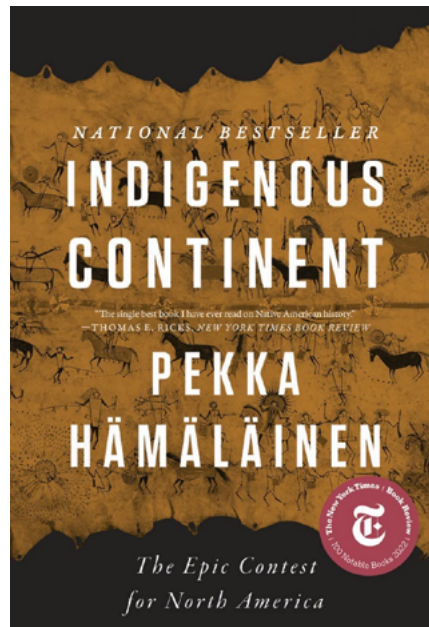


AMERICAN REALITY

AMY HELENE FORSS



Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America by Pekka Hämäläinen, who was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1995-1996

Pekka Hämäläinen's *Indigenous Continent* successfully argues a startling but rock-solid reality: "European colonists could do very little in North America without Native support and consent" (233). Offering his readers a different story, one far removed from the Early American metanarrative. Hämäläinen's comprehensive volume evenly covers both colonial and Native American history, a feat rarely achieved in United States texts.

Using a multitude of primary sources and secondary documentation, the Finnish-born scholar, currently the Rhodes Professor of American History at Oxford, analyzes how Indigenous nations controlled North America from the time of European re-discovery until the nineteenth century. According to Hämäläinen, it was the colonists who functioned as supplicants to the Indigenous population; Native Americans allowed, orchestrated, and monitored the European immigrants. While the foreigners focused on land expansion, Indians limited their endeavors through Nation kinship. The author maintains that Indigenous power, "the ability of people and their communities to control space and resources, to influence the actions and perception of others, to hold enemies at bay, to muster otherworldly

beings, and to initiate and resist change,” served as the “foundation of Indian strength” (XIV). (Note that I use Hämäläinen’s terminology throughout; he states early on that he supports the Indigenous preference for “Indian” rather than “Native American.”)

The Introduction, “The Myth of Colonial America,” encapsulates the main arguments and tells a tale of a powerful Indigenous America assisting colonists. For example, the author states the Seminole in Florida kept the presence of the Spanish to a minimum which allowed the US to easily annex Florida. Similarly, the author analyzes the significance of the Louisiana Purchase from an Indian’s perspective: Jefferson’s administration may have paid \$15 million, but the land mass was still under Indian rule. Unable to force Indian compliance, the US government negotiated contracts with sovereign Native nations 222 times beginning in 1804 and ending as late as 1970. Appreciated especially by this reviewer were the nods to Nebraskan Indian history, likely a result of the author’s 1995-1996 Fulbright at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

Defining Indigenous power as strategically situated, the author refuses to label Indian men and women as “warriors” but instead correctly calls them “soldiers” because they did indeed fight a lengthy war against colonialism. He also declines to perpetuate the anglicized title of “chief,” insisting on “officer”; that military description places Native American leaders more within the confines of a Nation administrator.

Elaborating on the theme of administration, Hämäläinen contends that no matter what variation of colonialism Europeans attempted on the continent—settler, legal, commercial, missionary, extractive, or imperial—Indigenous populations resisted the European overreach for four centuries. Here, Hämäläinen succinctly exposes accepted colonial dogma, the ingrained story of subjugated Indians, to be a national falsehood. Indeed, debunking long-accepted facts was one of my favorite features of this book.

Hämäläinen’s lengthy discussion of Po’pay’s organizing the 1680 Santa Fe revolt in New Mexico is particularly welcome. (Note that Hämäläinen uses his Ohkay Owingeh tribal name instead of the more commonly used Popé, typical of his desire to humanize Native American figures). Far too many texts gloss over the Santa Fe rebellion, but Hämäläinen’s decade-by-decade elucidation demonstrates a superb example of Nation resistance. He tells us “Christianized Indians” (162) joined forces with New Englanders to fight against Metacom (also known as Philip). While history books typically focus on Metacom’s capture and beheading—his head was on a spike in the Plymouth colony for 25 years (incredibly)—the carnage colonists exacted afterwards was “a sign of weakness, not strength,” according to Hämäläinen. In retaliation for Indians burning 1,000 colonial homes, their “slaughter of Native women and children, mutilation of Indian bodies, and sheer hatred

and rage shook the colonists' view of themselves as civilized people" (164). Afterwards, according to Hämäläinen, colonists deliberately rewrote history by writing twenty-nine narratives (between 1675 and 1682) to justify their violence.

Hämäläinen offers another reality when a century later, in 1790, George Washington took control of Ohio River Valley land with a show of American power, the US Army. Instead of waging war on the Indian Confederacy, which the author estimated would have cost upwards of \$200,000—monies the US treasury did not possess, Washington ordered the murder of resisting Indian men and the capture of Native women and children as hostages. Washington, according to the author, had undermined his own absentia attempt at benevolent Indigenous fatherhood: "Unable to defeat the allied Indians in battle, the President of the United States relied on terror and total war, targeting noncombatants, fields, orchards, and trade centers" (340).

Hämäläinen's deft rendering of an Indigenous-powered America would benefit United States history courses nation-wide

The volume's 500+ pages fly by, thanks to tight organizational flow and well-researched historical retelling. Using the chronology of history textbooks, Hämäläinen carefully contextualizes the American narrative within a much larger and longer Indigenous timeline framework. Hämäläinen's deft rendering of an Indigenous-powered America would benefit United States history courses nation-wide. The author's re-framing of America's Republic as a colonial chameleon constantly conforming to Indian standards exposes a wide swath of buried history. *Indigenous Continent* unearths a North America too rarely seen or taught but imperative to the country's future inclusivity and growth.

Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America*. NY: Liveright, 2022. 592 pages. \$22.00

BIOGRAPHY

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