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Whose Indian History?

Daniel K. Richter

SCHOLARSHIP on the Indian peoples of early America may be running out of fuel. Perhaps that assertion seems strange in the context of this semicentennial symposium. The Institute, after all, published in the mid-1950s William Fenton's call for a marriage of history and anthropology in a new "ethnohistory" of native-European relations. Two decades later it issued Francis Jennings's paradigm-shattering *The Invasion of America* and Alfred Crosby's introduction to the scholarship showing that many millions of native North Americans died from European viral infections during the colonial period.¹ Such works promised to revolutionize early American historiography: comfortable assumptions about the peaceful transit of Western Civilization to the Howling Wilderness could, it seemed, no longer be supported in light of Jennings's iconoclasm and an appreciation of the demographic carnage that followed 1492. In the late 1970s, I joined a number of other now-not-so-young

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¹ Fenton, *American Indian and White Relations to 1830: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1957); Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1975); Crosby, "Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXX (1976), 289-299. Since Crosby's article appeared, controversy has flourished on the exact size of pre-European-contact North American populations; for a survey of the literature see John D. Daniels, "The Indian Population of North America in 1492," *ibid.*, XLIX (1992), 298-320. At the mid-range of current conjectures is Russell Thornton's estimate of a population of something over 7 million north of the Río Grande (over 5 million in what would become the United States) at the time of contact (*American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* [Norman, Okla., 1987], 32). Whatever their controversies over the baseline, most scholars continue to agree with Crosby that, once epidemics of imported diseases began in any given location, cumulative depopulation from successive waves of disease was on the order of 75-95%.

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scholars who hoped (in our more hubristic moments) to heed Fenton's call and build what Jennings labeled a new "history of how Euramericans and Amerindians shared in the creation of the society that became the United States of America."² As the eighties became the nineties and our articles turned into books, the Institute continued to play an important role. Under its imprint, three major monographs appeared that sought to refocus early American history through close examination of Indian experiences; several others issued from scholars with close ties to the Institute and its sponsoring agencies.³

By such measures, then, the field has never been healthier, and the Institute may justly take pride in its contributions. I fear, however, that the spate of publications at the turn of the decade heralds, not an exciting period of new departures, but the end of the line. The warning signs are many. Although the subfield some call ethnohistory and others the New Indian History continues to flourish on its own terms, laments proliferate about its scant impact on larger areas of scholarship, on high school and college textbooks, and on the popular mind. Reginald Horsman's early 1980s observation that "native American history has never quite thrown off the parochial air that dominated it when it was merely a subfield of an equally parochial frontier history" still seems to hold.⁴ Apparently, 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. Worse still, some charge, the sect has tried to seize title to an Indian past that

² James Axtell, "A North American Perspective for Colonial History," *History Teacher*, XII (1979), 549-562; Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies from Its Beginnings to the Lancaster Treaty of 1744* (New York, 1984), xv.

³ James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Cataubas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1989); Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1992); Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1992); Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York, 1985); Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1990); Michael N. McConnell, *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and Its Peoples, 1724-1774* (Lincoln, Neb., 1992).

⁴ Horsman, "Well-Trodden Paths and Fresh Byways: Recent Writing on Native American History," in Stanley I. Kutler and Stanley N. Katz, eds., "The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects," *Reviews in American History*, X, No. 4 (1982), 242; Frederick E. Hoxie, *The Indians Versus the Textbooks: Is There Any Way Out?* D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian Occasional Papers in Curriculum Series, No. 1 (Chicago, 1984); Axtell, "Europeans, Indians, and the Age of Discovery in American History Textbooks," *American Historical Review*, XCII (1987), 621-632; David E. Stannard, "The Invisible People of Early American History," *American Quarterly*, XXXIX (1987), 649-655; Alfonso Ortiz, "Indian/White Relations: A View from the Other Side of the 'Frontier,'" in Hoxie, ed., *Indians in American History: An Introduction* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1988), 1-16; Merrell, "Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLVI (1989), 96.

rightfully belongs only to native communities. I seek in this essay to examine some of these complaints and to propose some ways to recapture the promise that Indian history once held for rewriting the broader stories we tell ourselves about the North American past. In efforts to reconceptualize those stories, questions of ownership—of whose Indian history?—are crucial. For the way we shape historical narratives helps to determine what we mean by *we*.

To be fair, some insights from the New Indian History *have* escaped the membership of the American Society for Ethnohistory to become the common possession of larger audiences. On the textbook front, mindless disregard for the historical presence of native peoples is now rare: nearly all current United States history survey volumes feature a multicultural cast of characters, and they largely (although not entirely) abandon facile assertions about a Virgin Land scantily populated by savages and wild beasts. Among weightier scholarly syntheses, even such eurocentric exceptions as Bernard Bailyn's *The Peopling of British North America* and David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* illustrate the trend. In remarkably similar passages, each author admits his temporary failure (in Bailyn's words) to "involve to any significant extent . . . either of the two non-Caucasian peoples—the Native Americans and the Africans—whose histories are so vital a part of the story" and claims to have been (in Fischer's phrase) "collecting his thoughts and materials on this subject for many years" in anticipation of an "opportunity to set them forward in more detail" in a future volume.⁵

So the scholarly revising slowly proceeds. Yet outside the ethnohistorical sect the *re-visioning* has barely begun; the hoary "master narrative" of American history seems distressingly tenacious.⁶ Much scholarship remains trapped in what Vine Deloria, Jr., calls "the 'cameo' theory of history," which "takes a basic 'manifest destiny' white interpretation . . . and lovingly plugs a few feathers, woolly heads, and sombreros into the famous events" without really changing the story line.⁷ Accordingly, the cover blurb of a revised edition of one colonial American history text promises a tale of "the experiences of Indians, Blacks, women, and other ethnic minorities," and its contents include a substantial section on "Indians of the Americas." Yet a chapter on "European Backgrounds" precedes the native American material and begins with the words "The discovery of America." When students finally reach the section on Indians, they are taught inaccurately that typical "Eastern Woodland villages were

⁵ Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York, 1986), 20; Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, 1989), 807–808.

⁶ See Nathan Irvin Huggins, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth," in *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery*, reissued ed. (New York, 1990; orig. pub. 1977), xi–lvii, quotation on xiii.

⁷ Deloria, *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (New York, 1970), 39. See also Axtell, "Colonial America without the Indians: Counterfactual Reflections," *Journal of American History*, LXXIII (1986–1987), 981–982.

small, perhaps numbering only one hundred people" and told derisively that those villagers were "living in Stone Age conditions."⁸ Meanwhile, within more specialized circles of early American historiography, as James Merrell complains, "those studies published in recent years that *should* have included native Americans too often [have] neglected to do so, apparently because their authors had not read (or had not profited from reading) the scholarship on Indians."⁹

Distressing as the situation may be in the world of professional historiography, greater problems appear when we consider the scant impact of the New Indian History on white American culture as a whole. True, in 1992, even the most bumptious North American celebrations of the Columbian Quincentennial could not avoid a twinge of guilt, while the popular press and many museum exhibits displayed an understanding of the Columbian tragedy that would have been unimaginable—if not un-American—a generation earlier. By October 12 a somber tone was so prevalent in the United States that *Time* magazine proclaimed to its international readers that "the actual day passed almost unnoticed."¹⁰ Closer examination suggests, however, that popular and semipopular conceptualizations had moved quickly from an unquestioning celebration of European triumph to the equally unquestioning worship of native American innocence epitomized by the titles of such strongly selling books as Kirkpatrick Sale's reevaluation of Columbus, *The Conquest of Paradise*.¹¹

And, for all that, the Transit of Civilization across the Atlantic to a Virgin Land still remained deeply rooted in Euro-American popular consciousness, as illustrated by a map of "Columbus' Discovery of America" that a fast-food chain distributed to thousands of its young customers in the Quincentennial summer. Quite oblivious to the messages preached from museums and mainstream media, the map's outline of North America features a smiling buckskin-clad Indian standing by a cluster of tepees to welcome the explorer; inexplicably, South America is occupied by a very white tourist snoozing in a Brazilian hammock. The presumably educational quiz on the reverse side offers nothing about the Western Hemisphere or its natives except a twice-repeated statement that "North America blocked the way" from Europe to the riches of the East.¹²

⁸ Jerome R. Reich, *Colonial America*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1989; orig. pub. 1984), back cover, 1, 21.

⁹ Merrell, "Some Thoughts," 96.

¹⁰ *Time International*, CXL, no. 17 (Oct. 26, 1992), 20. Popular media attitudes toward the Quincentennial are perhaps best reflected in a Columbus Special Issue of *Newsweek* (Fall/Winter 1991), published in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit, "Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Exhibition." For an overview of how the museum and scholarly communities, with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, chose "to commemorate rather than celebrate the event," see Axtell, "Columbian Encounters: Beyond 1992," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLIX (1992), 335–360, quotation on 335.

¹¹ Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York, 1990).

¹² "Columbus' Discovery of America," distributed by Long John Silver's Inc., 1992.

Compounding the silent discouragements of a limited impact on broader historical scholarship and a minuscule effect on the culture as a whole, the predominantly white and male practitioners of the New Indian History now encounter challenges to their basic assumptions that would have been barely imaginable when the field began to flourish in the 1970s. Calvin Martin, for example, once touted ethnohistory as "a better way to write Indian history," but more recently he has rejected the usual vocabularies of historical and anthropological scholarship as intellectual tools for the recolonization of native communities. Indians, he argues, are "people of myth," not "people of history"; their sense of time is circular and ceremonially repetitive, rather than linear and evolutionary. Thus "we historians need to get out of history, as we know it, if we wish to write authentic histories of American Indians."¹³

Martin's assault from within the circles of professional historiography is echoed by some Native Studies specialists and many tribal leaders, who argue that Euro-American documents are so inevitably tainted by biases and falsehoods and that Western concepts of history are so invariably foreign to Indian culture, that almost nothing written by white academics—no matter how attuned they may be to cultural difference—can be trusted. Only Indians can truly understand Indian experiences, and native orally transmitted histories must take precedence over Euro-American documentation. "The American Indian has a highly developed oral tradition," writes N. Scott Momaday in a moderate statement of the position. "It is in the nature of oral tradition that it remains relatively constant; languages are slow to change for the reason that they represent a greater investment on the part of society." Such a "respect for words suggests an inherent morality in man's understanding and use of language." By contrast, in modern Western culture "writing produces a false security where our attitudes toward language are concerned. We take liberties with words; we become blind to their sacred aspect."¹⁴ For writers and propagandists less scrupulous than Momaday, such privileging of oral tradition (no matter how recent its evident origins) over documentation (no matter how carefully weighed on the scales of scholarship) provides a potent weapon. Professional historians who challenge such modern Indian myths as the idea that whites invented scalping or the theory that the Iroquois League provided the model for the United States Constitution can thus be charged with intellectual elitism at best and racism at worst.¹⁵

¹³ Martin, "Ethnohistory: A Better Way to Write Indian History," *Western Historical Quarterly*, IX (1978), 41–56; Martin, "An Introduction Aboard the *Fidèle*," and "Epilogue: Time and the American Indian," in Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York, 1987), 195, 15.

¹⁴ Momaday, "Personal Reflections," in *ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵ Axtell and William C. Sturtevant, "The Unkindest Cut, or Who Invented Scalping?" *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXVII (1980), 451–472. For assertions of Iroquois influence on the Constitution see Donald A. Grinde, Jr., *The Iroquois and the Founding of the American Nation* (San Francisco, 1977), Bruce E. Johansen, *Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois, and the Rationale for the American Revolution* (Ipswich, Mass., 1982), and Johansen, "Native American Societies and

Reinforcing these onslaughts against the form of Indian History that some of us had hoped would revolutionize early American studies is the scholarly and cultural zeitgeist traveling under the names of deconstruction, discourse theory, post-structuralism, and postmodernism. For literary specialists and their growing armies of disciples in the humanities and social sciences, the terms are not synonymous, but they share the assumption that all "texts"—novels, legal documents, letters, material artifacts, historical monographs—are essentially chains of "signifiers" (symbols) that bear no necessary relationship to any "signifieds" (objective realities). If a text connects to anything outside itself, the relationship is merely that of "intertextuality" with other texts in an ongoing "discourse." Meanings "encoded" by authors—if they exist at all—are not necessarily "decoded" by readers operating in their own distinct matrices of intertextuality. Perhaps even authors and readers do not exist apart from the texts that create them as "subjectivities."¹⁶ For students of native history, the implication seems obvious: documents that created white subjectivities cannot possibly tell us anything about Indian history. At best, as David Murray suggests, we can examine "a 'discourse of Indianness,' which is available to Indians writing in English, as well as to whites" and only shows each culture trying futilely to explain its "untouched and unknowable otherness" to the other.¹⁷

Most of us who write early American Indian history find all such criticisms of our basic enterprise easy to counter, at least on the surface. Certainly, Indian and European time perceptions differ, but anthropological concepts (despite Martin's characterization of them as yet another species of imperialism) provide tools for dealing with such disparities. More important, as historian Mary Young points out, postulations of any single, unchanging "Indian" concept of time are even grosser oversimplifications than the most ham-handed efforts to stuff native peoples into European chronologies.¹⁸ No one who has read, for instance, the reams of

the Evolution of Democracy in America, 1600–1800," *Ethnohistory*, XXXVII (1990), 279–290. For refutations see Elisabeth Tooker, "The United States Constitution and the Iroquois League," *ibid.*, XXXV (1988), 305–336, and Tooker, "Rejoinder to Johansen," *ibid.*, XXXVII (1990), 291–297.

¹⁶ A brief introduction to the dense and complex theories undergirding these movements is Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Post-modernism* (Athens, Ga., 1989). On the implications for history and American studies see David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *AHR*, XCIV (1989), 581–609; David Hollinger, "The Return of the Prodigal: The Persistence of Historical Knowing," *ibid.*, 610–621; George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies," *Am. Q.*, XLII (1990), 615–636; and Steven Watts, "The Idiocy of American Studies: Poststructuralism, Language, and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment," *ibid.*, XLIII (1991), 625–660.

¹⁷ Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing, and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), 2.

¹⁸ Young, "Pagans, Converts, and Backsliders, All: A Secular View of the

treaty minutes in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Iroquois orators recounted their strongly periodized (and frequently revised) stories of the evolution of the Covenant Chain alliance with the English could conclude that these Indians, at least, lacked concepts of historical change and progress. The native orators who defiantly lectured Euro-Americans in such speeches would be surprised to learn that they had “lost faith (more or less) in that mythic commitment” Martin finds central to their culture and that, “in apostatizing, they fell into history and history’s offspring, ‘progress.’”¹⁹

The same recorded Iroquois stories suggest both the strengths and the weaknesses of Indian oral traditions as historical sources. Native communities, as Momaday reminds us, were and substantially remain oral cultures in which the spoken word carries a significance largely lost in literate and postliterate Euro-America. Close readings of native narratives about the past thus reveal aspects of culture and worldview unavailable elsewhere, as do the ways in which the tellers changed the tales to fit new circumstances. The permutations, however, demonstrate that oral traditions must be treated with as much care as any other form of evidence. As one student of oral history notes, claims for the unchanging truth of the spoken word ignore a fundamental distinction between forms of communication: “Whereas with written genres the setting in which one reads a text is often irrelevant to its interpretation, in oral genres the occasion of performance is clearly important and may be definitive of the audience’s expectation.” As a result, each retelling of an oral tradition must differ from the last, for the knowledge communicated is a social product of interactions among the speaker, the audience, and the memories of each. In such a context, oral genres require unfeigned belief in the immutability of the message in the same way that written scholarly genres require implicit confidence in the accuracy of footnotes—as a validation of the historian’s authority to interpret the past. In neither case should the assertion of infallibility be taken at face value.²⁰

Thus oral traditions may be “slow to change,” yet they do evolve, as all living social forms must if they are to speak to contemporary needs. Moreover, readings of traditional stories by native peoples are not necessarily superior to those crafted by others. The related notion that non-Indians have no business writing native history would be beneath contempt were it not part of a much broader perversion (and, more often, deliberate misrepresentation by conservative critics) of the goals of mul-

Metaphysics of Indian-White Relations,” in Martin, ed., *American Indian and History*, 75–83.

¹⁹ Jennings, “The Constitutional Evolution of the Covenant Chain,” *American Philosophical Society, Proceedings*, CXV (1971), 88–96; Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 87–89, 93–95, 140–142, 277–279; Martin, “Epilogue,” in Martin, ed., *American Indian and History*, 197.

²⁰ Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992), 51. See also Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1977), 18–22, 53–60.

ticulturalism in the late twentieth-century United States. Certainly, Indians should be writing and teaching their own histories from their own perspectives, and, certainly, white scholars have for too long comfortably presumed to do the job for them. But Alexis de Tocqueville long ago proved to Euro-Americans that outsiders can discern crucial aspects of a culture that are invisible to insiders.²¹

Postmodernist critiques also need not be as devastating as they at first appear. Of course, texts do not objectively mirror "reality"; of course, documents tell us more about their authors than about their subjects; of course, the meaning a text constructs for its author is not transmitted intact to modern readers; of course, signifiers have an annoying habit of becoming dissociated from their signifieds. But such cautions simply drive home in new, and sometimes more effective, ways lessons that any good historian already knows: read skeptically; question sources; verify assertions; understand the assumptions of the past and those of your own generation and class; and, even then, remember that all historical writing is interpretive rather than objective—that the best you can hope for is what Lawrence Stone calls "partial, imperfect, provisional truth."²² For to go all the way with the postmodernists is to reject the *entire* historical enterprise—not just Indian history—as a hopeless discourse of meaningless texts talking to meaningless texts; no document (or oral tradition) could ever provide useful evidence about the world outside itself. The "crisis of representation" some critics lament would then go far beyond Indian history to include all attempts to construct stories of the past.²³

Still, such arguments only reach the converted, and the insights of the New Indian History continue to belong primarily to the ethnohistorical sect. We return, then, to the central problem of finding a way to reach broader circles of scholarship and public opinion. The gaps between devotees of one or another scholarly paradigm or specialty, between professional scholars and popular readers, and between ethnic agendas (of either white academics or Indian activists) remain formidable. Yet each chasm, it seems to me, is a branch of larger canyon, because each concerns the role of myth in culture and history. For the white general public, for Indian activists, and even (the postmodernists rightly note) for professional specialists in early American native history, the contested ground is the mythic terrain of the master narrative that explains who a people are, where they have been, and what they hope to be.²⁴ Has the American

²¹ Susan Hegeman, "Native American 'Texts' and the Problem of Authenticity," *Am. Q.*, XLI (1989), 265–283; Hegeman, "History, Ethnography, Myth: Some Notes on the 'Indian-Centered' Narrative," *Social Text*, No. 23 (Fall/Winter 1989), 144–160.

²² Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529–1642* (New York, 1972), 26. The best discussion of these lessons remains E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* 2d ed. (London, 1987).

²³ Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn," 616–617; Hollinger, "Return of the Prodigal," 611; William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *JAH*, LXXVIII (1991–1992), 1347–1376.

²⁴ For a discussion of the role that myth has played in the formation of group

story been a democratic saga of immigrants who reaped the fruits of a Virgin Land or a tragic tale of the light-skinned few who profited from the miseries of the dark-skinned many? Are, for good or ill, Indians part of the epic at all? If so, are they models for democracy and ecological responsibility, reminders of our ancestral sins, or co-creators of the world in which we all live today? Can historical and anthropological scholars uncover aspects of the Indian past, or does the attempt merely perpetuate a bourgeois empiricist delusion that must be abandoned in favor of a native mythic worldview?

If myth and its functions indeed shape the basic dilemma, the question cannot be reduced simply to whether or not myth should play any role in our understandings of the past. What Charles A. Beard labeled “that noble dream” of historical objectivity has long since been shattered.²⁵ Instead, the questions must center on what *kinds* of roles myth and mythic narratives play in our historical stories and how those roles may be turned to constructive, socially inclusive purposes. As a starting point, it may be useful to distinguish between two kinds of narratives of the past—which we may name “emic history” and “etic history”—and to explore the role of myth in each.

In anthropological usage, emic analysis seeks to understand phenomena from an insider’s point of view, etic analysis from an outsider’s perspective. As one pre-postmodernist scholar puts it, in an emic mode “observers employ concepts and distinctions meaningful and appropriate to the participants.” In an etic mode, “they employ concepts and distinctions meaningful and appropriate to the observers,” even if those concepts and distinctions make little sense to the insiders.²⁶ In historical narratives, emic history may be termed a story written by and for cultural insiders; it constructs a usable, often quite mythic, sense of a people’s own past as a source of personal and communal identity. Emic narratives are epitomized

identity among professional historians see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 3–7.

²⁵ Beard, “That Noble Dream,” *AHR*, XLI (1935–1936), 74–87; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 415–629.

²⁶ Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York, 1980 [1979]), 29–45, quotations on 31–32. According to Harris, the emic-etic distinction was first defined in Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (The Hague, 1967). Three points should be stressed. First, *emic* is not a synonym for *subjective*, nor is *etic* another word for *objective*. The distinction is between *two* subjective points of view, not between fiction and truth. Second, to adopt an emic perspective is not necessarily to *be* an insider; it is only to employ the conceptual categories *used* by insiders. Third, most anthropologists who use the terms stress that scholars must not only distinguish between the emic and the etic but move between the two. Neither perspective can alone convey an adequate understanding of cultural phenomena. For a discussion of recent controversies surrounding these terms and their relevance for historical scholarship see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 548–555.

by epics of a Virgin Land or of a native people whose experience cannot be fit into bourgeois concepts of evolutionary progress. Etic history, by contrast, is written from an outsider's point of view, although one that should make no claims to a monopoly on objective truth. Etic history employs scholar's constructs almost necessarily at odds with the culture's mythological definition of itself and often is determined to expose the tensions that myth obscures. Thus Martin and his allies are correct to point out that the categories used by most professional historians are alien to many native cultures. But such concepts are also foreign to the self-conceptions of past Euro-American societies. To take one example, both women and men in seventeenth-century New England would find outlandish—if not devilish—a twentieth-century feminist analysis of the power relationships that shaped witchcraft beliefs and accusations in their society. Yet in a book such as Carol Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, etic categories can reveal patterns that make sense of the situation in ways unavailable to the participants.²⁷

Professional historians almost by definition adopt an etic stance. The tendency stems only partly from our flirtation with social science, our occasional delusions of objectivity, and, for many of us, our oppositional perspective on the dominant culture. Our eticism more profoundly grows from our view of ourselves as educators, as teachers whose job it is, in the classroom and through the written word, to challenge people to stand outside their comfortable, emic assumptions and to learn unpleasant lessons from their study of the past. I suspect that I am not the only professor who cringes at the relentless emicism of students whose essays begin "During the Revolution, we were fighting for our liberties" and who responds by scrawling "Were *you* there?" in the margin. The historian's job, most of us believe, is not to instill values of patriotism or ethnic solidarity or to speak "for" any group, whether dominant or subordinated. Instead, it is to be a *critic* of culture, who examines the past rather than celebrates it, who hopes to illuminate conditions of the present by casting a harsh light on previous experience. An etic stance toward the past sets the professional historian apart from the antiquarian, the politician, the lawyer, the novelist, or the priest of the civil religion. Neither flag-waving Columbus worship nor paeans to the superiority of Indian ways of perceiving the world meet our definitions of what the study of history is all about. "The function of the historian," writes E. H. Carr, "is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present."²⁸

That link to the present dictates, however, that scholarly eticism must return to an emic purpose. The point is doubly relevant for historians of North America teaching and writing in the United States because of the ways our students and readers almost inevitably decode our messages and

²⁷ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987).

²⁸ Carr, *What Is History?* 26.

integrate them into their own stories about the past. For them, history remains, as it should for us, a serious, essentially mythic business of defining group identity. "Our social existence depends on shared values, symbols and meanings . . ." William H. McNeill concludes. "The simple fact is that communities live by myths, of necessity. For only by acting *as if* the world made sense can society persist and individuals thrive."²⁹ Alas, that need for myth provides a key to Euro-American culture's attachment to a master narrative in which Indians play at best a cameo role. To call Western European Progress a tragedy for non-Western Europeans—as one must do when writing etic history—is to challenge white Americans' sense of who they are. The same can be said for scholarly critiques of some modern native interpretations of the Indian past. Neither audience is likely to listen to professional historians who attack old stories without offering new ones that address mythic needs. For, as William Cronon observes, "historical storytelling helps keep us morally engaged with the world by showing us how to care about it and its origins in ways we had not done before."³⁰

We require, then, new stories. The point is not, it should be obvious, to replace one set of fallacious metaphors with another that equally violates the canons of historical evidence. Nor is it to make Indians a "part of" a Euro-American narrative; that would merely perpetuate the cameo fallacy. Nor, equally, is it somehow to integrate the invaders' history into some mythic native paradigm of circular timelessness; that would simply reverse the error. Instead, the need is to construct a larger vision of both native and Euro-American experiences (and, indeed, of the experiences of all the peoples who have shaped North American society) that is inclusive and empowering, rather than imperialistic and dominating. For this sort of storytelling, it seems to me, professional historians' well-developed sense of the etic—and the skills of specialists in Indian history in particular—can make a vital contribution to constructing a new, and truly multicultural, emic sense of North American identity.

The existing literature already contains hints of the shape such a re-visioned story of the North American past might take. In the mid-1970s, Gary B. Nash's synthesis of early American history, *Red, White, and Black*, helped point the way. But in the less skillful hands of too many textbook authors, Nash's approach descends into cameo history in the absence of a set of unifying themes to connect, rather than separate, the experiences of diverse ethnic groups. Rather than empowering a new vision of multicultural diversity, then, multicultural history as often practiced reinforces ethnic separatism.³¹ A similar danger lurks in a further proliferation of

²⁹ McNeill, "Make Mine Myth," *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1981, A19; McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," in *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986), 322.

³⁰ Cronon, "A Place for Stories," 1375.

³¹ Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1974). The most cogent statement of this problem (although one that

specialized monographs—however important in their own right—on the experiences of one or another Indian people of early America; moreover, such studies remain open to deserved or undeserved charges of intellectual elitism, cultural imperialism, or naïve empiricism. The old master narrative of European progress and Indian retreat needs to be replaced, rather than simply mirrored, multiplied, or countered for various groups. As George Lipsitz observes in a recent survey of American popular culture, “socially created visions appear natural and inevitable unless we can tell stories that illustrate the possibility of overcoming unjust divisions.”³²

Two groups of broad themes, in particular, suggest plot outlines for such new kinds of narratives about the North American past. The first stresses, not the barriers that divided Indian and European Americans in the colonial period, but the cultural forms that evolved to foster communication between them. In this vein, James Axtell’s work on the often successful efforts of Indians and Europeans to “convert each other,” Daniel Usner’s analysis of the mixed culture briefly created by the diverse peoples of the lower Mississippi valley, and Richard White’s description of a “middle ground” of cross-cultural communication through shared misunderstandings that evolved in the Old Northwest provide fruitful insights.³³ Yet an exclusive stress on the arenas in which people from different cultures were able to work with, rather than against, each other runs the risk of obscuring the very real conflicts that must remain central to the tale. Clearly, in most times and places of early American history, Indians and Europeans failed to create a lasting middle ground.

Here, a second set of narrative lines offers promise through a stress on common processes, experiences, and phenomena that *all*, or nearly all, groups who struggled for survival and dominance in early America shared, albeit often in different ways. The most fully developed metaphor for a universal early American experience dwells in Merrell’s observation that Indians, as well as Africans and Europeans, confronted a “new world” of alien conditions.³⁴ A less poetic—and perhaps therefore less well articulated—story emerges from the intricate networks of brokerage and political alliance that tied together the many “little communities” of European, African, and native America. All seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans were members of small, face-to-face communities. As a result, all dealt with outsiders through layers of brokerage and negotiation—whether within their own ethnic groups (at the level of colony govern-

reaches very different conclusions from those presented here) is Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1991).

³² Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1990), 212.

³³ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, x; Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves*; White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991).

³⁴ Merrell, “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience,” *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLI (1984), 537–565.

ment, tribal structure, or emerging creole community of slaves) or with others (at the level of imperial officials, linguistic interpreters, or plantation overseers).³⁵ Yet another variety of shared experience lies in the progressive enmeshment of all of the peoples of North America in the world system of mercantile capitalism as producers of a diversity of foodstuffs and raw materials and as consumers of a similar array of British manufactures. Common economic forces shaped the lives of native fur traders and African slaves no less than of Boston merchants and back-country farmers. Through the colonial period, those forces increasingly united all the peoples of North America in a single transatlantic world that has not yet been adequately described.³⁶

The diverse forms of exploitation characteristic of that world suggest a final means of re-visioning early American history through common processes, a story line that avoids the dangers of both a too-rosy stress on consensus and a too-abstract tale of economic forces. The English in North America, John M. Murrin concludes, were "beneficiaries of catastrophe."³⁷ Indeed, a web of disaster united, in profound and personal ways, the stories of *all* the continent's inhabitants: natives and Africans who died in the millions from disease and enslavement; Indians who embraced Christianity only to find Europeans unwilling to practice the virtues "their" savior preached; African Americans who escaped slavery only to

³⁵ Darrett B. Rutman, "Assessing the Little Communities of Early America," *ibid.*, XLIII (1986), 163-178; Richter, "Cultural Brokers and Intercultural Politics: New York-Iroquois Relations, 1664-1701," *JAH*, LXXV (1988), 40-67; Nancy L. Hagedorn, "A Friend to Go Between Them: The Interpreter as Cultural Broker during Anglo-Iroquois Councils," *Ethnohistory*, XXXV (1988), 60-80; Merrell, "Some Thoughts," 117-119.

³⁶ For suggestive work on this theme see Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 58-104; Denys Delâge, *Le pays renversé: Amérindiens et européens en Amérique du nord-est, 1600-1664* (Montreal, 1985); David B. Guldenzopf, "The Colonial Transformation of Mohawk Iroquois Society" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Albany, 1986); and Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1989). Consumption patterns, in particular, united North American peoples who seem otherwise to have possessed little in common. As T. H. Breen observes, "British imports provided white Americans with a common framework of experience," and "Staffordshire pottery might be seen as the Coca-Cola of the eighteenth century" ("An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America," 1690-1776," *Journal of British Studies*, XXV [1986], 496; see also James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* [Garden City, N. Y., 1977], and Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* [New York, 1990]). While Breen notes in passing that among the many complex routes by which "cottons from India and nails from England" found their way to American consumers was one "from New York to Albany and from there to the Iroquois" ("Empire of Goods," 490) and Shammas alludes to the interconnection between consumer demand for "tobacco, sugar products, and caffeine drinks" and the growth of slavery (*Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 2-3), neither author systematically explores the exchange networks that tied together 18th-century native, African, and European Americans.

³⁷ Murrin, "Beneficiaries of Catastrophe: The English Colonies in America," in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia, 1990), 3-23.

find new forms of unfreedom; European servants who never achieved anything like the American dream; women whose autonomy led to accusations of witchcraft; even property-owning white males whose cherished economic *independence* rested uneasily on the economic *dependence* of women, children, and servants.

Lipsitz's reading of native American author Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* provides guidance on how an etic analysis of shared catastrophe might reshape the emic history that tells us who we are. Silko's central character, a métis Laguna Pueblo named Tayo, returns badly scarred from his service in the United States military during World War II. Neither the Enlightenment rationalism he learned in school (etic history) nor the ceremonies of his native community (emic history) can relieve his intense depression and loss of self. "Only a medicine man outside his own tribe can lead him to the truth," says Lipsitz, "a truth which involves a critical stance toward both Indian myth and Anglo-European history." As Tayo concludes, "The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other." For Silko's character, the insight applies to a much broader community than his own, for "if the white people never looked beyond the lie, to see that theirs was a nation built on stolen land, then they would never be able to understand how they had been used . . . ; they would never know that they were still being manipulated by those who knew how to stir the ingredients together: white thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world."³⁸

It is not enough to stress the shared catastrophes that an etic perspective on early American history reveals; more victimology is the last thing our culture needs today. An emic history growing from such painful lessons must find some hope, some sense of shared identity. "He would never get well as long as he used words like 'we' and 'us,'" Silko's Tayo came to realize. "His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything."³⁹ This insight suggests that, for historians of colonial North America, a solution may lie in the ways in which various peoples struggled against the catastrophes that enmeshed them—as native communities preserved their cultures despite epidemic depopulation and economic domination, as African Americans maintained their humanity despite a system of slavery that sought to make them things, as Euro-American women found self-worth despite the physical perils of constant childbearing and societal attitudes that devalued their household work, as white males somehow

³⁸ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 220–223; Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, 1986; orig. pub. 1977), 191.

³⁹ Silko, *Ceremony*, 125–126.

articulated a discourse of universal rights that later generations of all backgrounds could turn upon their oppressors.⁴⁰

There is little merit in attempting to rank the catastrophes of early American history or to rate the successes of those who rose above them. But surely the experiences of native Americans provide a powerful model for re-visioning the broader story, because the ordeals of Indian peoples go to the core of the experiences of all those who encountered "new worlds" in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Since the mid-1970s, specialized scholarship has taught a few of us much about those ordeals; now we need to connect the lessons we have learned in meaningful ways to the catastrophes of other early Americans in an inclusive narrative. Such an approach may even help the cultural descendants of European males rise above mere guilt to discover the strands that entwine their heritages with those of other ethnic groups and provide a basis from which to construct a story of the North American past that belongs to us all.

⁴⁰ The second and third themes are conveyed strongly in Huggins, *Black Odyssey*, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, 1980).