Beyond the New Indian History: Recent Trends in the Historiography on the Native Peoples of North America

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Abstract
Since its emergence over thirty years ago, the New Indian history has had a tremendous impact on studies of Native peoples in North America. Nonetheless, in crucial ways and for various reasons, scholarship on American Indians often remains isolated from larger currents of North American history. Just over the last decade, a handful of works have built on the foundations of the New Indian history and more consciously put American Indians into wide ranging conversations about North American culture and society. It is this current wave of scholarship that holds the most promise for moving the study of American Indians beyond the New Indian history and into an even more fruitful period where the connections between the experiences of American Indians and those of other North Americans draw increasing interest and examination.

It has now been thirty years since the emergence of the New Indian history. Grounded in the rise of social history, the growing interest in race and ethnicity, and the dramatic resurgence of Native people into the national spotlight, the New Indian history marked the first time that historians began taking American Indians seriously. The studies of Indian wars and United States-Indian relations that had up to then constituted written Indian history — and which cast Native people as savages, noble or otherwise, swept aside by the forces of Euro-American progress — were joined by works that sought Indian perspectives, stressed Indian agency, and took a critical view of U.S. colonialism. Perhaps most importantly, the New Indian history legitimated the study of Native peoples within the historical profession by arguing that without considering American Indians, one could not understand the development of North America.¹ The energy that drove this movement was palpable, especially at such annual conferences as the American Society for Ethnohistory (ASE) and the Western History Association (WHA), the New Indian history’s most fertile venues. When prodded, a few seasoned scholars might even recount how the work of the meetings often spilled, at times raucously, into the host cities’ bars and hotel rooms. Altogether, it seemed a movement fit for a generation raised in an atmosphere of social protest.
and the flaunting of convention that was eager to shake up the seemingly torpid halls of academia.

Decades later, the New Indian History, like so much produced by the baby boom generation, has in many ways become part of the establishment. Its imprint can be seen throughout academia, where subsequent generations of scholars have joined their predecessors in creating an infrastructure for studying American Indians. Several major history departments now train graduate students in the field, have a practitioner of Indian history within their ranks, and offer popular undergraduate courses that explore Native peoples’ experiences. The outpouring of scholarly articles, anthologies, and monographs on Indian history has reached new volumes, with major academic presses and scholarly journals dedicating considerable resources to producing and marketing scholarship on Indian people. Annually, meetings such as the ASE and the WHA persist in bringing together scholars studying Native America. While still underrepresented, Indian-themed panels appear at the profession’s most prestigious forums, such as the American Historical Association, the American Studies Association, and the Organization of American Historians. And new venues and institutional resources continue to be created for American Indian history. The American Indian Studies Consortium (AISC) of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), for instance, was established in 2001. Directed by the staff of the D’Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History at the Newberry Library in Chicago (another important site of the New Indian history), the AISC offers workshops, conferences, seminars, and fellowships to graduate students and faculty from the CIC’s twelve member universities. All of these developments over the past thirty years are encouraging and suggest a bright future for any scholar in or entering the field of American Indian history.

Yet, despite its elevated profile, in crucial ways scholarship on American Indians has remained isolated from larger currents of North American history. This is by no means a new concern. Daniel Richter, an early practitioner of the New Indian history, over ten years ago wrote that there remained a central problem of American Indian history finding ways to reach broader circles of scholarship. Conveying the darkest sentiments of his colleagues, Richter offered the possibility that the “perspectives on native peoples and their relations with European colonizers developed since the 1970s belong only to a tiny sect within the already small scholarly priesthood of early Americanists” (380). Actually, early American history, the area on which Richter focused, is where the New Indian history has made the strongest impression, at least in terms of complicating historical narratives and working its way into the consciousness of non-specialists. As someone who attended graduate school in the early 2000s, I can attest that the seminars I and many of my colleagues in other programs took on the historiography of early America not only began with groundbreaking scholarship on American Indian history (especially Richard White’s The Middle Ground), but also included other works in which Native peoples are integrated into
larger narratives (for instance, Daniel H. Usner’s *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*). When the study of North American historiography shifted to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, American Indians disappeared from our reading lists altogether. For American historians in-training, the message seemed to be that after 1800, American Indians ceased to be central to the development of North America, and their experiences did little to inform the major currents defining American society. So while it could be argued that Richter’s assessments have been tempered by another decade of historical thinking, they continue to resonate considerably when applied to the North American historiography over the past two centuries.

What accounts then for the enduring limits of the New Indian history, despite its long rein and the concern for its influence? Part of the problem of American Indian history has to do with the cultural baggage that scholars bring with them into academia. Alexandra Harmon speaks to this point in a recent article looking at the debates over individual land ownership and the “civilization” of Indian tribes. Focusing on Gilded Age Oklahoma, Harmon notes the existence of “a broad bilateral and intercultural discourse about economic culture, political economy, and race” (107) carried on by non-Indians and tribal entrepreneurs. In particular, Harmon finds that some tribal members welcomed the ability to amass large, southern gentry-styled estates and took up their pens to muse widely in public forums on such issues as the class system, economic growth, land distribution, tribal prosperity, private property, and the nature of man, showing the considerable influence of Euro-American norms and values. This conversation has been overlooked, Harmon contends, because of the tendency by intellectual and Gilded Age historians to associate economic individualism as antithetical to Native people. Such assumptions follow from popular ideas deeply imbedded in American culture and society that cast American Indians as exotic “others” locked in a cultural stasis, making them inherently different from the colonists, immigrants, and Americans with whom they interacted. Burdened by such cultural stereotypes, historians have been discouraged from seeing the likenesses between American Indian and non-Indians that would integrate American Indian experience into larger studies of North America.⁴

While I find especially convincing Harmon’s discussion about the persistence of cultural stereotypes and their affects upon the writing (or not writing) of Native history, I would offer that there is at least one more, related factor contributing to American Indian history’s insularity, or its failure to reach wider circles of scholarship. Furthermore, within this aspect of the problem also lies at least one of the keys to narrowing the gap between American Indian and North American history. To step back a bit, when considering the qualified successes of the New Indian history – specifically, its impact on the historiography of early America – an important point to remember is that historians of early America only began taking American Indians seriously when historians of American Indians began producing

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scholarship that put Indian people at the center of broadly conceived narratives about North American culture and society. In other words, to put things simply, it is first up to American Indian historians to show North American historians why Native people matter. While the last three decades have seen considerable progress on this front in regard to early American history, there has been noticeably less for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Exactly why American Indian historians themselves have been so slow to connect the history of Native peoples to larger trends in ways that might draw the attention of other scholars is a question intrinsically tied to Harmon and Richter’s observations and one that I will return to in the conclusion. Against a larger pattern of parochialism, however, I also find encouraging signs that some American Indian historians are in fact quite conscious about making connections to broader circles of scholarship. Over the last decade, a handful of works have built on the foundations of the New Indian history by continuing to put American Indians into wide ranging conversations about North American culture and society. Importantly, these studies are no longer limited to the early American period, but have increasingly addressed the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well. Considering how long it took the first generation of New Indian historians to impact broader notions of American history, it is worth staying tuned to see the effects of this more recent work. To be sure, it is this current wave of scholarship that holds the most promise for moving the study of American Indians beyond the New Indian history and into an even more fruitful period where the connections between the experiences of American Indians and those of other Americans draw increasing interest and examination.

Having led the way into the New Indian history, studies of early America continue to offer new understandings of Native peoples and their relationships with non-Indians, while also contributing to broader conversations about the development of North American culture and society. A particularly good example is James Brooks’s 2002 study, Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands. In one sense, Brooks does for the Southwest borderlands what Gary Nash’s Red, White, and Black and Richard White’s The Middle Ground did in earlier decades for the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes regions, respectively, showing that Native people played crucial roles throughout the colonial history of the area. Far from becoming simple victims to European expansion, Indians negotiated shifting sets of relationships among different tribes and European arrivals, vying for power and advantage and in the process contributing to the creation of complex societies and cultures. Thus, like Nash and White’s important works, Captives and Cousins stands as a new history of early America. Its examination of Indian societies and their interactions with each other and European arrivals has the potential to change the way historians of the American Southwest specifically and North America more generally think about the development of the region and the continent.
At the same time, *Captives and Cousins* makes a considerable contribution to American Indian history by focusing on Indian slavery, one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of Native American experience. Brooks examines the institution’s origins, roles, variations, shifts over time, and impacts upon the different societies in which it operated, arguing that rituals of violence and exchange were central to the relationships between the Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, Navajo, Ute, and Spanish people in the Southwestern Borderlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Women and children became both the objects of trade and captives most often taken in warfare, who were forced into roles that were imbedded within larger secular and sacred systems revolving around issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, kinship, honor, and economics. While this slave system had corrosive effects on Indian and colonial societies, Brooks contends that it also provided Indian groups with social stability, economic vitality, and cultural flexibility. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that this system unraveled, as the Southwest was incorporated into larger capitalist and nationalist systems promoted by the Spanish, Mexicans, and finally the Americans, whose anti-slavery campaigns ultimately brought the centuries-old practice of slavery in the Southwest to an end. Brooks’s deft treatment makes *Captives and Cousins* the new starting point for scholars studying Indian slavery and will surely inspire work in other regions.

While *Captives and Cousins* is notable for using a paradigm established by earlier New Indian Historians to break new ground, Jeffrey Ostler’s *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* offers a dramatic reinterpretation of terrain that has been heavily trod. Moreover, *Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism* brings considerable theoretical sophistication to the study of American Indian history, thereby inserting Native people into a comparative project traversing a wide range of academic fields and specializations. In this meticulously crafted work, Ostler takes the principles of the New Indian history to remarkable heights, by constantly interrogating Indian motivations and perspectives, vividly recounting reservations conditions and experiences, and creatively using a variety of sources that range from government documents to linguistic analysis (and which are accessible to the reader through exacting footnotes). Perhaps no other group of Native Americans has received as much public and scholarly attention as the Plains Sioux, yet time and again throughout the book Ostler convincingly dispels earlier interpretations and provides bold new understandings of the most well-known episodes in Native American history. On the killing of Crazy Horse, for instance, Ostler contends that earlier historians have focused too much on the war leader’s personality, without examining the larger context of U.S. colonial policy that helped facilitate the events leading to his death. Similarly, the book’s final chapters provide new ways of thinking about the rise of the Ghost Dance among the Lakota and the 1890 massacre of Indians at Wounded Knee, topics that have been recounted often yet have failed to elicit this type of complex analysis.
Even as it is grounded in the tenets of New Indian history, Ostler offers the field of American Indian history a corrective, arguing that the emphasis in recent years on historical agency has too often neglected questions of power, ideology, and the state, thus minimizing the “vast imbalance of power between Native peoples and Europeans” (5). Ostler thus seeks a more complex understanding of the relationships between colonial power and subaltern agency in American Indian experience. Drawing upon the work of scholars in subaltern studies, Ostler argues that U.S. expansion in the nineteenth century involved both imperialism and colonialism “insofar as it entailed the conquest of and eventual rule over Native people” (3), but that Native people also resisted, contested, and adapted to a colonial regime. In the end, Ostler shows both how Sioux individuals made important choices and how those choices were considerably constrained, reminding us that the Plains Sioux are still here but also that “survival is not the same as freedom” (5). By contextualizing the analysis in this theoretical framework, Ostler joins a wide-ranging, cross-field, and interdisciplinary conversation. This is something American Indian historians have more often than not failed to attempt, let alone with such success.6

Other recent works are also notable for both enriching American Indian history and bringing Native people into larger discussions, by similarly taking analytical tools and insights from many fields and disciplines. Tiya Miles’s path-breaking book on African slavery among the Cherokee, Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom,7 is especially important for its potential to influence American Indian, African American, and nineteenth-century historiography. Combining “the arc of Cherokee history” during the era of colonization by the United States with “the history of black slaves in Native America” (5–6), Ties that Bind highlights the central roles played in the Cherokee tribe by people of African descent. Working without abundant sources, Miles nevertheless uses key historical documents, literature, and a good deal of careful extrapolation to tell the story of the Shoeboots household, an Afro-Cherokee family composed of a Cherokee warrior-turned-farmer, his African slave and eventual partner, and their children and grandchildren. Taking the Shoeboots through many of the major events of nineteenth-century Cherokee and United States history, Miles interrogates the relationships between black slavery and Cherokee kinship norms, then black emancipation and Cherokee sovereignty, using wider discussions about colonialism, slavery, race, nation, and citizenship to ground the analysis. The result is by far the most insightful and provocative portrait of the intricate relationships between African slaves and American Indians in the nineteenth-century American South.

Studies of American Indians in the twentieth century have formed one of the field’s growth areas over the last decade, but have also been among the most insular and least contextualized within wider circles of scholarship. A welcome exception to this pattern has been the emergence of work on American Indian wage labor, the most broadly conceived of which is Colleen
O’Neill’s *Working the Navajo Way: Labor and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Focusing on the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, when Navajos increasingly became dependent on wage work as a component of household income, O’Neill examines “how Navajo cultural practices and values influenced [and were in turn shaped by] what it meant to work for wages or to produce commodities for the capitalist marketplace” (3). While several American Indian historians have similarly sought to understand the ways in which Native people engaged capitalism in relation to their own cultural frameworks, O’Neill is the first to connect this project to the work of twentieth-century labor historians. Beginning with gender scholars who have sought to relocate theories of class formation from the “shop floor,” O’Neill argues that Navajos understood their identities as workers through the lens of a kinship system tied to the household and the community. By “defining the parameters of class in household terms” (10), O’Neill is able to show how gendered expectations and cultural responsibilities become central to the development of economic relationships. Moreover, in this formulation wage work becomes one facet of a larger system of “making a living” that also includes domestic production for the market, sheep herding, domestic chores, and raising children. Perhaps most importantly, by elaborating on the ways that Navajos negotiated their engagement with wage work, O’Neill moves twentieth-century American Indians to the center of United States history, “not only as one of the groups defeated in an epic drama but as significant actors who shaped the regional dynamics of U.S. economic development . . . [by largely defining] the terms of local economic conditions” (5).

Another trend towards cross-fertilization within American Indian history shows the influence of U.S. cultural history and cultural studies. Paige Raibmon’s *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast,* thinks carefully about the ways that notions about Indian authenticity have both functioned and been negotiated by Native and non-Native people. Focusing on three cases studies – the experiences of Kwakwaka’wakw performers at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, migrant work in the Puget Sound hop fields during the late nineteenth century, and a 1906 legal case concerning Native people’s access to education in Sitka, Alaska – Raibmon investigates how non-Native ideas of authenticity worked to limit Native “claims to resources, land, and sovereignty,” while Native people “utilized those same definitions to access the social, political, and economic means necessary for survival under colonialism” (3). A similar political consciousness about the definition of Indian is at the center of Nancy Shoemaker’s *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America.* Shoemaker argues that eighteenth-century Native people and Europeans had considerable “cultures in common,” but that through contact worked to create new identities “that exaggerated the contrasts between them while ignoring what they had in common” (3). Both works seem indebted to Alexandra Harmon’s *Indians in the Making*.
which earlier brought interdisciplinary developments on the social construction of racial identities to the study of Native peoples.

Philip J. Deloria’s *Indians in Unexpected Places* 12 also merges American Indian history with cultural studies, but through a loosely related set of essays that span the twentieth century. Returning to some of the concerns discussed in *Playing Indian*, 13 a previous work, Deloria, like Raibmon, seeks to understand the expectations placed on American Indians by the larger society, especially those that have limited Native people to narrowly defined cultural stereotypes rooted in notions of the “primitive” and “anti-modern.” *Indians in Unexpected Places* is especially concerned, however, with the ways that Native people upset and complicated those ideas by “[engaging] the same forces of modernization that were making non-Indians reevaluate their own expectations of themselves and their society” (6). Deloria finds Indians working as actors, driving cars, engaging in athletics, and performing as musicians, thereby “[embracing] a different story about themselves than we are accustomed to hearing” (6). These narratives are particularly relevant today, Deloria contends, because of the persistence of “anti-modern” expectations in relation to Indian lives and their effects upon economic, political, and legal structures, which Native people continue to negotiate.

A final encouraging sign of American Indian history’s maturation and its growing influence is Colin G. Calloway’s *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark*, which serves as both a tome to synthesize a generation of work and a bold, reorienting perspective on a major historical field. 14 Calloway notes that many histories of the American West begin with Lewis and Clark’s expedition, when in fact the “new lands” Lewis and Clark explored were very old. “Lewis and Clark did not bring the West into U.S. history,” Calloway writes, “they brought the United States into western history” (2). Rather than seeing the American West as a backdrop for a national narrative, Calloway understands the region as a series of Indian homelands bordered by shifting frontiers, with each homeland the center of a world constantly working to define its place and adapt to outside influences and pressures. Probing the archeological record and ethnographic sources as well as more traditional written documents, *One Vast Winter Count* goes back twenty thousand years, then moves forward through the development of complex civilizations, encounters with Europeans, rebellions against colonial rule, the spread of horses, participation in trade and empire, and the imperial wars for control of North America. For teachers of Indian history in particular, *One Vast Winter Count* is a boon, providing tremendous amounts of lecture material. At the same time, it forces scholars to re-center their understandings of American Western history by taking an Indian perspective, seeing the West not as “a land of empty spaces with a short history [but as] a vast winter count, where many people etched their histories continuously from times beyond memory” (21). This Indian-centered approach to the history of the North American West marks

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One Vast Winter Count as a major milestone in the effort to position American Indian history within wider notions of historical development.

It can now be said with some assurance that many of the fears expressed by Daniel Richter in the early 1990s have proven overstated, especially that “the scholarship on the Indian peoples of early America may be running out of fuel” (379). Indeed, as the studies featured in this essay illustrate, American Indian historians have been hard at work over the past decade, building on the foundation put down by New Indian historians. Like much of the New Indian history, the best of this scholarship combines the creative use of sources, ethnographic perspectives (including Native voices), meticulous analysis, theoretical sophistication, and an active engagement with ongoing and wide-ranging conversations in ways that enhance the study of Native peoples, while also encouraging scholars in other fields and disciplines to think in more careful and creative ways about American Indians. Taking the past three decades of scholarship on Native peoples into account and observing the current scene, there still seems to be a kind of palpable energy that makes it an exciting time to be a historian of Native America.

As in past years, however, the field’s impact on broader circles of scholarship will almost certainly continue to depend upon American Indian historians making those first, crucial linkages. When discussing the notions of cultural difference that have often prevented the merging of Indian and non-Indian history, Alexandra Harmon conveys a sense of being disappointed with historians in general, but assigns particular culpability to some American Indian historians themselves, who have suggested that studying American Indians requires “different ways of knowing” and thus certain tools and strategies available only to specialists. This influence on the writing of American Indian history, I would argue, has combined, ironically, with the markers of the field’s success over the past thirty years, to produce a large amount of scholarship that is both satisfied with and validated for being insular.

More specifically, the institutional structures for American Indian history that have been created since the rise of the New Indian history have had the unintended effect of nurturing a type of parochialism in American Indian history. Such a community for American Indian historians now exists that there is often little pressure for practitioners in the field to contextualize their work more broadly. Conferences, journals, institutes, and funding opportunities exist specifically for American Indian history, but rarely do they explicitly encourage the wider vision that would extend the influence of Native people’s history beyond their own boundaries. The solution, of course, is within these same institutional structures. Conference panels that include American Indian topics, such as those at the American Society for Ethnohistory or the Western History Association, should not simply be “about Indians,” but ought to define larger themes that are not limited to Native people. Published work on American Indians must similarly seek a wider audience. The types of fellowships and other support for graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and faculty in American Indian history should
target scholarship that envisions American Indian history broadly. Just on the strength of the best work in American Indian history, a decade from now the readings lists for graduate seminars could very well have considerably more titles on American Indians. A conscious push by American Indian historians to redefine the types of studies that are supported and validated within the field might considerably accelerate this process and thus move the study of Native peoples to a stage beyond the New Indian history.

Short Biography

Nick Rosenthal is Assistant Professor of History, Loyola Marymount University. His current project is “Re-imagining Indian Country: American Indians and Cities in Modern America.” This book-length study examines the twentieth-century migration of American Indian people to the cities of the United States, the experiences of urban American Indian life, and the development of urban American Indian communities. Citing the importance of urban areas to American Indian people, it argues for “re-imagining Indian Country” to include the cities of the United States.

Notes

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6 Notable exceptions include works that have connected Native peoples to world systems and dependency theory, such as White, *Roots of Dependency*; Melissa L. Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Brian C. Hosmer, *American Indians in the Marketplace: Persistence and Innovation Among the Menominees and Metlakatlans, 1870–1920* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).


15 Richter, “Whose Indian History?”

### Bibliography


