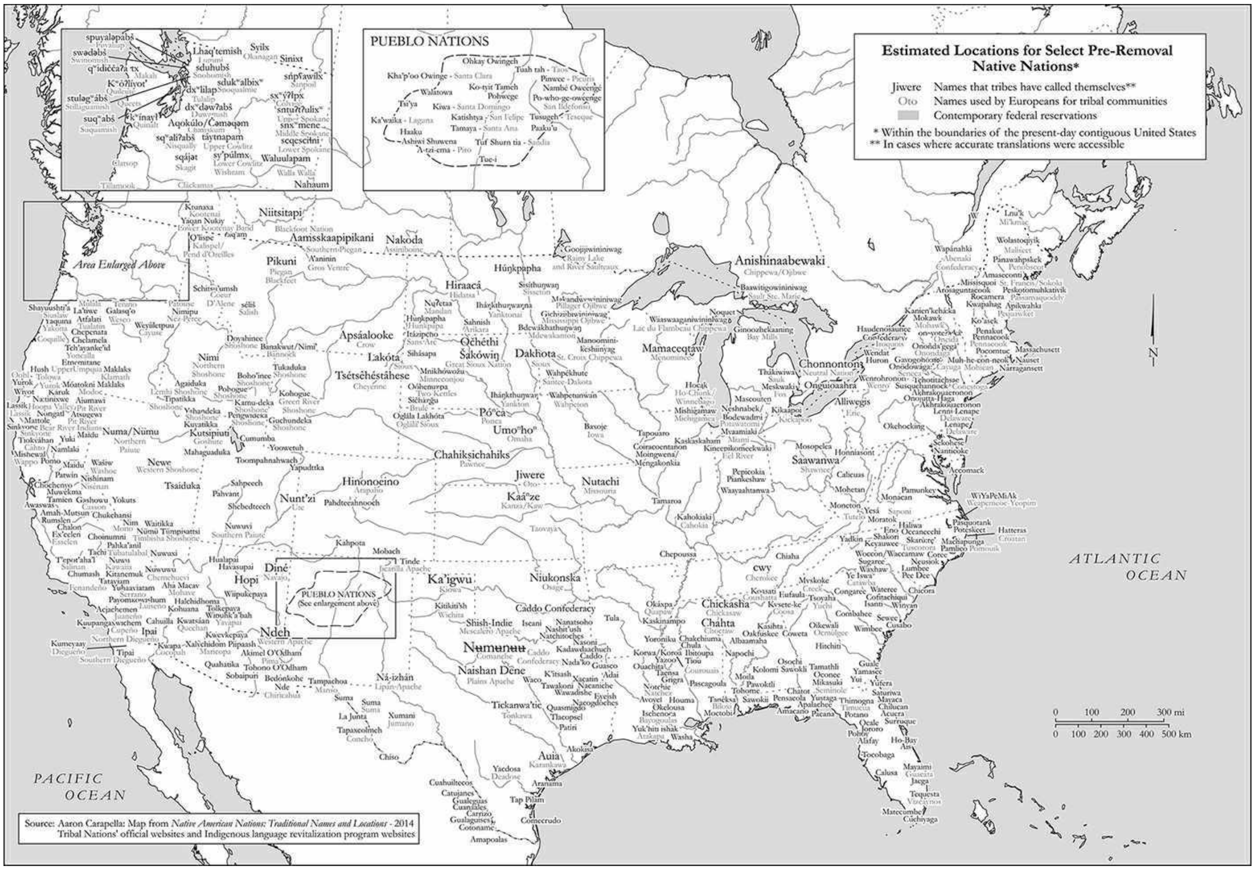
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Osage
Caddo Confederacy
Nde
Numunuu
Comanche
Naishan Dene
Chickasha
Chahta
Choctaw
Tickanwa'tic
Tonkawa
0 100 200 300 mi
0 100 200 300 400 500 km
N
Source: Aaron Carapella: Map from Native American Nations: Traditional Names and Locations - 2014
Tribal Nations' official websites and Indigenous language revitalization program websites

THE REDISCOVERY OF AMERICA

Introduction

Toward a New American History

How can a nation founded on the homelands of dispossessed Indigenous peoples be the world's most exemplary democracy? This question haunts America, as it does other settler nations.[1] Among historians, silence, rather than engagement, has been the most common response, together with a continued unwillingness to see America's diversity from the vantage point of those most impacted by the expansion of the United States.[2]

This is not that surprising. Like most countries, the United States has celebrated its past. Its revolutionary leaders understood America to be both a nation-state and an idea. As George Washington wrote in June 1783:

> The citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independency; They are, from this period, to be considered as the Actors on *the most conspicuous theater, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity*.[3]

Historians have largely followed suit in focusing on Europeans and their descendants: Puritans governing a commonwealth in a wilderness; pioneers settling western frontiers; and European immigrants huddled upon Atlantic shores.[4] Scholars have long conflated U.S. history with Europeans, maintaining that the United States evolved from its British settlements.[5]

In more complex narratives, a multicultural America struggles to extend its national promise to every one of its citizens and live according to its founding proclamation that all are created equal. Despite assertions to the contrary, American democracy arose from the dispossession of American Indians. If history provides the common soil for a nation's growth and a window into its future, it is time to reimagine U.S. history outside the tropes of discovery that have bred exclusion and misunderstanding. Finding answers to the challenges of our time—racial strife, climate crisis, and domestic and

global inequities, among others—will require new concepts, approaches, and commitments. It is time to put down the interpretive tools of the previous century and take up new ones.[6]

✦

Even the word *America* refers to Europeans and discovery. In 1507 cartographers Matthias Ringmann and Martin Waldseemüller renamed the recently encountered "fourth part" of the world after Americus Vesputius (Vespucci), its supposed discoverer.[7] Unlike Columbus in the 1490s, in 1503 Vespucci claimed to have found not passage to Asia, but something more—he claimed to have discovered "a new world."[8]

For centuries America and the New World have been ideas that convey a sense of wonder and possibility made manifest by discovery, a historical act in which explorers are the protagonists. They are the drama's actors and subjects. They think and name, conquer and settle, govern and own. They are at the center of Washington's "most conspicuous theater," just as Native Americans remain absent or appear as hostile or passive objects awaiting discovery and domination.[9]

Indigenous absence has been a long tradition of American historical analysis. Building upon a generation of recent scholarship in Indigenous history, this book joins the many scholars who are creating a different view of the past, a reorientation of U.S. history.[10] A full telling of American history must account for the dynamics of struggle, survival, and resurgence that frame America's Indigenous past. Focus upon Native American history must be an essential practice of American historical inquiry. Existing paradigms of U.S. history remain incomplete when they fail to engage the field. We need to build a more inclusive narrative, and this cannot be accomplished simply by adding new cast members to the dramas of the past. Our history must reckon with the fact that Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and millions of other non-white citizens have not enjoyed the self-evident truths of equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness proclaimed at the nation's founding as inalienable rights belonging to all. Many people have remained historically excluded from the nation and exploited by its citizens. Native peoples were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924, by which time the federal government had seized hundreds of millions of acres of land from Native nations in more than three hundred treaties.[11] Tens of thousands of

Native peoples were killed by settler militias and U.S. armed forces during the Civil War era, and government-sponsored campaigns of child removal from reservation communities resulted in 40 percent of Indian children being forcibly separated from their families and taken to boarding schools by 1928.[12]

Pervasive violence and dispossession are more than sidebars or parentheses in the story of American history. They call into question its central thesis. The exclusion of Native Americans was codified in the Constitution, maintained throughout the antebellum era, and legislated into the twentieth century: far from being incidental, it enabled the development of the United States. U.S. history as we currently know it does not account for the centrality of Native Americans.

Scholars have recently come to view African American slavery as central to the making of America, but few have seen Native Americans in a similar light. Binary, rather than multiracial, conceptions dominate studies of the past in which slavery represents the antithesis of the American idea. Leading scholarship considers it both America's original sin and its foundational institution.[13] "In the American book of genesis," we are told in a recent best-selling history of the United States, "liberty and slavery became the American Abel and Cain."[14] But can we imagine an American Eden that is not cultivated by its original caretakers? Exiled from the American origin story, Indigenous peoples await the telling of a history that includes them. It was their garden homelands, after all, that birthed America.

Building a new theory of American history is no small undertaking. It will take years and will require the labor of generations of contributors. It will need new themes, new geographies, new chronologies, and new ideas that better explain the course of American history. It is a simultaneous challenge and opportunity, one that falls particularly hard on tribal members who continue to bear the burdens of explaining Indigenous experiences, history, and policies to non-Native peoples.

Encounter—rather than discovery—must structure America's origins story. For over five hundred years peoples have come from outside of North America to the homelands of Native peoples, whose subsequent transformations and survival provide one potential guide through the story of America. Native peoples collectively spoke hundreds of languages and lived in societies ranging from small family bands to large-scale empires with emperors and vassal subjects. Their encounters with newcomers began in

well-documented form with Spanish explorers in the 1490s.

Understanding the formation of the earliest American colonies requires seeing Indigenous societies in motion, not stasis. Like the oceans upon which newcomers traveled, North America's earliest colonies experienced waves of turbulence within preexisting Indigenous geographies. From the foods they ate to the economies that sustained them, colonists depended on Indigenous peoples. To conceive of their composition, survival, and growth otherwise is fallacy. Indigenous-imperial relations explain the distinctions among Europe's American colonies, several of which, including colonial New Mexico, had been a part of European empires longer than they have been a part of the United States.

As the following chapters show, European contact sent shockwaves across Indigenous homelands, reverberating in many forms, some of them undocumented. Scholars have spent over fifty years attempting to measure the impacts of these intrusions. They suggest that the worlds of Native peoples became irrevocably disrupted by the most traumatic development in American history: the loss of Indigenous life due to European diseases. Epidemics tore apart numerous communities and set in motion large-scale migrations and transformations. North America's total population nearly halved from 1492 to 1776: from approximately 7 or 8 million to 4 million.[15]

The almost unimaginable scale of death and depopulation calls into question celebratory portraits of the nation's founding, and also helps to explain the motivations for American Indian trade, diplomacy, and warfare, all of which shaped the evolution of European settlements. From the rise of New France in 1609 to the colonization of California in 1769, the economic, diplomatic, and military influence of American Indians were key factors in imperial decision making. The treaties with Indigenous nations ratified by the U.S. Senate constitute the largest number of diplomatic commitments made by the federal government throughout its first century. These truths show that it is impossible to understand the United States without understanding its Indigenous history.

Revising interpretations of the past is an inherent part of the study of history, and as each generation reinterprets, it does so in response to new circumstances, ideas, and conditions. In the early twenty-first century, a new

paradigm, “settler colonialism,” became popularized by Commonwealth scholars dissatisfied with historical frameworks that naturalize the process of Anglophone global expansion.[16] Committed to assessing colonialism as an ongoing process, these scholars launched new methods, concepts, and historical approaches that centered upon Indigenous peoples. They called into question the founding narratives of nation-states, exposing how mythologies like the Puritan “errand into the wilderness” or the democratic nature of “frontier” settlements do more than erase Indigenous peoples—they turn history itself into nature and excise the violence of colonialism.[17] Moreover, as Commonwealth nations such as Australia and Canada offer national apologies and establish truth and reconciliation commissions to assess their respective histories of Indigenous forced acculturation, many have asked the historical community to examine the broader question of Indigenous genocide.[18] Using the definitions established by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), historians have located genocide across Native American history.[19]

Identifying American history as a site of genocide complicates a fundamental premise of the American story. Indeed, histories of Native America provide the starkest contrast to the American ideal. Native American studies scholars often view the conquest of the Americas as an ongoing process marked by mass violence that connects diverse Native nations.[20]

This book seeks to move toward reconciling these contested meanings of America. Drawing upon a wealth of recent scholarship, it aims to distill new insights into a single volume and synthesis, offering heuristics for building a new American history.

While the field of settler colonial studies has revealed the ongoing legacies of global colonialism and practices of Indigenous resistance, it nonetheless has limitations.[21] It often foregrounds Indigenous “elimination” as the defining aspect of Native American history and minimizes the extent of Indigenous power and agency.[22] It also struggles to assess changing power dynamics over time and leaves less space for recognizing Indigenous sovereignty across vast swaths of territories and over long periods.[23] To build a new theory of American history will require recognizing that Native peoples simultaneously determined colonial economies, settlements, and politics and were shaped by them.

Native American and Indigenous studies scholars have responded to the erasure of Native peoples from academic disciplines by emphasizing survival

rather than elimination.[24] The founding of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) in 2008 expanded professional opportunities for Indigenous scholars across the world.[25] Native scholars who once fought for visibility within established scholarly disciplines now interrogate those disciplines, collaborate with tribal communities, and build on the concept of "survivance" first articulated in 1993 by Ojibwe literary critic Gerald Vizenor.[26]

This book, indebted to these scholarly developments, seeks to recognize the extraordinary diversity of Native Americans as well as their equally extraordinary agency, which is essential to rediscovering American history. If the existing paradigms of U.S. history have been maintained by excluding Indigenous people, historicizing the agency of Indigenous peoples offers vital ways to remake these paradigms. Like all peoples, Native Americans have emerged as diverse peoples through centuries-old contests, continuities, and traditions. To understand such diversity and agency requires historicization.[27]

The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History traces a particular form of Indigenous agency—the dialectic of Indian-newcomer relations that developed over centuries of interactions, bringing new communities together in inextricable and enduring ways. The following twelve chapters examine specific paradigms of U.S. history—from the Spanish borderlands to the Cold War era—to expose the centrality of Indigenous peoples within them. Dialectics of transformation inform each chapter, none of which begins in a time before encounter. All the chapters focus on the interrelatedness of Native-newcomer relations, collectively asking whether there is potential for building an alternate American story that is not trapped in the framework of European discovery and European "greatness."

In a nation that has always been more diverse than its historical paradigms indicate, confronting such centuries-long dialectics is an essential, if daunting, challenge. The fact that American history flattens the actual diversity of the country's past deepens the need to rethink the field's foundations, especially as many recent syntheses downplay the "colonial era," suggesting that what matters most is the drafting of the U.S. Constitution.[28]

The mythology of America's founding offers limited spaces for Native Americans. The Declaration of Independence called Native peoples "merciless Indian savages" even as they remained an ever-present influence

on interior colonial settlements.[29] More experienced leaders than Thomas Jefferson, such as George Washington, advocated diplomacy over violence and drew upon existing Indian treaties to expand federal authority. As the first six chapters of this book suggest, looking at the full complexity of Native American history in the revolutionary period creates a deeper understanding of social—and eventually national—power.

When and where does the story of America start, and who constitutes its central cast? What are the main subjects, or acts, of this national drama? Are the English colonies the site of the origins of America? Did those who proclaimed themselves "We, the People" ever intend to relinquish their exclusive control? What were the legacies of the expansion of the United States across Indigenous homelands in the nineteenth century? How have Native nations responded to the overwhelming presence of federal power within their everyday lives?

Scholars have worked for generations to answer these questions, and starting in the late twentieth century, scholarly as well as tribal projects began to expose a rich historical universe that had been previously neglected. From the Makah Cultural and Research Center in Neah Bay, Washington, to the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Mashantucket, Connecticut, for example, nearly two hundred tribal museums and cultural centers now articulate the histories of these respective Native communities.[30] New source materials—oral traditions, ethnographies, Indigenous languages, and the archival records from multiple empires—have also helped create new historical and literary studies.[31]

Native Americans have now emerged from the shadows of historical neglect in their full complexity, living in varied societies, speaking centuries-old Indigenous languages, and governing often vast territories. Many continue to live in the homes of their ancestors and tend gardens that predate European arrival, such as the twenty-one Pueblo Indian nations of Arizona and New Mexico, who maintain North America's oldest continuously inhabited communities.

This rediscovery of American history continues to swell. Each year new courses, publications, and partnerships between tribal communities and non-tribal institutions continue to shape the practices of researchers, teachers,

tribal members, and students of all ages who yearn for more accurate, multiracial histories. Tribal governments have grown in their size and capacities, providing the clearest examples in American politics of the inherent sovereignty of tribal communities. Some, like the Navajo Nation, govern hundreds of thousands of citizens across millions of acres. Others employ thousands of Native and non-Native workers in their industries and economies.[32] These nations reside within the borders of the United States, where they maintain autonomy, sovereignty, and power in concert with the federal government.[33]

If our schools and university classrooms are to remain vital civic institutions, we must create richer and more truthful accounts of the American Republic's origins, expansion, and current form. Studying and teaching America's Indigenous truths reveal anew the varied meanings of America.

This book seeks to reorient U.S. history by redressing the absence of American Indians within it. Covering five hundred years of history, it builds on the work of many other scholars while recognizing that not all peoples, themes, and places can be held within a single study. American history developed out of the epic encounter between Indians and European empires and out of the struggles for sovereignty between Native peoples and the United States. American Indians were central to every century of U.S. historical development.

The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History seeks to combine multiple streams of U.S. and Native American history. Rather than seeing U.S. and Native American history as separate or disaggregated, this project envisions them as interrelated. It underscores the mutually constitutive nature of each; the two are and remain interwoven.

There have been few overviews or single-volume interpretations of Native American history. Even as the temporal, spatial, and ethnographical diversity of the subject has made a single interpretation difficult, scholars, teachers, and educators have developed new interpretive paradigms, fashioned new regional histories, and contributed to a vast rediscovery of new periods, places, and themes. Previously ignored, Native American history has become a flourishing field. As the following pages reveal, its insights unsettle