

REMOVALS

Nineteenth-Century American Literature &
the Politics of Indian Affairs

Lucy Maddox

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*Nineteenth-Century
American Literature and
the Politics of Indian Affairs*

LUCY MADDOX

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Everyone should have such collaborators.

Washington, D.C.
April 1991

L. M.

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Introduction

THE FULL STORY of Indian-white relations in North America is beginning to be told. But the emerging story is already taking two different forms. One version is being produced through the collaboration of a variety of traditionally white academic disciplines: history, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, even literary criticism. The same matter is simultaneously being treated from an Indian perspective, through academic programs in Native American Studies and, especially, through the recent proliferation of works by Indian writers that mark what has already been called the Native American Renaissance. Thus far, however, the two versions of the story remain separated by fundamental differences in the very nature of their structure and their discourse; it is still difficult to imagine a merging of the two into a single text. The definition of American history that the academy has always found most usable has been able, so far, to accommodate only an admittedly ethnocentric version of Indian history. Similarly, our working definition of American literature has not yet been able to accommodate Indian texts, oral or written, very comfortably. And these prevailing definitions, of course, not only determine their own discourses but continue to privilege them over competing ones.

The problem of bringing the two discourses together remains a

troubling one. Those of us who are in the relevant academic disciplines have still not made up our collective mind about whether it is appropriate to aim for a converging of the two versions of the story, or even whether such a convergence is possible. We have not, in fact, even decided whether the privileging of one discourse over another is a form of cultural arrogance that limits our knowledge, or whether it is the most logical and efficient way of extending the knowledge we already have.

The polarizing of positions that questions of this kind can produce is well illustrated by the first two essays in a collection called *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, a book that sets out to address the specific question of whether a single version of American history is possible or whether there must always be at least two American histories. In the first essay, a historian argues that it is not only possible but necessary for academic historians to unlearn their ethnocentric methodologies and learn to merge Indian and white "metaphysics" into a single, "bicultural" understanding of the past: "The time is auspicious to equip ourselves with the linguist's and ethnologist's tools and to return to the sources and find the Indian as he defined himself and his world."¹ In the second essay, another historian argues that even if such a "bicultural" approach were possible, it would not produce valid history-writing:

Only the end of writing formal history as we know it can truly accomplish the cross-cultural goals implied by the metaphysics of writing Indian history. Can we, however, throw out the ethnocentric bathwater of Indian history without also tossing out the baby of history? . . . History-as-understanding and history-writing are parts of specific cultures, hence ethnocentric in their presuppositions about the nature and ordering of the past-as-lived. Without these constraints, there can be no formal history-as-now-understood; with those constraints there can be no New Indian History as some envision its larger goals of cross-cultural respect and understanding.²

In short, according to this latter argument, American history (as text) cannot accommodate Indian history (as text) without destroying itself. The two discourses must remain separate; and if they do, the passage implies, then it follows that, at least among academic his-

torians, the relative values of the (white) baby and the (Indian) bath-water will remain constant.

Among teachers and critics of literature, there are similar differences of opinion about whether Indian texts, either oral or written, can be made accessible to a non-Indian audience through any of the methodological approaches currently available in academic literary studies—or, for that matter, whether many of the Indian materials can even be legitimately treated as *texts*. Arnold Krupat represents one side of this argument when he says that although “to speak of post-structuralist theory in conjunction with Native American literatures may seem as odd as serving dog stew with *sauce bearnaise*” the emphasis in poststructuralist theory on interpretive openness and indeterminate meanings actually makes it a useful and appropriate methodological tool for illuminating Indian literatures, especially oral narratives.³ On the other side of the argument are those who, like Elaine Jahner, caution that “critics need to be aware that conventional approaches and vocabulary are as likely to obscure as to illuminate” both the form and the content of Native literature, oral or written.⁴ The most radical argument against the position represented by Krupat can be illustrated, very succinctly, by Gerald Vizenor’s insistence that “academic evidence is a euphemism for linguistic colonization of oral traditions and popular memories.”⁵

This contemporary argument among academics about the compatibility of competing discourses actually has a long and fairly stable genealogy; what distinguishes this newest version of the argument from previous versions is primarily its narrowness, its location almost entirely within the academic community. Although the argument now focuses on the admission of Native American history and literature(s) into the canon and the curriculum, what was at issue in earlier phases of the debate was the admission of the Indian people themselves into the structures of American society. Then as now, the voices that have dominated the discussion have begun with the assumption that accommodation really means the complete assimilation of the Indians into white institutions. And over and over, those voices have declared that they find such accommodation ultimately impossible. As President James Monroe put it in 1825, “Experience

has clearly demonstrated that, in their present state, it is impossible to incorporate [the Indians] in such masses, in any form whatever, into our systems."⁶ Monroe's conclusion was echoed by John Quincy Adams in 1828; in the history of official relations with the Indians to that date, Adams said, "the ultimate design was to incorporate in our own institutions that portion of them which could be converted to the state of civilization."⁷ Having given up on the design of incorporation, both Monroe and Adams eventually settled on a new design: the removal of the Indians beyond the limits of the "systems" and "institutions" of white civilization.

In the current debates over the status of Indian literature and history in our academic institutions, we have not, I believe, fully acknowledged just how long the basic terms of the argument have been in place. Nor have we fully recognized something even more important: the "Indian question" that now seems mildly perplexing to some of us was much more deeply perplexing to those who were concerned with the definitions of American literature and history in the first half of the nineteenth century, when those definitions were still being constructed and when the fate of the Indians was still being decided. The question of whether Indians and whites could inhabit the same territory, physical or metaphysical, was unavoidable as long as the Indians continued to defend their right to live (and to maintain their tribal identities) within the territorial limits of the United States; it was a question that had to be confronted by anyone who participated—whether by moving to the frontier, by becoming a candidate for office or even voting for one, or by publishing a book—in the extension of the claims of white culture to full possession of the country. Yet, in our reading of nineteenth-century literature, we have generally assumed that only a handful of writers were actively concerned with the politics or the ideology of Indian-white relationships, and that the only major one among them was James Fenimore Cooper; the rest were minor frontier writers, western local colorists, or negligible sentimentalists. Such an assumption is, I believe, the equivalent of concluding that the only American works of the 1960s and 1970s to which the Vietnam War is relevant are those that are set in Vietnam.

My study of "the Indian question" focuses primarily (although not exclusively) on the period between 1830, when the U.S. Congress officially sanctioned the creation of an Indian Territory west of the Mississippi and the removal of the Indians still living east of the Mississippi, and the middle of the 1850s, when the attention of the general public shifted from the problem of the Indians to the problems of slavery and sectionalism. The establishment of the Indian Territory in 1830 was clearly an attempt to obviate the problem of Indian-white incompatibility by simply drawing dividing lines across the map of North America. But it was just as clearly a shortsighted attempt (or perhaps a deliberately temporizing expedient), since white Americans soon began to push beyond the geographical boundaries they had set for themselves, insisting that wherever they went, they brought with them the rights and privileges to which they were entitled by virtue of their status as citizens of the United States. Whereas the presence of Indians in the East had originally been an obstacle to the construction of a morally defensible American polity and to the enforcement of federal and state laws, their presence in the West quickly proved to be an obstacle to white America's claims to the moral right to unhindered expansion across the continent. The Indians, that is, continued to frustrate white America's efforts—official and unofficial—to include them within the discourse of American nationalism and, concomitantly, within the structure of the country's laws and institutions.

In his report for the year 1851, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs quoted with exasperated approval the remark of a former attorney general of the United States that "there is nothing in the whole compass of our laws so anomalous, so hard to bring within any precise definition, or any logical and scientific arrangement of principles, as the relation in which the Indians stand towards this government and those of the States."⁸

The jury-rigging of federal policy toward the Indians that continued throughout the nineteenth century is evidence of just how imprecise and inadequate were the "principles" upon which generations of public officials attempted to construct a workable and codifiable relationship between white Americans and the Indians. The

nature of the problem is suggested by the attorney general's own language: the official efforts to structure arrangements among people that could be called "precise," "logical," or "scientific"—the kinds of arrangements that, taken together, constitute "government"—were continually undermined by the persistent otherness of the Indians. The relationship between the U.S. government and the Indians was one that could not, from the perspective of those within the government, be clarified or stabilized through the imposition of an available discourse. There was no discourse that seemed able to put *Indians* and *government* together in any precise or logical relation except that of opposition.

The frustration expressed by the attorney general and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs is the result of their attempt to find what we might now call a master narrative, a discourse that would eliminate or submerge oppositions through new rhetorical arrangements and new definitions. Their need for the master narrative was widely shared not only by others who wrote about the "Indian question" in the nineteenth century but by those who wrote more generally about the evolution of culture and polity, as well as about the creation of policy, in America. What emerges from our rereading of some of this writing is the recognition that most of those who wrote shared the assumption that oppositions should and would be dissolved in the new nation, as the union became more perfect. Opposition ought to yield, in the natural course of things, to accommodation.

The yoking of oppositional or incompatible terms is characteristic of most of the rhetoric generated by "the Indian question" in the nineteenth century; the logical result of this kind of yoking is that the narratives in which the terms are contained almost inevitably conclude with the posing of either-or statements. No matter where the writer begins, and no matter what his or her sympathies, nineteenth-century analyses of "the Indian question" almost always end, as we shall see, at the virtually impassable stone wall of the choice between civilization and extinction for the Indians. The terms *civilization* and *extinction* are themselves rhetorically oppositional, in the sense that they are drawn from different discourses and therefore stand in a relation to each other that resists mediation or accom-

modation; the only way of linking the two terms within a rhetorically coherent statement—and therefore within an ideologically consistent discourse—is by use of the word *or*. And although the two terms are incompatible with each other, each invites combination with a series of other terms with which it is fully compatible; when one speaks of *civilization*, to take the most important example, one can also speak of *nations*, but when one speaks of *extinction*, the compatible terms are *tribe* or *race*. The stories of nations belong to the domain of modern history, while the stories of tribes and races belong more properly to the domain of ancient history (the tribes of Israel, the aboriginal races) or even natural history (the finny tribe, the feathered tribe).⁹ The nations of the civilized world may rise and fall, but only tribes and races become extinct.

In his *History of the United States* (1840), George Bancroft raised the question of whether the Indians might have once belonged to nations and then have reverted to tribalism as the result of an extended period of migration. On the basis of his knowledge of Indian languages, Bancroft was able to refute the reversion hypothesis:

It has been asked if our Indians were not the wrecks of more civilized nations. Their language refutes the hypothesis; every one of its forms is a witness that their ancestors were, like themselves, not yet disenthralled from nature. The character of each Indian language is one continued, universal, all-pervading synthesis. They to whom these languages were the mother tongue, were still in that earliest stage of intellectual culture where reflection has not begun.¹⁰

The fact that Bancroft was prepared to entertain the idea that Indian people once lived in “civilized nations,” even if he was also prepared to reject the idea, suggests the binary nature of his conception of the possible modes of social and political organization. Either the Indians have always been tribal (and therefore uncivilized), or they once were organized into nations.

The nineteenth-century writing about the Indians that the following chapters examine constantly illustrates the difficulty white Americans had in conceiving of living Indian people as belonging to nations—either to their own Indian nations or to the new republican

nation that white America was consciously constructing for itself. Indians are almost always referred to in this writing as belonging to race and tribe; eventually (at least by 1849), the Indians on reservations are even being referred to in official writing as "our colonized tribes."¹¹ This identification of Indian people as tribal is not in itself necessarily problematic as a form of ethnographic description. The problem is that the peculiarly unitarian character of American new-nation ideology, and of the rhetoric it produced, meant that tribalism was generally represented as antithetical to the entire project of nation-building.¹² The persistence of the notion that their tribal identity precluded Indian people from being or becoming members of a nation—that is, citizens—is reflected in the report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1856, who noted approvingly that one object of federal treaty-making with the Indians had been "the gradual abolition of the tribal character." (He also noted, in the context of discussing treaties and tribalism, that in the previous three and a half years the process of treaty-making had succeeded in removing from Indian control about 174 million acres of land, "either by the extinguishment of the original Indian title, or by the re-acquisition of lands granted to Indian tribes by former treaties. . . .")¹³ If tribal people could not qualify as citizens of a nation, neither should their claims to proprietorship of land within the geographical limits of the nation be considered valid.

In the chapters that follow, I have attempted first (Chapter 1) to restore the context of the public debates on the question of the Indians' place in the American nation and in the new American literature—debates that were both extensive and intensive—by surveying briefly the issues that were discussed in print, especially between 1830 and the middle of the 1850s. Then (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) I have reconsidered some nineteenth-century texts, including some very familiar ones, within that restored context in order to illustrate the ways in which they were responsive to the political, philosophical, and aesthetic issues raised by the Indian debates. My reconsideration of these texts has been grounded in two basic assumptions: first, that whether the American writer in this period wanted to address the question of the place of the Indians in national culture or to avoid

it, there were few subjects that she or he could write about without in some way engaging it; and second, that as a result of that engagement, the American writer was, whether intentionally or not, contributing to the process of constructing a new-nation ideology, a process that both necessitated the removal or supplanting of inappropriate forms of discourse and justified the physical removal and supplanting of the Indians.

Although my purpose in Chapter 1 is to offer a general survey or representative sampling of contributions to the debates on the question of the incorporation of Indians into American public discourse, the succeeding chapters, in which I offer readings of specific literary texts, are not meant to constitute a survey. I have chosen instead to concentrate in these chapters on a few texts by a few writers, most of whom one would not ordinarily place on a list of American writers who addressed, or were even significantly influenced by, "the Indian question." All of these writers—Herman Melville, Catherine Sedgwick, Lydia Maria Child, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Francis Parkman—were New Englanders and therefore geographically distanced from the sites of actual physical conflict between Indians and white Americans. At the same time, because all were located at or near the center—both geographical and intellectual—of American literary production, the many implications of "the Indian question" were necessarily familiar and close to them and figured in their writing in ways that have not yet been closely examined.

In my own examination of these writers, I have concentrated on demonstrating the extent to which all of them were bound by the ideological and discursive limits imposed by the rhetoric of the civilization-or-extinction argument. I begin with Melville, and I give Melville the most space in the book because he is the one of the seven who is the most clearly aware of those limits; he is, therefore, also the only one who is visibly disturbed by a conviction that the American writer is legitimated only by acknowledging the limits and working within them. Of the seven, only Melville offers anything like a radical critique of the civilization-or-extinction argument (and its rhetoric), and even he is ultimately incapable of dislodging or re-

placing the models he is resisting. He can offer his critique only by populating his texts with significantly silent presences who, by their silence, call attention to their exclusion from American public discourse.

Melville, therefore, helps to define for us certain constraints within which the American writer was working, whether consciously or unconsciously, during much of the nineteenth century. He also helps us to recognize the complex and problematic relationship between the writing that was being produced in New England and the writing that was being generated on the American frontiers. The definition of that relationship was, as Melville seems to have known, deeply political in its nature and of critical importance to both the writer and the ordinary citizen, since it had everything to do with the larger definition of America as a nation and as a culture with claims to legitimacy.

In offering the survey that constitutes Chapter 1 (especially the first half of the chapter), I am going over some territory and summoning some arguments that will be familiar to many readers. I do so, at the risk of redundancy, because of my awareness that the territory I am recrossing, as familiar as it may be to some, has not yet been sufficiently defined as an appropriate site for locating an interpretation of canonical American texts. An important part of my purpose in this book is to argue that the history of white America's response to "the Indian question" is a history that *ought* to be familiar not just to specialists but to every serious and responsible reader of nineteenth-century American literature.

In the first chapter especially, but throughout the rest of the book as well, I am drawing on my reading of many other critics and interpreters whose work has made it possible for me to shape my own argument; my project is clearly grounded, as any project in literary or cultural criticism must be, in the work that has been done by others. Some of this work is acknowledged in the chapters that follow or in the notes; some of it is not. Among the critical books to which I am most indebted are several that, I am sure, will be as indispensable to the education of future writers on the subject of Indian-white relations as they were to me. These include Robert Berkhofer's *The*

White Man's Indian; Richard Drinnon's *Facing West*; Leslie Fiedler's *The Return of the Vanishing American*; Reginald Horsman's *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Albert Keiser's *The Indian in American Literature*; Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilization*; and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*.

These and other books provided me with essential information and with a series of theoretical perspectives that were useful to me in situating my own argument; however, it was my reading of a different body of work—produced by Native American writers, many of them writing outside the academy—that most consistently energized me as a critic and persuaded me of the necessity for a revisioning of the contexts within which the canonical literature of the nineteenth century was produced. The list of Native American writers whose work radically changed my thinking is a long one; it begins with Paula Gunn Allen, Vine Deloria, Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, Beatrice Medicine, Simon Ortiz, Wendy Rose, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor.