Dr. Lutz
United States History
The Wardlaw + Hartridge School

Summer Assignment

Instructions:

-Print this document
-Read and annotate the attached reading
-Students are required to work on this project individually. Your response must be in your own words and reflect your thinking.
-Respond to the below prompts in a typed response that is 300-500 words. You should upload the typed portion of this assignment to Canvas and it will be checked through Turnitin. You should hand in your printed and annotated reading in person at our first class.

This assignment must be submitted before our first class period in September. There are NO extensions, and NO late work will be excepted. Assignments not submitted on time will receive a zero.

Response Prompt:

Describe the myth Ari Kelman addresses here and what is made visible by looking past it. Then, describe your personal reaction to the history Kelman outlines here. What were you thinking and feeling as you read this? How does it contribute or challenge what you already know about Indigenous Americans and their history?

Where do you think Kelman best proves his argument? What piece of supporting evidence convinces you the most?

MYTH AMERICA

HISTORIANS TAKE ON THE BIGGEST LEGENDS AND LIES ABOUT OUR PAST

EDITED BY
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VANISHING INDIANS

Ari Kelman

In April 2021, Rick Santorum, a former Republican senator and failed presidential candidate, spoke before the Young America's Foundation, an organization devoted to inculcating conservative values—including the importance of "individual freedom, a strong national defense, [and] free enterprise"—in its members. Santorum, in the decade and a half since losing his Senate seat, had fashioned himself into a political pundit and commentator, someone media outlets and movement conservatives could reliably count on to serve up hard-right rhetoric in print and in person. In his speech about the sanctity of religious liberty, Santorum looked back to the nation's origins, suggesting that when European colonists arrived in what would become the United States, they found only a "blank slate." There was "nothing here," he insisted. Drawing an unbroken line between colonial pioneers and practitioners of modern conservatism, he noted that "we birthed a nation from nothing." Santorum, catching himself, allowed that "yes, we have Native Americans." But of their contributions to the nation's development, "Candidly there isn't much Native American culture in American culture." In just a few sentences, Santorum had erased the history and culture of Indigenous Americans; Native peoples, if they had played any role in the nation's development, had long since departed the stage, leaving behind little of substance.[1]

Although Santorum later insisted that he had been misunderstood, his remarks echoed and amplified persistent misconceptions about the mechanisms and consequences of American imperialism: the myth of the

vanishing Indian. The notion that Native peoples would sink whenever they found themselves awash in a flood tide of settlers predated the founding of the republic. Colonists in New England systematically erased evidence of long-standing Indigenous cultures and societies as a way of legitimating Euro-American land claims. The presence of so-called Indians in the region, newcomers insisted, had been only fleeting, an ephemeral curiosity whose time had come and gone. By the mid-nineteenth century, pseudoscience propped up such claims. God and nature, racial theorists insisted, had destined savage Indians to disappear when confronted by white civilization. As time passed, an equally crude cultural explanation emerged to supplement that sort of environmental determinism: Indians were always and everywhere premodern people; they were incapable of adapting and surviving in a fast-changing world. In the years after the Civil War, onlookers nationwide kept waiting for these primitives to disappear, even as warfare between federal and Indigenous soldiers bathed the American West in blood.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, tribal nations were often confined to reservations. Many Native homelands, ostensibly guaranteed to their inhabitants in perpetuity, were being privatized and sold at market. In the coming years, the independent political standing of some tribes would be terminated by federal authorities. Across the 1920s and 1930s, even as Indigenous people gained the prerogatives of citizenship, audiences consumed films, photographs, and books that depicted Indians as endangered or extinct. Through the 1960s, with wars abroad and struggles for civil rights at home shifting the cultural context, the myth of the vanishing Indian persisted. In 1970, Dee Brown published *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. An account of the continent's conquest and colonization, Brown's book allowed Native people to speak for themselves. But he still concluded that by the end of the nineteenth century, the "culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed." A hugely popular work of revisionist history intended to document a vibrant Indian past, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* instead reduced Indigenous history to declension, destruction, and disappearance. Brown's work, no matter the author's intentions, seeded the ground for a speech like Santorum's.[2]

By the time that Rick Santorum spoke before the Young America's Foundation, the erasure of Native peoples, whether from literature or the landscape, had a long history. Jean O'Brien, a renowned White Earth Ojibwe scholar, has written about British colonists in New England first dispossessing and then displacing Native Americans. Settlers, she demonstrates, claimed to have created the region's enduring institutions—to have ushered in the foundations of civilization and modernity—and then began casting Indians as immutably premodern. Indians facing a changing world could not adapt, New Englanders insisted. Instead, overmatched and unfit, tribal peoples would vanish from the scene. In this way, settlers absolved themselves of guilt for the cruelty they visited upon Native nations; they turned imperial violence into innocent virtue. Constructed narratives of regional progress hinged on episodes in which colonists confronted and overcame savages, replacing them with white settlements. What had been a time without history gave way to an era of colonial primacy and progress. The disappearance of Indians became a mile marker on the road to transforming a hideous and desolate wilderness into a congenial settler homeland.[3]

Many leading figures within the founding generation believed that Indians would eventually vanish, their disappearance clearing the way for the young United States to thrive. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, looking back on the consequences of the conquest and colonization of Massachusetts for Native peoples, asked, "What can be more melancholy than their history?" Pointing to an emerging racial explanation for the transition from Native to non-Native control of the Atlantic coast, he observed, "By a law of their nature, they seem destined to a slow, but sure extinction." Encapsulating the myth of the vanishing Indian, he concluded: "Everywhere, at the approach of the white man, they fade away. We hear the rustling of their footsteps, like that of the withered leaves of autumn, and they are gone forever." Some of Story's contemporaries, including Thomas Jefferson, held more nuanced views of Indigenous people. Jefferson theorized that Indians were likely capable of improving their race. So long as they embraced Christianity and adapted to sedentary agriculture, he believed that Native people could assimilate and perhaps even become productive Americans, yeoman farmers capable of republican virtue. But

Jefferson, Story, and their peers elided episodes of settler violence, constructing instead foundational myths around unexamined assumptions of American innocence, progress, and innovation.[4]

As antipathies between settlers and Indigenous people deepened throughout the era of the early republic, and especially during and after the War of 1812, when Native warriors fought with the British against American soldiers, the myth of the vanishing Indian spread more widely. The idea that Indians were destined to fade away, their disappearance preordained by the Almighty rather than a consequence of federal policies or the actions of independent settlers, offered both an explanation and a kind of exculpation for what might otherwise have been an unnerving transition in a nation proud of its postcolonial origin story and its publicly anti-imperial posture. A commonly held perspective suggested that settlers in the United States, looking only to better themselves and improve the landscape around them, had neither sought a fight with Native peoples nor hoped to overrun their homelands. Regrettably, Indians had allied themselves with Great Britain, making themselves America's enemies, the argument went, and employed tactics that had no place in civilized warfare —never mind that Patriot soldiers had sometimes used similar methods in their fight with redcoats during the Revolutionary War. That Indigenous peoples might disappear in the wake of the War of 1812 seemed to many onlookers like just deserts.[5]

As the years passed, pressure on Indians living between the Atlantic coast and the Appalachians became unbearable. Around the time of the Louisiana Purchase, President Jefferson had mused about exchanging Native ground to the east of the Mississippi for federal lands to its west. By the 1820s, even though the so-called Five Civilized Tribes included among their ranks Christians, farmers, and slaveholders, settlers in the Southeast viewed those Native nations as an impediment to progress. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson decided to remove those tribes to a so-called permanent Indian frontier, territory beyond the Mississippi guaranteed to Native nations "in perpetuity." President Jackson and his supporters, working against the backdrop of the myth of the vanishing Indian, often recast the policy of removal as a kind of humanitarianism. They suggested that either Indians would willingly go into the West or they would disappear

entirely. “All good citizens, and none more zealously than those who think the Indians oppressed by subjection to the laws of the States,” Jackson suggested in justifying removal, “will unite in attempting to open the eyes of those children of the forest to their true condition, and by a speedy removal to relieve them from the evils, real or imaginary, present or prospective, with which they may be supposed to be threatened.” The myth of the vanishing Indian became a self-fulfilling prophecy.[6]

With the United States hurtling toward civil war, racial scientists grew more authoritative by crafting planks for the South’s pro-slavery platform and, in doing so, amplified the myth of the vanishing Indian. Adherents of the American school of ethnology, drawing on Samuel George Morton’s *Crania Americana*, argued for the theory of polygenesis. Different races of human beings had been created during different episodes, they claimed, and therefore differences found among them, including apparent inequities of ability or variations in intellect, would remain immutable. Pointing to variegations in human skulls, Morton insisted that they came from entirely separate species of human beings. Josiah Nott, a physician and racial theorist in Mobile, Alabama, expanded on Morton’s work, arguing that Native peoples, a distinct race created in a discrete moment, were incapable of change and that God and nature had sealed their fate: “To one who has lived among American Indians, it is vain to talk of civilizing them.” He concluded, “It is as clear as the sun at noon-day… the last of these Red men will be numbered among the dead.”[7]

During the Civil War, the Republican Party passed landmark pieces of legislation—the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the Morrill Land-Grant Act—remaking the United States into an empire that stretched from coast to coast. Native peoples responded by fighting for their families, their homelands, and their sovereignty. Early in the war, southern diplomats guaranteed that a new Confederate nation would safeguard its allies’ political and cultural prerogatives. Some Cherokees, weary of the federal government’s broken promises, agreed to fight with the South. In 1862, Dakota peoples in Minnesota launched a territorial and cultural counterrevolution, burning towns and pushing settlers out of large swaths of the state. Federal troops then marched to restore order, smashing Native soldiers before staging the largest public execution in the nation’s history:

thirty-eight Dakotas hanged the day after Christmas, 1862. Two years after that, on November 29, 1864, volunteer soldiers in Colorado Territory descended upon a peaceful Arapaho and Cheyenne village and slaughtered more than 150 people, the vast majority of whom were women, children, and the elderly. In the wake of what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre, Native nations on the plains fought together during Red Cloud's War.[8]

Westward migrants and federal officials were shocked and infuriated as Indigenous people, supposedly hardwired by racial destiny to disappear when faced with adversity, kept adapting and fighting, sometimes securing stunning victories in struggles with the United States. Just days before the nation's centennial celebration, an army made up of Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota warriors destroyed George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry. Onlookers around the United States grappled with the hard truth that Indians had bested one of the Civil War's heroes. When he took office in 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant had initially hoped to feed rather than fight Native people. He claimed that he did not want to destroy what remained of Indigenous America. But after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he reversed course. The Indian Wars would not end until federal troops, responding to a perceived threat associated with a religious revival known as the Ghost Dance, killed hundreds of Native people at the Wounded Knee massacre.[9]

With the Civil War over and the Thirteenth Amendment ratified, many abolitionists searched for good works to occupy their idled hands. Some turned to the cause of Indian reform. In 1879, an author named Helen Hunt Jackson began writing an exposé of how Indians had been mistreated throughout the nation's history. Published in 1881, *A Century of Dishonor* revealed "the robbery, the cruelty which were done under the cloak of this hundred years of treaty-making and treaty-breaking." Rather than assuming that Native people would inevitably vanish, Jackson suggested that the people of the United States should understand their culpability in what today might be called a genocide. She warned that a day of reckoning drew near: "The history of the United States Government's repeated violations of faith with the Indians thus convicts us, as a nation, not only of having outraged the principles of justice, which are the basis of international law;

and of having laid ourselves open to the accusation of both cruelty and perfidy; but of having made ourselves liable to all punishments which follow upon such sins." Only by repenting, she insisted, and also by shifting federal Indian policy, could the United States avoid the "natural punishment which, sooner or later, as surely comes from evil-doing as harvests come from sown seed."[10]

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the American West, despite the death and degradation associated with the Indian Wars, remained a place of hope and promise for the United States. But anxieties over the implications of imperialism troubled many observers of the region's landscape and history. Frederick Jackson Turner fretted over the closing of the frontier. He worried that a dearth of unoccupied land accessible to settlers would imperil American democracy. Indians disappeared in the West of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis." In these same years, conservationists, including Teddy Roosevelt, unspooled their own declension narratives, predicting the impending destruction of the bison—a synecdoche for the West—and the Native peoples who depended on those beasts. An emerging field of professional anthropology, theorized by scholars such as Franz Boas, employed familiar rhetoric, warning colleagues that Native peoples would soon vanish: "Day by day the Indians and their cultures are disappearing more and more before the encroachment of modern civilization, and fifty years hence nothing will remain to be learned in regard to this interesting and important subject." Famed ethnographers, including George Bird Grinnell and James Mooney, went into the field to try to capture that culture before it was gone.[11]

Vanishing Indians featured prominently in popular culture and the arts early in the new century. Photographer Edward Curtis captured images of Native peoples who he believed would soon disappear. His haunting work rendered static figures who were, outside his frame, dynamic, embodying the misconception that Native Americans were trapped in the amber of a bygone era. He titled the most iconic of his compositions—a group of Navajos on horseback, riding away from the photographer toward an uncertain fate—*The Vanishing Race.* As Curtis tried to preserve evidence of a Native presence in the United States, he contributed to a deepening sense that Indians would soon be gone forever. Around the same time, readers

consumed dime novels about cowboys and Indians. Zane Grey's *The Vanishing American*, released first as a book and then as a silent film in 1925, told the story of federal exploitation of the Navajo people. The book is relatively sympathetic to the plight of its subjects; the movie is less so. In both cases, beleaguered Indians ultimately realize that their traditional ways of life are doomed in a changing world.[12]

Ironically, as the myth of the vanishing Indian spread from the realms of pseudoscience and scholarship into the popular imagination, becoming more deeply ingrained in American culture than ever before, federal treatment of Indigenous people improved somewhat. At the same time, what had been a demographic decline seemingly began reversing itself—although census data are notoriously unreliable when it comes to Native Americans, who sometimes live in hard-to-reach places and frequently prefer not to be counted by investigators on the federal payroll. During the era of the New Deal, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed John Collier, a sociologist and advocate of Native rights, to the post of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Collier crafted the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, reversing decades of policy devoted to assimilating Indigenous peoples—making Indians vanish, in other words, through a process of officially sanctioned amalgamation—and instead respecting their political and cultural sovereignty. As Collier explained in a rejoinder to critics, the goal of the legislation was "to recognize and respect the Indian as he is." In 1938 Collier reported that "Indians are no longer a dying race."[13]

In the three decades between Collier's statement and publication of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Native nations, despite popular misunderstandings and the ongoing impact of settler colonialism—economic, environmental, and demographic devastation; public health catastrophes, including epidemics of substance abuse and malnutrition; and social, cultural, and political dislocation—survived and even thrived in some instances. These were years in which Indigenous peoples increasingly eschewed assimilationist pressures and fought for recognition on their own terms. Tribal peoples organized themselves to protect their ways of living: creating language-preservation programs, safeguarding sacred sites, and fighting for sovereignty. By 1970, the year of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*'s publication, *Time* reported that American Indians were "no longer

vanishing" and were instead "the nation's fastest growing minority." Nevertheless, Dee Brown, no matter how sympathetic he intended his portrayal of Native history and peoples, recapitulated antiquated rhetoric about the disappearance of Indians.[14]

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee sprawls beyond any single region and sweeps across a vast temporal arc. From start to finish, Brown intends his book as a corrective for pervasive myths about the nation's character and history, which, in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, are inextricably intertwined. By incorporating Native voices into the national narrative, Brown helps readers understand that the United States achieved its status as a continental empire not merely by dint of Manifest Destiny but also because expansionist visionaries abetted the flow of settlers into the West. The cruel logic that accompanied demographic change at this scale, Brown suggests, hinged upon the assumption that treaties could be shredded, that communities could be dehumanized, and that Native people could be dispossessed and slaughtered. Brown relies on unsparing, even voyeuristic, storytelling. Readers bear witness as soldiers chop genitalia from the bodies of their victims and rip unborn children from their mothers' wombs; across the book's chapters, as Brown debunks notions of national innocence, corpses stack up like cordwood. In the end, there can be no conclusion other than that American exceptionalism is a deceit as self-serving as it is grotesque. But at the same time, a book written to debunk one pernicious myth unwittingly reifies another, hammering home the message that by the start of the twentieth century, Indians had vanished.

Intent on centering the experiences of Native peoples in his work, Brown featured their voices, but only as echoes of the distant past. His writing predated insights about mediated texts and linguistic sovereignty that now circulate widely in the field of Native American and Indigenous studies. Rather than exploring cultural positionality and multivocality, Brown could not believe that the polished rhetoric punctuating *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*'s pages had come from the mouths of Indians. An intrepid researcher, he "spent hours tracking down identities of the official interpreters" before reaching "the conclusion that in most cases it mattered little who the interpreters were. The words came through into English with the same eloquence." What Brown overlooked was the fact that those

translators often worked in service of federal authority; they were agents of empire, and the documents they produced were later collected as part of a settler-colonial project and housed in the National Archives and the Library of Congress. Brown never bothered working with Native informants or tribal elders. He ignored Indigenous protocols for the collection and reproduction of conversations and stories. He had little interest in conducting oral histories or ethnographies. Indians were, he thought, relics of the past. They had, in his telling, effectively vanished wholesale in the aftermath of the massacre at Wounded Knee.[15]

Brown, the author of twenty-nine books throughout his career, never enjoyed better timing than with the release of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Published against the backdrop of the modern civil rights movement, which generated popular interest in the nation's history of mistreating people of color; the so-called New Age, which featured seekers fascinated by Indigenous peoples and cultures; and declining support for the United States' war in Vietnam, which sparked anti-imperialist sentiment, Brown's book offered readers a scathing indictment of misbegotten federal authority, enduring bigotry and racial violence, and American empire. In 1968, tribal activists formed the American Indian Movement. A year after that, some of the organization's members seized control of Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary —located on an island a bit more than a mile offshore of San Francisco—a triumphant debut of Red Power. Just a week before the siege at Alcatraz started, Seymour Hersh, then a young investigative reporter, broke news of American soldiers killing more than a hundred villagers in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai. The next year, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* arrived in bookstores. As a critic noted, "Brown is clearly one of a few authors who manage to write the right book at the right time."[16]

After spending more than a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* sold well over five million copies before Dee Brown's death in 2002. It remains the most popular and likely the most influential work of western history ever written, its impact lingering into the present. In the half century since *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*'s publication, Native writers and activists have pushed back against the book's legacy and the myth of the vanishing Indian more broadly. In 1999, for example, Gerald Vizenor theorized the notion of "survivance" for

Indigenous peoples, suggesting that "Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry." In other words, Vizenor rejected the notion that Indians should be understood as Dee Brown had cast them. Twenty years later, Tiffany Midge, a Lakota writer and humorist, poked fun at the ongoing impact of Brown's work, publishing an essay collection titled *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's*, in which she acknowledges the impact of settler colonialism but focuses more of her attention on the reality of Native American lives as persistent and complex. Finally, in that same year, 2019, David Treuer, an Ojibwe scholar, author, and cultural critic, published *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*.[17]

Treuer's book explicitly rejects Brown's framing of history, picking up the story of Native peoples after the violence at Wounded Knee—a time when, Brown had insisted, they should have disappeared. Treuer explains his inspiration: "the simple, fierce conviction that [our] cultures are not dead," that "[Native] civilizations have not been destroyed." Wounded Knee, he notes, often serves as a coda in discussions of Indigenous people. Many textbooks and scholarly monographs feature Native nations, if they are featured at all, only during the decades between Jacksonian removal and the end of the Indian Wars, after which they seemingly vanish. But Treuer insists that the tragedy at Wounded Knee should instead be understood as the "point from which much of modern Indian and American life has emerged." It is "not just that 150 people were cruelly and viciously killed," he mourns, but also "that their sense of life—and our sense of their lives—died with them." He suggests that "the victims of Wounded Knee died twice—once at the end of a gun, again at the end of a pen." In Treuer's view, it is only by rewriting the history of Native peoples—acknowledging their ongoing resilience and complexity—that the work of authors like Dee Brown can be effaced and Wounded Knee and the years since reclaimed and redeemed.[18]

Yet the myth of the vanishing Indian—despite the presence of so many actual Indians, including those increasingly working in the public eye, demanding that onlookers acknowledge their existence—persists. For someone like Rick Santorum, keen to signal support for American imperialism, excising the contributions and persistence of colonized peoples

serves as a kind of shibboleth. Critics noted that Santorum chose not just to denigrate but also to erase the history and cultural contributions of Native peoples in the United States. Simon Moya-Smith, a Lakota journalist, suggested that "American history textbooks routinely—and, for men like Santorum, conveniently—leave out the deep and textured history of this continent's Indigenous peoples, as well as the details of the shocking brutality of the white men who invaded our land and claimed it for themselves." Moya-Smith concluded: "America desperately tried to get rid of us. Yet here we stand, Rick Santorum. Our stories and histories and bodies are going nowhere, white man. We are resilient." Nick Estes, a Lower Brule Sioux scholar who has written about the struggle over the Dakota Access Pipeline, observed that "the erasure of Native people and histories, which existed before and survived in spite of a white supremacist empire, is a foundational sin of a make-believe nation." Other onlookers, including Fawn Sharp, president of the National Congress of American Indians, labeled Santorum a racist and suggested that his remarks were predictable.[19]

On social media, in newspapers, and on TV, Native and non-Native people called on CNN, Santorum's employer, to fire the controversial commentator. Santorum engaged in what appeared to be a halfhearted effort at damage control, insisting that he had been misinterpreted. "The way we treated Native Americans was horrific," Santorum clarified, adding that "it goes against every bone and everything I've ever fought for, as a leader, in the Congress." Observers noted that he did not apologize for his remarks. Less than a month later, CNN's head of strategic communications, Matt Dornic, announced that the organization had "parted ways" with Santorum. An unnamed executive explained that "none of the anchors wanted to book him. So he was essentially benched anyway." Summing up management's decision, Dornic added: "I think after that appearance, it was pretty clear we couldn't use him again." Santorum would, at least for a time, vanish. It seemed likely, though, that the myth that had contributed to his disappearance would persist.[20]