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The Promise and Perils of Synthetic Native History

Over the past year, two prominent historians have invited readers to rethink the master narrative of US history. In 2022, Oxford University historian Pekka Hämäläinen published *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America*. Hämäläinen’s synthesis focused on power, which he argued Native people had more of, and for much longer, than previous scholarship has acknowledged. In his review of *Indigenous Continent*, fellow historian Ned Blackhawk criticized Hämäläinen’s analysis, which, he insisted, relied on an overly simplistic binary of “power” and “weakness.” Writing in the *Washington Post* (Oct. 4, 2022), Blackhawk found fault with the inadequacies of *Indigenous Continent*’s solitary introductory citation and argued that “Finnish-born Hämäläinen” (why his country of birth matters is not clear, but I’ll return to this) was in such a rush to “overturn many historical fallacies” that he ended up reinforcing them.

Blackhawk’s review was unvarnished in its criticism; it was also self-serving. Blackhawk put the world on notice that his own synthetic history would soon enter the world. In 2023, Ned Blackhawk’s *The Rediscovery of America* hit bookshelves. Blackhawk lays claim to synthesizing the past generation of historiography (he cites no archival material or community engagement). The scholarship he cites, however, is idiosyncratic, and sometimes extends beyond the past generation and into the 1970s or earlier. Blackhawk selects histories that help him craft a book that moves the master narrative of US history beyond the trope of “discovery” and toward a more inclusive accounting of the past—one focused on nuance and analysis of Indigenous-European “encounters” (pp. 2-3).

Foundational to Blackhawk’s nuance is a new theory of US history. That new theory is based on a very old methodology: “dialectic” history (p. 6). Dialecticism is a Eurocentric approach to under-
standing the past. With Hegel and Marx among its most prominent intellectual forebears, dialectic history typically emphasizes the importance of conflict in driving historical change. This approach has proven foundational to the emergence of settler-colonial studies. Blackhawk nods to settler studies, referring particularly to leading voices in the field as “Commonwealth” scholars (an oddly imprecise label given his precision in identifying Hämäläinen’s country of birth). He is particularly indebted to the British-born Australian anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, whose argument about settler colonialism being premised on the “elimination” of Indigenous populations still looms large in histories of settler societies. Blackhawk wants to build on the insights of settler studies by focusing our attention on the experiences of Native people.

Despite promises of historical nuance and the centering of Native people, we really do not get to know them in this book. We rarely hear Indigenous voices and read only superficial descriptions of their kinship networks. In fact, Native people are more often than not acted upon (usually violently). In this sense, the book is more at home in settler studies, not in Native-centered historiography.

Blackhawk, a historian at Yale University and a member of the Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, makes his settler-leaning focus clear in the first line of the book, asking, “How can a nation founded on the homelands of dispossessed Indigenous peoples be the world’s most exemplary democracy?” (p. 1). This is not a new question. Historians have busily deconstructed American exceptionalism since at least the 1960s. Still, Blackhawk uses it to reframe how readers understand topics such as property rights, enslavement, suffrage, and economics in US history. It’s also a question that introduces readers to a strawman: “historians.” Blackhawk cites only two historians (one of whom is dead) for their inadequacies, so it remains unclear which historians he is taking issue with.

*The Rediscovery of America* is divided into twelve chapters. From the book’s clumsy title to the awkwardness of its prose, Blackhawk’s synthesis lacks the narrative fluidity of Hämäläinen’s *Indigenous Continent*. Clichéd metaphors—“beacons on the sea” (p. 289)—and typographical errors—for example, General Winfield Scott appears as “General Winfried Scott” (p. 211)—blight the narrative. And Blackhawk cannot resist pausing at regular intervals to upbraid “historians” as he takes us from the Spanish borderlands to the Red Power Movement and a few short remarks about the challenges facing Native communities in the twenty-first century.

The early chapters cover well-trodden historiographical ground. European invaders slaughtered Native people across North America, while those who survived faced an even deadlier foe: epidemics. As Blackhawk correctly points out, the combination of violence (some of it explicitly genocidal) and disease reduced Indigenous populations by as much as 90 percent (p. 51).

All that violence and death shaped the trajectory of settler societies; it also reshaped Native politics and trade. The Iroquois Confederacy, for example, coalesced in the eastern Great Lakes during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee, skillfully engaged with seventeenth-century Europeans, acquiring firearms in exchange for furs and hides. As Blackhawk correctly points out, the combination of violence (some of it explicitly genocidal) and disease reduced Indigenous populations by as much as 90 percent (p. 51).

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When he gets to the Revolutionary period, Blackhawk takes us away from British North America’s seaports. He instead transports us into the Pennsylvania backcountry. Here he finds the
cause of the Revolutionary War: anti-Indian racism and the killing of Native people (p. 172). That violence was very real, but Blackhawk misses an opportunity to place Pennsylvania’s backcountry in the larger context of backcountry violence in Virginia (which he largely ignores) and throughout the Southeast. In fact, Blackhawk’s treatment of the Native South is wholly inadequate, and his claim that historians have not addressed the links between Native dispossession and the extension of slavery is patently false (p. 52).

After the war, Blackhawk observes, Americans built a republic with a colonial constitution guiding the actions of its citizens (p. 178). This is not an original insight, but it is an important one. For readers unfamiliar with Native histories, it will sharpen how they see the era of forced removals, land speculation, railroad construction, mining, and the allotment of Indian lands.

The latter third of the book contains some of the strongest analysis. Blackhawk narrates how political pressures shifted federal Indian policy away from reservations and toward the allotment of Indian lands during the 1870s and 1880s. Blackhawk also opens a window into the trauma experienced by Native children in boarding schools, and the economic struggles of tribal communities. Importantly, chapters 10 and 11 provide brief introductions to major court rulings on Native sovereignty, and account for the rise of new Indigenous institutions, such as the Society of American Indians and their campaign for Native Americans to become US citizens. These are rare glimpses into the words and thoughts of Native people.

In his review of *Indigenous Continent*, Blackhawk suggests that Hämäläinen reinforced stereotypes and largely failed to shed new light on Native history. In *The Rediscovery of America*, Blackhawk aims to rectify that. He insists that the burden of telling more inclusive histories falls on Native people (p. 3). It is true that we need more Native voices analyzing the past, but storytelling shouldn’t be confused with xenophobia. No one person (irrespective of their place of birth), or group of people, owns the past. History is a mediated series of narratives to which we all must contribute. If *The Rediscovery of America* proves anything, it is the urgency with which we need multivalent histories that are told from diverse perspectives using a range of sources.
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