Sovereignty in Motion:

Indigenous Power, Negotiated Order, and Colonial Violence in North American History

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Over the last half century, the historiography of Indigenous North America has shifted from narratives of disappearance and inevitability to histories that center Indigenous sovereignty, political creativity, and methodological plurality. Across regions and scales, scholars demonstrate how Native nations contested, negotiated, and reshaped colonial projects—sometimes through accommodation and mediation, sometimes through decisive coercive power, and often amid structures of violence that imperial states imposed and Indigenous communities navigated or redirected. Read together, the works of Ned Blackhawk, Richard White, Pekka Hämäläinen, Karl Jacoby, and James Merrell reveal a continent in motion: sovereignties overlapping and shifting; borders hardening and dissolving; communities reinventing themselves under duress; and Indigenous ascendancy, diplomacy, and memorialization shaping the trajectory of North American history. The unifying theme—sovereignty in motion—captures both the dynamism of Indigenous power and the historical processes that produced negotiated orders and violent collisions across centuries.

Ned Blackhawk's *Violence over the Land* reframes the early American West around cascading systems of coercion—raiding, slaving, military campaigns, environmental disruptions, and forced removals—arguing that violence was not incidental to empire but its animating force.[1] Rather than depicting Great Basin peoples as marginal or culturally static, Blackhawk centers Ute, Shoshone, and Paiute histories within overlapping Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. imperial ambitions that reshaped Indigenous worlds long before direct American settlement.[2] Violence in this account is historically constructed: intensified by horses and livestock, commercial integration, demographic upheavals, and state coercion; and refracted through

[1] Blackhawk, Ned, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1–22; 51–94.
[2] Blackhawk, 22. Blackhawk prefaces this by focusing in the Great Basin, the further removed the idea of a mass violence against Indigenous peoples is regulated to "local phenomenon."

Indigenous political calculations that often mixed diplomacy and force. A signal innovation is the way Blackhawk moves the geographic and conceptual center of Western history; by following the routes of captivity, trade, and punitive campaigns outward from colonial New Mexico, he integrates Great Basin peoples—long dismissed as "primitive" in earlier historiography—into the core narrative of empire-making.[3] Methodologically, this requires balancing mission archives, baptismal registers, and colonial documents with oral traditions and environmental histories, challenging archival hierarchies that occluded Indigenous perspectives.[4] If such structuring emphasis on trauma risks flattening Indigenous actors into distant, collective subjects, Blackhawk counters by tracing decision-making—Ute alliances and raiding, Shoshone ecological adjustments, Paiute survival strategies—revealing a political economy of violence contingent on historical circumstance.[5] And when his lens widens in *The Rediscovery of America*, it becomes clear that U.S. governance, diplomacy, and law were repeatedly forged in relation to Native nations, compelling a reperiodization that refuses to separate Indigenous history from the national story.[6]

If Blackhawk restores violence as a historical engine of empire, Richard White restores the negotiated practices that, under certain conditions, constrained and redirected imperial aims. In *The Middle Ground*, the Great Lakes appear not as unidirectional conquest but as a zone of negotiated sovereignty in which Algonquian-speaking peoples and Europeans fashioned shared conventions in diplomacy, law, trade, and ritual under conditions of relative balance.[7] This

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[3] Blackhawk, 95-147; 203-38.
[4] Blackhawk, 288. Blackhawk is within this community but states that it's a non-reservation family.
[5] Blackhawk, 148-202; 239-88; 293.
[6] Blackhawk, Ned, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 3–27; 189–236.
[7] White, Richard, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 85; 50–112; 257–317.

negotiated order relied on kinship metaphors, translation, and ceremonial practice, and it functioned because each side grasped enough of the other's meaning to sustain alliances while projecting their own assumptions onto shared language.[8] White's insistence on village-level granularity—internal dissent, religious movement, and local politics—demonstrates that this order was built as much in households and everyday exchanges (including marriages that linked commerce and diplomacy) as in councils and forts.[9] It is also interesting to note that White provides a nuanced approach to gender and how they were included in the Middle Ground as well.[10] In his earlier *Roots of Dependency*, White complements this argument by showing how environmental transformation and market coercion produced dependency historically, not culturally; subsistence systems were restructured by policy and ecology, not by inherent deficiencies.[11] As the demographic and strategic balance shifted after 1763—first under British rule, then American expansion—the delicate reciprocity that underwrote the middle ground eroded, and the negotiated order dissolved.[12] In this way, White's work converses with Blackhawk's: negotiated spaces emerge and endure only where power is constrained; when violence and settlement intensify, accommodation frays.

The question of power—its sources, reach, and decline—moves to the forefront in Pekka Hämäläinen's corpus, which insists that Indigenous ascendancy was structuring rather than episodic. In *The Comanche Empire*, authority coheres around nodal, ecological, and economic control: Comanche power managed movement and access—trade fairs, corridors, valleys—and orchestrated flows of animals, captives, and goods, compelling Spanish, Mexican, and later

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[8] White, 56.
[9] White, 85-99; 314-15.
[10] White, 91.
[11] White, Richard, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 3–34; 187–242.
[12] White, *The Middle Ground*, 318–429.

American officials to recalibrate strategy within Comanche-centered markets.[13] Rather than rigid borders, influence radiated through networked control, a geography defined by routes and seasonal sites whose ecological and political significance explains both rise and unraveling when shocks frayed those networks.[14] *Lakota America* offers a different wager: Lakota ascendancy operated through strategic migration, adoption of horses and firearms, and deft entanglement with imperial supply chains and treaty categories; annuities, commerce, and "friendly/hostile" designations became instruments of Lakota statecraft, amplifying power even as entanglement heightened precarity in the 1860s–1870s.[15]

During the 1850s through 1870s a "Lakota-U.S. alliance" allowed for the Lakota to expand their empire at the expense of other tribes, especially the Ponca and Pawnee.[16] Seeing these works together sharpens mechanism: Comanche power hinges on controlling circulation; Lakota power folds imperial infrastructures into Indigenous political economy. And here the tension around imperial language becomes historiographically useful: "empire" illuminates coercive capacity, tribute-like extractions, and expansive diplomatic management while also challenging us to sustain Indigenous vocabularies of peoplehood and kinship alongside comparative frames drawn from European experiences.[17] As White's negotiated order gives way under asymmetry, Hämäläinen's ascendancy shows how Indigenous states could create

[13] Hämäläinen, Pekka, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 1–29; 131–200; 279–328.
[14] Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 4.
[15] Hämäläinen, Pekka, *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 67–120; 201–66; 309–64.
[16] Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 335.
[17] Hämäläinen, Pekka, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: Liveright, 2022), 7–42; 287–343.

asymmetry; and as Blackhawk tracks coercion's spread, Hämäläinen shows how Indigenous coercion compelled European accommodation.

If continental syntheses risk smoothing local complexities, Karl Jacoby's microhistory edges in from the borderlands to unsettle straight lines. *Shadows at Dawn* reconstructs the 1871 Camp Grant Massacre as a crucible where O'odham, Nnēē (Apache), vecinos of Mexican descent, and Anglo-Americans acted within distinct historical logics, producing layered conflict and divergent memorializations.[18] The event emerges not as a simple colonizer/colonized clash, but as a convergence of intertribal rivalries, Spanish/Mexican systems of slaving and mission/military rule, and Anglo newcomers whose intermarriage and contested allegiance to federal policy reconfigured local identity.[19] Jacoby's method—refusing mono-archival dependence—reads O'odham calendar sticks, oral accounts, archaeology, military reports, and newspapers against one another to recover Indigenous voices and expose rumor, propaganda, and the selective framing of Indigenous action.[20] If Hämäläinen's ascendancy frames macro-power and White's middle ground frames negotiated order, Jacoby shows how memory and misapprehension produce moral geographies that justify or challenge present claims—reminding us that sovereignty moves not only through corridors and councils but also through archives and narratives. His disciplined focus does not seek portability; rather, it argues for localized histories to prevent mythic generalization, an ethic that echoes Blackhawk's insistence on regional specificity even within continental logics of violence.

[18] Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), xix–xxiii; 3–78; 209–74.
[19] Jacoby, 76.
[20] Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn*, 79–144; 145–208.

From violence and negotiation to ascendancy and microhistory, James Merrell returns us to the social infrastructure without which sovereignty cannot endure. In *The Indians' New World* and *Into the American Woods*, Merrell traces how Indigenous communities rebuilt themselves amid disease, displacement, and demographic collapse, forging new identities, confederacies, and kinship networks that stabilized diplomacy and social continuity.[21] The Catawbas—composite and emergent from Piedmont fragments—crafted a polity through mergers, migrations, and alliances, leveraging an "oversized image" in imperial geopolitics to secure gifts, protection, and mediation in intertribal disputes.[22] The mediators and interpreters—often women and culturally bilingual figures—translate not only language but political meaning; communication itself becomes a form of Indigenous power that sustains negotiated order where violence and asymmetry might otherwise prevail.[23] Merrell does point out a interesting facet of European American interpretations in the nineteenth century and the dismay of the lack of "aboriginal dust" the Catawba projected during that time; forgetting that most groups take on elements of the major culture but still have Indigenous or in-group relationships.[24] If Merrell's interpretive tension lies in maintaining continuity without essentializing "traditional ways," his achievement is to show that community reconstruction is historical creativity, not passive survival; kinship, diplomacy, and memory are infrastructure.[25] In effect, Merrell's work supplies the connective tissue between White's negotiated order and Jacoby's multiperspectival method,

[21] Merrell, James H., *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact Through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 3–74; 163–231.
[22] Merrell, pg. 271. Merrell notes that the Catawbas maintained their "core."
[23] Merrell, James H., *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 27–88; 241–302.
[24] Merrell, *The Indians' New World,* 268.
[25] Merrell, *The Indians' New World,* 166.

while reminding readers that the ascendancies Hämäläinen charts depend on everyday practices of cohesion that Blackhawk's coercive systems constantly strain.

Taken together, these historians articulate a fourfold framework of sovereignty in motion. Indigenous ascendancy demonstrates that power could be decisively Indigenous—Comanche and Lakota regimes structured continental politics and constrained imperial states—and that decline owes to ecological shocks, market shifts, and policy entanglements rather than inevitability.[26] Negotiated order shows sovereignty expressed through mutual accommodation under conditions of balance—hybrid diplomatic and legal forms sustained by mediators whose social roles underwrite governance in everyday life.[27] Violence and entanglement insist that colonial violence is a historical product of empire and borderlands intersections—slaving economies, punitive campaigns, rumor, and racialized propaganda—and that recovering Indigenous narration requires multiperspectival reading of archives.[28] Community reconstruction demonstrates that Indigenous societies rebuilt political and social worlds through kinship and diplomacy, creating new nations from fragments and sustaining identities despite demographic and territorial crises.[29] The theme sovereignty in motion binds these strands: Native power was never static; it moved across corridors, councils, courts, and households; it rose through ecology, mobility, and statecraft; and it persisted in memory and mediation even when territory narrowed. Methodologically, the field now insists on plural archives—oral tradition, archaeology, environmental history, linguistic analysis—challenging Eurocentric periodization and rejecting frontier teleology of disappearance. The result is a historiography that understands Indigenous North America as a continent of architects—of regimes, middle grounds, borderlands narratives,

[26] Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 279–328; Hämäläinen, *Lakota America*, 309–64.
[27] White, *Middle Ground*, 257–317; Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 241–302.
[28] Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, 1–22; Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn*, 209–74.
[29] Merrell, *Indians' New World*, 163–231; 269–307.

and reconstructed communities—whose histories remain indispensable to the making of North American polities and publics.

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