

**A YOUNG READERS' EDITION OF THE FIRST HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES
TOLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Historian Robin D. G. Kelley called it "the most important US history book you will read in your lifetime," and former Navajo Nation president Peterson Zah declared it "an indispensable text for students of all ages." Upon publication, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* shattered our understanding of the United States as a land "discovered" in the "New World." This young readers' edition continues that re-education by accessibly challenging the Doctrine of Discovery, Manifest Destiny, and the myth of the US as a "nation of immigrants." Here, readers will learn about the ongoing Indigenous genocide often omitted from textbooks, the role colonialism played in forming the US, and the many ways Native Americans have actively resisted US imperialism for centuries.

Fully adapted, the text includes discussion topics, archival images, original maps, recommendations for further reading, and other materials to encourage young people and readers of all ages to think critically about their own place in history. Spanning more than four hundred years, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People* radically reframes US history and explodes the silences that have haunted our national narrative.

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ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

ADAPTED BY JEAN MENDOZA AND DEBBIE REESE

THIS LAND

Under the crust of that part of the earth called the United States of America are buried the bones, villages, fields, and sacred objects of the first people of that land—the people who are often called American Indians or Native Americans. Their descendants, also called Indigenous peoples, carry memories and stories of how the United States came to be the nation we know today. It is important to learn and know this history, but many people today lack that knowledge and understanding because of the way America's story has been taught.

Like most people, Americans want to think well of themselves, their ancestors, their history, and what they and their leaders do. As advanced technology makes the experiences of Indigenous peoples around the world more readily available, it is necessary that Americans learn to think more completely and more critically about their own history, because it can help them be better citizens of the world. Part of that critical thinking involves recognition that “America” is a name given to two land masses by European colonizers. Indigenous peoples had, and have, words for the land in their own languages.

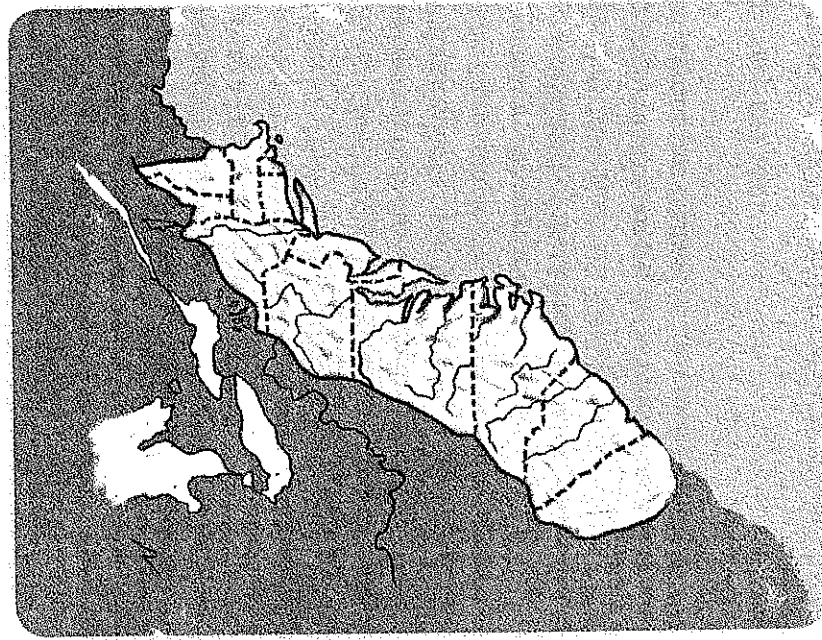
THEN AND NOW

Everything in US history is about the land: who oversaw it and planted crops on it, fished its waters, maintained

its wildlife; who invaded and stole it; how it became a commodity ("real estate") broken into pieces to be bought and sold. As anthropologist Patrick Wolfe writes, "Land is life—or at least, land is necessary for life."¹

One interesting activity is to quickly draw a rough outline of the US at the time it gained independence from Britain. Go ahead—take out a sheet of paper and try it!

• Did your outline look something like this?



• Or did it look more like this?



Teachers who have done this activity with their students say that most of them draw the shape of the current United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But the US didn't look like that until a century after independence. What became independent in 1783 were just thirteen British colonies hugging the Atlantic shore.

When teachers remind students of this, they are embarrassed. They know better, but somehow they forget! They are not alone. This is a common mistake.

What has happened since Europeans first encountered the land masses known as North and South America? Most books about American history say they were discovered by Christopher Columbus and other Europeans, settled by courageous English citizens seeking religious freedom, and expanded by brave settlers who moved westward in search of adventure and a better life. Most people's understanding of what it means to be an

American is founded upon such tales, which together form a myth-like origin story.

ORIGIN STORIES OF THE UNITED STATES

Origin narratives, or “stories about how this all began,” help a group of people feel that they belong to a community with a common past and shared ideas about what is important. Origin stories are central to a people’s sense of a unifying identity. However, origin stories may leave out key aspects of what actually happened and overemphasize others. That is the case with the most familiar origin story of the United States.

In the late fifteenth century, as European explorers sailed to unfamiliar places, their actions and beliefs were guided by the Doctrine of Discovery—the idea that European nations could claim the foreign lands they “discovered.” The Doctrine of Discovery was laid out in a series of communications from the pope, leader of the Catholic Church, who was extremely influential in European politics at the time. It asserted that Indigenous inhabitants lost their natural right to that land as soon as Europeans arrived and claimed it. People whose homelands were “discovered” were considered subjects of the Europeans and were expected to do what the “discoverers” wished. If they resisted, they were to be conquered by European military action. This enabled Columbus to claim the Taíno people’s Caribbean home for Spain and to kidnap and enslave the Indigenous peoples. Similarly, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, the first groups from England to settle what became the United States, believed they had a covenant with God to take the land. The Doctrine



Landing of Columbus, by painter John Vanderlyn, is a mural in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, DC. It is a typical depiction of the 1492 “discovery of America.”

of Discovery influenced the policies of the young United States and directly affected the lives and the very existence of Native people. However, history textbooks for young people rarely invite students to question or think critically about that part of the US origin story.

“Free” land, with all its resources, was a magnet that attracted European settlers to the Americas. The word *settler* is used so frequently that most people do not recognize that it means more than just a person who settles down to live in a new place. Throughout history it has also meant a person who goes to live where, supposedly, no one has lived before. More often than not, “settlers” have gone to live somewhere that is already home to someone else. They are important to a nation—like Britain or Spain—when it plans to set up colonies in an area. Colonization is the process of taking political and economic control of a region, and colonizers are the people

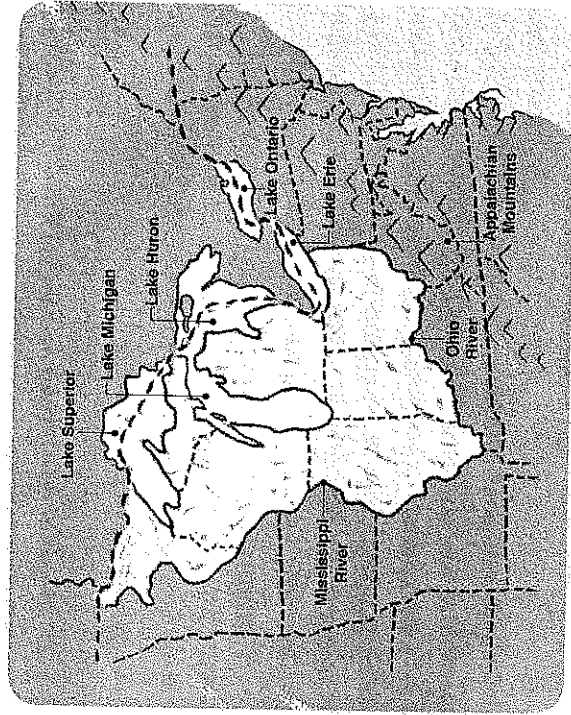


Cree artist William Kent Monkman reimagined the "discovery of America" with oddly dressed, ill-mannered, and greedy invaders.

or institutions that are part of that process: the military, business interests, people who go there to live, and sometimes representatives of religious institutions. Because of their key role in establishing and populating a colony, settlers may be called colonizers. Settlers who came to what is currently known as North America wanted land for homes, farms, and businesses that they could not have

in their home countries. Settlers who used the labor of enslaved Africans wanted limitless land for growing cash crops. Under their nations' flags, those Europeans fought Native people for control of that land.

Even when the United States consisted of just a few states on the Eastern Seaboard, the country's founders fully intended for "America" to extend "from sea to shining sea." In fact, the first law of the new nation was created because of that demand for land. The Continental Congress wrote the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, two years before the Constitution was ratified. It allowed settlers to live in "Indian Territory" west of the Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains. Before that, the British government's Proclamation of 1763 prohibited settlement there.



The territory affected by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 included parts of what are currently known as the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

In 1801 President Thomas Jefferson described the intent to expand the boundaries of the United States, saying, "It is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will . . . cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws."²

This idea eventually came to be called Manifest Destiny—the belief that English-speaking Americans were destined to spread their presence and their ideals across the entire continent. Manifest Destiny was the banner under which the homelands of Indigenous peoples would be taken.

✿ VIEWS OF US HISTORY

If you read many US history books, you may find several interpretations of the country's origin myth. As later chapters of this book will point out, many interpretations of the origin myth misrepresent and do injustice to peoples indigenous to this land.

For example, many school textbooks uncritically accept the ideas expressed in the Doctrine of Discovery, Jefferson's statement on expansion, and Manifest Destiny. They treat expansion of the US from Atlantic to Pacific as inevitable and good. Whatever stood in the way (that is, Native nations and their citizens) was seen as a problem to be overcome by any means necessary, including military force.

Another interpretation of the US origin myth found in some history books is the idea that relations between the Native people and the European Americans should

be viewed as a *cultural conflict*. This view was a reaction against the civil rights movement and student activism of the 1960s and was seen as objective and fair. This view is expressed in statements such as the following:

- "There were good people and bad people on both sides."
- "American culture is an amalgamation of all its ethnic groups."
- "A frontier is a zone of interaction between cultures, not merely advancing European settlements."
- "The Natives and the European Americans experienced an encounter at the frontier and engaged in dialogue."

Some who hold this view even suggest that Indigenous cultures were responsible for their own demise. In trying to be objective and fair, such perspectives ignore centuries of US policy and law that did not question whether European Americans had the right to take over the entire continent.

A *multicultural* interpretation of US history emphasizes only the "contributions" of groups that were ignored in the dominant origin myth, including Indigenous peoples, women, African Americans, and immigrants. Indigenous peoples are portrayed as having helped make the country great by sharing corn, beans, buckskin, log cabins, parkas, maple syrup, canoes, and even the basic concepts of democracy. But the idea that "gifts" from Indians helped to establish and enrich the US hides that these resources were taken, often by force, as the country expanded. The multicultural perspective tends to cast Indigenous peoples in

general as an oppressed racial group without considering important political differences between the Native nations and other oppressed populations. It says little or nothing about the theft of Indigenous lands and the cultural destruction that made “unity” possible.

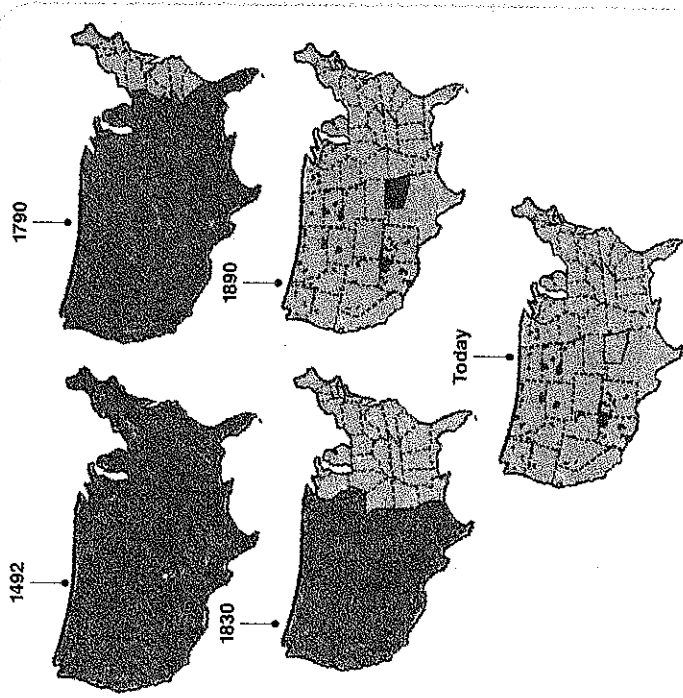
AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

Today in the United States there are more than five hundred federally recognized Indigenous nations composed of nearly three million people. These are the descendants of the fifteen million original inhabitants of the land, the majority of whom were farmers who lived in towns.

The Indigenous peoples’ land base has also been drastically reduced since first contact with Europeans. Walter R. Echo-Hawk writes that Indian landholdings in the US had plummeted to 156 million acres by 1881. By 1934, about 50 million acres remained. During World War II, the US government took 500,000 more acres for military use.³

Much of that remaining land consists of more than three hundred federally recognized reservations. The concept of reservation—confining an Indigenous group to a reserved land base in exchange for US government protection from settlers—arose during the era of US expansion and treaty making that spanned the years from independence to 1871.

Although Native historians and scholars have written at length about how events in US history have impacted Indigenous peoples, their perspectives are not often



The map dramatically shows the reduction in Indigenous lands, but its scale does not allow the “today” map to accurately depict all existing tribal offices and land holdings across the country.

included in history courses. Instead, students are taught another origin story, one about the US as a nation of immigrants. Native peoples, to the extent that they are included at all, are conveniently renamed “First Americans,” which casts them as immigrants (usually from Asia across the Bering Strait), undermining their claims to the land.

The “nation of immigrants” framework obscures the US practice of *settler colonialism*. This book takes

the view that settler colonialism was key to building the United States. The goal of settler colonialism is to take over all resources in a region, particularly the land. During the colonial era, for example, European business corporations received military support to take over and use land and other resources for profit in foreign areas around the world, including what came to be known as the Americas. As more and more settlers arrived, one settlement paved the way for another, and another. This gave the European governments and the government-backed corporations control and influence farther and farther from the original settlements. The US followed a similar growth model after independence.

The following ideas are basic to American settler colonialism:

- White supremacy. The idea that European American “civilization” is superior to those of the American Indians and of the Africans who were enslaved for economic gain is called white supremacy. At the individual level, this means that “white” lives are seen as more valuable than those of darker-skinned people.
- African American slavery. Although slavery is mostly associated with the American South, the entire country, as it grew, benefited from the enslavement of people, primarily Africans and African Americans.
- A policy of genocide and land theft. The United Nations now defines *genocide* as an act, or acts, “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in

part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”⁴ These acts are

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The following statement from General William T. Sherman in 1873 is an example of what genocidal attitudes sound like:

We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women and children . . . during an assault, the soldiers can not pause to distinguish between male and female, or even discriminate as to age.⁵

The continued influence of settler colonialism and genocide show up when history is retold in a way that

CONSIDER THIS

Let's consider the word *civilization*. Who decides what *civilization* is? And how does our definition shape how we think about societies and the people in them?



James Earle Fraser's *End of the Trail* was exhibited at the 1915 World's Fair. It is an example of imagery created by non-Native artists that incorrectly suggests Indigenous people had come to the end of their existence and are no longer here.

celebrates settlers and makes Indigenous peoples disappear from the historical record. This practice is sometimes called “firsting and lasting.”⁶ You may have seen examples of it.

All over North America are places that are described as “the first” settlement, building, or school. Invariably this means the first settlement, building, or school created by white settlers, as if no one lived there before they came.

On the other hand, stories of the US are also full of instances of the “last” Indians or last tribes—“the last of the Mohicans,” “Ishi, the last Indian,” and *End of the Trail* (a famous sculpture created by James Earle Fraser).

Settler colonialism requires violence or the threat of violence to attain its goals. You will read more about the US history of settler colonialism, white supremacy, slavery, genocide, and land theft in later chapters. You will also read of the many ways in which Native nations and communities have fought for their survival. After all, people do not hand over their land, resources, children, and futures without a struggle! Modern Indigenous nations and communities are societies shaped by their resistance to colonialism.

TO DO

Native nations have their own websites, just like the fifty US states do. Go online and study a handful of them. How does the information they provide compare to what you've seen elsewhere about Native people?

This book tells the story of the United States as a colonialist settler-state, one that sought to crush and subjugate Indigenous populations. In spite of all that was done to them, Indigenous peoples are still here.

It is breathtaking, but no miracle, that they have survived as peoples.

This is a history of the United States.