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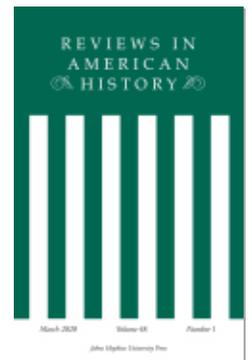
## Rewriting and Rerighting Indigenous Histories

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## REWRITING AND RERIGHTING INDIGENOUS HISTORIES

Andrew H. Fisher

**Nick Estes**, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. London and New York: Verso, 2019. x + 310 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, and index. \$26.95.

**David Treuer**, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2019. 512 pp. Notes and index. \$28.00.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (second edition 2012), Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith posed a provocative question: “Is History Important for Indigenous Peoples?” Her answer was ambivalent but affirmed the need for “a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to *rewriting* and *rerighting* our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes” (p. 29). Over the past twenty years, dozens of Native American authors and scholars have turned to that task, yet the process of decolonizing the academy and the larger society has only just begun. The books considered in this review strike two more blows against the intellectual structure of settler colonialism and its logic of elimination, which seeks to destroy Indigenous cultures in order to replace them.

Although they differ considerably in style and tone, *Our History Is the Future* and *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* share Smith’s commitment to “rewriting and rerighting” the position of Indigenous peoples in both the past and the present. Nick Estes (Kul Wicasa/Lower Brule) and David Treuer (Ojibwe) write to counter a historical tradition that Estes calls “distorted” and “deeply disempowering” (p. 16). Their interest in doing so is not historiographical but unabashedly presentist, as they seek to change the terms under which Native communities live today. “There is no separation between past and present,” argues Estes, “meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. Our history is the future” (pp. 10–11). The history of Indigenous peoples is also, they insist, integral to the history of modern America and the world.

*Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* emerged directly from the confrontation noted in its subtitle. Estes, a professor of American Studies and a Lakota citizen of the Oceti Sakowin (People of the Seven Council Fires, or Sioux Nation), was among the “Water Protectors” who stood up against Energy Transfer Partners and its government backers in 2016–17. For more than six months, a coalition of tribal members, environmental activists, and Indigenous allies from around the world staged peaceful protests to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) from carrying crude oil beneath the Missouri River (Mni Sose) just upstream from the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota. Their movement drew both international media attention and militarized police, dispatched from multiple agencies and jurisdictions to clear the pipeline’s path by force. In the ugly crackdown that followed, law enforcement deployed anti-riot gear, armored vehicles, pepper spray, tear gas, water cannons, LRAD acoustic weapons, and counterinsurgency techniques against people armed only with drums and prayer feathers. Ultimately, the Water Protectors failed to stop the “Black Snake” (Zuzeca Sapa) from crossing the Missouri, but Estes found hope in the “meaningful solidarities” (p. 7) that had formed among activists from many walks of life. He also found inspiration for a book. Less than two years later, he published *Our History Is the Future* in order to “chart a historical road map for collective liberation” (p. 22).

Estes’s book places the #NoDAPL movement in the larger context of Oceti Sakowin resistance to the entwined powers of settler colonialism and corporate capitalism. Since the early nineteenth century, when Lewis and Clark described the Sioux as the “vilest miscreants of the savage race” (p. 74), the tribes have generally been regarded as obstacles to American expansion and economic development on the Great Plains. Their heroic defiance of U.S. hegemony has made the Lakotas especially a favored subject among scholars and buffs alike, yet relatively little published work has followed their story beyond the Wounded Knee Massacre or connected it to broader historiographical themes and trends. That unfortunate tendency reflects and perpetuates the logic of elimination by discursively erasing the Native present and consigning American Indians to the margins of a literature focused on the development of the U.S. nation-state. By instead framing Oceti Sakowin history as a continuing struggle against colonial occupation, Estes explains, “we can see that Indigenous history is not a narrow subfield of US history—or of the history of capitalism or imperialism, for that matter. Rather, Indigenous peoples are central subjects of modern world history” (p. 21).

Estes grounds his insightful study in five historical episodes bracketed by his firsthand analysis of the standoff at Standing Rock. In the opening chapter, he explores the intersection of “race, class, and colonialism” (p. 28) that lies at the heart of contemporary conflicts over land and water on the High Plains.

He also incorporates gender and sexuality as analytical categories, noting both the prominence of women, Two-Spirits, and LGBTQ people on the front lines and the “murderous heteropatriarchy” associated with the “man camps” of the oil and gas industry (p. 31). In contrast with their “death culture” (p. 31), he celebrates the rebirth of traditional camp life and Indigenous spirituality as a result of the #NoDAPL movement. “Where physical infrastructure lacked,” he writes, “an infrastructure of Indigenous resistance and caretaking of relations proliferated—of living and being in community according to Indigenous values—which for the most part kept people safe and warm” (p. 58). This opportunity for cultural renewal is one of the bright spots that Estes sees in an otherwise dark picture of “racial capitalism” (p. 28) run amok.

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the emergence of the Oceti Sakowin as a distinct nation and its clashes with the encroaching United States during the nineteenth century. These sections effectively establish Estes’s premise that the current fights against the DAPL and Keystone XL (KXL) pipelines are deeply rooted in earlier conflicts over land and water, and over the meaning of land itself. From beavers and bison to gold to oil and gas, Euro-American entrepreneurs have exploited the Upper Missouri country for its rich natural resources. That drive for profit immediately placed the United States at odds with the Oceti Sakowin, which drew not only their subsistence but also their collective identity from the territory surrounding Mni Sose. By the 1850s, American efforts to dominate and develop the region had triggered brutal campaigns of conquest that Estes characterizes as genocidal and ecocidal, “entailing the wholesale destruction of nonhuman relations” (p. 90) such as the Pte Oyate (Buffalo Nation). The Indian Wars did not end at Wounded Knee, he contends, but continue in the form of state violence and surveillance against Water Protectors, whose resistance in turn invoked the spirit of the Ghost Dance, which Estes recasts (à la Jeffrey Ostler) as “part of a growing anticolonial theory and movement” (p. 124).

Although this period also produced the treaties that supposedly secured Oceti Sakowin sovereignty over a portion of their homelands, those agreements failed to stop the erosion of Sioux territorial, political, and cultural integrity. As Estes shows in Chapter 4, the Pick-Sloan Plan of the 1950s–60s amounted to “a twentieth-century Indigenous apocalypse, inflicting an immeasurable amount of loss that is still experienced today” (p. 134). Built in violation of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty and over the objection of Sioux tribal councils, a series of federal dams inundated the valuable bottomlands of several Missouri River reservations and broke up the communities that had managed to thrive there. The affected tribes eventually received some monetary compensation, but the bitterness that Pick-Sloan engendered among the Oceti Sakowin fueled their resistance to the DAPL, which crosses beneath one of its massive reservoirs (Lake Oahe). “With the Pick-Sloan dams and the failed project of

termination," Estes explains, "a new generation of young people, thrown from their reservation homelands and shipped off to the city, took up the mantle of Red Power in the spirit of their ancestors and demanded freedom and justice in the face of this history of dispossession" (p. 167).

Chapters 5 and 6 detail the rise of pan-Indigenous activism during the 1960s–70s and that movement's contribution to the #NoDAPL campaign. Inspired by the contemporary Civil Rights struggle and the writings of Vine Deloria, among other influences, urban Indian activists and Native college students joined with reservation-based "knowledge keepers" to fight for Indigenous freedom. Estes focuses on the activities of the National Indian Youth Council and the American Indian Movement (AIM), but he also calls attention to the role that Indigenous women played through independent groups such as Women of All Red Nations. Moreover, like historian Gyorgy Toth, Estes emphasizes the crucial work of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) in fostering "a global forum and allies worldwide" (p. 226), including other nationalist groups and Eastern Bloc states. Although some of the latter had checkered histories with their own Indigenous peoples, they gave aid and succor to the IITC's fledgling movement against settler colonialism. "The Treaty Council saw its sacred duty as ending imperialism abroad by ending it at home," writes Estes, "and at Standing Rock in 2016, this spirit of internationalism was visible once again as a parade of Indigenous nations from around the world showed up in solidarity" (p. 245).

*Our History Is the Future* concludes with a ringing call for decolonization. By mobilizing an international alliance against predatory capitalism, Estes argues, the Water Protectors had once again reminded settler society of its tenuous claims to belonging on a stolen continent. More importantly, the activists had reminded Indigenous peoples of their own power: "The #NoDAPL camps didn't just imagine a future without settler colonialism and the oppressive institution of the state, but created the future in the here and now" (p. 253). That future depends on Indigenous peoples and their allies embracing the revolutionary potential of Standing Rock. "For the earth to live," Estes declares, "capitalism must die" (p. 257). If that sounds more like the closing line of a manifesto than the conclusion of an academic history, then you have properly understood the purpose of this impassioned and important book.

Given his stated intention to use history as a wedge to "make a crack in history" itself (p. 18), it seems almost beside the point to call out the fissures in Estes's narrative. They are neither large nor numerous, but there are some instances where moral clarity comes at the expense of historical complexity. In his discussion of Oceti Sakowin origins, for example, Estes takes issue with Richard White and other historians for portraying the Sioux as "a pillaging band of expansionists" (p. 69). To be sure, he acknowledges that the Sioux fought against other Indigenous peoples, and he is right to criticize the false

equivalences that have been advanced from that fact. In citing just two works from forty years ago, however, he neglects more recent and nuanced interpretations by scholars such as Jeffrey Ostler and Pekka Hämäläinen. Similarly, his charge that historians have “uncritically” taken the words of Lewis and Clark “at face value” (p. 74) references only the popularized accounts of Stephen Ambrose and Ken Burns, while ignoring the ethnohistorical perspective of James Ronda. Although such oversights may reflect the short timeframe in which Estes produced the book, they tend to create scholarly straw men that stand in for “American history” as a whole.

That said, there is no doubt that U.S. historians have many sins to answer for in their treatment of Indigenous peoples, with the greatest one being their old habit of making Indians disappear. As David Treuer explains in the prologue to *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, he wrote his book to counter the persistent myth of the “Vanishing Race” and the public’s fixation on decline and dysfunction in Indian Country. “It is adamantly, unashamedly, about Indian life rather than Indian death” (p. 1), and for that reason he focuses on the period since 1890. In a sense, the book serves as both a sequel and a rebuttal to Dee Brown’s best-selling elegy *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), which Treuer read in college and found deeply dismaying. Looking to provide something more than “a list of the tragedies we had somehow outlived without really living” (p. 11), he strives to balance the grim realities of Native history with stories of individual and tribal resilience. He aims not only to change non-Indian minds, but also to “confront the ways we Indians ourselves understand our place in the world” (p. 11). As a young man, Treuer saw his own community on the Leech Lake reservation as simply a place of suffering, a dead end to escape as soon as possible. Now, like Estes, he aims to use history as a tool of empowerment for Indigenous peoples. Also like Estes, he relies on his own experiences and observations to infuse his book with a sense of personal urgency and authority. The result is, he admits, “a hybrid like me: part history, part reportage, part memoir” (p. 14).

Treuer deftly weaves the autobiographical and journalistic elements of his account into a sweeping survey of modern Native American history in the Lower 48 States. Those threads help enliven and enrich a narrative that might otherwise bog down in an endless litany of “broken treaties and massacres and names and dates, of moments when things might have turned out differently” (p. 16). At 455 pages of text, the book certainly contains its fair share of those things, but Treuer’s easy prose and eye for telling details keep it moving from start to finish. So does the judicious use of humor, such as the laugh-out-loud line that opens Part 1: “Columbus’s journey to North America was a mission that would resemble the worst kind of marriage: he came for money and ended up in court” (p. 21). The material that follows is anything but funny, as Treuer proceeds to outline how the continent’s diverse

Indigenous peoples were reduced to “the scattered remnants present in 1891” (p. 21), yet he avoids a tale of inevitable marginalization and victimization. To the contrary, he states, “Any history that persists in using the old model of New World history as something made by white people and done to Indian people...is not a real history of this place” (p. 29).

The following six parts trace the shifting fortunes and varied survivance strategies of Native Americans from their historical nadir in the 1890s to their resurgence in the present day. Parts 2 and 3 provide overlapping coverage of the Americanization era, the Indian New Deal, and Native service in World War II. Part 4 describes Indian migration to cities during the postwar period as well as the origins and effects of Termination policy, focusing on the experiences of the Little Shell Chippewa and Menominee reservations. In Part 5, Treuer makes the usual stops on a tour of the Red Power era and its political legacy, but he breaks with Estes and some other scholars in showing a darker side of AIM. Part 6 highlights tribal enterprise in the age of casino gaming, while Part 7 explores cultural revitalization and wellness programs that blend respect for tradition with a spirit of innovation. Although Native nations still face many deficits and problems rooted in their colonial history, Treuer sees real promise in the Indigenous future. “Sovereignty isn’t only a legal attitude or a political reality;” he writes, “it has a social dimension as well. The idea and practice of sovereignty carries with it a kind of dignity—a way of relating to the self, to others, to the past, and to the future that is dimensionally distinct” (p. 389).

*The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* ends with an affirmation not only of Native American survival, but of historical and contemporary relevance as well. If we treat Indigenous peoples as a historical sideshow, Treuer argues, “we do more than relegate Indians themselves to history—as mattering only in relation to America’s deep and sometimes dark past. We also miss the full measure of the country itself. If you want to know America—if you want to see it for what it was and what it is—you need to look at Indian history and at the Indian present. If you do, if we all do, we will see that all the issues posed at the founding of the country have persisted....To ignore the history of Indians in America is to miss how power itself works” (p. 453–54). Fittingly, the final episode of Treuer’s narrative is the confrontation at Standing Rock. In the “sordid process” (p. 437) that produced the DAPL, we witnessed power dynamics as old as European colonization. But we also saw Indigenous peoples “making a stand on behalf of all Americans for better processes, better decisions, and better laws for our energy future, to protect all of us” (p. 438).

Estes might disagree with certain aspects of Treuer’s interpretation, and specialists will certainly catch a few errors and omissions of significance scattered throughout the text. Treuer is not writing for professional historians, though, but rather translating their work for a public that remains woefully

ignorant of Native American history. The core of his contribution is the collection of personal stories and profiles of modern Indigenous people caught “in the radical act of living” (p. 453). Along with Estes, he is part of growing cohort of Indigenous intellectuals working to fulfill the promise of decolonized scholarship that Linda Tuhiwai Smith envisioned two decades ago. They are telling their own stories, writing their own versions, in their own ways, for their own purposes. They have important things to say, and these books deserve a broad audience.

Andrew H. Fisher is an Associate Professor of History at the College of William & Mary. He is the author of *Shadow Tribe: The Making of Columbia River Indian Identity* (University of Washington Press, 2010) and is currently working on a biography of the Yakama actor, activist, and technical advisor Nipo Strongheart.