

Ethnohistory for a Tribal World

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A Tribal World

At the outset of any reflection on historical writing, it is wise to remind ourselves that getting a fix on our current intellectual location is always problematic. This enterprise should begin with a large dose of humility. We should not forget that 191 years before the 1996 meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory, William Clark and his fellow explorers passed close to the society's gathering spot along the Columbia River and reported "great joy in camp[;] we are in View of the ocian [*sic*] . . . this great Pacific Ocean [*sic*] which we [have] been So long anxious to See."¹ Clark was wrong. When he made that entry in his journal, he and his cocaptain, Meriwether Lewis, and their companions had come to the estuary of the Columbia; the great sandbar and the Pacific Ocean still lay in the distance before them. Time and circumstance can shape our perceptions of reality so that our expert conclusions are frequently incorrect. That commonplace observation is the essence of my message, but stating a position does not explain its significance for ethnohistorical scholarship. It is to that task that I now turn.

Despite the fact that I attended my first ethnohistory meeting twenty years ago, have served on several of the organization's committees, and chaired the annual program committee, it is not clear to me why our society has remained so interesting and so civil for so long. While social customs have changed a great deal since Jimmy Carter held a campaign rally outside our Albuquerque meeting site in the fall of 1976, this group seems remarkably unchanged. We continue to be small and interdisciplinary; we have money in the bank; and our meetings are largely free from the em-

ployment anxieties and textbook hustles that have become so prominent at major disciplinary gatherings. Sadly, I suppose, this continuity reflects our persisting marginalization in the academy, as well as the continuation of the employment "crisis" into the present day. But our steadiness is internally generated; it is not simply a consequence of external forces. It is a function of our divided self: anthros and historians, North Americanists, Latin Americanists, literary scholars, social scientists, graduate students, and older scholars come most prominently to mind, but other divisions—as any former chair of the program committee will tell you—lie close beneath the surface: Arctic scholars versus the Plains specialists, Mayanists versus the Nahuatl folk, the Southwest versus the Northeast, the untenured versus the tenured, Africanists versus Americanists. And so on.

We may not agree on a definition of ethnohistory, but we do agree that no single discipline or interest group should hold sway over us. We are a kind of academic Yugoslavia: we lack the security apparatus Marshall Tito employed to forge his national stability, but we hold carefully to a rotating presidency, and our officers and committee heads follow a well-traveled ritual of succession; we govern ourselves lightly. The Yugoslavia analogy is a tricky one, but our approach to history rests on a shared agreement that multiplicity lies at the heart of our identities as scholars. We gather as ethnohistorians because we know a single discipline or research focus reveals only part of the truth we pursue. Like Cotton Mather, who said that the only way to be sure of God's presence was to be unsure of it, our intellectual work rests on uncertainty and an openness to the other avenues and viewpoints that lead to our subjects. As scholarly Yugoslavians, we are conscious of our divisions, respectful of competing nationalities, and careful not to demand too much unity. Our meetings have a wonderful spontaneity, I think, because we don't always know until the first day if anyone is actually going to show up.

We are also tolerant of the presidential ritual, the annual reflection on what holds the society together. It offers an annual commentary that speakers hope will have meaning in the various academic homelands the membership returns to at the close of each meeting. Each year we put one of our number on the spot and ask him or her to explain or demonstrate what ethnohistory is and what it might mean. It is refreshing that so many expect to learn something at these ritual occasions, just as they expect to learn something at the meetings as a whole.

Since I am a historian, and as I approach this occasion and this society from a historical perspective, it seems appropriate to ask what the scholarship produced by the disciplines and the interests represented under the banner of our stable society have to offer the world around us—a world

that appears to have changed so dramatically since I attended my first society meeting on the optimistic eve of Jimmy Carter's election.

To begin with a haunting image: In November 1995, on the night my term as president of the American Society for Ethnohistory began, but half a world away, Yigal Amir stepped out of a Jerusalem crowd and shot Yitzhak Rabin dead. Amir continues to defend his action as justified by Hebrew tradition; he argues that by making peace with the Palestinians, Prime Minister Rabin had betrayed his culture, his history—his "people." Or, put another way, Amir believes Rabin betrayed both his "ethnos" and his ethnohistory. Anyone who has seen Amir on television will agree that he is a deranged and unstable man. I do not for a second equate the scholarship I will criticize in this article with this murderer's horrible deed. His action was a crime; controversial ideas are not. I wish to engage ideas in debate, not to dismiss them as evil. I cite the Rabin murder only to invite the reader to think with me about the kind of ethnohistory a world needs when it seems sometimes that people have learned our lessons too well. They are so devoted to their versions of ethnohistory that they are willing to violate or destroy the civility we treasure to defend them.

There is a terrible paradox embedded in the juxtaposition of an ethnohistory meeting and Yigal Amir's despicable act. The paradox is this: many of us were drawn first to ethnohistory, to this decent society, and to the methods it advocates because, like our intellectual forefather Lewis Henry Morgan, we believed that this approach to scholarship held out the possibility of encouraging "a kinder feeling towards the Indian [or, we might substitute another culturally distinct group], founded upon a truer knowledge of his civil and domestic institutions."² An interdisciplinary "history in the round" (the late Wilcomb Washburn's phrase) held a similar appeal because it offered the prospect that people who previously had been forgotten or caricatured in academic scholarship could be made whole as they were portrayed sensitively, fairly, and humanely.³ They would come, in historian Joseph Levenson's generous phrase, "into history" as people whose ways were knowable and whose motives could be comprehended.⁴ Our common commitment to argumentation based on evidence (despite how differently we may define that term), our common concern for reasoned analysis, and our journal's presentation of logical exposition could each provide crucial contributions to the dissolution of stereotypes and faulty assumptions, replacing them with a sense of intellectual kinship and, perhaps, a new sense of interconnectedness. Or, put more simply, through our work, rigor might undermine racism, and scholarship might begin to bridge the differences between peoples.

Ethnohistoric Tribalism

Certainly, many of our ambitions have been achieved. Among historians (my people), the past twenty-five years have been an age when a new, interdisciplinary social history—what is sometimes called history “from the bottom up,” the history of “everyday life,” or history “with the politics left out”—has inspired fresh descriptions of Native Americans, African Americans, women, working people, immigrants, children, and others who traditionally had not been represented in government institutions or political decision making and who therefore had slipped outside the historian’s gaze. Using methods drawn from anthropology, sociology, folklore, and other fields, and following paths that run surprisingly close to those first explored by scholars writing in *Ethnohistory*, historians have brought new voices and new lives to visibility. Students in traditional history courses now encounter the past in surprising and unprecedented ways. New fields of scholarly inquiry have become standard features of historical writing and teaching. Few subjects are dismissed as ineligible for historical analysis.

New subjects illuminate the generous promise of ethnohistorical inquiry because (like the topics we explore in our journal and at our meetings) they all rely on interdisciplinary scholarship, they nearly always focus on the experiences of specific communities, and they routinely ask how behaviors arising in one historical context become encoded into community customs that are then passed on to new times and circumstances. For this reason I would celebrate both the growth of American Indian historical writing and the explosion of scholarship focused on conceptions of gender as manifestations of a new historical ethnography. The first is a consequence of a subject initially addressed seriously at these meetings decades ago; the second is an example of historians and literary scholars grappling with anthropological terms and categories that are so much a part of the ethnohistorical method. Rabin’s death casts a shadow over this celebration. We should be as appalled by Yugoslavia’s dissolution into interethnic violence, the African versions of the same trend we see only dimly through press reports, and similar events taking place in our own cities and communities. While completely different, these conflicts all are routinely justified and defended by people who are obviously beyond the control of our society but who speak in defense of a particular ethnohistorical point of view.

I illustrate these worries with two fairly shopworn examples of growing “ethnohistorical tribalism” in the United States. In the first example, we recently endured a national assault on a set of voluntary history standards that had been devised by teachers to organize into coherent themes the new,

interdisciplinary scholarship and its multiplying subjects. This effort was carried out in relative innocence by committees of teachers and scholars and then was ambushed by a well-organized group of self-appointed amateurs, who attacked the new standards as a betrayal of American civilization and an abandonment of the nation's heroic icons. Politicians educated in an earlier generation and supplied with briefing papers by the *Wall Street Journal* and conservative think tanks brayed on that something essential in the American people's history was under threat. With such iconic figures as George Washington downplayed or diminished, they argued, the nation's traditions soon would vanish and the national sky would fall. This campaign persuaded decision makers that the national ethnohistory had been violated; the standards were discredited, and our children were deprived (at least temporarily) of an education informed by new circumstances and new knowledge. This was a "tribal" response because it was defensive, parochial, and committed to a fixed notion of national cultural identity. Admittedly imprecise, the "tribal" label underscores the distance between the sophisticated and nuanced pictures of cultural experience that ethnohistorians produce and the simplistic ones demanded by those who operate in the political arena and on the talk-show circuit. Or, to state the case more succinctly: many Americans rejected the new, ethnohistorically inspired scholarship on the grounds that it is bad ethnohistory.

In the second example, we might recall the political muscle flexing that in 1990 produced the American Indian Arts and Crafts Act, a statute that declared it a federal offense for anyone who is not a member of a federally recognized tribe to claim to be a tribal member when selling art. The new regulation amounts to a codification by the tribes themselves of racial classification schemes imposed on them by the federal government more than a century ago. Blood-quantum classification schemes have a practical benefit, for they give tribes an apparently "scientific" basis for carrying out the vital task of controlling their membership, but the blood-quantum arithmetic runs counter to the historical experiences many of us have traced in both the archives and the field. By relying on blood quantum to define membership, tribes are forced to equate "blood" with sovereignty. A defense of sovereignty, then, requires a defense of one's "blood." The sad consequence of that logic is that the tribes' lobbying has produced an American law that can penalize people whose lives violate an official ethnohistory. In this new world there are no adopted Indians, no multiracial Indians, and no official difference between enrolled Hopis, who have a relatively "high" blood-quantum requirement, and enrolled Cherokees, who do not. There are also no Indians who exist outside the federal system: no Monacans, no Indiana Miamis, no Brothertons, and no

Ohio Shawnees. Ethnographic data must be filtered through a series of federally authorized tribal bureaucracies. Once again, it appears that the insights of ethnohistory have come into conflict with power struggles in a divided, and increasingly tribal, world.

These two examples tell us that, of itself, ethnohistorical scholarship has not dissolved the bonds of ethnic antagonism or inspired a process of spontaneous cross-cultural understanding. Let me be clear: the attack on the history standards and the passage of the Arts and Crafts Act are not the cause of cross-cultural tension in the world. Rather, these phenomena are reflections of broader cultural tensions and evidence that, despite the stability and success of our society, we ethnohistorians do not appear to be making much progress toward the "kinder feeling" Morgan spoke of in 1851 or the "rounded vision" that inspired my membership in this group a generation ago. Political scientist Jean Elshtain captured my sense of unease in the introduction to a recent collection of essays. Surveying the assaults on community institutions and social cohesion taking place around her, she recalled her own youthful struggles with political enemies whose defeat she was sure would bring on a new age. Today she finds herself arguing for the toleration of conflicting points of view. "I am somewhat abashed now as I look back twenty years or more and recognize how easy it was for me to hate," she notes. "I do not hate anymore. I have joined the ranks of the nervous."⁵

The Future: Unproductive Paths

The question the nervous among us should consider is clear: What kind of ethnohistorical scholarship is most needed and most productive in a world of deep ethnic divisions where the public discussion of cultural differences and cultural history ignores, distorts, or denies the interdisciplinary, comparative, and multivocal scholarship that defines our society? We as a small community of worriers have survived a difficult time with our resources intact; how should we use these resources in the years to come?

Before turning to new scholarly paths, we should first identify which paths have served their purpose and are no longer helpful. These paths are candidates for closure. First, we have had enough polemical ethnohistory. Works in this category use ethnographic materials to make a historical argument aimed at a contemporary political issue. Their principal focus is not ethnographic or cultural history itself but contemporary affairs. The goal—usually a worthy one—is to use neglected ethnographic data to shift the reader's perspective on events and to instruct the majority society about some aspect of contemporary native life. The best and most productive ex-

ample of this genre of polemical ethnohistory writing is Jack Weatherford's *Indian Givers*, a popular account of American Indian cultural achievements and their impact on Europe. (Weatherford has appeared on *Larry King Live* and has won the Anthropology in the Media Award from the American Anthropological Association.) After separate chapters on the native production of silver, rubber, corn, potatoes, and other goods in precontact America, and descriptions of how those items were transferred to Europe, Weatherford steps back to explain the significance of his story:

Over the past five hundred years, human beings have sculpted a new worldwide society. . . . Indians played the decisive roles in each step to create this new society. Sometimes they acted as prime movers, other times they played equal roles with other sets of actors, and sometimes they were mere victims. . . . Somewhere in the telling of modern history . . . attention drifted away from the contribution of the Indians to the heroic stories of explorers and conquistadors. . . . The Indians disintegrated into peripheral people. They became little more than beggars on the world scene, pleading for food, for the redress of land and treaty rights, for some attention. In ignoring the Indian cultures, however, we are doing far more than merely slighting the American Indians of their earned place in history. We may be hurting ourselves because of what we have all lost.⁶

What is most striking about this excerpt is not its grandiose claims—I agree with many of them—but its self-absorption. The problem Weatherford seeks to overcome is the vulnerability of modern civilization. “We” hurt “ourselves” because “we” lost something—this concern is more significant than “merely slighting the American Indians of their earned place in history.” Weatherford has sound points to make, but his focus is neither ethnohistorical nor even ethnographic. His focus is not the history of the cultures he is describing. His focus is the American public’s understanding of its own past. He wants his presumably non-Indian audience to see the “contributions” Indian people have made to an agreed-on national narrative. His argument draws ethnohistorical materials to support a wake-up call to complacent middle-class Americans. It does not illuminate or challenge the experiences of native peoples.

Many historians, including me, can see themselves in Weatherford’s prose. Claiming that Indians represent a forgotten chapter in American life, we have written about the “relevant” chapters in their histories. These chapters illustrate national ignorance, greed, and cruelty, and they present great “contributors” to American life: Squanto, Sacajawea, Navajo Code Talkers, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Wilma Mankiller. The “great-

contributions" approach to history is a textbook staple. The "illuminating-chapters" approach is one I have employed myself. My first book, *A Final Promise*, followed this path by showing how the national reform movements of the late nineteenth century carried consequences for Indian people that were disastrous for their communities and their traditions.⁷ While shedding light on ethnohistorical change, books like these or the textbooks that celebrate Ira Hayes's contribution to the victory over Japan do not contribute to a rounded view of native life. They can provide a sharply new and provocative vision of conventional historical narratives, but they do not add substantially to an understanding of the rich, complicated history of particular cultural or ethnic communities. In fact, they suggest almost the opposite of what most ethnohistorical accounts teach. They emphasize the compatibility of Native American and traditional histories rather than point out (as ethnohistorians routinely do) that different cultures produce a plural past in which different people enact a variety of historical narratives. From an ethnohistorical perspective, "significance" is not a function of a group's contribution to national "progress."

Another path that does not need expansion is represented by books from the "contributions" school that adopt a more romantic pose, producing analyses that posit a fixed tribal or ethnic "mind" that stands stoically at the center of history, waiting to inspire and instruct the majority culture. According to this view, tribal essences may be treated cruelly or ignored in one era, but they survive through time. For these romantic polemicists, history is the interaction of fixed cultural spheres, each containing a quantity of tradition and ritual. Sometimes these spheres touch at a critical moment—as when the Iroquois and American spheres supposedly did in 1787, so the former could inspire the latter's writing of the American Constitution—while at other times the native sphere is buried and simply waiting to be discovered, as when Indian rituals are called on by people who are unrelated to their original practitioners but assume that a tribal ceremony can be prescribed like medicine and will retain its transformative power no matter where or when (or by whom) it is performed.

Bruce Johansen, writing in *Ethnohistory*, asserts that his objective in the Constitution debate is "to sketch a picture of how the American Indian example worked into the grand river of ideas that gave birth to our founding ideology." He adds, "Indigenous threads were woven into our revolutionary tapestry."⁸ Among those threads, Johansen argues, are the concepts of a sovereignty that can be divided between states and nations, the separation of powers, and perhaps the idea of liberty itself. Those who disagree with him, Johansen asserts, want "to write native people out of

history." By contrast, he asserts, his view of history proceeds through the discovery of "many voices."⁹

Two aspects of this argument are striking. First, here, as with Weatherford, the focus is the history of European and American nations, not that of native people. Johansen argues that he is addressing the problem that Indians will be written "out of history" if their discrete contributions are not recognized by a non-Indian American audience. "History" is singular; it is European and conventional American history. If the actions of the tribes are not recognized by the majority population, then the Iroquois have no contribution and they are "out of history." Nowhere in this argument is there a sense that influences on American or Iroquoian culture are fluid, multifaceted, unexpected, and unpredictable. For Johansen, contributions are fixed and tangible quantities—threads, streams—that can be identified and therefore should be identified, traced, and publicly acknowledged.

Second, one sees this essentialist version of ethnohistorical materials in the religious writings that fill so much of the shelf space in the massive bookstores that have invaded our neighborhoods and our lives in the past few years. For example, Ed McGaa's *Rainbow Tribe*, published by Harper-Collins, presents the thoughts of an "Oglala Sioux Ceremonial Leader." McGaa asserts that "global warming, acid rain, overpopulation and deforestation" require him to form a new tribe, the Rainbows, that draws its membership from all ethnic groups and from all parts of the world. "Rainbows can pursue the same natural knowledge regardless of the many diverse paths they have walked in this modern world," he writes. Even more inviting, they can practice "mother earth ceremonies" and re-create traditional tribal life. "The Rainbows . . . are actually doing and participating within the values and beneficial aspects of the past tribal ways," McGaa claims.¹⁰ Like its shelfmates, *Rainbow Tribe* speaks reverently of Black Elk and Frank Fools Crow but offers little beyond personal reflection. No effort is made to link religious ideas to the vast and complex spiritual record of the Lakotas or any other tribe. While certainly well intentioned, it is grounded neither in a community's experiences nor in concrete tribal traditions. The idea that community rituals might be divorced from their contexts and passed on to anyone wishing to stop acid rain reduces these rituals to the role of props. Clearly, the content of the affected cultural traditions has been judged less important than what they might contribute to a modern political campaign.

A third category of ethnohistory, with increasingly limited contemporary utility, is one many of us practice by default; it is properly labeled "cookbook ethnohistory." Cookbook ethnohistory is produced by those

of us who work at times and in places that are distant from the people who are our subjects. When you can't go to China, you use a Chinese cookbook. The same thing holds true for ethnohistory. In 1981, for example, a colleague and I coedited and annotated a series of letters written by E. Jane Gay during the four years that she accompanied Alice Fletcher to the Nez Perce reservation. Fletcher was the tribe's allotting agent, and Gay's letters provide a fascinating, firsthand account of the Nez Perce people as they struggled to adjust to new conditions. Written with all the best intentions by people who had "discovered" new materials but had no ties to the Nez Perce community, the book's introduction and annotations carry all the shortcomings of cookbook ethnohistory. Noting that Nez Perce villages contained "from ten to seventy-five people" and that the plateau environment made it necessary for the group to "spread itself thinly across the landscape," our introduction focused on intrusions on tribal life and shifts in the group's material living conditions.¹¹ The discussion contained no descriptions of Nez Perce religious ideas, no culture heroes other than men who dealt with the Americans, and no clues to suggest the Nez Perce understanding of the nineteenth-century events that we lined up before our readers. I mention this distant project to emphasize that stunted versions of our craft are often unavoidable.

At the same time, collapsing nuanced ethnohistory into a shorthand recipe does not only happen because of circumstances. It is also a by-product of scholarly work whose primary mission is theoretical rather than historical. My candor risks a crack in our multinational society's unity, but it also requires the admission that from the perspective of a historian, emphasizing the "ethno" rather than the "history"—that is, focusing on comparative and cultural concerns rather than specific community experiences—leads us to a cookbook version of events. These admissions are necessary when introducing (and criticizing) one of the grandest examples of cookbook ethnohistory ever written, Eric Wolf's monumental *Europe and the People without History*, published by the University of California Press in 1982.

Even though it is a classic of modern scholarship, Wolf's opus turns on a concern for cross-cultural relationships, not ethnographic insights. He writes at the outset that the "central assertion" of the book is "that the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes."¹² Wolf condemns those who separate the world into the realms of the civilized and the backward, as well as those who view Western history as a series of torch passings: Greece to Rome, Rome to Paris, Paris to London, London to Boston, and so on. In place of this whiggish positivism, he argues that we need to see the actual relationships societies had

with one another: the torchbearers took circuitous routes; they stopped for coffee; they married unexpected folk; they used new tools. The key to this more sophisticated view, Wolf argues, was ethnohistory. "The more ethnohistory we know," he writes, "the more clearly 'their' history and 'our' history emerge as part of the same history." "Black history," he adds, is not something distinctive but "a component of a common history suppressed or omitted."¹³ It is stunning to look back at that quotation fifteen years after it was published. Rather than reject the notion of progress itself, Wolf appears to be arguing for a replacement theory: the interrelated cultural systems of the world present a *common history*, understood best in the Marxist terms of power—domination, resistance, and accommodation. *Europe and the People without History*, he declares, presents "an analytical account of the development of material relations, moving simultaneously on the level of the encompassing system and on the micro level." "In this account," he adds, "both the people who claim history as their own and the people to whom history has been denied emerge as participants in the *same historical trajectory*."¹⁴ Evidently, the people who have been denied history will now be given history, positioned carefully onstage as Professor Wolf tracks everyone, European and non-European alike, through a "common trajectory"—the same history. The message of the book is not diversity but unity; our histories are not complicated and tangled but interlinked and common. The result sounds strikingly like the "contributions" version of American history: everyone plays his or her part.

Europe and the People without History is provocative, imaginative, even inspiring, but it is difficult to argue that it should be duplicated or imitated by ethnohistorians in an age of sharpening ethnic boundaries and caricatured traditions. While useful pedagogically, cookbook ethnohistory cramps ethnographic understandings in its generalizations, values certain actors over others, and erases uncomfortable aspects of the stories that might contradict Wolf's version of the "common trajectory." Wolf's structures are illuminating, but they do not speak to the polarized ethnographic arena we see before us. They do not alleviate our worries.

The common theme in these works—polemical, romantic, and cookbook—is a desire to collapse community histories for interpretive ends. Summarizing, promoting, connecting, or romanticizing ethnographic materials can be valuable. The process enables authors to make previously excluded groups "part of history" and to illuminate times and places when community traditions overlap. Weatherford, Wolf, and their less able colleagues raise Indian people to visibility, but like cabaret pianists who talk about baseball while playing their repertoire of standards, the authors engage in ultimately secondary and superficial conversations with

ethnohistorical materials; their attention is fixed on another narrative—European expansion, constitutional history, or environmental destruction. Where should our attention be fixed?

Turning to the Concrete, the Unexpected, and the Puzzling

In a phrase, back to the community experience itself. In an age of moralistic posturing and simplistic narratives of “contribution,” our goal should be to describe community lives in their own terms—terms that inevitably defy symmetrical generalization. Rather than encourage Lewis Henry Morgan’s “fellow feeling” by connecting, linking, or otherwise flattening experience, we should concentrate on the cases at hand in order to explore the distances between us. The consequence of that effort will be not to separate our lives but to recognize their common asymmetry, their universal humanity. This connection is far more important than our putative “common history.” We need to recall that simple exposition—the construction of a narrative and the relation of a story from beginning to end—brings our subjects “into history” without requiring them to fit a preordained structure or polemical goal. Our subjects are our kin, but they are separated from us by culture, language, and time; they need our attention and our deepest sensitivity; they don’t need dull academic uniforms and certificates of membership in the ranks of the noble, the heroic, the oppressed, or the enlightened. It is perhaps an artifact of the postmodern age that we no longer need to persuade each other that we have a “common trajectory.” As modernism wanes, we also find it less attractive to arrange the seats on the stage of history. The dismantling of large intellectual structures has taken place at the same time that other grand structures—encompassing worlds as diverse as finance, military alliances, and art—have lost their grip on the globe. Even if we set aside the abuses and distortions noted here, one would expect the appeal of grand theory to be waning as skyscrapers blossom in Shanghai and Poland becomes a loyal member of NATO. It seems natural, somehow, to leave larger structures momentarily aside.

At the same time, scholarship cannot abandon its responsibility to seek meaning in experience; ethnohistorians, like artists and bankers, should still be expected to interpret events by separating “significant” information from the trivial. After all, we seek descriptions that are ultimately normative. Our narratives describe actions and patterns of behavior we consider “representative” of a people, a time, or a place. There may be those who argue that all of this effort to look for new approaches is futile. They might argue that *any* narrative description flattens and distorts

experience, producing narratives that are nothing more than projections of the author's own anxieties. The remaining paragraphs of this essay should make clear my disagreement with that position and should demonstrate the distance between the descriptions I advocate and the polemical writings I suggest we set aside. We are not inmates of paper prisons, constructed solely out of autobiographical texts. Cacophony—an endless series of distinct and idiosyncratic stories—is not the only alternative to polemical ethnohistories rooted in politics or academic theory. It is possible to imagine instead an approach to ethnohistorical narratives that bends in the direction of diversity and is less certain of its conclusions. "Ethno-critic" Arnold Krupat, who has suggested a path charted between dogma and randomness, encourages us to move in this direction. Conscious of what we wish to avoid as much as what we seek, it should be possible to avoid overly neat models and narratives dependent on "connections" while standing clear of chaos.¹⁵

In constructing nonpolemical ethnohistorical narratives, we should define our goals as precisely as possible. Three of these strike me as most important. First, these new narratives should be puzzling. That is, they must be sufficiently open-ended to explore and account for (or even seek out) behavior that our theories can neither predict nor easily explain. One illustration of this quality might be drawn from the epic voyage that looms over any American historical group that gathers near the western end of the magnificent Columbia River.

Many observers have noted that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's winter at Fort Clatsop was something less than fun. Short supplies, venereal disease, rain, and fog certainly encouraged an air of pessimism and fear, but a larger, psychic uneasiness clouded the explorers' five months on the Pacific. James Ronda puts his finger on it when he observes that "until they reached the Columbia" Lewis and Clark could rely on a double stereotype of the people they encountered: Indians were either allies and customers or hostiles. In the Northwest, however, the native people didn't fit into either category. Hooked into British and inter-Indian trade networks and indifferent to the tattered trappings of American power the captains paraded before them, the people who came to Fort Clatsop were frustrating and elusive. "They were," Ronda writes, "villagers who did not farm and warriors who preferred trade to combat."¹⁶ The Corps of Discovery formed no relationship with the coastal people; they hunkered down in their camp, tried to stay dry, and waited for spring. Lewis made notes, worried over his men's behavior, and nurtured his resentment of the busy tribespeople who seemed so indifferent to his presence.

A pivotal event, recorded briefly in their journal, reveals the conse-

quence of this brooding. On 17 March 1806, on the eve of their departure for St. Louis, Lewis wrote, "We yet want another canoe, and as the Clatsops will not sell us one at a price which we can afford to give we will take one from them."¹⁷ The expedition's confiscation of the Clatsop canoe was the first act of theft and intentional deception recorded in the explorers' journal. It separated the outbound and inbound portions of the journey. The first leg had been devoted to science and diplomacy; the second would be dominated by thoughts of empire.

At the level of historical narrative, it is difficult to square this incident with the conventional view that Lewis and Clark's journey was an exercise in "undaunted courage." While a popular writer like Stephen Ambrose might dismiss the theft as inconsequential ("Lewis felt he had no choice. Perhaps he was right"), the ethnohistorian should explore its unexpectedness. If it seems out of character, perhaps our vision of our subject's character is wrong.¹⁸ But this incident also tells us something about encounters across cultural divides. In the modern context, with tribalizing forces surrounding our labors, we do not have the luxury of taking Lewis and Clark's path. We cannot ignore or disdain the behaviors we do not understand as the captains dismissed the Clatsops. Neither can we erase disturbing data by deciding that our subjects' remoteness from us somehow justifies theft of their points of view or their history. Just as Lewis's "feeling" that he had no choice is no excuse for his theft, so our feeling that we have bigger ideological fish to fry should not excuse the simplification or distortion of community histories. Instead, we should explore the forces and attitudes that create incidents we cannot explain easily; we should embrace the puzzles, not ignore them.

Almost by definition, the construction of ethnohistorical narratives leads us to consider the unfamiliar and the unexpected. Our response to these encounters cannot be to erase what confuses us or to transport a puzzling episode into some imagined "common history." Rather, the unfamiliar and unexpected should inspire reflection concerning our differences and an explanation of the puzzle that would make sense to all who participate in the incident. One example from the recent past will illustrate this observation. In October 1996 a *New York Times* writer called leaders of modern American Indian tribes who oppose archaeology "creationists," thereby implying that their concerns could be grouped with those of fundamentalist Christians who oppose the teaching of modern science in the nation's classrooms.¹⁹ Compressing a vast and complicated issue into a cliché consigns the *Times* to the rainy quarters of Captain Lewis. Like the desperate soldier who felt he had to steal, the reporter has given up on rational inquiry and retreated into self-righteous name-calling and stereo-

types. By contrast, simply to pronounce the Clatsops or others "different" and heirs to a tragic and forgotten culture is to resign ourselves to randomness, to a state of multicultural anarchy. Today we can afford neither option.

Second, new ethnohistorical narratives must accept the complexity—the tangle—of the human experiences they chronicle. Such a statement seems to offer little with which one would disagree, but the "tangle" historians of Native Americans most frequently encounter is the matter of identity, particularly tribal identity. To illustrate, let me describe an incident that occurred at the Newberry Library in the spring of 1921. Clara Smith, the curator of the library's American Indian materials, reported that "a man and a lady" presented themselves one day. "I saw at once," Ms. Smith wrote later, "that the man was Dr. Charles Eastman. . . . Dr. Eastman told me when he shook hands with me that he had wanted to see the . . . library for a long time. I told him I had something that I had wanted to show him for a long time." Clara Smith then retrieved one of the sketchbooks of Frank Blackwell Mayer, an artist who had been present at a treaty council at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, in 1851. One of the pages contained a portrait of Nancy Eastman, Charles's mother, who had died while he was still an infant.²⁰ The significance of the incident has to do with more than the library and its holdings: Nancy Eastman was the daughter of Captain Seth Eastman, a western artist, and Wakaninajin (Stands Sacred), a Santee woman with whom he lived. When Eastman left Minnesota, he abandoned his Santee family; his daughter was raised a Santee. Had the grandson lived all of his years with his family, Charles Eastman's life might have fit into some category of "Sioux" or even "Indian" experience, but the path that led him to the Newberry Library at the age of sixty-three passed through Presbyterian missions; Dartmouth College; the killing field at Wounded Knee; St. Paul, Minnesota; Amherst, Massachusetts; and a summer camp in New Hampshire. Eastman—from the West—recovered his mother in a Chicago library, fought for his community in books published in Boston, and lived the last years of his life in neither the East nor the West but in the North. He died alone in a lakeside cabin in Ontario.

Born to the status Gerald Vizenor has labeled "crossblood," Eastman spent his life crossing racial and cultural borders and reshaping his identity in a perpetual effort to make sense of himself and his ethnohistory. As a small child, he was a "hostile," fleeing the violence at Mankato; as an adolescent, he was the star mission student, pleasing his teachers with his rapid acquisition of English and his adoption of Christianity; he was the bronze, twenty-five-year-old Dartmouth freshman who embodied the late-nineteenth-century romantic image of a son of the forest "raised up"

by Christian charity; as a young man, he was the loyal native doctor, dispatched to Wounded Knee to watch a callous burial party pitch frozen bodies deep into the South Dakota soil. He wrote that his experience at Wounded Knee was "a severe ordeal for one who had so lately put all his faith in the Christian love and lofty ideals of the white man." At the end of an autobiography, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, whose title again sought to define his identity in an appealing and comprehensible manner for non-Indians, Eastman pulled back from the easy trajectory. He would not abandon his tribal past. "I am an Indian," he wrote; then he added, "I am an American." No single category would do.²¹

Critics more able than I have studied Eastman and his contemporaries, but there is a great deal we do not know, and perhaps will never know, about him. Nevertheless, it is relevant to observe that the complexity of Eastman's life cannot fit easily into a narrative of progress, a recounting of connections, or a desire to draw him into some predetermined historical narrative of American Indian contributions or achievements. His life defies both dogma and randomness, and while his may be a particularly dramatic example, it is different only in scale from those who came before him or after—people who adapted, constructed, retreated, and resisted the identities pressed on them. And what is true for individuals is no less true for communities. An axiom pronounced by one of my predecessors in this spot, Helen Hornbeck Tanner, and not as yet disproved is that no tribal village whose membership one can count and trace in detail will be found to contain only members of that tribal community. In my years of work in the archives and with native communities, I have come across countless stories of Crees, Frenchmen, Mexicans, captives, runaway soldiers, former captives, ex-teamsters, and assorted combinations of the above who were community members but (according to ethnographic wisdom) "should not" have been present. All participated in community life, each shaped an identity in relation to the community, each was a surprising part of the community's history, and each disrupted the ethnographic purity of "their" tribe. And all deserve—demand—inclusion in our narratives.

Third, acknowledging that our words are not random and that all narratives are ultimately normative, we must nevertheless struggle to provide our students and readers with stories that allow for an open vision—one that is coherent but attends to several layers of meaning and many co-existing interpretations. A marvelous example of an event that inspires this kind of open and multifaceted narrative is the dedication of the National American Indian Memorial, which took place at Fort Wadsworth at the entrance of New York Harbor on George Washington's birthday—22 February—in 1913. Planned to include a 165-foot-high statue of a Plains Indian

(the Crows claim White Man Runs Him was the model), the memorial was intended to commemorate the "free gift" of a continent by Native Americans. Press reports of the event and the memorial program published afterward by Rodman Wanamaker, its chief sponsor, emphasized the presence that day of thirty-two Indian leaders and the president of the United States. For the event's sponsors, the gathering symbolized the end of conflict between native people and the United States. It was, declared the caption for a photograph of the group published in the *New York Times*, a "group of Indian chiefs such as a camera man probably will never face again."²²

The event's white organizers made a valiant effort to fix its meaning in history. Not only was the Fort Wadsworth monument designed by whites to celebrate the European conquest of North America, but also the assembled "chiefs" who arrived from reservations across the country found themselves faced with a "Declaration of Allegiance," prepared by Wanamaker for their signature. "The Indian is fast losing his identity in the fact of the great waves of Caucasian civilization," it proclaimed, adding, "Though a conquered race, we [meaning the chiefs] hereby bury all past ill feelings." One can easily imagine a Cheyenne elder thinking to himself: "Forty-eight hours in a smoky railway coach and now this!"

I first saw the *New York Times* photograph of the memorial dedication twenty years ago, and I have come back to it many times over the years. Each return was prompted by a new project or a new question. The result is an increasingly large and complicated narrative of what took place on the day of the monument's dedication. At first, one sees only the press caption for the picture and the silliness of Wanamaker's ersatz ceremony. It is hard to think about an event that featured the president wielding a shoulder blade hoe in a top hat without smiling. Further study widens the story and reveals some of its seriousness. One notices, for example, that no women were present that day and that several of the thirty-two "chiefs" are men wearing business suits, most of these obviously a generation younger than their senior companions in traditional outfits.

Among the younger participants was Robert Yellowtail, an educated Crow rancher in his late twenties who escorted Plenty Coups and some older reservation leaders from Montana to the New York ceremony. He and the others then went on to Washington, DC, where they conducted several stormy meetings with acting commissioner F. H. Abbott (also in the picture) over the paltry return the Crows were earning from their cattle leases.²³ Another young man, wearing a headdress and a blanket wrapped casually around his street clothes, was Delos K. Lone Wolf. He was a graduate of the Carlisle Indian School, a missionary for the Meth-

odist Church, and a government employee. A decade earlier Lone Wolf had assisted his uncle and namesake, who had been the plaintiff in a suit brought by the Kiowa tribe against the secretary of the interior; the suit sought to block the implementation of a land-sale agreement that had been imposed on the Kiowas by federal bureaucrats in violation of the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge. Also present at the dedication was Reginald Oshkosh, a Menominee, another Carlisle alumnus. Oshkosh is credited with winning approval for the creation of the Menominee sawmill, one of the first tribally operated business enterprises in the country. He stood for this portrait with his colleague Mitchell Waukean, another political leader deeply involved in the tribal timber enterprise.

Scanning the thirty-two "chiefs" assembled under Wanamaker's nostalgic banner, one begins to detect the presence of narratives that contradict a theme of tribal decline. One also detects strains in the tableau of unity. Crows and Sioux stand politely away from each other, while the walrus-mustached Angus McDonald from the Flathead reservation stands alone and to one side. Son of a Scottish trader and a Salish woman, McDonald wore a kilt to the New York event. His stolid gaze gives no hint that one of his descendants would one day be president of the National Congress of American Indians or that another would found a tribal college. At the edge of the group of "chiefs" stands the superintendents of the Standing Rock and Northern Cheyenne reservations and the acting commissioner of Indian affairs.

Each new look, each new subplot, teaches us more about the dedication ceremony and amplifies the tension within its official theme of decline. Differences emerge, persuading us that we perhaps understand the event less simply at the end of our studies than at the outset. In the end, the narrative we construct of that day should encompass both domination and resistance, both decline and renewal.

Imagining a Plural Future

Former attorney general Robert Bork has written in a recent book that "multiculturalism is a . . . series of lies." One lie, he declares, is that "other cultures are equal to the culture of the West." "If the legitimacy of Eurocentric standards is denied," he adds, "there is nothing else. . . . a single set of standards is essential to a sense of what authority is legitimate, what ideas must be maintained. The alternative to Eurocentrism . . . is . . . chaos."²⁴ In Bork's view, insisting on plural understandings of the past or nuanced narratives of human experience as I have done here undermines standards that are essential for social stability. He warns that relativism

means the abandonment of norms and the ready advent of "tribal hostilities" and social fragmentation. Bork concludes, in effect, that there is no alternative to the polemical histories I suggest we set aside. In his view, pluralism leads inevitably to deterioration. "Multiculturalism," he pronounces, "is barbarism and it is bringing us to a barbarous epoch."²⁵

This voice of fear reminds us of the chauvinism that has been so powerful a force in recent history, and it suggests a conclusion. The only normative alternative to the complex and multifaceted ethnohistorical narratives I believe we need in the 1990s and beyond is an endless succession of ideological formulations that "fit" human experiences into schemes devised for other means. Be they progressive like Wolf's or reactionary like Bork's, the forces that seek to order ethnohistorical writing in a fragmented and contentious age divert us from facing the central ethnohistorical task before us: comprehending and describing as accurately as possible the lives of people and communities whose allegiance is to a variety of cultural traditions other than our own. Our goal should not be to serve one or another interpretive construct—as interesting as it may be to explore and discuss it—but to explore cultural differences through time and to help our colleagues understand the complexity of cross-cultural interaction. The outgrowth of this exploration should be self-critical narratives that question their insights even as they make them. These narratives also resist the desire to compress, essentialize, and manipulate the people who lie at the heart of their inquiries.

While recognizing that our scholarship can only approximate the reality we seek to describe, we cannot retreat to a world of randomness or self-absorption—the Amirs and their ilk will be only too happy to take our place by setting forward their own versions of the ethnohistorical past. At the same time, we should reject the fearful authoritarianism of Bork as energetically as we reject any ideology that preaches that we cannot afford our complex and mysterious puzzles. Our goal is to maintain a scholarly and intellectual arena where civil discourse and open inquiry are not solely the pastimes of scholarly societies. When successful, our efforts should undermine the escapist idea that only Eurocentrism or Marxism or romanticism can save us from chaos; our narratives should demonstrate that, while they are connected, the world's peoples have devised a dazzling universe of traditions and etched fascinating, puzzling histories into our memory. This society can teach the viability of a complicated, plural past by defending ambitious, multifaceted, and self-critical scholarship that focuses on differences rather than on commonalities. Such scholarship might in the end encourage both a "kinder feeling" and a plural future. It is our privilege to narrate unfamiliar histories others have ignored. We

should do our work with more humility than Captain Clark, who thought he saw the Pacific when he didn't, and with less fear than Robert Bork, who sees the end of a world where we see a beginning.

Notes

This essay has benefited from careful critiques by many colleagues, the most vocal of whom are Thomas Biolsi, Colin Calloway, Charles Cullen, Harvey Markowitz, and Paula Wagoner. I am grateful for all the comments and criticisms I received both at the annual meeting and afterward. I regret that my dear friend Alfonso Ortiz can no longer be included in this conversation, but I hope that some of Al's irreverence and perceptiveness is evident here and that my ideas reflect some of what he taught me.

- 1 The quotation is from *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gary E. Moulton, vol. 6 (Lincoln, NE, 1990), 33.
- 2 Leslie Henry Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee or Iroquois* (Rochester, NY, 1851), 1.
- 3 Wilcomb Washburn, "Ethnohistory: History in the Round," *Ethnohistory* 8 (1961): 31-48.
- 4 Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, pt. 3 (Berkeley, CA, 1968), 87.
- 5 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York, 1995), xvii.
- 6 Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World* (New York, 1988), 253.
- 7 Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln, NE, 1984).
- 8 Bruce Johansen, "Commentary on the Iroquois and the U.S. Constitution," *Ethnohistory* 37 (1990): 281.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 288, 289.
- 10 Ed McGaa, *Rainbow Tribe: Ordinary People Journeying on the Red Road* (New York, 1992), 19, 70, 22.
- 11 E. Jane Gay, *With the Nez Percés: Alice Fletcher in the Field, 1889-92*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie and Joan T. Mark (Lincoln, NE, 1981), xvii-xviii.
- 12 Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA, 1982), 3. None of the criticisms of this book diminishes my admiration for Wolf or obscures his ethnographic achievements in *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago, 1959). Thanks to the thoughtful criticism of Thomas Biolsi, I am reminded as well that I am not the first to wrestle with the ethnohistorical implications of Wolf's paradigm. See, for example, Gerald M. Sider, *Lumbee Indian Histories: Race, Ethnicity, and Indian Identity in the Southern United States* (New York, 1993), and Jane Schneider and Rayna Rapp, eds., *Articulating Hidden Histories: Exploring the Influence of Eric R. Wolf* (Berkeley, CA, 1995).
- 13 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 15 Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).
- 16 James P. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians* (Lincoln, NE, 1984), 202. For another, more recent example of ethnographers encountering puzzling be-

- havior, see Thomas Biolsi, "The Anthropological Construction of 'Indians,'" in *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria, Jr., and the Critique of Anthropology*, ed. Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman (Tucson, AZ, 1997), 140-45.
- 17 *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 426. See also William Nichols, "Lewis and Clark Probe the Heart of Darkness," *American Scholar* 44 (1979-80): 94-101. I am grateful to Professor Nichols for bringing the significance of this incident to my attention.
- 18 Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York, 1996), 330.
- 19 George Johnson, "Indian Tribes' Creationists Thwart Archeologists," *New York Times*, 22 October 1996, 1.
- 20 Clara Smith to Edward Ayer, 8 April 1925, Edward Ayer Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.
- 21 Charles Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian* (Boston, 1916), 114, 195. For a discussion of the culture concept and the issue of spatial disruption—a central theme in Eastman's autobiography—see Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Current Anthropology* 7 (1992): 6-23.
- 22 *New York Times*, 9 March 1913, Picture Section, part 1.
- 23 See Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805-1935* (New York, 1995), 289-90.
- 24 Robert Bork, *Slouching towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York, 1996), 311, 313.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 313.

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