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Review



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Continental Shifts

[James F. Brooks](#)

Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution. By KATHLEEN DUVAL. New York: Random House, 2015. 462 pages. Paper, ebook.

Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People. By ELIZABETH A. FENN. New York: Hill and Wang, 2014. 477 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America. By MICHAEL A. McDONNELL. New York: Hill and Wang, 2015. 414 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776. By CLAUDIO SAUNT. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014. 283 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

This past summer I taught the survey of early American history for the first time since my first year at the University of Maryland, more than twenty years ago. Although I had trained (vaguely) as an early Americanist, my courses at Maryland and the University of California, Santa Barbara—interrupted by a long decade as an administrator and executive at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico—had focused on my primary areas of specialization: the histories of borderlands, Native America, and the American West.

I took this as an opportunity to refresh my familiarity with the field and to explore whether I might design a course that met the catalog criteria—"Colonial through Jacksonian era. A survey of the leading issues in American life from colonial times to the present. The course focuses on politics, cultural development, social conflict, economic life, foreign policy, and influential ideas"—while also addressing some of our students' particular social locations and experiences. UCSB is the first Association of American Universities institution to achieve Hispanic Serving Institution status (greater than 25 percent Hispanic undergraduate enrollment), and 62 percent of students are nonwhite. In the 2016 entering class, 42 percent are first-generation [End Page 533] college attendees, 84 percent are from public high schools, and 90 percent hail from California. I wondered if I could craft an American history survey that would address the core curriculum yet also speak in some ways to their own life stories and experiences. For this class of forty-six students, I designed a place-shifting continental journey within an overarching theme of "Natives, Newcomers, and Emerging Nations."

The four books treated in this review delivered important content to the course—in fact, Claudio Saunt's *West of the Revolution* was among those I adopted as required texts. Each is superb, in its own way. Elizabeth A. Fenn's *Encounters at the Heart of the World* and Michael A. McDonnell's *Masters of Empire* are masterful examples of the microhistorical genre (writing from a place, and among a people, over time), while Kathleen DuVal's *Independence Lost* and Saunt's *West of the Revolution* employ kaleidoscopic narrative (rotating vantages to trace particular biographies across subregions). All yield the rich results of deep research by mature scholars: original evidence interpreted in compelling prose. All are crafted to infuse a sense of contingency into early American history—by foregrounding indigenous efforts to shape the unfolding encounter toward their own specific ends and by allowing readers to experience the uncertainties of decision making that underlay what appear as long-term processes. They thus represent a scholarly generation's commitment to emphasize indigenous actors as agents rather than "people without history" who inevitably succumb to the expansion of global mercantile capitalism. They also attend to less-than-uniform strategies on the part of colonizing peoples.¹ All four books remind us of the fact that certain indigenous nations experienced "strength and expansion in the midst of empire" (McDonnell, 15) as emerging markets and military alliances often served their own strategic ends.² All, too, reflect the historical realities that indigenous peoples faced in the long-term confrontation with overwhelming demographic imbalance. Finally, each strives to reach beyond the ever-narrowing market of academic readers in a desire to write crossover books that might draw the attention of the interested public.

I launched the course with an exploration of the "politics of populating" the Americas to give students a sense of how theories such as the "kelp highway" (Pacific coastal current drifting) or "Solutrean" (North Atlantic ice pack migration of European Solutrean lithic people) hypotheses unsettle the long-standing Beringia land-bridge narrative. Although these may deepen the timeline of human presence in the Americas, they also open a door for critics to question indigeneity itself, with arguments around multiple migrations, first-

comers versus newcomers, and little-disguised hints that 1492 represented **[End Page 534]** just another wave of colonial expansion. Students patiently absorbed a riff on "autochthonous" (original) versus "allochthonous" (intrusive) peoples in anthropological thought. We talked about Keith H. Basso and Western Apache senses of place as compact metaphors for culture history.³ We puzzled about how identities—individual, family, kin, clan, lineage, or nation—might vary in relation to the scale of place. I hoped they might see that debates buried in deep history have substantial purchase in the modern moment.⁴

The Mandan story developed in Fenn's work flowed easily from this opening in that the Mandans' "heart of the world" was, in fact, itself a product of migration and place-making for some four centuries after the first millennium C.E.—displacements necessitated as often by political conflict with neighbors as by environmental factors. This prompted a discussion of cross-cultural variations on how places become homes, from how world quarter shrines of Tewa in northern New Mexico function today to the Lone Man cedar "ark" at the center of Mandan villages, symbols rich with stories that could make place a home, no matter how many and extended their migrations. The 2016 presidential campaign rhetoric and the multiethnic and immigrant composition of the class—which (I would come to learn) included at least three Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) "DREAM Scholars"—brought a sense of currency to the topic. Little did we imagine how much.

McDonnell's attention to intersecting indigenous and imperial worlds in the Upper Great Lakes (focusing on the Anishinaabe Odawa at Michili-mackinac Island) asked us to shift from a conventional east-to-west visual orientation toward one where in all directions "numerous and long-standing rivalries and relationships" (13) with other Native nations took daily precedence over the geopolitics of European empires. Eurocolonial ventures in North America—from Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca to Hernando de Soto to Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and Juan de Oñate in the southern reaches, to the French quest for the Northwest Passage in Odawa territory—often proved secondary to Native struggles over leadership politics, sustaining areas, and military alliances. Indigenous peoples' avid engagement with trade and exchange opportunities across many regions opened a discussion about how material objects (glass beads, beaver pelts, deerskins, iron cookware, and muskets) have social and political lives that find meaning in their particular cultural contexts.⁵ McDonnell's insightful reading of kinship politics, particularly the capacity of *doodemag* (lineages) to absorb outsiders, whether Native or European, and facilitate access to Native military allies or French trading **[End Page 535]** locations, highlighted the elasticity of Native kin practices and inspired discussion of alternative marriage forms (and their practical applications) in the United States today. The Iraq war veteran among the students brought his own feelings to bear on the depth of destruction wrought by the global arms trade as well.

We followed his cue to explore the dialectic of dependency and independence in that first century of early American relationships, as gunpowder, firearms, horses, cattle, and hogs enriched some while devastating others. Contending Spanish and French imperial

designs on the continent also placed the weakness and fragility of the late-coming British in perspective, while setting the table for comparisons between the mercantile model and what would develop in Protestant England in the seventeenth century—a preview of a Weberian riff on the rise of capitalism and the emergence of so-called independence factions in the toehold British colonies.

DuVal's *Independence Lost* elevated our topographic tour of the continent, bringing into focus the Gulf Coast and its hinterlands. Through the lives of eight individuals—from the Chickasaw leader Payamataha to his very different counterpart among the Creeks, Alexander McGillivray; from New Orleans merchant Oliver Pollock and his wife Margaret O'Brien Pollock to the slave (and Spanish spy and courier) Petit Jean; from French Canadian expat Amand Broussard to British West Florida's councilor James Bruce and his wife Isabella—we see DuVal's central thrust worked out in the quotidian irony that "independence depended on others" (293). For most actors in colonial America, indigenous or intrusive, she argues, "*advantageous interdependence* was a more logical goal," and all employed tactics that would offer "more control over dependent relationships" (xxi). Where political independence may have been the goal of Native leaders such as Payamataha or McGillivray (in very different registers) or the disgruntled subjects of Britain's thirteen colonies, all were embedded in the fact that "each side in an exchange relationship trades because the other has what it wants" (xxii). This conundrum would bear bitter fruit, as Natives, slaves, and citizens of the new United States would find that the quest for independence could, in fact, intensify their vulnerability.

One sees the irony at work among the Mandans in the middle years of the eighteenth century. In their center-place at the confluence of the Heart and Missouri Rivers, these floodplain farmers took corn cultivation to its most northern reaches, expertly developing quick-ripening variants that could succeed in short growing seasons and build substantial resiliency into community foodways. Self-sufficiency encompassed bison hunting as well, for Mandans took advantage of the herds that would find winter shelter in river bottomlands, drawn in by the numinous powers of spiritual leaders, where they could be harvested in collective surrounds. This independence would seem supercharged as Mandans found themselves athwart **[End Page 536]** the expanding horse-and-gun frontiers after the 1730s. French voyageurs working southwest from the Great Lakes hinterlands brought reliable trade muskets to the Mandans, as English agents did with the Northwest Trade gun, just as horses flowed northward each summer across the greening "sea of grass" (85) and attracted new migrations from woodland hunters such as the Arapahos, Crows, Kiowas, Lakotas, and Cheyennes. As the most reliable provisioning point, with rich granaries well defended by earthworks and stockades, the river villages, in the first decades of the horse/gun intersection, could serve as commercial hubs and gain wealth. In that independence, however, lay vulnerability—by the 1740s new equestrian nations were emerging that could forgo trade in river villages or turn them into vassals. Lakota winter counts show dramatic spikes in violence: "relentless warfare was indeed the

new reality" (Fenn, 144). Mandans formed defensive alliances with Hidatsa and Arikara neighbors, a coalition that may have had the capacity to field fifteen thousand warriors in 1773. Yet history would soon shatter that alliance's security.⁶

Saunt's radial point in *West of the Revolution*, the year 1776, offers a pivot around which the course rotated. Situated in what most (not all) of my students recognized as a landmark year in conventional American history, Saunt surprises by opening his book with the mustering caravan of Franciscan padres Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Francisco Silvestre Vélez de Escalante as they depart the royal villa of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in search of land passage from that colony to the recently founded presidio and mission complexes in Alta California. The expedition failed, making only a wide circuit through today's Utah to end at the Hopi Mesas at the turn of the year. Yet Saunt shows that incentive to connect New Mexico to Alta California lay in Russia's dramatic expansion into North America raised a geopolitical threat to the Spanish Empire—from 1740s fur-harvesting outposts on the Aleutian Island chain to permanent settlements after 1774, Russians cast their eyes (and otter-harvesting expeditions) down the Pacific coast. Spain responded by initiating the colonization of Alta California in 1769, with military presidios at San Diego, Monterrey, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara.

Saunt employs nine microhistories of place across North America to bring the continent alive: Alaska's Aleutian Islands; San Diego and San Francisco, California; North Carolina; New Mexico; Saskatchewan, Canada; South Dakota's Black Hills; the Osage country along the Mississippi River; and the Creek lands in Georgia and Florida, with sidebar vignettes evoking familiar benchmarks of the revolutionary era such as Philadelphia, New **[End Page 537]** York, and Boston. Although McDonnell's Odawa were proving masterful in their manipulations of empire(s) and DuVal's Creeks were edging toward a political formation (McGillivray's dream of a great Southern Confederacy), Saunt argues that the Osage—ideally situated between the frayed edges of the French, British, and Spanish Empires—were becoming an empire themselves, incorporating weaker indigenous groups in tributary relationships and playing the Europeans against one another until well after 1776. For the Odawa and others of the *pays d'en haut*, the "Treaty of Paris of 1783 ensured that while one war for American independence came to an end, many other contests for Native American independence would continue" (McDonnell, 309).

In Saunt's book, we see a remarkable extension of Native creative diplomacy in the pursuit of self-preservation, if not self-determination, among the Creeks as well. In 1779, a delegation from that nation, led by "Captain of the Indian Troops" (199) Escuchape, visited Havana, Cuba, to float a proposal that the Creek Nation supply food provisions to the huge numbers of slaves bound to sugar plantations on that Spanish island. As Creeks had begun an economic transition of their own to slave-based cotton planting and grain provisioning, able to produce well beyond their own subsistence needs, with access to shipping through long relationships at Gulf Coast ports, Escuchape saw international alliance as yet another avenue toward the independence that depended on others.

The decade of the 1780s brought cascading traumas to the Upper Missouri River, however. Near the apex of their power, the Missouri River villagers fell victim to the continental scourge of a smallpox plague that had erupted in Mexico City in August 1779. By December 1780 the "disease with seven-league boots" (Fenn, 154) had struck Lipan Apaches in northern Mexico; shortly thereafter it reached Comanches in Texas and then the Puebloan peoples of New Mexico. Horse-and-gun trade networks doubtless moved it northward, to Shoshones. By summer 1781 smallpox drifted into the heart of the Mandans' world. Fenn insightfully situates the disease in a public health narrative, distinguishing between biophysical vulnerabilities and the structures of settlement patterns, trade networks, and timing that heightened river villagers' catastrophe. In a brief aside, she notes that in the very months when the Mandan villages lay decimated, the many black slaves who had accepted British promises of freedom on their march through the South to what they planned would be their new imperial headquarters at Yorktown, Virginia, were abandoned by their erstwhile liberators.⁷ [End Page 538]

Mandans rebuilt their depleted nation, however, in alliance with similarly plague-stricken Hidatsas and Arikaras, concentrating their defensive villages in new upstream territories at the confluence of the Knife and Missouri Rivers, where in the winter of 1804 the Corps of Discovery would find generous shelter at Mitutanka. Even depleted in power, Mandans presented as sovereign peoples and assigned a plot of land upon which Meriwether Lewis and William Clark would construct Fort Mandan, the first hint of a new dependency—one that would lead to the establishment of the Mandan-Hidatsa town of Independence on the Fort Berthold Reservation, flooded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during construction of the Garrison Dam and Lake Sakakawea from 1946 to 1951.⁸

Like the Mandans and other peoples discussed here, I did not, of course, assume that total independence was mine in the early American survey. We covered core matters such as the Reformation, Puritanism, the Atlantic world economy, liberalism, Federalism and Anti-Federalism, and republican motherhood. We studied the many forms of slavery in North America and the intensification of the plantation economy after 1796. We devoted two class sessions to breaking down the history lodged within Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* lyrics, blessed by several class members who knew them by heart and offered a cappella renditions. I did find the works reviewed here, however, especially useful in building a complex perspective around our Emerging Nations theme. Each work, some more explicitly than others, offers insights about Native forms and experiments with kinship, coalitions, alliances, and confederacies that bore fruitful comparison to the debates over the long decade it took Americans to transition from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution, a point well developed by DuVal in her final chapter. Like Native peoples as well as French and Spanish colonists abandoned by their imperial supporters, Americans sought to walk a tight-rope between dependency and independence and found success in a form of interdependence: "by ceding some sovereignty to the new government created by the Constitution, the states established a framework for dominating the nineteenth-century west" (DuVal, 344). In that alchemy, alas,

also lay sinister forms of limited sovereignty that would come into the law in terms such as "domestic, dependent Nations" in the Marshall trilogy or the Dred Scott ruling that African Americans had never been a part of the "sovereign people" who made that Constitution and therefore had no rights the law was bound to respect.

DuVal, Fenn, McDonnell, and Saunt are accomplished scholars and gifted writers. Their books deserve a readership beyond the few hundred **[End Page 539]** academics in our subfield and the students who may be assigned them in upper-division history courses. If our work is to find traction beyond the classroom (or the ever-shrinking and ever-more-vulnerable circle of professional peers), however, it ought to appeal to the educated and curious non-academic. I keep one such reader in mind when I write: a natural resources attorney who serves on cultural and environmental nongovernmental organization boards and stops to read every historical marker she encounters in her travels. Such readers once sustained the trade book market, and they continue to populate museums and historic sites in substantial numbers, far more than they consume scholarly monographs, at least in part because museums and historic sites continue to foreground biographies and stories in their interpretation, often substantiated by the "stuff" of history (material culture). Surveys show that our publics trust museums' interpretations far more than those of academic authors—probably because the material culture they interpret seems like solid evidence (which we know it often is not). Reaching such an audience was one goal of my recent book *Mesa of Sorrows*. With Mesa Verde National Park hosting 583,527 visitors in 2016, I thought a story, at once specific to the Hopi Mesas, rich with the tangible matter of archaeology, and yet ineffably and globally human, might find a readership.⁹ Time will tell.

I did, however, work with legendary trade editor John Glusman peering over my shoulder, a reeducation that will stick. Several of his marginal comments color everything I write these days. "The job of a trade author is to make your reader feel smart, not how smart you are." "Respect your reader. Tell the story and let them find the meaning." "You want your reader to feel she or he is one page ahead of you—give them the evidence to do so." And finally, "you write because you feel. That's why we read. Put some feeling in this."

Each of these, of course, are vulnerable to critique. The political economy of the academy requires that we "show how smart we are" in order to find jobs and develop careers. Inscrutable writing sometimes pretends toward brilliance, while limpid English is interpreted as simplemindedness. Voluminous footnotes are as often academic blood libations as they are historiographically insightful. (One thing trade publishers have learned is that footnotes and within-text numerals intimidate and annoy many potential readers—thus the innovation of keyword end-noting). We all understand, too, that crafting a narrative is implicitly an act of interpretation, but to reiterate an argument, sometimes dozens of times within a single work, intrudes on our readers' own experience of the evidence. I lost count of how many times I saw "stop lecturing me" in my margins. **[End Page 540]**

Few of Glusman's directives come easily to those of us who developed our writing in the academy. Affect, inference, allusion—even narrative arcs—are not central to our experience, nor much respected in the guild. Yet microhistory (as we know from practitioners as diverse as Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzberg, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Alan Taylor, E. P. Thompson, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, to name but a few) seeks "a return to narrative, detailed analysis on a small scale, and the search for unforeseen meanings embedded in cases." The method functions, as Clifford Geertz once wrote, "like a magnetic field passing through iron filings" to pull a character-rich story from the debris of the past. I've been trying to get a grip on the method for several decades, learning to fly low and think high simultaneously, without crashing. Angela Pulley Hudson's *Real Native Genius*, Charles Hudson's *Conversations with the High Priest of Coosa*, Joshua Piker's *The Four Deaths of Acorn Whistler*, and Janet D. Spector's timeless *What This Awl Means* are examples to which I aspire. Others, including our authors here, are working in this register. We are getting there.¹⁰

Teaching this class reminded me of the midterm course evaluation I posed in 1995 as a nervous first-time professor at Maryland. I asked the class what one thing they might remember ten years from now. The vast majority, as I recall, said "the stories." When queried why, they replied "because X was so sad," or "Y made me laugh," or "Z made me really worry about America." This question of emotion seems most daunting, because to elicit feelings from one's readers may feel manipulative and to expose one's feelings self-serving. To render emotions palpable, while attending to the empirical, seems nigh impossible. Yet we must. It is on the full currents of sorrow and light freshets of joy that human stories turn. **[End Page 541]**

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Footnotes

- ¹. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982).
- ². Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992); Robbie Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540–1715* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010).
- ³. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1996).
- ⁴. Daniel Lord Smail et al., "Forum: Investigating the History in Prehistories," *American Historical Review* 118, no. 3 (June 2013): 708–801.
- ⁵. Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986).
- ⁶. James F. Brooks, "Sing Away the Buffalo: Faction and Fission on the Northern Plains," in *Beyond Subsistence: Plains Archaeology and the Postprocessual Critique*, ed. Philip Duke and Michael C. Wilson (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1995), 143–68.
- ⁷. For the contemporary resonance of smallpox among Mandans and Hidatsas, see James F. Brooks, "The Pestilent Serpent: Colonialism, Health, and Indigenous Demographics," in *Beyond Germs: Native Depopulation in North America*, ed. Catherine M. Cameron, Paul Kelton, and Alan C. Swedlund (Tucson, Ariz., 2015), 249–61.
- ⁸. Carolyn Gilman and Mary Jane Schneider, *The Way to Independence: Memories of a Hidatsa Indian Family, 1840–1920* (St. Paul, Minn., 1987); "Garrison Dam," The History and Culture of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Sahnish, Official Portal for North Dakota State Government, http://www.ndstudies.org/resources/IndianStudies/threeaffiliated/historical_1900s_garrison.html.

9. James F. Brooks, *Mesa of Sorrows: A History of the Awat'ovi Massacre* (New York, 2016).

10. James F. Brooks, Christopher R. N. DeCorse, and John Walton, eds., *Small Worlds: Method, Meaning, and Narrative in Microhistory* (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 2008), 3–12 ("return," 4); Clifford Geertz, "Among the Infidels," review of *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*, by Natalie Zemon Davis, *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 23, 2006 ("magnetic"); Janet D. Spector, *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (St. Paul, Minn., 1993); Charles Hudson, *Conversations with the High Priest of Coosa* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003); Joshua Piker, *The Four Deaths of Acorn Whistler: Telling Stories in Colonial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013); Angela Pulley Hudson, *Real Native Genius: How an Ex-Slave and a White Mormon Became Famous Indians* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2015).

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