



# FORGING THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

Volume I ♦ Readings in United States History to 1877

SECOND EDITION

JOHN R. M. WILSON

# Forging the American Character

Readings in United States History  
to 1877

Volume I

Second Edition

**John R. M. Wilson, Editor**  
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# Preface

A long United States history textbook may run to 1,000 pages. Although that length may seem intimidating to students, it does not allow extended treatment of a wide variety of fascinating topics. A book of readings does. The theme of this reader is the American character. I trust that the concept will illuminate American history without being overly restrictive.

A reader like this enables students to explore subjects ranging from the moral aspects of the American “invasion” of 1492 to the debate over multiculturalism in the 1990s, from the horrors of life and death in the Civil War to the national obsession with the Kennedy assassination. The nature of the selections varies. Some offer new interpretations of the past; others introduce readers to new findings; while still others synthesize the writings in a historical subfield. The readings do not pretend to cover every possible topic; rather, they explore various areas that shed light on the American character yet suffer comparative neglect in many textbooks.

Trying to define the American character can be very frustrating. No one has been able to develop a widely accepted definition of the concept. Authors often use different meanings in the same piece of writing—for instance, referring interchangeably to the character of the individual American and to the character of the mass of Americans. National character, especially in a country as big and heterogeneous as the United States, can be useful only as a large-scale generalization to cover the most prominent characteristics of the national culture. Some scholars have criticized efforts to capture the national character, suggesting that in many cases they may be merely intellectually sophisticated forms of racial stereotyping.

Yet the practice persists, perhaps because it is so convenient to group people and thus make them more manageable. Perhaps the most useful definition would be that national character means generalizations about a nation or nationality developed to elucidate the ways in which it is distinctive.

A national character suggests tendencies on the part of a people, not fixed positions held by everyone. It means that, all things being equal, the people of a given nation are more likely to believe or behave a certain way than those of another nation. There is an inherent comparison implied in suggesting a national character, although studies of the American character generally tend not to explicitly explore other nationalities.

The genre began very early in the history of the United States with the publication in 1782 of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*; the immigrant asked the famous question, "What then is this American, this new man?" Crèvecoeur's pioneering inquiry into the American character ran up against geographical and cultural heterogeneity, which has become a vastly greater obstacle in the succeeding two centuries. The most famous inquiry came in the 1830s when Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* and provided penetrating French insight into the nature of the conforming, religious, liberty-loving joiners he observed. Over the years, historians and other social observers have sought to explain American distinctiveness through such characteristics as abundance, exposure to the frontier, pragmatism, belief in progress, and mobility. They have debated the relative influence of mother England and the wilderness, and in so doing have illuminated American self-understanding—without providing any final answers. The quest continues, as the popularity of *Habits of the Heart* (1985) attests.

This collection suggests that Americans have defined themselves not only by what they are, but by what they are not, and the latter negative definition is an important component of Americanism. By and large, Native Americans have not been allowed to share their heritage with Europeans. For other nationalities, conformity to the English cultural model was long required for acceptance in the United States, although a more pluralistic, open society seems to be emerging in the late twentieth century. Yet over the past half century, the increasingly diverse American population has frequently defined itself less by what it is than by what it is not—as antifascist and, especially, anticommunist.

This book should help to clarify some of the various forces, ideologies, people, and experiences that have helped forge today's distinctive American character. If, as Socrates said, the unexamined life is not worth living, then this excursion into the life of a people should help make it more worth living.

In closing, I'd like to thank the reviewers of my book, John Powell, Pennsylvania State University at Erie, and Anthony N. Stranges, Texas A&M University.

John R. M. Wilson  
Costa Mesa, California

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peoples, including Indians, had been conquering their neighbors since the beginning of history. The invasion of America was hardly on a different moral plane than those of the Mongols or the Arabs or Romans, or even of the Inca or Aztecs. Further, it is difficult to blame Europeans for spreading diseases that they didn't understand themselves.

James Axtell, Kenan Professor of Humanities at the College of William and Mary, chaired the American Historical Association's Columbus Quincentenary Committee. His own reflections, some of which are summarized in this article, are explored at length in his 1992 book *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*. In short, he calls upon students of history to exercise care in making sweeping judgments about the past. Though they are emotionally satisfying, they do not advance the cause of truth unless handled very carefully. His cautionary voice merits serious consideration.

The chair of the American Historical Association's Columbus Quincentenary Committee tried to keep track of all the Columbian and encounter scholarship that has been pouring forth since 1986. This material included a large number of articles, newsletters, and manifestoes by Native Americans and by people and groups—usually on the political left—who wished to protest or forestall the celebratory nature of the quincentenary.

Many scholars who have endeavored to put native peoples on America's historical map and to get them a fair hearing at the bar of both justice and history have been struck by the frequency of the use of the word "genocide" to characterize European treatment of the natives in the colonial period. In the counter-Columbus, counter-celebratory literature, genocide has become the dominant abbreviation or code word to describe Columbus and his successors' relations with the Indians.

For example, an ad hoc group of "progressive" educators, ecologists, and community activists who formed "The Columbus in Context Clearinghouse," proposed to "celebrate the resistance of Native Americans to 500 years of genocide."

Jan Elliott, the editor of *Indigenous Thought*, a Florida-based anti-Columbus newspaper, described the loss of American Indian life as "the biggest holocaust in history" and called Columbus a "mass murderer." Elliott wrote in the first issue that "Celebrating Columbus's 'discovery' of America is analogous to celebrating Hitler's holocaust." Indian activist Russell Means further raised the moral ante. When he protested an exhibition on Spanish-Indian encounters at the Florida State Museum, he told the press that "Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent." The governing board of the National Council of Churches of Christ declared that after Columbus, America was the scene of "invasion, genocide,



slavery, 'ecocide,'" and the "rape of mineral as well as natural resources." Genocide appeared nine times in their five-page statement.

How should historians, teachers, and students of history respond to this characterization? We should ask five rather standard questions about it: How is genocide defined by its users? What historical evidence do they adduce to support their indictment? What counterfactual evidence have they explored? In their indictment, who, *specifically*, is judged guilty? Why is the word so widely used?

First, in the protest literature, "genocide" is never defined, perhaps on the assumption that we all know what it means. But do we? The word was coined in 1944 to describe the infamous Nazi attempts to annihilate the Jews, a group they chose to characterize as a biological subspecies or race. Webster's definition of genocide is not much help: the use "of deliberate, systematic measures toward the extermination of a racial, political, or cultural group." One of the best and most comprehensive definitions in the large literature of genocide is that of Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonasohn: "Genocide is a form of one-sided *mass* killing in which a *state* or other authority *intends* to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the *perpetrator*." Such a definition excludes from consideration victims—civilian or military—of two-sided war, of any natural or unintended disaster, and of any individuals or "loose cannons" acting outside the orders of the state or political authority. The last are, more precisely, homicidal maniacs or mass murderers who massacre innocent people.

The examples most frequently adduced to support the charge of genocide are the Spaniards' wanton killing of Taínos in the gold-bearing interior of Hispaniola during Columbus's inept governorship in 1494–95, the high body counts of Indian warriors during the conquests of Peru and Mexico, and the precipitous decline of native populations in subsequent decades. These examples do not amount to relevant or unambiguous evidence of genocide. The conquest phases of the various European invasions of the Americas were dedicated to the achievement of military, political, economic, and religious hegemony over the native peoples, not their mass destruction, and they were aimed at temporary and numerically superior political and military opponents. In Central and South America, resistant native armies were targeted for defeat or destruction, but native populations *per se* were largely protected by Spanish law and colonial self-interest so as later to provide labor or tribute to the *encomenderos*. Crown officials were entrusted with their spiritual and, to some extent, physical well-being. In North America, native populations were equally vital to the military and economic needs of the European

colonies, as allies against colonial rivals, as fur trappers and hunters, and as food producers.

The evidence for genocide from Indian population decline is ambiguous because newly imported epidemic diseases killed the vast majority of Native Americans after contact. Gross demographical statistics—conjured from fragmentary figures and social-scientific assumptions and often inflated for moral or political reasons rather than historical necessity—are impossible to interpret clearly because they include the victims of intertribal warfare, migration and dislocation, and uncontrollable natural disasters, as well as overwork and other forms of colonial oppression.

Even enslavement and forced relocation of the natives of the Bahamas and other Caribbean islands do not constitute genocide because the intent of the Spanish slavers was not to annihilate the natives physically; on the contrary, it was to ensure their physical viability so they could provide free labor wherever they were needed by colonial entrepreneurs. There is no need to resort willy-nilly to inflated indictments of genocide when man-stealing, kidnapping, enslavement, and other accurate terms are available. If genocide is to retain any meaning or moral impact at all, it must not be applied wholesale to every Indian death in the colonial period. To do so is to dilute the meaning of the word to insipidity and to squander its intellectual and moral force.

This is not to say that bona fide cases of genocide cannot be found in colonial America. Although no European colonial government ever tried to exterminate all of the Indians as a race, there are at least five authorized colonial attempts to annihilate single tribes—men, women, and children. The Puritans of Massachusetts and Connecticut tried unsuccessfully to obliterate the Pequots of Connecticut in 1636–37. The French, who in Canada come off smelling like a moral rose in the textbooks, had better success in exterminating the Mississippi River Natchez and the Wisconsin Foxes in the 1730s. The English assaults on the Powhatan chiefdom in Virginia might be included, but these took place only after the sudden native uprising of 1622, which then gave the outnumbered settlers reason to believe they were repulsing a military attack and acting in justifiable self-defense.

Perhaps the most heinous act of genocide—from the vantage point of the “Age of AIDS”—was the calculated use of germ warfare, which was not resorted to, we should emphasize, for more than two-and-a-half centuries after Columbus’s landing and then by only one European power that we know of. In 1752 the acting governor of Canada told his French superior in Paris that “twere desirable that [smallpox] should break out and spread, generally, through the localities inhabited by our rebels.” By this he meant the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes tribesmen who were as-

serting their independence or switching their allegiance to the English. "It would be fully as good as an army," he concluded, with callous disregard for native women and children.

The French governor was only indulging in wishful thinking. The English commander for the same area put the thought into action eleven years later, during Pontiac's (so-called) Rebellion. In June 1763 Sir Jeffrey Amherst conspired with his field commander, Colonel Henry Bouquet, to send two blankets and two handkerchiefs from a smallpox hospital among the "rebellious" Delawares, Shawnees, and Ohio Senecas. By the following autumn it was reported that "The poor Rascals are Dieing very fast with the small pox; they can make but Lettle Resistance and when Routed from their settlements must parish in great Numbers by the Disorders."

Have the protestors explored any evidence that would undermine their ascription of widespread colonial genocide? They have not, except for disease. Yet, Jan Elliott's reaction to the disease panel of the Florida State Museum's exhibit may be typical. She accused exhibit designers of cowardly apologetics and trying to slip off the skewer of moral responsibility. One purpose of their carefully worded labels, she said, was to "deflect the focus from murder and genocide and the reparations which these acts would demand to disease as an unintended consequence." Another purpose was to deflect attention "away from the social problems that . . . Indian peoples face today by emphasizing that most . . . Indians died out by the 1600s."

In addition to minimizing the lethal legacy of disease and ignoring the Spanish *hidalgos'* self-interest in preserving the lives and labor of their Indian subjects, the protestors fail to understand that some native populations actually managed to reproduce themselves and even to grow modestly once the initial onslaught of epidemics had passed and the survivors acquired lifesaving immunities. The protestors have also failed to realize that native populations were partially lost through nonmortal miscegenation with black Africans and white Europeans. Nor have they recognized the irony of yelling genocide in a national theater that seats almost two million self-declared Indians, nearly as many as watched the opening scenes of the Columbian Encounter in 1492.

Granting that at least some Indian groups were the victims of colonial genocide, who is, or was, to blame specifically? The protestors black-wash with a broad brush. Sometimes Columbus is the archfiend. At other times, conquistadors, the Spanish, Europeans, white males, capitalists, and Christians, as well as a generalized, modern "we" are condemned to share the admiral's guilt. Such charges are neither responsible history nor acceptable morality. The major problem with genocide as a description of,

or even analogy to, the post-Columbian loss of life is that the moral onus it tries to place on the European colonists—equating them with Heinrich Himmler and the Nazi S.S.—is misdirected and inappropriate. As Edmund Burke warned in the late eighteenth century and as we have come to realize in the twentieth, “you cannot”—or rather, *should not*—“indict a whole nation” for the misdeeds and crimes of a few. The colonists were personally and directly guilty for only a small fraction of the Indians who died in the three centuries after contact. Disease, not the Spanish, was responsible for most of the native deaths in Latin America. Genocide, as distinguished from other forms of cruelty, oppression, and death, played a very small role in the European conquest of the New World.

Why do protestors use genocide so frequently? Most of the time they offer no clue. But Jan Elliott, the Cherokee director of *Indigenous Thought*, shed some light on her motives when she spoke of the “reparations” which the “murder and genocide” of Indian people in the past “would demand” if the truth were known and acknowledged. We may also assume another motive on the part of native protestors: moral leverage in current fights for justice and equity. Making a white judge, juror, or congressman feel guilty for the genocidal behavior of his racial or national ancestors may lead to better results in the political or judicial process today or tomorrow.

Who can blame them for resorting to such tactics, given the odds they face? Yet we must distinguish between history as a truth-seeking discipline and the selective use of historical truths or half-truths for unapologetically political ends. When political maneuvers are passed off as historical truth, historians have an obligation to subject their claims to careful scrutiny. Otherwise, we risk turning our profession into an agency for the dissemination of propaganda, which can easily turn against us with the slightest shift of ideological winds.

What should the historian’s response be to those, especially native people, who use genocide freely to characterize the 500-year Columbian Encounter? First, we should acknowledge the legitimate emotional source of their need to use genocide to describe what happened to their ancestors as recently as our own century. Genocide—as a shorthand for a long legacy of injustice, pain, and loss—feels right to the survivors and descendants, many of whom experience on a daily basis what they regard as distressingly similar assaults on their lives, dignity, and livelihood. Yet, after fully acknowledging the emotional justice of the natives’ cause, historians should limit the use of the word to historically verifiable occurrences, rather than encouraging an indiscriminate scattershot assault on the past. We owe all the people of the past equal and impartial under-

standing, not just its victims or the fashionable favorites of the media and textbook publishers. At the end of the twentieth century, we should feel an obligation to protect the innocent of whatever era, group, or action from injustice and defamation.

Second, historians should also counsel against the use of any kind of moral blackmail and resist any collective guilt-trips. Blackmail is always blackmail, whether it be emotional or intellectual, and is always illegitimate. Furthermore, if important and even long-overdue gains can be made through the use of moral blackmail, those same gains can be retracted when susceptible hearts and soft heads turn hard in new ideological climates. Social and moral gains are much more secure when they are the products of good history, free conscience, and consistent, durable principles of justice.

Having addressed the issue of genocide and one moral extreme of the quincentenary, historians should not pat themselves on the back for their moral moderation and professional probity. Such congratulations would be premature and perhaps hypocritical because we have jumped to judgment—a few to the right but most to the left—like lemmings, without much study or benefit of forethought. Like our predecessors, we have found it easier to judge than to understand. We have conveniently forgotten that understanding in some depth usually undermines the seemingly firm ground of rectitude, often obviates the need for judgment, and sometimes even leads to forgiveness, that most unfashionable virtue. Our all-too-human propensity to jump on moral bandwagons and to make snap judgments about human behavior in other times and places cause a lot of mischief in our classrooms and publications because we commit too many elementary sins against straight moral thinking.

We hang simplistic, abstract labels when we should unpack and examine fully the complexity of past events, social conditions, and human motivations. To declare the Columbian legacy as nothing more than “Imperialism & Colonialism, Racism and Oppression,” as the New York “progressives” have done in capital letters, is to close discussion, not to open it. Labeling is a form of name-calling, with few benefits, even if it fulfills some atavistic need for visceral vocalization. It does no justice to the object of reproach and leads to no reforms.

Another mistake we make is stereotyping people on the basis of one or a few characteristics (usually the only ones we have bothered to learn about), when we should search for their full and individual humanity, withholding judgment until we know much more about them. We are experts at lumping people into racial, national, political, and other cultural categories, particularly people with whom we have no personal acquaint-

tance. We should work much harder at splitting the human race into its individual components, and at recognizing many more human faces in our mental crowds, just as we would like to be recognized by others.

We are also impeded in our moral thinking by our sloppy handling of moral vocabulary, which is nearly as large as the language itself and for the most part unspecialized. Most of the words we use in history and everyday speech are like mental depth charges. When heard or read, these words quickly sink into our consciousness and explode, sending off cognitive shrapnel in all directions. On the surface they may look harmless or benign, but as they descend and detonate, their resonant power is unleashed, showering our understanding with fragments of accumulated meaning and association. Therefore we should use words—not just the moral-sounding ones, but all of them—with extreme care because they are powerful instruments of judgment and can maim heedless handlers. Those who brandish genocide at every opportunity are particularly prone to accidents, but so are the careless wielders of other sharp words.

None of these criticisms should be construed as an argument against the legitimacy and utility of judging the past. Historians do it all the time, we are incapable of not doing it, and we should do it. But we should do it well and we should do it for valid reasons, not because our knees or trigger fingers twitch every time we open a history book.

We judge the past for at least three important reasons. The first is to appraise action, an intrinsic part of historical thinking. Not to make such judgments is to abandon the past to itself, rendering it unintelligible and untranslatable to the present. The second reason is to do justice to it, although making judgment is not the same as passing sentence. As historians, we are too involved in both the prosecution and the defense since the words and reputations of the dead on all sides are in our hands. History's goal is not to punish or rehabilitate historical malefactors, who are morally incorrigible in any event, but to set the record straight for future appeals to precedent. The third reason for judging the past is to advance our own moral education, to learn from and, in effect, to be judged by the past. Since we think and speak historically for our own generation, we can have judgmental effect only on ourselves. Consequently, history becomes, in Lord Bolingbroke's famous phrase, "philosophy teaching by example," a "preceptor of prudence, not of principles." After bearing witness to the past with all the disinterestedness and human empathy we can muster, we should let ourselves be judged by the past as much as, or more than, we judge it. The past is filled with the lives and struggles of countless "others," from whom we may learn to extend the possibilities of our own limited humanity. As we learn about what it is like to be other than ourselves, we are better able to do justice to the past.

The relationship between the past and the present is always troubled and troubling. Historians cannot help but draw on the past for materials, methods, and models. Our self-images and social foundations are fabricated from historical elements, all inherited but reshaped by our current needs and biases, and then rewoven by our flawed and fluid memories. We need the past to give us bearings, but we often construct pasts that are merely useful and undemanding, more wishful than true. This leads to serious problems for historians because we cannot cure inherited social ills or make moral amends for past wrongs unless we know how the past actually was. It is perhaps the profession's most important task to ensure that our image of the past is as nearly full, complex, and true as the past itself was, lest we lose our bearings in fantasy and waste our resources and moral energies on false trails.

What responsibility should the present feel toward the past? Are we, the living, obliged to redress the mistakes, injustices, and crimes of the past? If we are so obliged, how should we go about it? Who should be the beneficiaries? If we discover through the assiduous study of the past that our ancestors did wrong to people in the past and that we have benefited—directly or indirectly—from those transgressions, what should our personal and collective response be? What is the range of alternatives?

The first and perhaps toughest questions to be answered revolve around identity: who are we who feel morally responsible? How closely related—biologically or socially or politically—are we to our perpetrating ancestors? Who were the victims? To whom should redress be made? It makes some difference whether the present we and the past ancestors consist of a national, ethnic, racial, religious, or gender group, and how great the temporal and lineal distance is between “them” and “us.” Before moral responsibility can be fairly laid, it is also important to determine what proportions of the offenders were directly and indirectly responsible for the acknowledged misdeeds, and what proportions of the victims directly and indirectly suffered them. We must know the latter to be able to designate the beneficiaries of our tardy justice once we have decided what form it will take.

There are essentially three types of moral responsibility assigned by historical critics of the quincentenary. The first attributes past social wrongs to systemic rather than personal or even collective agents. Adherents of various forms of Marxism and other universalizing ideologies tend to blame history's ills and crimes on large, reified abstractions such as Western civilization, imperialism, racism, capitalism, or “phallocentrism.” Systems and historical processes present easy targets for blame, but they are virtually impossible to apprehend and bring to trial; they are notoriously immune to short-term reform, particularly when the prose-

cutors are largely their heirs and social products. Systemic indictments seem to work much better for political ideologues and activists than for moral reformers since they allow the former to assert their moral superiority and political rightmindedness without actually doing anything to change what was or is wrong, much less to redress the historical grievances of the wronged.

The second type of moral responsibility is attributed to groups, although not all groups are equally good candidates. How can any groups other than nation-states effectively redress past injustices in material ways? It is hard to imagine, for example, all men compensating women for millennia of lower status and pay, or Christians for past spates of antisemitism other than by regretting the past, acknowledging their complicity in it, and promising full and quick reform. One hundred thirty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, it is difficult to see how even the descendants of slaveholders, if they were moved and able, could materially indemnify the scattered descendants of their ancestors' black slaves.

The national government can do something for the victims of legal injustice who are still living or their descendants, provided those victims were treated unjustly according to laws under which we still live. The Japanese-Americans whose civil and property rights were violated during World War II have received reparations, however tardily and inadequately, from Congress. Many Indian peoples whose ancestors lived in what became the United States have obtained retrospective justice, monetary awards, and even the return of land through the Indian Claims Commission, the federal courts, and the provisions of the Trade and Intercourse Act of 1790, which prohibited any sales of Indian land without federal authorization. Certain standards of evidence must be met by tribes wishing to prove lineal descent from the victims, the tribal ownership of the land in question, and the economic value of the land at the time of loss, but these have proven superable in nearly 300 cases in which native groups received belated justice.

But what about American Indians who were wronged between 1492 and 1790? Should Queen Elizabeth II and the British Parliament own up to and pay reparations for lands taken, traders cheated, murders unpunished, and religions subverted under the British colonial regime? Or were the innocent Indians simply taken advantage of by disingenuous sharpers from the sophisticated Old World? Are their losses cause for reparation or simply a regrettable object lesson for the future? Might we not legitimately feel just as sorry for the other victims of British colonialism? Why do we select for belated justice groups that were mistreated only after 1492 and in the Americas? As denizens of the all-encompassing world made



possible by Columbus, should we not extend our moral sympathy and indignation to the victims—black, brown, or white—of the Aztecs, Incas, Cahokia mound-builders, Iroquois, Muslim invaders of the Iberian peninsula, Mongols, Ottomans, Persians, Greeks, and Romans? While there is no statute of limitations for historical judgment, there must be one for retrospective legal justice. Over the long haul of history the human skein simply gets too tangled for administrative purposes and the moral connection between “them” and “us” becomes too attenuated.

The present generation carries all the weight it can bear from its own dilemmas and conflicts and does not need any excess baggage from the colonial period. Despite the resort to universalizing labels such as imperialism and colonialism, most of the battles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are behind us. As a nation of law and order (however imperfect) and increasingly refined sensibilities, we are not guilty of murdering Indian women and children, of branding slaves on the forehead, or of claiming and confiscating any real estate in the world we happen to fancy. We have a related but quite different set of moral problems: personal and institutional racism toward people of all colors; poverty and disease on Indian reservations and in inner cities; leveraged buyouts and junk bonds; disproportionately large black and Indian prison populations; military intervention in Latin America and the Middle East; immigration quotas; abortion policies; and campus intolerance, to name just a few.

The third and fundamental basis for moral responsibility is personal. As individuals of conscience, we are capable of a wide variety of responses to past injustice. One response that will probably not find much favor is to deed over some or all of our property to descendants of its last aboriginal owners or to the slaves who worked our ancestors' plantations, although there might well be a conflict over which group takes moral precedence. If we have similarly benefitted from past injustice but in a less direct and documentable way, we might choose to share our partially ill-gotten gains by contributing liberally to the Native American Rights Fund or the United Negro College Fund. With or without money, we could support actions designed to give all Americans a fair shot at realizing their human and economic potential.

Historians are particularly well qualified to take additional steps to prevent present and future generations from perpetuating unthinkingly attitudes and actions that have damaged people in the past. We can inspire and teach students to read enough history to realize that our current fortunes and misfortunes are the product of complicated, interlocking, ongoing human stories whose next chapters do not have to be written the same way. We can work to include slighted peoples in the mainstream, not the mere eddies, of our national or continental history. In the process,