Look How Far We’ve Come: How American Indian History Changed the Study of American History in the 1990s

In September 1992, while anxious preparations continued throughout the hemisphere in anticipation of the contested Columbian Quincentenary, graduate programs in American history welcomed another crop of prospective historians. In many departments, first-year students undertook immediate investigations into the changing currents of American historical writing through variously formulated “historiography” courses. Often overwhelmed, many also sought aid and refuge. Scouring journals, book reviews, and historiography collections, incoming students began their professional training by charting the changing interpretations over time within various subfields of American history, often turning their first assessments of the state of the profession while initiating potentially lifelong conversations with arguments and ideas from throughout the ages.

Of the many thumbed-through works that sat on the bookshelves of these historians-in-the-making, the sixth edition of Gerald Grob and George Athan Billias’s Interpretations of American History (1992) remained among the most referenced. Providing succinct overviews of twenty-two canonical subjects across the sweep of U.S. history, this two-volume set surveys scholarly debates with the intention of not resolving academic disputes but introducing them, providing students and scholars alike with clearly marked paths into the contested terrain of American historiography. Of its many strengths, the anthology’s humor particularly stands out. Were Puritans “bigots” or “builders,” American Imperialism a process of “altruism” or “aggression”? Learning that such debates constantly change and that revising interpretations of the past is inherent to the study of history, Interpretations, now in its seventh edition, remains an indispensable tool for historians at all levels.

Of the primary differences between the anthology’s sixth and seventh editions, the appearance of an entire section on American Indian history is among the most obvious. Placed noticeably at the beginning of Volume 1, “American Indians: Resistance or Accommodation,” precedes discussions of the Atlantic World, the American Revolution, and other commonplace pillars of the Antebellum Era. Such inclusion is more than cosmetic and represents greater shifts in the profession at large. For, between the sixth edition’s publication in 1992 and the seventh’s in 2000, arguably no field of inquiry in American history witnessed such reversals of fortune as American Indian history; in the nineties, every major professional book award save for the Pulitzer was garnered by an Indian history title. Between 1989 with the publication of James Merrell’s The Indians’ New World and 2003 with the dually-awarded Bancroft Prize to Alan Gallay’s The Indian Slave Trade and James F. Brooks’s Captives & Cousins, Indian historians recast the spatial, temporal, and thematic parameters of the field, locating America’s indigenous peoples at the centers of national inquiry. Gone now are the days when historians could so casually dismiss or ignore the continent’s constellation of diverse and powerful Native populations. Gauging the experiences of the first Americans now remains a critical component in today’s historical universe.

Mirrored by a decade of unprecedented indigenous social and economic development, this academic transformation shows no signs or intentions of abating. Indeed, as the most recent trends in the field suggest, American Indian and indigenous history appear to be on the cusp of further reconfiguring national histories throughout the Ameri-
cas, as interrelated questions of memory and orality, trauma and genocide, and state formation and dispossession garner increased scholarly and public attention (6). From Ottawa to Patagonia, Guatemala City to Greenland, indigenous intellectuals, activists, and supporters project a vision of the future based upon revised understandings of the past. Located within and among such hemispheric currents, American historians have much to gain from understanding and participating in these transnational conversations. Those who teach about the American West similarly will profit from examining these new narratives.

If the Grob and Billias volume is an unlikely starting point for entry into these paradigm shifts, 1992 is not. Not only did Quincentenary debates rage throughout the hemisphere, but indigenous concerns also reached the highest levels of international public opinion, as the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations assessed the state, plight, and history of Native peoples (7). Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchu won the Nobel Peace Prize, while gatherings of indigenous peoples drew tens and hundreds of thousands. From San Francisco to Mexico City, Indian peoples proclaimed their continued resistance to state-designed policies of assimilation and land loss, while also affirming their faith in community-based spiritual, cultural, and social practices.

The antecedents of such heightened awareness extend back, particularly in the United States, to the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when a generation of Indian activists began laying the seeds for policy reforms and tribal sovereignty efforts (8). Historiographically, the hunger for narratives of American history that did not marginalize or stigmatize Native peoples fueled growing interests in the works of a generation of “New Indian historians,” who had fought for years to put Native histories back onto the many vacant landscapes of American historiography (9). Similar to coeval urban renewal efforts of the Reagan era, these scholars attempted to rehabilitate blighted aspects of the past, various pothole-ridden avenues of inquiry deprived of adequate academic interest and funding. Often working in the overlap between anthropology and history known as “ethnohistory,” New Indian historians helped restructure critical portions of the profession, as their labors, along with ongoing indigenous intellectual and community efforts, helped inaugurate alternative visions of America and its history (10).

Not surprisingly, many of the first achievements occurred away from traditional centers of analysis, on the so-called margins or “frontiers” of historical inquiry (11). In addition to ethnohistory, Indian historians worked within the few associations that took Indian history seriously, particularly the Western History Association and its increasingly popular paradigm of New Western History (12). While building upon the works of others who sought to bring minority voices into the mainstream of American history, the developments of the late 1980s and especially the early 1990s heralded the rise of arguments that were increasingly incongruent with existing paradigms (13). Nowhere was this more apparent than in the study of early America, particularly after the publication of Merrell’s The Indians’ New World, Richard White’s The Middle Ground (1991), Ramón Gutiérrez’s When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away (1991), and Daniel Richter’s The Ordeal of the Longhouse (1993) (14). All four won multiple awards, with Merrell, Gutiérrez, and Richter winning the Frederick Jackson Turner Award for the best first book in U.S. history. While not all strictly Indian or western historians, the currents as well as politics of the field coursed through each (15).

White’s The Middle Ground took particular issue with the trajectory of colonial history. In his nuanced, rigorously conceptualized study, White reinterprets Franco-Algonquian relations in the Great Lakes—the centerpiece of the French empire in North America. By extension, he narrates an alternative vision of early America, bringing Indians not only to the center of analysis but also recasting what that center becomes. For, in White’s world, the differences between Indians and imperialists are less pronounced than their commonalities; their shared relations drive the region and, indeed, the continent’s history.

Such bold ambitions clearly create both positive and negative fallout, and many have taken issue with White’s paradigm, especially his claims about Anglo-Indian relations following the defeat of the French-Algonquian alliance in the Seven Years’ War (16). At its time, however, White’s narrative distanced, or recast, so many elements of early American historiography that the field, in many ways, has yet to fully recover (17). Although in 1991, this field—which Grob and Billias chose not to include in their sixth edition—did not possess much academic currency, it is now a dominant theme in colonial history as innumerable studies of colonial encounters, imperial borderlands, and Indian-settler relations seek to contend with elements from White’s work.

In a nutshell, The Middle Ground hinges on a series of critical encounters: first, the violent confrontation between Algonquians and gun-possessing Iroquois raiders in the 1640s-1660s. As the Iroquois in their search for furs and captives drove Algonquians west into “diaspora,” a second encounter between French missionaries, traders, and officials with these “refugee” communities emerges, one that conjoins Algonquian village and French imperial demands for nearly a century (18). Such mutually constructed binds, in which, for example, French profits from the fur trade are subsumed in the gift economy of the village, lay at the center of the Middle Ground and help explain Indian-imperial relations. As this mutually constitutive world evolves, Franco-Algonquian allies confront, in the third encounter. Englishmen with whom they fatefully clash in the Seven Years’ War. A continental and indeed global conflict, the war ends with the ironic “restoration” of the Middle Ground as English officials ultimately inherit and continue similar imperial-village relations, providing gifts and arbitration to Algonquian communities while even protecting Indian lands through the Proclamation Line of 1763 (19). Originating in the Ohio River Valley, the war’s consequences, as Fred Anderson has also shown, set in motion the second great struggle of the eighteenth century as well as the
In the American Revolution and its aftermath, Algonquian villagers confront an imperial power with whom they are unable to enact the rituals and relations of the Middle Ground. Lasting until the War of 1812, this final encounter brings dispossession, conflict, and racially marked difference to Indians who had navigated empires for generations and come to inhabit a world in which such navigations structured everyday life. The death-knell of the Middle Ground, then, represents a larger loss and tragedy: the inability of a new settler society to make room for indigenous peoples who had once courted allies from Montreal, Paris, and London. Their relations with the young American republic quickly devolved into conflict and created a uniquely American form of western expansion—Indian removal.

The implications that the American Revolution must be understood from an imperial and continental framework stagger the historiographic imagination. For, until only recently, much of early American history read as prologue to the Revolution, as multiple aspects of colonial history attempted to resolve the recurring debates about the ultimate nature of our nation’s founding (21). In the wake of The Middle Ground, Indians and the imperial context not only appear as convincing templates upon which others must operate, but they have also become equally valid lines of inquiry. The field’s many achievements, 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 (22). Perhaps equally interesting have been the ways colonial historians previously untrained in the currents of the field have retooled and initiated research projects that have produced surprisingly powerful narratives with Indians at their centers (23).

West of the Mississippi and in policy-centered analyses, similarly important strides have been made. Given that the majority of Indian reservations are in the West (notwithstanding Wisconsin’s eleven federally-recognized tribes) and that many Indian people’s lives are tied in constitutionally unique ways to the federal government, recent studies of tribal communities and U.S. Indian policy have provided valuable insight into the ongoing dialectics of U.S. state rule and American Indian community formation (24). Loretta Fowler, Melissa Meyer, and Frederick Hoxie, among others, have offered remarkable studies of Indian communities undergoing dramatic social change in the aftermath of American conquest. Their findings are both surprising and unpredictable. Focusing less on military and diplomatic relations, these and other recent studies of the Reservation Era have uncovered complicated social dynamics operating within as well as upon Indian peoples. For some, like the Northern Arapahoe of Wyoming, early reservation confinement brought continued political challenge but did so, according to Fowler, on Arapahoe terms, as Arapahoe leaders successfully adapted their age-based political structures to their new reservation environment (25). Fowler’s study is particularly insightful given the Arapahoe’s shared occupancy of the Wind River reservation with their hereditary enemies, the Eastern Shoshone, for whom reservation confinement became more difficult.

In Hoxie's work, Indian identity remains ethnically, socially, and economically determined (26). Prior to the nineteenth-century assimilation era policy of allotment, ethnic relations within many Great Lakes Indian communities were fluid as social relations forged during the fur trade continued into the Reservation Era. At Minnesota’s White Earth Reservation, “mixed-bloods” owned stores, lived in stone houses, and even published newspapers. They also symbiotically interacted with more “traditional” Ojibwe who seasonally migrated and subsisted off large portions of the reservation. Such interdependency and hybridity collapsed after a series of land grabs by the state and its corporate interests. The ultimate “tragedy” at White Earth becomes, then, not reservation confinement, but the unrelenting processes of land loss that destabilized previously extant economic and social relations, as race, dispossession, and impoverishment became increasingly fused into new social hierarchies. Hoxie offers a similarly historicized yet markedly divergent analysis of Montana’s Crow Indians, exposing the tremendous similarities as well as differences among Indians in their confrontations with the American state (27). For, in Hoxie’s work, the Crow proudly and defiantly “parade” through the Reservation Era, establishing capacious and adaptive religious, familial, and political practices in their new reservation homelands.

As these studies reveal, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed spectacular growth in the federal government’s capacity to enact, police, and enforce Indian policy, and other historians have explored additional aspects of assimilation’s many designs. They have focused particularly on Indian children, tens of thousands of whom grew up within the confines of government and missionary boarding schools. As in Canada, the placement of Native children into punitive or organized schools perhaps best encapsulates the ironic and bitter lega-
cies of Indian-white relations in North America. Whereas contemporary lawsuits in Canada bring growing exposure of the physical, psychological, and sexual abuses that pervaded Canadian "residential" schools, American Indian boarding school experiences have yet to garner such national attention (27). Signs of growing awareness are increasingly evident, however, particularly in the works of Native scholars Brenda J. Child, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, and Devon Mihesuah (29). Designed to undermine the fabric of tribal communities by literally removing generations from each other, boarding schools, nonetheless, became sites of Native adaptation as well as pain. As Lomawaima demonstrates, at the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma, Indian students forged close intertribal ties, benefitted from aspects of the curriculum, and over time made the school their own. Such reclamation, ownership, and Pan-Indian solidarities are increasingly apparent in studies of these institutions, which ironically produced many prominent Indian leaders, including Charles Eastman, Susan and Suzette LaFlesche, Robert Yellowtail, and the great collegiate-cum-Olympic athlete, Jim Thorpe. The harrowing yet resilient experiences of these young Indian students produce potentially great attraction for present-day classrooms where current students may be able to see both the negative as well as positive impacts that such schooling produced.

Following generations of warfare, reservation confinement, and intrusions by foreign states and institutions, Indian peoples throughout the first half of the twentieth century endured the innumerable legacies of conquest. Impoverishment, disease, and racism constituted but a few of the primary forces marginalizing Native peoples in their homelands. While more attention has recently been paid to these twentieth-century Indian experiences, American historians still struggle to reconcile the American Century with its indigenous counterpart. While often integrating Indian peoples into multicultural visions of a diverse American mosaic, U.S. history teachers would also be well served by focusing on the cultural, regional, and particularly Constitutional distinctiveness that characterizes America's "domestic dependent" Indian Nations, whose sovereign status has recently been affirmed and enacted in unprecedented degrees (30).

The past two decades have witnessed such staggering political and economic reversals that a new epoch in American Indian history is upon us, fueled partly by the rise of Indian gaming as well as a generation of Indian educational, community, and political activism. Many Indian communities now oversee economies, territories, and citizenries that are national in scope as well as size. The Navajo Nation, for example, encompasses 27,000 square miles and has as many residents as Iceland, while the Oneida Indians of Wisconsin employ more people than any other corporation in Green Bay, including the Green Bay Packers. Many tribes have used such increased independence to regain lost resources, reinvigorate cultural practices, and re-establish institutions of political authority. Others have increased housing, educational, and health care benefits for their communities while curtailing reliance upon agencies of the federal government, particularly the Bureau of Indian Affairs, whose legacies of mismanagement are subject to escalating lawsuits. While most of the over 500 federally-recognized Indian communities have not shared fully in this economic renaissance, collectively, Indian communities stand united in ensuring that future threats to their homelands will be met with sustained and determined resistance. As the 2004 opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in the nation's capital further suggests, Indian peoples remain vibrant and enduring actors in twenty-first-century American society (31).

"Indians" and "the West" remain among our nation's most popular and powerful images. Home and abroad, they excite the minds of both the young and old. Following the past decade of achievement, American Indian historians stand poised to further weave Native peoples into the fabric of our nation's changing past. In the wake of this scholarly profusion, many familiar narratives and tropes of American history have crumbled; iconographic images of passive Indians receding before an inexorable tide of white expansion, for example, now appear as uncanny artifacts of American myopia. While the "frontier" in many ways has finally ended, replaced by more capacious, diverse, and complicated paradigms, the enduring allure of these transformed subjects reminds us how quickly historical currents can change, while affirming our sense of their connection to social developments outside of the classroom.

Endnotes
1. These observations are based on two years of graduate training in American history at the University of California, Los Angeles, from 1992 to 1994, followed by five additional years at the University of Washington. The author would like to thank members of those two programs for their friendship, advice, and support.
4. Several national book prizes including the Bolton, Parkman, Bancroft, and Turner awards as well as annual best book awards from several regional historical associations, like the Western History Association and Southern History Association, were garnered by Indian history titles in the 1990s.
5. James H. Merrell, The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg,


16. For reassessments of White's claims about the Seven Year's War, see Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, & the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

17. For indications of how reformed the historiography of British North America has become, see Bernard Bailyn, "The First British Empire: From Cambridge to Oxford," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (July 2000): 647-60.


21. As Anderson argues, studies of the American Revolution have historically minimized assessments of Anglo-French imperial relations in North America, diminishing the significance of the Seven Years' War, "the most important event to occur in eighteenth-century North America." Anderson, *Crucible of War*, xxviii.


28. Over 90,000 Canadian Native students attended Residential Schools and over 10,000 have filed class-action lawsuits against the Canadian government, which has issued national apologies and established governmental agencies to handle the redress and resolution of this "national tragedy." For an overview of these efforts along with multiple teaching guides, see "Indian Residential School Resolution Canada" at <http://www.irsr-rqpi.gc.ca/english>. See also, J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).


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