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Source: *The Journal of American History*, Mar., 2007, Vol. 93, No. 4 (Mar., 2007), pp. 1165-1170

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25094606>

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# Recasting the Narrative of America: The Rewards and Challenges of Teaching American Indian History

Ned Blackhawk

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With eleven federally recognized tribes, Wisconsin remains central to America's Indian past. The western center of the Great Lakes fur-trading empires, the nineteenth-century home to thousands of Algonquian, Siouan, and Iroquoian speakers, and the site of several of the most intense political standoffs in the twentieth century, Wisconsin has always been and remains "Indian country."<sup>1</sup>

I knew such generalities upon appointment to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Department of History and American Indian Studies Program (AISP) in the fall of 1999. In fact, working in an environment seemingly so well situated for Indian history powerfully attracted me to the position. I had no idea, however, how challenging enacting curricular initiatives amid such historical currents could be. For, while recent studies of American Indian history have forced reconsideration of innumerable aspects of the American experience, translating the achievements of such scholarly profusion into accessible lectures and navigable syllabi remains a constant struggle. Indian history appears increasingly critical to nearly all epochs of the nation's past, while in the classroom reconciling commonplace assumptions about America with the traumatic histories of the continent's indigenous peoples can be an exceedingly turbulent endeavor. What follows are reflections based on my experience teaching the semester-long American Indian history survey course at Madison for the last seven years. My teaching has been uniquely rewarding, but it has sparked both challenges and concerns.

First, as in any recently ascendant field of inquiry, scholarly insights and public consciousness move at different speeds. What may seem to be the most important academic finding may not work so well in the classroom; given its historic marginalization, Indian history is particularly prone to such discrepancies. That American history was taught for so long without attention to the continent's original inhabitants and was written to celebrate certain chapters of the national story over others compounds this field's comparative disadvantages. The endless cacophony of simplistic media representations only deepens the challenge of engaging one of America's most complicated narratives.

Such challenges are in many ways accentuated by several of Madison's general education requirements, particularly an ethnic studies requirement that was introduced in the 1990s. Housed within an amalgam of ethnic studies program units, nearly all of Madison's AISP courses in 1999, including my American Indian history survey, fulfilled that

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<sup>1</sup> Patty Loew, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal* (Madison, 2001), 12–112.

requirement. From the outside, that status might seem beneficial both to the course and to the larger program. Under such initiatives, many of the nation's ethnic studies and American cultures departments have seen large enrollments and, as a result, garnered additional resources, especially teaching assistants and faculty, thus broadening their curricular impact. At Madison, however, faculty and teaching assistant positions have not kept pace with increased demand. The university's nearly thirty thousand undergraduates in twenty-one different schools and colleges demand entrance into a handful of ethnic studies courses, including mine.

As on any campus and as in any ethnic studies field, the currents of multiculturalism flow into the classroom, and with them, varying social and political positions. I initially designed my first lecture course for students who I assumed were somewhat interested in American Indian history. Now I have recast the American Indian history survey both to engage those with interest and to challenge those without. I see America's Indian past as one of underrecognized trauma as well as triumph, the epitome of several of the nation's darkest chapters and, recently, its noblest ideals. Students entering this class now encounter a variety of pedagogical strategies aimed at recasting various commonly held assumptions about America. Indeed, the juxtaposition between one-dimensional portraits of "America" and of its "Indians" begins the course.

It goes without saying that "Indians" remain iconographic Americans. I use the tensions that arise from conjoining two of our nation's most powerful adjectives—American and Indian—as heuristic guides in profitably organizing my survey. Embedded in that conjuncture are lessons and truths that can potentially transcend what either term provides in isolation. I begin the course by telling students that despite recent attempts to shed the racist, limiting, and painful history of the term "Indian," we will use such terminology purposefully, trying to recapture and revise the representational power of one of America's oldest pejoratives. While at times interchanging "Native American" or simply "Natives" with "American Indians," we proceed from the premise that the once historically disparate subjects of U.S. history and American Indian history must be understood together and as mutually interanimated.

With such pedagogical guides, it is tempting to follow many scholarly trends by foregrounding Indian historical actors in many of the most dramatic chapters in the nation's past: the innumerable encounters of the colonial era; the imperial and revolutionary struggles of the late eighteenth century; the early republic and its westward expansion; and the nineteenth-century Indian wars and their traumatic aftermath. While the overwhelming number of monographs in American Indian history generally fall within such periodization, the teaching of that history must also extend beyond such parameters to interrogate normative assumptions about the nation's past and the place of Indian peoples in it. Within and outside the academy, a cascade of challenges and contemporary Indian community concerns confront those entering into the currents of this field, challenges and concerns that make Indian history and teaching it a unique and particularly rewarding opportunity. Among the many possible approaches, I have identified four that offer engaging, structuring principles for my survey course.

First, I attempt to destabilize assumptions about the uniformity of American Indian experience; the tremendous diversity of the continent's indigenous populations may partially explain the nation's historic reluctance to engage the history of the Native Americans. With over 560 contemporary, federally recognized Indian communities in the Unit-

ed States, one cannot fully gauge the regional, cultural, linguistic, religious, intellectual, economic, legal, and political distinctiveness of each of America's indigenous nations. Engaging students in such diversities of experience, however, is possible as well as necessary, especially in academic environments close to contemporary Indian communities and with Indian student populations. As far too many Indian people know too well, simplistic assumptions of a uniform Indian experience pervade popular culture, and challenging students to recognize and reformulate such received knowledge remains essential, particularly because the legacies of conquest have so often been rationalized with, and accompanied by, monolithic and dehumanizing caricatures.

Several strategies can be used to transcend monolithic portraits of Indian life, and historicizing the multiplicity of American Indian experiences through combinations of texts, novels, poems, oral histories, films, life histories, and other media can deepen students' understandings. For example, detailing both the spread of equestrianism onto the Plains and the ubiquitous history of Plains Indian iconography invites students to engage important aspects of Indian history while also recognizing the mythologies embedded in visual constructions. In such context, one can weave together eighteenth-century Plains Indian history, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's journey up the Missouri River, and Kevin Costner's mythic West, profitably deploying them against each other to convey critical, ongoing aspects of the field.<sup>2</sup> One need not be familiar with Hollywood's representations of Indians or the history of equestrianism to see various connections between them, nor to see which elements of these pasts have been chosen for memorialization and which others have not.

Second, while introducing the diversity of Indian experiences can fragment a survey effort, common themes can unify it, particularly the centrality of Indian peoples to the making of America. Many undergraduates may recoil at this structuring principle, particularly if the instructor makes the end of the American Revolution the halfway point of a single-semester survey, as I do. Given their general unfamiliarity with early American history, many are unprepared for the relentless assault of Indian-imperial relations in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century North America. Unaware that England and its Atlantic colonies were not the major centers of colonial America until a century after Spanish exploration, many students bemoan the constellation of competing indigenous and imperial actors set before them. I try to ameliorate these concerns with outlines, lists of exam study questions, and select readings; the "middle ground" forms a lecture, not a required text. Ultimately, however, I find little resolution to that impasse. The first three centuries of colonial intrusion into the Americas form a necessary introduction to indigenous history, particularly when investigating both the influence of native peoples on the continent's development and the devastating impacts of European influence on the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

That third and latter theme, I believe, is one of the hardest to integrate into a survey course, and I have encountered similar difficulties when teaching the first half of the U.S. survey course. That the largest loss of human life in world history followed the arrival of Europeans in the Americas remains so incongruent with prevailing assumptions

<sup>2</sup> *Dances with Wolves*, dir. Kevin Costner (Tig Productions and Majestic Films, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991). For one of the most successful surveys of Indian-imperial relations before 1800, see Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York, 2001).

about America and its history that many are unprepared, reluctant, or simply too overwhelmed to engage this foundational aspect of our nation's past. "Depressing," "politically motivated," and even "anti-American" are not uncommon reactions to my survey course on student evaluations. Some wonder why I place so much emphasis on Spanish contact and the Columbian exchange at all. More often, however, students are intrigued and begin interrogating critical elements from the postcontact era. How responsible were Europeans in the spread of unknown microbes throughout the Americas? What do the varying debates about the size of precontact native populations reveal about the nature of academic scholarship? What other social forces impinged on native communities' capacities to withstand the spread of diseases? Most important, what lessons, legacies, and conclusions can one draw from these devastating generations of contact? Such engagement, I believe, is critical both to understanding the postcontact development of America and also to formulating alternative visions about the nature of our nation's past and the place of Indians within it.<sup>4</sup>

Emphasis on the traumatic impacts of European contact may reify notions of Indian victimization. However, other critical lessons emerge from foregrounding Indian agency amid such disruptions: namely, the resilient, adaptive capacity of Indian groups to respond to colonialism in challenging and often deadly circumstances. Ultimately, such emphasis may reorient the broader meanings associated with both Indian and American history. For example, studying the experience of settler-Indian relations within a hemispheric or even global context recasts critical elements of the national past. A comparative history of the Americas is unimaginable without analyses of indigenous people. Highlighting the exciting transnational turn that increasingly links the experiences of indigenous communities across the hemisphere and the Pacific Rim encourages such internationalization. Similarly, students and scholars alike often forget that the two most recently admitted states to the Union have sizable indigenous populations. Their histories parallel and intersect with those in the continental United States and Canada and others in the Pacific. Conjoining Alaskan and Hawaiian native histories, then, with those in the lower forty-eight states as well as with Canadian First Nations and Pacific Islander experiences can stimulate such interconnections.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, while such comparative attention can generate greater linkages and awareness, sustained focus on the uniqueness of Indian-white relations in the United States, particularly from a legal and constitutional perspective, must invariably characterize significant portions of any Indian survey. I make the end of the Revolutionary War the half-way point of the survey so that federal Indian policy spans the entire second half. I do so purposefully in a state and on a campus with a sizable Indian population. While many students find the machinations of Indian law and sovereignty confusing, communicating the constitutionally unique standing of Indian communities vis-à-vis other American

<sup>4</sup> For estimates of the collapse of Native American populations after 1492, see Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York, 2005), 92–112; Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman, 1987), esp. 3–42; and William M. Denevan, ed., *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> For select studies engaged with the transnational currents of indigenous history, see Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change* (Vancouver, 1997); Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2002); Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, 2005); Noëne K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, 2004); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, 1999).

groups remains central to my course. Despite the enormous gains made in the scholarship of early America, without more sustained examinations of the national histories of particular Indian nations, the field of Indian history may remain slightly behind or out of step with the dramatic achievements currently being made throughout Indian country. Such achievements, as Charles Wilkinson has effectively demonstrated, have come largely from the continued activism of Indian community leaders and from within the nation's legal system. The narrative of Indian history ends neither in the nineteenth century nor in defeat, and contextualizing the recent successes of America's indigenous nations within a historically and constitutionally informed perspective remains among the most pressing challenges for the field. Fortunately, Wilkinson's *Blood Struggle* is now in paperback, and twentieth-century Indian history has become far more established, as have rich interpretations of the origins and particularities of Indian sovereignty.<sup>6</sup>

Toward those ends, I offer exams and teach texts specifically aimed at recasting the narrative of Indian victimization and disappearance and highlight the ways Indian communities endured, adapted, and refashioned the world around them, particularly after reservation confinement. Frederick E. Hoxie's *Parading through History*, for example, skillfully details the many ways Montana's Crow Indians came together in the late nineteenth century and established the capacious religious, political, and social institutions that over time have made them into a modern Indian nation. Continuing where many conclude, Hoxie's study of the reservation era nicely conveys the ties between pre- and post-confinement history. Students marvel at his concluding section on the Crow leader Plenty Coups' grace and dignity during the Armistice Day celebration at Arlington National Cemetery following World War I, when this venerable Crow leader began the ceremonies with a prayer in his native language. Hoxie also includes a revealing photograph of Plenty Coups and the French field marshal Ferdinand Foch, who sought out the Crow leader in Montana during his tour of America. The text and photo nicely communicate each leader's respective *national* standing and highlight the larger themes of adaptation and survival found throughout the book. While students, ultimately, may identify as national leaders those who negotiated the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 more readily than they would identify Plenty Coups as one, I remind them that many state legislatures now host annual addresses delivered by tribal leaders. Each spring, for example, Wisconsin's state legislature—located at the opposite end of State Street from our campus—sponsors a State of the Tribes Address, and the university's Indian faculty, students, staff, and alumni are well represented in the audience.<sup>7</sup>

I also not only insist that students engage John Marshall's interpretation of the Constitution's commerce clause but also that they link such Supreme Court rulings to their own world here in Wisconsin, whose Indian history has recently found powerful synthesis in Patty Loew's *Indian Nations of Wisconsin*. In fact, I know of few other state or regional surveys as successful as Loew's, and I encourage the use, adoption, and continued creation of such regionally specific texts. Loew's work provides vivid overviews of Wisconsin's Indian nations and useful up-to-date political and legal profiles of their current development. Denied voice and recognition in so many narratives of America, contemporary Indian communities demand increased historical focus, particularly in academic institu-

<sup>6</sup> Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* (New York, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805–1935* (New York, 1995), 344–74.

tions that were often created shortly after their dispossession; at Madison, my classes meet on Ho-Chunk Indian homelands. I believe a successful semester requires bringing Indian community members into class, encouraging attendance at local Indian events, and communicating respect for the challenges and sacrifices so many Indians, particularly Indian veterans, have endured.<sup>8</sup>

Not all texts or initiatives work in the classroom. Students often maintain an undercurrent of resentment due to their perceptions of my political intentions. I try to highlight the political diversity found in Indian country and its supporters; Arizona's Republican senator John McCain not only blurbed Wilkinson's book *Blood Struggle* but is also a consistent advocate for Indian rights. However, in a class where, as on the campus as a whole, nine out of ten undergraduates are white, racial politics and representation are unavoidable, particularly given my own identity as a self-identified and enrolled tribal member. Whereas American Indian men constitute approximately 10 percent of the inmate population at the federal correctional institution in Oxford, Wisconsin, sixty miles north of Madison, on campus Indians are less than .5 percent of the student population. Although I work closely with Indian undergraduates, native students have never totaled more than 20 percent of students in the course. The educational and pedagogical obstacles to American Indian higher education are well reflected, then, in my class demographics.<sup>9</sup>

While the task of covering over five hundred or five thousand years of indigenous history in North America may seem both potentially daunting and depressing, the resiliency of Indian peoples illustrates an underrecognized form of American achievement, one that can reorient the often linear teleology of America and offer insight into the ongoing transformations of its indigenous communities. Laden with pain, Indian history is also filled with surprising moments of joy, satire, and celebration. Its fiction and forms of cultural production reveal both pathos and humor, perhaps none better than the works of the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie. In the opening story to his recent collection, *Ten Little Indians*, Alexie contemplates the nature of Indian identity, rhetorically asking,

But who could blame us our madness? . . . We are people exiled by other exiles, by Puritans, Pilgrims, Protestants, and all of those other crazy white people thrown out of a crazier Europe. We who were once indigenous to this land must immigrate into its culture. I was born one mile south and raised one mile north on the Spokane River where the very first Spokane Indian was ever born, and I somehow feel like a nomad.

Such expressions of exile form appropriate entryways into the contested, vibrant, and contemplative landscapes offered by teaching North American Indian history, providing vistas of insight into the evolving patterns of American history. Teachers of Indian history, no longer an anecdotal, cursory, or shadowy component of the national epic, now possess a wealth of materials to guide students into the field, so that we may all someday, perhaps, become nomads no more.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. 515 (1832); U.S. Const. art. I, par. 8, cl. 1; Loew, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin*, 40–47.

<sup>9</sup> The federal correctional institution at Oxford, Wisconsin, hosts an annual powwow and regularly holds community meetings for its Indian inmates. For general information about Oxford, see Federal Bureau of Prisons, "FCI Oxford," <http://www.bop.gov/locations/institutions/oxf/index.jsp>.

<sup>10</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Ten Little Indians* (New York, 2003), 40.