Imagine There Is No Country

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I was asked to keep the talk short to leave plenty of time for discussion.

When asked for a title for this talk several months ago, I said, “How about ‘Imagine There Is No Country: Western North American History Before States and Empires’?” Then the AHA program came out, and I found I was actually giving a talk called “The American West, the American Indians, and the Environment in the College American History Class.” I have no idea how this happened...

In any case, this raises the degree of difficulty for me. Can a talk titled “The American West, the American Indians, and the Environment in the College American History Class” contain a talk titled “Imagine There Is No Country”? This is kind of like being asked to write a 10-minute version of an Italo Calvino novel...

I taught the American history survey for 25 years before I came to Stanford. I taught it at Michigan State, Utah, and the University of Washington. I taught all of U.S. history in 10 weeks -- from virgin soil epidemics until the latest sitting president. At Stanford, I only teach the nineteenth century, and I love it. I like the sweep of it, I like reading material outside of my specialty, and I like dealing with big ideas and big themes.

I have also realized my own specialties -- the environment, the American West, and Native American history - - do not fit easily within the American history survey. You can fit it in, but it is like a scene in The Sopranos with Tony Soprano at a parent-teacher conference. You can cram it in, and I do it, but it isn't comfortable.

Why don't they fit?

Let me start with Indian peoples. The way I teach the history of Indian peoples is pretty conventional among most scholars these days. Indian peoples are just as much a product of the political, social, environmental, cultural, and economic changes of the last 400 to 500 years as are other Americans.

There was, in James Merrill's nice phrase, an "Indian New World" just as there was a European one. What else could there be -- as disease and displacement by war ravaged older societies, as surviving groups won new political and social status? The environment they faced was new, the technology they used was new, and there was intense cultural ferment and invention.

What does the first 200 years of this history have to do with the United States? Well, nothing. There was no United States. We treat the 13 colonies as sort of a fetal form of the United States. The American Revolution was something that no one in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, and much of the eighteenth centuries ever imagined. The 13 colonies did not exist as a unit. They were part of a much broader British Empire. Indians did deal with the British Empire, just as they dealt with the Spanish and French Empires. And they dealt with individual colonies. But there were no Indian peoples that I know of who dealt with the 13 colonies.

Indian peoples are immensely influential in colonial history. And in teaching about colonial history, and broader Atlantic world history, it's very easy to put Native Americans into it. But to understand their influence, you need to move well beyond the circumscribed boundaries of the 13 colonies. Before 1776, we do not have American history. We have imperial history, and that's the history that Indian peoples fit into.

In the nineteenth century, we still do not have American history, but now at least there's a United States, so the tension is much more productive. The U.S., in becoming an American nation, was trying to force Indian peoples within a nation state. Indian nations can serve as wonderful examples of the limits of nationalism, the rise of racial citizenship, and the complexities of sovereignty, because Indian nations emerge within the period as semisovereign units within a larger sovereignty. This is something the students that I teach still do not realize.

I begin my nineteenth-century course with Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee prophet, to make a simultaneous point about Indian resistance, the alliance of Indian peoples with foreign powers in order to counter American expansion, and also the common cultural and economic world that whites and Indian peoples inhabited east of the Mississippi in the early nineteenth century. Tenskwatawa had visions at a time when whites in the region were also having visions and falling as if dead. His visions were of a god who seemed Christian and of heaven and hell. Far from instituting a return to tradition, he wanted Indians to be born again with new gender roles, new religious practices, and new social organizations. I would argue that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, conflicts between Indians and whites over the interior of the United States came about not because Indians and whites were so different, but because they were so similar. Each had a mixed agricultural and pastoral economy that was supplemented by specialists in the fur trade. Each needed the same resources; each had weak control over violent and often drunken young men. Indians paradoxically both stood outside the usual contours of early nineteenth-century American history and had one foot planted firmly in it.
I'm also a New Western historian at heart, and I do not write frontier history. I'm interested in the history of the trans-Missouri American West as a region of the U.S. The West, however, is a parallel problem with that of the original 13 colonies. The U.S. gets part of it in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase, most of the rest of it in the 1840s and the 1850s, and adds Alaska later on. Before these dates, the area isn't American. There can be no American history in this region because, until 1869, most of it was not a meaningful part of the United States. Until the first transcontinental railroad was built, the American state -- for that matter, the Mexican state and British Empire -- had no control over the vast swath of land that runs from the Arctic to northern Mexico. Before that, the British, French, and Russians also claimed this area, but they had even less control. These are just lines on a map. They had influence, but outside of small imperial enclaves, they had no control and no monopoly on force. This was one of the last places in the world to come under the sway of states and empires.

What made the difference were transcontinental railroads. The way they did it can be illustrated by this story.

In the spring of 1869, the year the Pacific railroad was finished, Dan Castello's Circus and Menagerie stopped in Cheyenne, Wyoming, then a raw railroad town on the Union Pacific. Elephants had been marching with the circuses across settled eastern and midwestern countryside since the early nineteenth century, and by the 1850s some circuses were moving by rail. Elephants, however, had not passed across the Missouri River or crossed the Great Plains or penetrated the Rocky Mountains until Castello set off in 1869 to tour the West newly opened by the Pacific Railroad.

And so in 1869, elephants -- both African and Indian -- lumbered off the train in Cheyenne and then began a four-day march to Denver, roughly 85 miles away across the Great Plains. The year before, even as Union Pacific surveyors were laying out the depot town, the Cheyennes had killed two Mormon emigrants near where the elephants now walked. In 1868 there was still fighting between the Cheyennes, soldiers, and Union Pacific workers along the train's route in Nebraska and Wyoming.

The elephants lumbered toward Denver in a cold rainy spring along land that still contained, in much reduced numbers, buffalo and antelope. There is no evidence that buffalo and elephants ever came face to face, but one might have caught the strange whiff of the other across the grasslands. The year before Arthur Hoyt, traveling across the same region between the newly laid tracks and Denver, imagined himself constantly under observation by Indian war parties, but no Indians attacked the marching circus. The Cheyennes and Arapahoes waited. They waited until the circus and menagerie arrived in Denver, and then they did what Denverites did: hundreds of Indians -- "brilliant in fresh paint and savage finery," according to the Rocky Mountain News -- watched the parade pass through the streets on June 5, 1869. The spring cold and the high altitude took their toll on the elephants, but the show went on as the circus played Colorado Springs, backtracked to the railroad, and then played railroad towns from Laramie west.

If a railroad could suddenly, across hundreds of miles, deliver elephants and Moroccan acrobats into new towns of green lumber and filthy streets, what couldn't they deliver? If railroads could move elephants, then they could move virtually anything across vast and forbidding distances. Elephants symbolized the increased speed with which the flora and fauna of continents could be mixed and mingled, the vast reach of American popular culture, and the way it and the railroads could pull once-isolated regions into a new cultural as well as economic orbit.

The railroads turned the West on its axis. Railroads no longer moved primarily north-south, as they had previously. Railroads began to move primarily east-west. Railroads were the products of an intervention by the state and by international financial capitalism, and they brought both to the West, making it the most modern part of the country. The railroads made the west-east boundaries of the continent real. The Canadian boundary and Mexican boundary meant nothing until the railroads -- but at the same time, they subverted it because east-west trunk lines had branch lines that went north and south, and at the same time as they drew these boundaries, they pierced them from Canada and Mexico.

My third area of specialty is environmental history, which is also hard to contain within the boundaries of the nation state and the American survey. I've already alluded to virgin soil epidemics that were the defining element of contact. Epidemic diseases to which Indian peoples had no immunity created the greatest demographic disaster in human history, killing up to 90 percent of the populations they affected, but this is a disaster that had little to do with national or imperial boundaries. Very often, later environmental changes had their roots in multiple countries. The industrial changes that brought coal mines, dams, and oil wells were not the products of a single country, and their consequences ramify worldwide.

It's not that you can't tell these stories within the history of the United States, but you can tell only part of it. If you tell them the wrong way, you tend to create a kind of American exceptionalism. The environmental story of the U.S., as Tom Dunlap has argued, is very similar to that of other English-speaking settler colonies around the world. What Americans do to the environment and what steps they take is not that different from what happens in Australia, Canada, New Zealand. National histories matter. But the nation state cannot contain all the histories that flow through it. When we pretend we can, either by narrowing the parameters to a simple political history, or by ignoring how the things we study constantly move through national boundaries, we become enemies of history itself.

To speak rather broadly, there are two kinds of histories: One celebrates the inevitability of the present. It seeks in the past only those things that can be connected to the present. It seeks to explain how the present came to be. It's often very well intentioned. It speaks in the name of relevance and defends presentism as connecting the present and the past. But it is paradoxically one of the reasons the young hate history. The present and the past flow together and become one. When we go to the past, all we find there are people...
moving along the road to become us. But if we're at all discontented with being us, as any sensible person
should be, and at all discontented with the world we've created, this kind of history seems conservative and
hopeless. Things are this way. They can be no other way. We're going to show you. Get used to it.

There is a second kind of history. This history does not look for the present in the past as much as for those
things that are odd and strange: the elephants marching into Denver. These are not the things that flowered
necessarily in the present, but those things both good and bad that still lay dormant and may never flower.
They seek in the past the wider possibility of being in it. This history seeks in the past hope. It is this history
I'm interested in. It's the history not only of John Lennon, but the history of country-and-western songs: things
don't have to be this way.

Thank you.

Professor Richard White's seminal work revolutionized the study and understanding of the history of the west.
His book, The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 won
the Albert Beveridge award. More recently, his book titled Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's
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