

ÉTUDE CRITIQUES / REVIEW ESSAYS

Centering Native Diasporas in North American History

LABELLE, Kathryn Magee – *Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 273.

SMITHERS, Gregory D. – *The Cherokee Diaspora: An Indigenous History of Migration, Resettlement, and Identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 358

STECKLEY, John L. – *The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 306.

During the past decade, the concept of diaspora has made a powerful entry into Native North American history.¹ While scholars may have previously felt uncomfortable with this culturally alien term whose origins lie in Jewish history, many have come to embrace it as a way to make sense of the continent's Indigenous pasts, which seem increasingly complex, shifting, and entangled.² Since 2000, three overlapping historiographical trends have paved way for this development. First, Jon Parmenter, Michael Witgen, and others have recalibrated scholarly understandings of mobility in Native North America, arguing that rather than a sign of Native decline or disunity, mobility often constituted a strategy for political expansion, a complex cultural way of inhabiting space, and a social process linking people to one another.³ Second, Ned Blackhawk, Robbie Ethridge,

1 Sami Lakomäki, *Gathering Together: The Shawnee People through Diaspora and Nationhood, 1600–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Kenneth Mello, "'Diaspora' and the Wabanaki Relationship with Land," in Graham Harvey and Charles D. Thompson, Jr., eds., *Indigenous Diasporas and Dislocations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 85–103; Sheri M. Shuck-Hall, "Alabama and Coushatta Diaspora and Coalescence in the Mississippian Shatter Zone" in Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall, eds., *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), pp. 250–271; Gregory D. Smithers and Brooke N. Newman, eds., *Native Diasporas: Indigenous Identities and Settler Colonialism in the Americas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); Laura Keenan Spero, "'Stout, Bold, Cunning and the Greatest Travellers in America': The Colonial Shawnee Diaspora" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

2 For the origins of the diaspora concept, see Kevin Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2–6.

3 Jon Parmenter, "The Iroquois and the Native American Struggle for the Ohio Valley, 1754–1794" in David Curtis Skaggs and Larry Nelson, eds., *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754–1814* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001), pp. 105–124; Jon Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534–1701* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010); Stephen Warren, *The Worlds the Shawnees Made: Migration and Violence in Early America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina

and others have reconsidered how violence shaped Indigenous North America, splintered communities, hammered fragments into new “coalescent societies,” and turned Native homelands into “borderlands” and “shatter zones.”⁴ Finally, a burgeoning body of research has demonstrated that in this world of mobility and violence Indigenous identities were always multi-layered, fluid, and debated—yet also resilient and enduring.⁵

Together, these studies have raised new questions about belonging, peoplehood, power, and place in Native North American history. Even more fundamentally, they have invited scholars to rethink how to write about the continent’s past: whose perspectives, which geographical borders, and which communal identities should frame historical narratives when such traditional foci as nations, tribes, and bounded places seem inadequate, even distorting? Diaspora offers one fertile perspective for engaging these questions, for it binds together mobility, networks, identity, lived and remembered landscapes, and violence. Emphasizing the concept’s complexity, one specialist defines diaspora as an involuntary migration, the connections among the dispersed migrants, and their enduring links to old homelands.⁶

The three excellent monographs under review here thoughtfully explore the possibilities and potential problems of using diaspora as an analytical lens in Native North American history from a variety of perspectives. Taken together, they illuminate how centering Indigenous diasporas can help reconfigure the continent’s history. As the three books give different weight to the concept of diaspora—indeed, John L. Steckley does not even use the term—and trace quite differing diasporic experiences, they collectively offer a good overview of what historians can do with the concept.

The one to make the most thorough use of diaspora theory is Gregory D. Smithers in his superb exploration of how diverse experiences and memories of migration shaped Cherokee notions of identity from the mid-1700s to the 1940s. As the book’s unconventional temporal scope suggests, Smithers boldly reframes and re-centres Cherokee history. While studies of Cherokee history have traditionally

Press, 2014); Stephen Warren and Randolph Noe, “‘The Greatest Travelers in America’: Shawnee Survival in the Shatter Zone” in Ethridge and Shuck-Hall, *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone*, pp. 163–187; Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

4 Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Robbie Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World 1540–1715* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Ethridge and Shuck-Hall, *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone*; Alan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

5 Gary Clayton Anderson, *The Indian Southwest, 1580–1830: Ethnogenesis and Reinvention* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Heidi Bohaker, “Nindoodemag: The Significance of Algonquian Kinship Networks in the Eastern Great Lakes Region, 1600–1701,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 23–52; Alexandra Harmon, “Wanted: More Histories on Indian Identity” in Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, eds., *A Companion to American Indian History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 248–265; Michael A. McDonnell, “Rethinking the Middle Ground: French Colonialism and Indigenous Identities in the *Pays d’en Haut*” in Smithers and Newman, eds., *Native Diasporas*, pp. 79–108.

6 Kenny, *Diaspora*, pp. 13–14, 40–41, 105.

been dominated by the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of the Cherokees from their homelands in southeastern North America to the Indian Territory in 1838-1839, Smithers situates this traumatic event in a much broader context of mobility and connectivity. Tracing the diverse experiences of various Cherokee communities, groups, and individuals across a wide landscape stretching from the Southeast to Hawaii, he demonstrates that the Cherokees interpreted their multiple migrations, resettlements, and identities in radically differing ways. Indeed, from the late eighteenth century on, Cherokee identity has been “multi-dimensional” and “multi-sited” (p. 16), a nexus of contestation as well as unity.

Although the Trail of Tears still rightfully plays an important role in Smithers’s analysis, he places equal weight to two other transformative periods of displacement and resettlement: the turn of the nineteenth century and the US Civil War. During the late 1700s, relentless Anglo-American expansion convinced many Cherokees that the only way to maintain a viable Cherokee “soul”—understood as traditional lifeways, gender roles, and spiritual balance—was a migration to the trans-Mississippi West. Other Cherokees, however, remained in the Southeast and adopted “a language of nationalism” (p. 29) to defend their sovereignty and land rights against colonial intrusions. As they increasingly defined nationhood as territorial and political consolidation, the Eastern Cherokee elites came to see their western tribespeople as politically suspect outcasts. Yet, as Smithers deftly shows, the lives of the Eastern Cherokee leaders also transcended the national and territorial boundaries they themselves were drawing. In the early nineteenth century, education, business, politics, and marriages took many elite Cherokees beyond the nation’s homelands and by the 1820s some of them argued that “Cherokee identity was not dependent on a specific place” (pp. 84–85). Unlike the Western Cherokees, however, the Eastern elites saw progress and reinvention, not tradition, at the heart of Cherokeeity.

These divergent notions of what being Cherokee meant clashed violently, when the US government compelled the Eastern Cherokees to join their western relatives in the Indian Territory in the late 1830s. The devastating removal was followed by bitter struggles among the disparate communities forced to share a common homeland. As Smithers convincingly argues, these conflicts were not simply contests for power but concerned the fundamental question about the meaning of a collective Cherokee identity. The removal of the Eastern Cherokees also complicated Cherokee notions of homelands. Smithers’s insightful analysis of the changing and complex meanings of “home” runs through the entire book and represents a major contribution to the field of Native North American history. He traces carefully how the removed Cherokees gradually turned their reservation in the Indian Territory into a new “political homeland.” With time, this homeland became an important focal point for diasporic Cherokees; even people who had never lived on the reservation often dreamed of “returning” there. At the same time, Cherokees also retained memories and stories of their ancient homelands in the East. Both old and new homelands, then, offered to the Cherokees fixed geographical and metaphorical points of reference that helped them to contemplate their identity.

Much of Smithers's book—chapters five to seven—investigates the impact of the US Civil War and its legacies on Cherokee homelands and ideas of nationhood. The war divided the Cherokees, initiated a massive refugee crisis, and forced the Cherokees to rethink the place of people of African ancestry in the nation. Smithers's analysis of the "refugee business" is particularly powerful. After the Civil War, thousands of Cherokee refugees, displaced by the conflict, began returning home just as the Cherokee reservation was assaulted by a massive tide of American settlers and railroads. To control the crisis, the Cherokee leadership sought to define increasingly strictly who was a Cherokee and had a right to live in the nation's territory. Over the late nineteenth century, the nation built an extensive bureaucratic machinery to monitor citizenship and movement in and out of the reservation. While traditional notions of kinship and adoption retained some importance, Smithers demonstrates that a racializing "rhetoric of 'blood'" (p. 178) powerfully transformed notions of belonging and community, often marginalizing people with African ancestry.

Perhaps the most profound of Smithers's many insights is his vision of the Cherokee diaspora as something more than simply physical migrations and political divisions. In an important analytical move, he places Cherokee memories and stories of travel and dispersal at the center of his work. And instead of using Cherokee narratives simply to illustrate events reconstructed on the basis of Euro-American documents, Smithers skillfully explores the significance of memory and storytelling to a diasporic people. As he shows, narratives of migrations—especially stories of the forced removal of 1838–1839—allowed widely dispersed people to feel connections with one another and distant homelands. Likewise, they helped individuals and communities to give meaning to traumatic events and to build models for possible futures.

One aspect of the Cherokee diaspora that Smithers might have given more attention to is kinship. Considering the important role that matrilineal clans had long played in Cherokee life, there is surprisingly little discussion on how clan networks may have shaped Cherokee migrations and identities or how the diaspora transformed the clans. This is a minor criticism, however. Stimulating, well-argued, and elegantly written, Smithers's excellent book offers a model on how to think about Indigenous diasporas and how centering Native diasporas can reframe larger issues in North American history.

Just like the Trail of Tears has dominated Cherokee histories, the devastating Haudenosaunee attacks in 1649 have long shaped the ways scholars have narrated and understood the past of the Wendat people. A powerful confederacy of farmers and traders around the Georgian Bay, the Wendats were dispersed by the Haudenosaunees and scattered across the Northeast, some migrating to Michilimackinac, others to Quebec, and still others to Haudenosaunee homelands, Detroit, and elsewhere. So dramatic was this dispersal that many historians and anthropologists have portrayed it as the end of Wendat history and any meaningful Wendat peoplehood.

Kathryn Magee Labelle forcefully challenges, and convincingly demolishes, this "discourse of destruction" (p. 196) in her aptly-named *Dispersed but Not*

Destroyed that follows the Wendat diaspora through the seventeenth century. A top-notch ethnohistory, Labelle's book demonstrates how to write against declension narratives in Native history without losing sight of the very real suffering and pain that people facing epidemics, violence, and dislocation must have experienced. Even when writing about harrowing events, she consistently stresses Wendat agency, centers Wendat individuals and initiatives, and places Wendats within the context of their own culture and networks. In doing so, Labelle shows Wendats—as individuals and communities—making considered decisions and pursuing calculated goals through the worst of times.

Labelle does not deny the devastation the Haudenosaunee attacks visited on the Wendat communities in the mid-1600s. In chapters one and two, she carefully investigates the background of this warfare and its intersections with deadly foreign epidemics that were simultaneously causing major demographic, political, and cultural transformations among the Wendats. She, however, makes very clear that the scattering of the Wendats was not a panic-ridden act of a dying people but instead a “calculated dispersal” (p. 64) based on careful deliberations. “[O]ld systems and traditions” (p. 5), such as international alliances and multiethnic kinship networks, gave shape to the Wendat exodus. Tracing the routes of the various groups through chapters 3–7, Labelle demonstrates that the Wendat refugees often settled among peoples with whom they had previous social, political, or economic relations. Alternatively, many sought to rebuild their power and prosperity with time-tested strategies and migrated to areas that shared geopolitical characteristics with their old homelands. Throughout her analysis, Labelle sets Wendat migrations and resettlements in the context of such Native cultural patterns as adoption, kinship, intermarriage, and captive-taking that had long extended Indigenous social and political networks, integrated strangers into communities, and shaped movement through space. This effectively indigenizes the very notion of diaspora, a major contribution to Native history as well as to diaspora studies.

While scholars long portrayed the dispersal as an unmitigated disaster for the Wendats, Labelle argues convincingly that, in time, geographical scattering actually became a source of power for at least some Wendat communities. Here she joins Jon Parmenter and others who have sought to re-envision power in the seventeenth-century North American landscape ordered more by kinship and ritual than by bordered territoriality and nationhood.⁷ According to Labelle, widespread mobility extended the Wendats' political, diplomatic, and kinship networks and made them skilled in mobilizing these webs for their benefit in the volatile world of warfare, competition over trade, and colonialism.

Labelle's key contribution to wider scholarship concerns the importance of these Native-centric networks. Embracing “[a] ‘system’ paradigm” (p. 6), she contends that in the seventeenth century North America's political landscape was far more profoundly shaped by overlapping and organizationally ambiguous “multifunctional networks” (p. 6) than by confederacies or tribal and ethnic polities. These networks included widespread diasporic communities and multi-

7 Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*; Witgen, *Infinity of Nations*.

community coalitions which often proved much more enduring in the turmoil of colonialism than more elaborate political formations. Seeking to “reconceptualize these Native networks from a Wendat perspective” (p. 183), Labelle carefully traces especially “the Wendat-Anishinaabe Coalition” (p. 68), as well as the diverse relations between several Wendat and Haudenosaunee communities.

Labelle’s analysis, like the recent work of Heidi Bohaker and Michael Witgen, invites scholars to rethink both the configurations of power in seventeenth-century eastern North America and the models we today use to narrate and analyze them.⁸ What is emerging from this evolving literature is a landscape of multi-layered and kinetic Native-dominated networks that is not best elucidated by focusing on single nations, confederacies, communities, or colonies. However, foregrounding shifting and multipolar webs that lack clear centers can be challenging. Labelle does an admirable job in keeping her narrative of the various Wendat groups and migrations clear and easy to follow. Yet at times her own language stresses confederacies and nations rather than networks. For example, when Labelle discusses the Wendat-Anishinaabeg “Coalition” she gives the impression of a centralized alliance between two monolithic nations rather than a more complex arrangement among several towns and kin groups. Similarly, when Labelle emphasizes that the widely-scattered Wendats “retained an essential Wendat identity” (p. 100) she weakens her own analysis of the very different meanings the various groups gave to being Wendat and overlooks those diasporic communities where some originally non-Wendat residents seem to have *become* Wendats over time.

Yet these criticisms merely show that depicting a world where people moved through complicated multi-polar networks but also possessed complex ideas of peoplehood and community is eminently challenging. *Dispersed but Not Destroyed* is a major contribution to the understanding of this world. It counters declensionist myths of Wendat destruction and draws a complex yet coherent picture of the vibrant Wendat diaspora. At the same time it prompts broader questions about power, society, and narrative in the study of seventeenth-century North America.

Unlike Smithers and Labelle, John L. Steckley does not employ diaspora terminology or theory in his study of the eighteenth-century Wendat (or Wyandot, to follow Steckley’s terminology) society. Instead, using rich Jesuit materials (many of them in Wendat language) that document life in two Wendat villages on Bois Blanc Island in the Detroit River in the 1740s, he sets out to analyze the political, social, and ritual structures of these communities. Despite this seemingly local focus, however, Steckley’s meticulous book is all about how a Native people coped with diaspora. Indeed, his exceptionally detailed focus on Indigenous kinship networks offers a highly useful, if not easily imitated, model for scholars who wish to conceptualize Native dispersals from a firmly Native perspective.

Much of Steckley’s book is devoted to a painstaking analysis of the Jesuit documents that list the residents of the two villages, record their relationships, and detail their political and spiritual roles. Throughout, Steckley makes excellent use of Wendat-language materials. He demonstrates that in the 1740s—a century

8 Bohaker, “Nindoodemag”; Witgen, *Infinity of Nations*.

after the Wendats dispersed from their homelands—their lives continued to be largely structured by traditional matrilineal clans. Steckley argues convincingly that in the turmoil of diaspora Wendat clans proved more resilient than the Wendat confederacy. When the confederacy fell apart in the mid-1600s, clans continued to give order and security to the Natives and “kept the Wyandot strong” (p. 6). The clans linked people, both locally and over vast distances, and constituted a channel through which outsiders could be recruited and assimilated into local communities. Moreover, Steckley deftly counters oft-heard arguments that interpret the divergent political strategies adopted by different clans as corrosive “factionalism.” Instead, he shows that the clans’ varied, even opposing, politics gave the Natives flexibility and multiple options needed to navigate their dangerous world.

At times Steckley’s prose gets a bit heavy, and his readers would have benefited from a more extended description of his Jesuit sources at the beginning of the book. Yet *The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot* is a compelling piece of research. While both Smithers and Labelle certainly recognize the significance of kinship in Indigenous diasporas, Steckley takes the analysis of diasporic kinship webs to a much deeper level. His work makes clear that foregrounding *either* confederacies or diasporic networks in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Native North American history can be distorting without a thorough grasp of Indigenous kinship systems. Similarly, Steckley’s skillful interpretation of Native-language materials serves as a healthy reminder of the formidable cultural gulf separating modern scholars from the Native peoples of the past and forces us to reflect critically on the epistemological basis of our language and theoretical models.

Placing Indigenous diasporas and dispersals at the center of North American history, the three books reviewed here invite scholars to rethink how to analyze and narrate the continent’s past. They take us beyond old arguments over place versus process and suggest instead that networks and connections may offer a more fruitful focus. Yet they also remind that an analysis of webs and mobility must be intertwined with a sophisticated understanding of how Native peoples thought about nationhood, community, and belonging. Any discussion of these themes should also be grounded in Indigenous constructions of self. For Labelle and Steckley, Wendat customs of adoption and inheritance of clan names reveal rich cultural understandings of personhood, and Smithers discusses Cherokee notions of multiple souls in similar terms. Others should continue from where they leave off and consider the challenge these Native constructions of self pose to the fundamentally Western identity theories which underlie much of the current diaspora scholarship. As Smithers’s work shows, “place” may need rethinking too. What counts as place in North American history: Native roads, remembered landscapes, imagined places? Smithers, Labelle, and Steckley do not give final answers to all of the questions their work raises; instead, they push us forward toward new ground and offer us maps to chart our paths. That is a considerable feat.

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