
Book Section:
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How making space for Indigenous peoples changes history

Leila K. Blackbird and Caroline Dodds Pennock

> 'The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory, destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long, the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.'
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> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

LKB: For many, if not all, Indigenous peoples, there is no separation between the past and the present. It is held within traditional ways of knowing and belief that all time and all history are interconnected and co-existing, crucial to culture and well-being. We hold these connections to be sacred. The rupturing of those threads, which weave together the present and the past, and living generations to the ancestors, has been a violence beyond the initial acts of colonisation, enslavement, massacre, land theft, displacement, genocide, and treaty violations. Mythologised accounts of colonisation are still normal in the classroom, but even they fill far too few pages of our history books. Approaches to studying and teaching the history of the so-called 'New World' have often been inadequate, if not outright destructive. Yet, by making space for Indigenous peoples and perspectives in the present, we can change history into something more honest and dynamic, which also holds great promise for repair.

History is forged into a weapon in the crucible of politics. Carefully crafted versions of the past have far too often been deployed by policy makers and educators to reinforce the perspective of the coloniser and to create national myths. Unfortunately, this has also come to define the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. For Native Americans, this history is inescapable; it forms the legal frameworks of nation-states,

defines borders and citizenship, limits our political sovereignty, and even quantifies our blood. Colonial policies have been used for generations to forcibly reshape and supplant our traditional ways of knowing and being, to break our kinship bonds, and to control our very identities in order to maintain control over the land and its resources. Natives must learn from an early age to hold history on our shoulders, while simultaneously not allowing the weight of it to crush us. We must know, deeply, that we are not victims. We are survivors, culture-bearers, and thriving communities. We are still here. This is our land. And we belong to it, not it to us.

It is a creation of historical memory and literature, rather than one of fact, that Indigenous peoples are somehow gone or forever left behind in the past. To think we are unchanging relics creates no path for us to the future. But colonial rule was justified by this logic – that we were ‘primitives’, incapable of 'civility', modernity, or self-governance. That is the foundation of sand on which empires have been built and on which they have collapsed. Likewise, imperial histories are a version of the past that have been hollowed out and rendered incomplete. They are missing the faces, voices, and stories of the millions of Indigenous peoples who also lived and loved, who travelled and created, and who were warriors, poets, prophets, healers, diplomats, and intellectuals. Erasure is a form of violence that sustains a settler colonial present.

To view Indigenous peoples as real, living, and modern challenges that ongoing colonial reality. As scholars and students, simply shifting this perspective makes it possible to restore agency to Native actors in the past. But it also leads us to making space for living Native people who seek to repair connections across time and place and to mend the threads that

tie our ancestors to us and to our future generations. Only when Indigenous peoples are considered capable of having a future are we able to hope and dream it into being. Only by first recognising and honouring the gravity of the past can we then begin to make space for the possibility of reconciliation in the present. That is why we must invest in a history that is capable of centring the many vibrant Indigenous cultures, polities, and languages that continue today. It is a vital and necessary project, perhaps now more than ever, and it presents us with an opportunity for strategic collaboration. This piece is an exercise in doing precisely that. By retaining our unique voices and perspectives before joining in conclusion, we seek to provide example. Stories often live in many dimensions.

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CDP: In 1961, E.H. Carr called on historians to recognise the ways in which they stood between the past and the present: neither neutral custodians of a dry collection of facts, nor propagandists who used snippets of evidence to embroider their historical fictions. For Carr, history could and should reflect the concerns of one's age, but it must never be overwhelmed by them. As scholars entering the academy, we are taught to walk along this careful precipice: to recognise our biases in order to acknowledge them; to understand how the evidence we choose shapes our story. Yet even six decades after Carr's clarion cry against absolute objectivity, the model of a historian as impartial observer unfortunately lingers. That model also abruptly evokes an uncomfortable relationship of power and curiosity. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) wrote, 'research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary… it conjures up bad memories'. Scholars of Indigenous histories have to remember that Indigenous peoples' bodies, lives, and histories

have been the subject of scrutiny for centuries. The idea that a non-Native observer can somehow 'recover' these pasts for 'neutral' scrutiny reproduces a deeply problematic dynamic that has been at the heart of the relationship between the West and 'the rest' for centuries.

For a non-Native scholar working on Indigenous histories, this history is also inescapable, and it must inform my practice. History, Carr wrote, 'is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past'. This dialogue is critical, but I see it as a less abstract one than Carr, as a conversation that is not only between the historian and her 'texts' (be they alphabetic, visual, material, or oral) but which places between them an awareness that the evidence we study reflects a violent rupture for Indigenous peoples, who still flourish across the world today. As a historian of the Aztec (more properly the Mexica) world, I am used to working with sources which were created almost exclusively after the invasion of Mexico, using texts which were written by, with, or under the aegis of conquistadors, missionaries, enslavers and settlers. Few Mesoamerican texts survived the Spanish conflagration of the great pictographic archives, which were destroyed by missionary fervour in the first years after the conquest. Even later documents written by the Nahua – Nahuatl-speaking descendants of the Aztecs and their neighbours – are inevitably shaped, in part, by the colonial encounter: by violence, disjuncture, and destruction, as well as by adaptation, resistance, and syncretism.

As scholars, we learn to read 'against the grain', to look behind the obvious, and excavate for evidence beyond the façade, but we are not always able to 'read' Indigenous histories clearly through the cracks of preconception and assumption. Although it is now fairly

mainstream to claim that one works in an interdisciplinary way that we now call 'ethnohistory' – an inclusive approach which brings together different disciplines and sources, such as art history, archaeology, ecology, landscape, linguistics, and anthropology, to illuminate Native histories – the place of contemporary Indigenous communities has remained tenuous. Oral histories are often dismissed as 'anecdote' and Indigenous elders as 'storytellers', as if this were different from being historians. Rather, we must recognise alternative ways of doing, telling, and understanding the past, which may explicitly reject Western 'facts' in favour of traditional 'stories', simply because they matter more or contain different ways of knowing. As Susan Gillespie – who rejected relentless archival empiricism in favour of reading Aztec 'mythical histories' on their own terms – wrote: 'there are other "truths" to be found' there. Indigenous epistemologies are valid in their own right.

The study of Indigenous histories should be a work of collaboration and conversation, not just between the historian and her texts, but also with the people she finds there, and those who have come after. In attempting to recover the world of Tenochtitlan, for example, my work in many ways embraces the traditional methods of the cultural historian, but I do this always in the awareness that, although the age of the 'Aztecs' has passed, millions of people still speak Nahuatl, and more than a hundred other Indigenous languages, in Mexico today. Descendants of the Mexica, Zapotec, Mixtec, Tepanec, Olmec, Maya, and countless others live in every corner of the country. And although I cannot 'speak' to their ancestors in the way that one may still speak with a living Lakota, Apache, or Cree elder about their history, I can help to write a history which centres Indigenous voices and is written in the awareness that it matters to their descendants. When we stereotype Indigenous peoples of the past as vicious, bloodthirsty and brutal, we implicitly excuse the invasion of their lands, the

enslavement of their children, and the ongoing racism and oppression experienced by them across the Americas today. I cannot speak for them, but by carefully unpacking the texts, I can try to help them speak for themselves.

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LKB: As the old axiom states, history is written by the victor. To most Americans, then, history begins with colonisation. To them, it is not contact and connection but, rather, conquest that defines the modern nation. In the United States, the national origin story is steeped in 'Manifest Destiny', a philosophy by which Anglo-Protestant expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific and beyond is seen as having been justified, inevitable, and a God-given right. In Canada, competing British and French imperial interests and violence have equally shaped contemporary national realities. But historiography – most often tied to its nation of origin and, therefore, to its nationalism – cannot be entirely devoid of culturally constructed preconceptions or prejudices. This is at the heart of the lesson that Carr taught us. Nevertheless, some of the academy's most prized thinkers have upheld profound biases, even if they have believed their perspectives to be wholly objective. Empiricism is often naïveté.

European settlers and their descendants have learned to see themselves as the proud inheritors of the Western Enlightenment tradition, and it is upon this framework that the historical profession has been built. At the turn of the 20th century, the American Historical Association (AHA)'s Committee of Seven determined that national history education must be a political project, and future AHA president James Harvey Robinson began developing a

‘New History’ to shape the ‘scope and intent of historical study’. In 1916, Robinson and his colleagues established the importance of the subject in the emerging public-school curriculum, offering the U.S. Bureau of Education the promise of being able to create a proper citizenry through education. The profession then began espousing a lasting version of history that exalted ‘Western Civilisation’ in hopes of defending the world from the darkness of the ‘barbarism’ of the World War era. Ever since, secondary-school curricula have centred the ‘progressive evolution’ of the ‘Caucasian race’ and the Christian faith to global domination, from the ancient Greeks and Romans through ‘our shared European beginnings’ to the pilgrims and the pioneers who ‘discovered’ and ‘built’ America.

As an Indigenous historian in the American academy, I must constantly grapple with these deeply embedded prejudices. Raised in the Deep South, my childhood history textbooks told tales of ‘vanishing Indians’ and courageous frontiersmen, of ‘happy slaves’ and kind fatherly enslavers. In their pages, I could not find my truth or that of most of the people I knew and loved. This is exactly what inspired me to become a historian. However, it has also meant I have had to learn how to walk in two different worlds. Education itself has fractured Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge production, and institutions have long been part of the European ‘civilising’ project. For Native Americans, this is deeply bound with trauma. When my mother first learned of my intention to pursue higher education, she warned me not to forget that this system was not built for me; rather, it was expressly built to destroy people like me.

From the 1870s, while white children were being inculcated with the ‘civilising myth’, Native children were being forcibly removed from their homes, cultures, and communities and

placed in ‘Indian boarding schools’. The first of hundreds operated by either the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) or private religious groups, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was established by Brigadier General Richard Henry Pratt under the philosophy of ‘Kill the Indian, and Save the Man’. Pratt and those like him believed in what the Canadian Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, called the ‘final solution’ to ‘the Indian problem’: forcible assimilation to whiteness, or utter annihilation. Likewise, his government developed a policy of ‘aggressive assimilation’, claiming Aboriginal cultures were unable to adapt to modernity.

The parallel history of ‘residential schools’ in Canada, the last of which closed in 1996, has lately been at the centre of a national human-rights investigation. Through this investigation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) uncovered thousands of accounts of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children forbidden their languages and cultures, of rampant physical and sexual abuse, and of cruelty, starvation, and death. The findings are clear: the legacy of these schools is one of genocide. The consequences of this are still tangibly felt through poverty, disease, and despair; Indigenous peoples across the U.S. and Canada have the highest rates of suicide, incarceration, sexual assault, and death by homicide per capita than any other racial or ethnic group. Across the Americas, Indigenous people remain disadvantaged by every socioeconomic measure, such as employment, education, health, and wealth. But as Tanya Talaga (Anishinaabe) reminds us, ‘you are conditioned not to care, you are conditioned to indifference, and there is a violence to that indifference.’

Unfortunately, the United States currently has no vision for truth or for reconciliation, and many of the horrors of the past remain hidden from our history books. Only now in our living generations have Native Americans been able to begin to break this cycle of intergenerational trauma. Unlike the historians who have recently penned think-pieces denying the horrors of slavery and genocide in support of a more 'traditional' or 'patriotic' version of the past, to which they hope we return, I believe we should never locate our national identities within histories that glorify domination. Instead, we should take the time to carefully consider the 'dialogue between the present and the past' and then reflect upon the colonial roots of our shared consciousness. We must be willing and courageous enough to look into the proverbial abyss, to truly know ourselves. This is how we make space to honour those who remain. The truth is, neither coloniser nor colonised can heal through denial.

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CDP: As a British historian trained two decades ago at Oxford, I learned that sources matter, that how you choose them and use them shapes the histories you tell. I learned that those histories matter, and that they could be used and abused for political ends. The post-modernists had taught the academy there was no such thing as what Hayden White called a 'value-free history', that narratives were powerful and multiple, and that our interpretations were deeply embedded in our own context, as well as in those of our authors. Postcolonial historians and the work of the Subaltern Studies Group challenged the nostalgic fantasies of Britain's imperial past and, in the U.S., the New Philology transformed our understanding of Mesoamerica by focusing on the study of Indigenous languages. But, although we were

taught to try and recover unheard voices in our work, it was rarely suggested that those unheard voices might be those of our contemporaries. Or, crucially, that the stories we were telling might be part of an ongoing narrative of oppression.

Indigenous history was seen as the past, rather than the present. It was only when I looked outwards, beyond the academy, that I saw the people who were still living with this history. My work is rooted in the scholarship of people like the doyen of Nahuatl studies, Miguel León-Portilla, and his teacher Angél Garibay K. These men did remarkable work identifying and translating millions of words of historic Nahuatl. They believed that Aztec literature and philosophy should take their place in the canon of world civilisations – and they were right; translation and interpretation are vital tools in understanding the Indigenous past. But they remain part of a tradition of ethnology which focused on observation and translation, rather than on collaboration. León-Portilla's enthusiasm for Indigenous Mexican history was encouraged by his uncle, Manuel Gamio, a distinguished archaeologist and one of the key architects of *indigenismo*, the twentieth-century attempt to create a unified national identity based on the pre-Hispanic histories of Mexico. His work, and that of ethnologists and linguists like Garibay, was vital in reconstructing the history of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, showing their complexity and significance. But, while Gamio revered the art and culture of their ancient past, he saw contemporary Indigenous communities as potential citizens in need of modernisation and integration in the efforts of the national state.

Indigenismo promoted the Indigenous past and offered some limited benefits to living Native communities, but it was fundamentally an assimilationist project designed to take the 'good parts' of Indigenous heritage and subsume the rest into a homogeneous *mestizo*

Mexican identity. Indigeneity – a glorious fossil, disconnected from descendant communities – was appropriated to create a nationalist narrative, while Indigenous people themselves were stereotyped, acculturated and erased, creating what the Mexican ethnologist Guillermo Bonfil Battalla, called an 'imaginary Mexico' designed 'to incorporate the Indian, to de-Indianise him'. For him, this invented *indigenismo* stood in opposition to '*México profundo*' (deep Mexico). Battalla saw Indigenous peoples as embodying the 'real' Mesoamerica and as the 'bearers of ways of understanding the world and of organizing human life that have their origins in Mesoamerican civilization', as distinctive communities, individuals, families, and regions who maintained parts of their cultures and traditions.

As a museum director, Batalla was one of the first to work directly with Indigenous communities, empowering them as co-creators of their own histories. This model of *indigenismo participativo* (participatory indigenism) sees Indigenous activists partnered with scholars and institutions to empower local communities and revitalise linguistic and cultural traditions. In 2003, Nahuatl and 62 other Indigenous languages were officially recognised, but many of Mexico's Indigenous languages remain endangered, putting at risk the history and cultural identity of those communities. At institutions like IDIEZ (Zacatecas Institute for Teaching and Research in Ethnology), Indigenous students and teachers work in partnership with academics to revitalise their language and create scholarship for other contemporary speakers, rather than merely translating for external audiences. There, Indigenous people are not just informants or bystanders, as they are so often made to be. Instead, they are active participants in research and teaching in a place that sees their cultures as 'characterized by continuity, not rupture'.

Such partnerships offer a model that provides the possibility to see Indigenous history as a cooperative effort, rather than as an ivory-tower exploit. Historians too can find collaborative and ethical methods which recognise the value of working in partnership with Indigenous peoples. As an academic historian, I cannot disavow the traditions of scholarship and seizure that form part of the foundations of my discipline. By studying, categorising, and labelling the Indigenous past, we have colonised it. To push back against this possession through strategic collaboration is to reimagine history; this is what it means to 'decolonise' this past.

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Both: Since the earliest encounters between Indigenous peoples and European invaders, the practice of history has been entangled with colonisation. Texts were burned and cultures recreated in the image of their colonisers. Material objects were seized, scrutinized, and displayed without deference to the communities tied to them, and without understanding their significance or power. Since the sixteenth century, Indigenous peoples' sacred objects and human remains, imbued with spirit, have formed parts of prestigious institutions' prized collections. Tens of thousands have yet to be repatriated. But for Indigenous communities that have been forcibly acculturated and who seek to repair the connections between living generations and ancestors, the ability to reclaim heritage is vital. As Governor Tarita Alarcón Rapu (Rapa Nui) told the British Museum when pleading for the return of *Hoa Hakananai'a*, the giant *moai* statue stolen by the navy from Easter Island in 1868, 'We are just a body. You, the British people, have taken our soul'.

Scholars have now (mostly) accepted the importance of including Indigenous peoples in the histories we tell. ‘Frontiers’ and ‘discovery’ have given way to ‘middle grounds’ and ‘entangled histories’. Making space for Native stories has already changed history by transforming our understanding of the dynamics of empire, showing that Indigenous peoples had limited agency within colonialism, and undermining enduring assumptions of European racial and cultural superiority. Likewise, museums are slowly finding ways to engage in what Margaret M. Bruchac (Abenaki) has called ‘restorative research’, returning looted items to descendant communities and working with Native people to better understand and represent their own past. In 2017, for example, hundreds of cultural objects were repatriated from the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, completing what Chief Many Hearts Lynn Malerba (Mohegan) has called ‘a sacred circle’. Yale and the Tribe also have cooperated on the Native Northeast Research Collaborative, which supports scholarly efforts alongside empowering tribal communities to research their own heritage and affirm their sovereignty. Yet, this is the exception and not the rule.

The stereotype of Indigenous cultures as ‘people without history’ barely changed between the sixteenth-century, when Juan Ginés de Sepulveda justified Spanish colonisation of ‘these half-men (*homunculi*)... [who] are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings’, and 1965, when Hugh Trevor-Roper decried ‘the study of pre-European, pre-Columbian America’ as ‘largely darkness… And darkness is not a subject for history’. The denial of Indigenous histories is a continuing colonisation, a device that makes the past unintelligible by erasing lived realities and severing connections across time and space. Only by embracing Indigenous histories, informed by oral and sacred traditions,

archaeology, and alphabetic sources, as well as deep understandings of landscape and language, can we pierce the supposed 'darkness' which veils the Indigenous past.

We must make space for Indigenous peoples themselves, as partners in our professional practice able to speak their truths. Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) offers a template for collaborative, interdisciplinary practice that recognises Indigenous communities have linguistic, archival, and culturally specific expertise. And Indigenous peoples are confronted every day with the consequences of their histories, often knowing their pasts more intimately than those who once sought to forever erase them. Recent prize-winning works by NAIS scholars like Lisa Brooks (Abenaki) and Christine K. DeLucia have been ground-breaking and transformative, unsettling dominant narratives and compelling readers to take seriously Indigenous perspectives. In tracing the 'memoryscapes' of colonial North America, both rewrite our understandings of the British Atlantic world, making elusive pasts visible through archival rigour layered with living Indigenous knowledge and methods. For DeLucia, 'Memory bridges the "proof" chasm, while history dwells on the vacuum.' Unfortunately, such reorientations have not been unanimously embraced. NAIS has been stereotyped by its detractors as too presentist, 'politically correct', or lacking in objectivity. But as Carr recognised, objectivity is fantasy. History has long been produced to serve nationalist and imperialist agendas and used as a weapon to silence the truths of colonised peoples.

It has always been a privilege of those who get to write history to determine what it is. By protecting the status quo of archival methodologies as the only arbiter of 'truth', historians perpetuate the epistemic violence the archive embodies. By dismissing Native knowledge as

inherently 'biased' or untrustworthy, detractors hold white supremacy as the implicit standard. Philip J. Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) asks, 'Do Native peoples want absolute authority over academic history (framing the questions, conducting the research, generating conclusions)? Perhaps. Perhaps they simply want the recognition of some measure of authority over *themselves*.' Because the lack of self-determination has profound material and political consequences. If the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing challenges European ways of understanding and telling history, then history will only be richer for it. It will empower us all to deepen our understanding of the past and confront preconceptions of 'truth' mired in generations of bias. In our unending dialogue between the present and the past, Indigenous peoples must be able to speak and to be heard.

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Further Reading

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