An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America.

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Michael Witgen has written an important book about the indigenous history of the Western Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi Valley regions that in many ways is both an extension of and a successor to Richard White’s The Middle Ground.1 While working with White’s conception of the middle ground, Witgen narrows its applicability from a region-wide phenomenon to a set of specific interactions between colonists and indigenous peoples. He argues that a “Native New World” (17) formed in the second half of the seventeenth century as Natives encountered “new peoples and things” moving “between the colonized east coast of North America and the indigenous western interior” (116).

Two-thirds of the book and five of the seven principal chapters focus on the period from the 1660s to the 1730s, with beautifully told vignettes that foreground indigenous actors and reveal the complexity of regional politics in this place and time. Witgen’s main point, compellingly argued, is that the Native New World emerged as a self-directed process that was not, as White suggested, cocreated by a small number of French traders, travelers, soldiers, and priests. Witgen makes a significant contribution to the field by revealing how, until the second half of the nineteenth century, Native cultural priorities determined the place that French, English, and later American priests, traders, soldiers, and officials would have in the region. Witgen’s history, then, is less one of mutual accommodation and much more one of adaptation by European newcomers to the indigenous realities of the North American interior. Because of their small numbers, colonizers could project no more than “an illusion of empire” (314). For example, by the end of the seventeenth century, the “Dakota-Yankton/Yanktonai-Lakota alliance network” alone “encompassed at a minimum twenty-four thousand people” (165), twice the entire population of New France.

To reorient the reader, Witgen consciously uses indigenous terms of identity: Anishinaabeg instead of Ojibwa, Chippewa, or Ottawa; Muskegowlack-athinuwick for Lowland Cree; Wyandot for Huron. He also uses Native places names, mainly in Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabeg: Gichigamiing instead of Lake Superior, Odaawaa Zaaga’igan for Ottawa Lake or Lac Courte Oreilles, Shagwaamikong for La Pointe. In place of the French pays d’en haut, he uses “Anishinaabewaki,”

which means “Indian country” (32). Witgen persuasively demonstrates through rereading of narratives by “English traders and French missionaries . . . that the real source of power in the western interior of North America was not empire or even the larger Atlantic World, but rather a Native political imaginary that determined the meanings attached to space, place, and collective and individual identity” (138).

Like Ned Blackhawk’s *Violence over the Land*, Kathleen DuVal’s *The Native Ground*, and Pekka Hämäläinen’s *Comanche Empire*, Witgen’s approach puts indigenous history front and center.² Witgen’s attention to indigenous languages and cognitive categories enables him to provide a more nuanced understanding of indigenous history than White was able to do, despite relying on many of the same translated primary sources. Witgen pays attention to how politics operated through significant indigenous political categories such as Anishinaabe *doodemag* (clans or kinship networks) or Dakota *oyate* (council fire) and *tiyospaye* (lodge group). These concepts help him explain the complexity of regional politics: how, for example, one Dakota oyate, comprising several lodge groups, formed an alliance with some Anishinaabe doodemag, while other oyate and doodemag, on both sides, were steadfastly opposed.

Perhaps Witgen’s most significant intervention is explaining the Anishinaabe distinction between *inawemaagen* (relatives) and *meyaagizid* (strangers or foreigners), showing that “new people entered this world according to these categories” (33). Inawemaagen were insiders, including biological kin, allies, and trading partners. Meyaagizid were outsiders and thus subject to violence. This distinction complicates the middle ground, revealing it as a place where French colonists had to become inawemaagen in order to survive, thus “taking on the rights and responsibilities that this relationship implied” (33). Witgen uses this insight to reveal the cultural logic behind indigenous actions that otherwise could be (and have been) misinterpreted as evidence of colonial power.

Two examples demonstrate the usefulness of this approach. First, Witgen’s narrative opens in 1660 with a rich description of an important spring ceremony held at a village on the shores of Odaawaa Zaaga’igan and hosted by the Anishinaabeg of Gichigamiing. This event was recorded in the writings of the French trader Pierre Radisson. French and English appear in this Native New World as sources of interesting goods and of particular types of *manidoo* (spiritual/spirit power) but not as particularly significant actors, despite claims to be so in letters and reports to officials.

back home. Rather than taking at face value Radisson’s claim to have organized the event and brokered a peace between the Anishinaabeg and their longtime enemies, the Dakota and Muskekowuck-athinuwick, Witgen reads against the grain to tease out how the Anishinaabeg used specific rituals “to transform their enemies into relatives” (31) through arranged marriages, the exchange of gifts, and the collective burial of their dead in one grave. Radisson is nowhere in sight. Witgen then situates the source, Radisson’s narrative, as part of the genre of “narratives of discovery” (35) before returning to the same event once again by the end of the chapter to assess Radisson’s claim that he and Médard Chouart Des Groseilliers had brokered the peace themselves to increase French access to furs. In this retelling, the presence of the French and their trade goods are understood as important to the peace process because the Anishinaabeg were willing to offer the Dakota and the Muskekowuck-athinuwick “access to the manidoo of New France” (63), as one would for family. These alliances, though, as Witgen explains, “evolved as a part of the existing social world that defined Anishinaabewaki, rather than as the outcome of a process of discovery and expansion on the part of the French Empire” (64).

Once the French became inawemaagen, they increasingly found themselves in awkward situations that required creative solutions. However, there is a clear distinction in Witgen’s writing between French fur traders, who, because of their long residency in the region, understood the implications and responsibilities of being inawemaagen, and transient colonial officials, who often did not. Try as these officials would, they could not make all Great Lakes peoples conceive of themselves as the children of the governor of New France (Onontio). The Dakota–Western Anishinaabe alliance operated well outside of French control and became a “new constellation of Native power in the west that undermined the French alliance system” (167). Many central Anishinaabeg were opposed to alliance with the Dakota and wanted the French to choose sides; several soon forced the issue. In 1683 two French traders traveling southwest of Lake Superior were deliberately killed by several Anishinaabeg opposed to the alliance with the Dakota, in order to send a message to the French. The French governor’s delegate in the region, Daniel Du Lhut, attempted to “act like a father” (201)—to discipline those responsible while protecting his relationships with and right to trade with the Dakota and Western Anishinaabeg. Du Lhut did not want to pick sides; instead he chose to arrest and try the killers for murder. The elders’ council refused to act like a court as Du Lhut wished; instead they told the accused that “the Frenchman is now the master of your bodies” (203). Du Lhut then executed the accused “in front of an audience of . . . at least four hundred Native warriors” (206). As Witgen explains, the fact that Du Lhut could not only do this but live to tell the tale had
less to do with French power and more to do with the politics of doodem relationships. The accused were of two doodemag that were not part of the Dakota–Western Anishinaabe alliance, while Oumamens, the prominent Amikwa (Beaver) ogimaa from eastern Lake Huron who supported Du Lhut in council, was related through his doodem to those who were.

Witgen’s commendable use of a wide range of sources makes these new interpretations possible. His attention to indigenous languages, Anishinaabemowin primarily, but also Cree and Siouan languages, is crucial. There are multiple instances of Witgen’s ability to identify the name of an Anishinaabe doodem or place from a garbled French transcription of an Anishinaabe word. For example, he demonstrates that Outoulibis and Tabitibies are two French efforts to write the same thing phonetically: apittipi anissina pe, or Blue-water people, from the “Moose River system” (389 n. 42) that drains into Hudson Bay. By working with recent anthropological and Native studies scholarship and language specialists, Witgen has, in addition to offering the broader interpretative frame of a Native New World in this book, contributed specific knowledge to the field. It is fair to say that thanks to the work of Witgen, along with Anton Treuer, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, Cary Miller, Tracy Neal Leavelle, Brett Rushforth, and others, historians will no longer be able to exempt themselves from the requirement to study indigenous languages when writing indigenous histories or histories of indigenous-newcomer relations.3 Witgen’s Great Lakes region is richer, too, for the inclusion of the Hudson’s Bay Company into his narrative. While the story of French and English rivalry for control of the fur trade is a staple of Canadian historiography, Witgen argues for its significance to American history as well, and in tracing out the movements of peoples and goods from Hudson and James Bay posts to the Great Lakes region and beyond he demonstrates how all of these nonstate societies creatively used alliances constructed through the idiom of kinship to exert influence and control over a vast region and effectively thwart imperial ambitions.

There are some quibbles with this otherwise valuable monograph. Women and gender are conspicuously absent from Witgen’s analysis and yet there are passing references in his text to daughters being exchanged in marriage and women exchanged as slaves. Kinship alliances require the establishment of kinship ties, including affinal ones. So what role did

women play in maintaining these alliances? Work by Sylvia Van Kirk about
the role of women in the fur trade and more recently by Miller about the
importance of women’s councils should not be ignored. Since Anishinaabe
women, for example, kept their doodem identities when they married,
every husband and wife had two sets of doodem kin on whom they could
depend for support.

Witgen also struggles to define Anishinaabe doodemag—at times
using it as a substitute for nation or tribe. But again, this underscores the
importance of gender as a category of analysis. A gathering of the Amikwa
or Beaver doodem, for example, would include wives from different doo-
demag. This reality complicates our reading of primary sources. When, as
Witgen describes, the Sauteurs reported to the Amikwa that the “Renards
and Saki” had attacked and “killed an Amikois [Amikwa], a Sauteur, a
Cree, and two Gens des Terres” (282), was this a report on an international
gathering of politically distinct peoples or family groupings of husbands
and wives? A gendered reading would suggest the latter. And there are
times when Witgen resorts to generalizations about Europeans in the seven-
eventh and eighteenth centuries that belie the historical complexity of that
century and its peoples. For example, in attempting to explain the differ-
ence between Anishinaabe and European social formations, Witgen writes,
“The social organization of European empires centered on the nation,
which provided a unified and hierarchical structure for organizing collec-
tive social identity and mobilizing political power” (19). It would be more
accurate to say that the nation in Europe was an idea in formation during
this colonial period.

When one casts a wide net, as Witgen does, sometimes factual errors
are also introduced, in this case revealing in the last chapter Witgen’s
lack of familiarity with nineteenth-century Canadian history. Describing
Lower Canada as a separate entity from Quebec (Lower Canada became
a province of Quebec after Confederation in 1867) or asserting that the
English population of Lower Canada was in the majority (it was not) are
minor irritations, but they do not detract from Witgen’s overall argu-
ment. However, it is unfortunate that Witgen chose to end this otherwise
very good work with an epilogue titled “Louis Riel, Native Founding
Father,” which contains some substantial errors. In this epilogue Witgen

4 Sylvia Van Kirk, “Many Tender Ties”: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western
Canada, 1670–1870 (Winnipeg, 1980); Miller, Ogimaag, 66–71.
5 Heidi Bohaker, “Nindoodemag: The Significance of Algonquian Kinship
Networks in the Eastern Great Lakes Region, 1600–1701,” William and Mary
6 David A. Bell, The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800
(Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837 (Lon-
don, 2003).
introduces a discussion of Riel, a Métis leader of French, Anishinaabe, and Cree heritage, both as a symbol of the Native New World and as an important call to understand “the expansion of the American and Canadian nation-states into these territories as closely related historical experiences” (364). While I agree with the second, his first point is highly problematic. Witgen writes that Riel was executed shortly after he helped bring the province of Manitoba into Confederation in 1870. But Riel was not executed until fifteen years later, after he had led a second uprising known as the Northwest Rebellion in 1885, farther west in what is now the province of Saskatchewan. And that execution was not about his role as a “native founding father.” Rather, it sparked the first major crisis in French-English relations within the new Dominion of Canada, as the people of Quebec saw it as the execution of a clearly mentally unstable French-Canadian Catholic by a vengeful English Protestant majority. And then Riel faded into the historiographical background. The celebration of Riel’s indigeneity as a Métis leader, and his rehabilitation as a Father of Confederation, would wait until the late twentieth century.7

Nevertheless, Witgen’s error here does not detract from either the value of the book’s main chapters or the validity of two final points he makes in the conclusion. First, he joins Alan Taylor in arguing for the importance of the intertwined histories of the northern borderlands in American history.8 Second, he shows that in both Canada and the United States in the nineteenth century, “indigenous peoples” (and he includes Métis here), “so pivotal to the evolution of modern North America, were coercively refashioned as cultural outsiders in the very world that they had helped to create” (368). For this and so much more, Witgen deserves to be praised.