

# Native Americans, Military Science, and Ambivalence on the Pacific Railroad Surveys, 1853–1855

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## AN AMERICAN DAWN

THE sky was dark when Sam An-ax-shat left the Americans and began his hike east through the mountains. For two weeks, An-ax-shat had guided a small party of U.S. Army mapmakers and scientists between the walls of the Cascade Range, west into the Willamette Valley. At eighteen, An-ax-shat was not much younger than the party's commander, Lieutenant Henry L. Abbot (1831–1927), who had just turned twenty-four. Fear haunted both young men. Rumors of an Indian war floated through forests and valleys of the Oregon Territory, and Abbot was afraid that hostile Indians would see his small, lightly armed party as “tempting prey.” For his part, An-ax-shat left under the mantle of night to slip past white settlers, fearful they would kill him if he traveled by day. The two men had parted amicably earlier that day, when Abbot paid An-ax-shat for his services, gave him presents, and provided him provisions for his trek to rejoin his band. “I have little doubt,” Abbot subsequently wrote, “that we all owe our lives to the fidelity of this Indian.”<sup>1</sup>

I wish to thank Martha Sandweiss and Gabriel Swift for their counsel.

1. Henry L. Abbot, “Narrative and Itinerary Continued.—Routes of Detached Parties,” *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, 12 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States War Department, 1855–1860), vol. 6, pt. 1, pp. 96–102. A note on citations: A single volume of the *Reports* often contains multiple sections, each with independent page numbering. I cite the *Reports* by volume, part, and page number within that part. (Because of inconsistent organization in the *Reports*, my numbering of volume parts sometimes differs from that in a given *Report*, as when a *Report* contains an unnumbered initial section followed by several numbered parts. In all cases, I number parts sequentially, starting at the beginning of each volume.) Collectively, I

Like so many Indian-white encounters in nineteenth-century western North America, the relationship between An-ax-shat and Abbot blended money, power, dependence, misunderstanding, fear, and gratitude.<sup>2</sup> Abbot's documentation of their experience survives in the pages of the *Pacific Railroad Reports*, an ambitious federal project to survey possible transcontinental railroad routes. The narrative accounts of the survey's officers, woven among tables of meteorological observations and barometric profiles of mountain passes, reveal a profoundly unsettled American West and hint at far greater changes soon to come.

Political disagreements occasioned the *Pacific Railroad Reports*. A transcontinental railroad had been an attractive prospect since the 1840s, but the project repeatedly foundered for lack of agreement on where to build it. As American emigration to recently acquired Western territories accelerated, the question became increasingly urgent. Throughout the 1850s, a stormy Congress considered and rejected multiple transcontinental railroad bills, each of which sunk under the weight of sectionalism, regionalism, or party politics. In 1853, the clouds briefly parted over the Thirty-second Congress. Amendment 10 to the Army Appropriations Bill, authorizing surveys for potential railroad routes, mustered enough votes to pass both houses. The amendment directed Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to "make such explorations and surveys as he may deem advisable, to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi river to the Pacific ocean."<sup>3</sup>

And so, in 1853, teams of men fanned out across the newly American West to inspect possible courses for a railroad across the continent. They examined everything that might aid or hinder construction and

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will refer to these documents as the *Pacific Railroad Reports* or the *Reports*. A note on terms: Where possible, I refer to native people by their tribal or band affiliation. Otherwise, I usually use the word "Indian" to describe the native people of western North America, in recognition of my sources' use of the same term and for stylistic reasons.

2. See, for example, Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A New History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (New York: Ecco, 2012). More generally, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

3. Amendment 10 to the 1853 Army Appropriations Bill, quoted in *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. iv. For a summary of the congressional transcontinental railroad debates and proposed (and failed) bills, see George Leslie Albright, *Official Explorations for Pacific Railroads, 1853–1855* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1921), 29–39.

settlement: terrain, weather, flora and fauna, natural resources, and Indian tribes. Over two years, the results of their surveys poured into Washington, D.C., and the War Department compiled these findings into an encyclopedia-sized set of twelve volumes, collectively entitled *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*.

Exploration is a cultural activity and the *Reports* communicate the attitudes, desires, goals, and fears of their creators.<sup>4</sup> These dimensions, however, have been largely overlooked. Previous writers have emphasized the political, scientific, and military importance of the surveys, but these authors tend to focus on operational details and uncritically reproduce the explorers' viewpoint.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, intellectual movements like the New Western History, which contends that conflict and warfare shaped the American West, have left little analytical space for scientific expeditions. This makes it more difficult to understand enterprises like the Pacific Railroad Surveys, which, although conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, maintained an air of objective neutrality. Finally, historians tend to regard the *Reports* as Western materials, confining their influence to one region rather than considering them in a national light.

I propose to look at these *Reports* in a new way: as documents of a settler-colonial society. Settler colonialism describes the marginalization or elimination of native people by non-natives so that the foreigners can acquire, hold, and use native land. It differs from extractive

4. William H. Goetzmann articulated this idea in *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (1966; repr., Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1993), xi. For a historiographic recapitulation of exploration studies, see John L. Allen, "Where We Are and How We Got There: Surveying the Record of Exploration Studies," in *Surveying the Record: North American Scientific Exploration to 1930*, ed. Edward C. Carter III (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999).

5. Goetzmann characterizes the survey parties as "clearing away the Indian barrier" so that "the yeoman and the cattle raiser and the storekeeper [could] take proper possession of his fee-simple empire in the unspoiled West." See William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 261, 18, and esp. 209-337. Edward S. Wallace dedicated his study of Western exploration to the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers, who "probably did more, in proportion to their small numbers, toward the winning of the West than any other group in our history." Wallace, *The Great Reconnaissance: Soldiers, Artists and Scientists on the Frontier 1848-1861* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), ii.

colonialism, where a small cadre of temporary foreign administrators exploits native labor.<sup>6</sup> As with extractive colonialism, the attitudes of settler-colonists continue to organize and influence a society long after the initial acts of dispossession.

In America, as elsewhere, a wide range of official practices have supported the settler-colonial project, including miscegenation laws, erosion and denial of native land claims, abduction and resocialization of native children, mandatory religious conversions, and selective policing—all with the goal of expropriating territory.<sup>7</sup> While most of the men who led and staffed the surveys did not intend to settle in the region they explored, they understood that their work was a first step toward opening the American West to white settlement. This understanding influenced how they wrote the *Reports*.

Ambivalence is central to settler colonialism. Historian Walter Hixson writes that identities such as “colonizer” and “colonized” were “constructed, unstable, and required constant repetition and affirmation in order to assert them as being real.” This instability leaves space for contradictory ideas and mixed emotions. In the American West, for example, Hixson notes that “masses of Americans empathized with Indians, condemned treaty violations and aggression against them, and strove to shepherd them to civilization and salvation. Almost none of these people, however, perceived Indians as having legitimate claims to occupy colonial space.”<sup>8</sup> Ambivalence is also the most difficult qual-

6. For the theoretical basis of settler colonialism, see Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), esp. chap. 1.

7. In the words of anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, “invasion is a structure not an event.” Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8.4 (2006): 388. Numerous recent studies examine settler colonialism in the American West. On native child abduction and resocialization in state-sponsored boarding schools, see Margaret Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). On the use of legal frameworks, particularly criminal law, to gain control over native people, see Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). On the use of police and law enforcement agencies to incorporate national borderlands and impose racial order, see Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875–1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

8. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism*, 3–4.

ity of settler colonialism to grasp. The men who led and staffed the surveys believed in the moral rightness of opening the West to white settlement. The study of settler colonialism asks how the practitioners of conquest justified their actions.<sup>9</sup>

Re-evaluating the *Reports* as national documents of a settler-colonial society offers several insights. First, it demands a greater sensitivity to the historical presence of native and non-white peoples. With this in mind, I have tried to read these documents with an awareness for the experiences of non-white peoples, particularly Indians and people of mixed-race ancestry.<sup>10</sup> Second, at a national scale, this reading reveals the shared causes and similar effects of the Civil War and of territorial expansion. Historian Elliott West has suggested the phrase “Greater Reconstruction” to describe the historical period 1845–1877, in order to emphasize the similar projects of construction and rebuilding that took place in the American South and West.<sup>11</sup> In my usage, “Reconstruction” also includes the process of settler colonialism: the removal of native societies in advance of their replacement—their reconstruction—in the image of settler-colonists. Finally, and more broadly, this approach proposes that American history is most fruitfully understood from a continental or hemispheric perspective, instead of within the usual east-to-west narrative. Giving historical weight to events in the North American West helps to dislodge the eastern seaboard and the North Atlantic world from their centrality to American history.<sup>12</sup>

9. In this analytical turn, settler colonialism elaborates on principles first elucidated by the New Western History. If that approach led historians to focus on the lasting effects of conquest, settler colonialism encourages historians to examine its causes and motivations.

10. In this reading, I follow the example of Pekka Hämäläinen, who analyzed Spanish, American, and Mexican documents to reconstruct the world and society of Comanche Indians. Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

11. Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xvii–xxii.

12. For other works that aim to tell American history from new perspectives, see Claudio Saunt, *West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), which places the American Revolution in continental perspective; Gray H. Whaley, *Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee: U.S. Empire and the Transformation of an Indigenous World, 1792–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.–Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973).

The *Pacific Railroad Reports* are manifestos of invasion. Over four sections, I explain the *Reports*' historical origins; discuss the influence of science and modernity on the institutions responsible for producing them; draw out ambivalent themes in the *Reports* and in the journals of a civilian staff member, Thomas Adams; and describe the world the *Reports* made.

#### THE RAVENOUS 1840S

The story of the *Pacific Railroad Reports* begins not in 1853, when the survey parties undertook their work, but during the 1840s. In rapid succession, the United States annexed the Republic of Texas (1845), concluded a treaty with Great Britain that determined the northern border of the Oregon Territory (1846), and secured vast territorial concessions from a defeated Mexico (1848).<sup>13</sup> Manifest Destiny, the American belief that westward expansion was both proof of and reward for national and racial superiority, justified and encouraged these acquisitions.<sup>14</sup> They gave added urgency to the defining problem of the second half of the nineteenth century: How would America grow into its new borders?<sup>15</sup>

This problem was partly logistical. If the 1840s were about acquiring territories, the 1850s were about accessing them. Beneath the countless debates about internal improvements in the early national period lurked a more selfish question: Whom would they benefit? At the time,

13. In 1853, the United States wrested one more strip of land from Mexico with the Gadsden Purchase, which finalized the contemporary borders of the contiguous United States.

14. On Manifest Destiny, see Robert W. Johannsen, "The Meaning of Manifest Destiny," in *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997). The ideology had its critics, who charged that Manifest Destiny was racist, arrogant, and too dependent on recent technological innovations, such as the telegraph and railroad. See Thomas R. Hietala, "'This Splendid Juggernaut': Westward a Nation and Its People," in *ibid.*

15. In phrasing the problem this way, I echo Elliott West's argument that the Civil War era is about much more than slavery and its expansion. In addition to West, *Last Indian War*, see West, "Reconstructing Race," *Western Historical Quarterly* 24.1 (2003): 6–26. I aim to situate Western events in American history in a way that unites Western and Eastern historical narratives, or at least reveals the extent to which those histories are interpenetrated and mutually constitutive.

it was widely accepted that only one transcontinental railroad would be financially feasible. Sectional, regional, and political concerns quickly overwhelmed the discussion.<sup>16</sup>

Sectionally, Northern and Southern senators fretted over the placement of the railroad. As immigrants crowded Northern cities, threatening to tilt the balance of power in Congress, Southerners grew increasingly concerned about their status as a political minority. They were anxious, too, about the future of plantation agriculture as soil exhaustion spread through the Upper South, portending economic decline. The only way to preserve the Southern way of life, it seemed, was to secure additional territory for slavery.<sup>17</sup> A transcontinental railroad connecting the South to the Far West could solve these problems while preserving the economic prominence of Southern trading cities, principally New Orleans. Northerners contended that the North's robust transportation infrastructure offered superior connections for a transcontinental railroad, which would provide an outlet for the North's abundant manufacturing capacity. Both sides viewed the railroad debate as a proxy battle over competing economic systems: free labor in the North, slave labor in the South. Depending on where it was built, both sides believed, the transcontinental railroad would encourage one to the detriment of the other.<sup>18</sup>

Regional debates pitted coastal states against those in the interior and cities along the Mississippi River against each other. Coastal states argued that maritime trade was the engine of American commerce and warned that an expensive transcontinental railroad would drain

16. Historian John Lauritz Larson argues that Americans in the Early Republic saw government-sponsored internal improvements—canals, roads, railroads—as threats to individual liberty and autonomy because the government could not ensure fair distribution of the benefits of such projects. Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). On the financial impracticality of multiple transcontinental railroad routes, see Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 125. For a general (if dated) legislative history of transcontinental railroad proposals between 1850 and 1862 (when the first Pacific Railroad Act, authorizing construction, was passed), see Lewis Henry Haney, *A Congressional History of Railways in the United States, 1850–1887*, Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin, Economics and Political Science Series, 6, no. 1 (Madison, 1910).

17. May, *Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire*.

18. Larson, *Internal Improvement*, 243–45.

the economy. Interior states countered that the lock on trade enjoyed by coastal states was unjust, if not unconstitutional, and that a railroad was necessary to distribute the benefits of national trade fairly. The river cities all wanted the economic prize of being eastern America's gateway to the Pacific.<sup>19</sup>

Politically, the debate pitted growth-minded Whigs against small-government Democrats. Whigs proposed chartering a national corporation to construct the railroad, but Democrats countered that national corporations invited corruption and were therefore a danger to the national economy and to the Republic itself. The few Western Democrats eager to see a publicly constructed railroad ran counter to their party's platform, which opposed federally directed internal improvements, in part because federal projects put power in the hands of the national executive at the expense of the states.<sup>20</sup> Alliances continually shifted as politicians attempted to balance sectional, regional, and political concerns.

More than a decade of deadlock resulted. Multiple transcontinental railroad bills came up for debate in the Senate, but none received sufficient votes to pass. Even the 1853 amendment funding the surveys did not pass easily. Numerous senators argued that federally directed surveys set a precedent for precisely the type of unconstitutional internal improvements that motivated them to oppose a transcontinental railroad.<sup>21</sup>

Territorial expansion was also a racial problem. How would America incorporate large numbers of non-white people into the body politic? Elliott West has argued that the defining racial problem for America in the nineteenth century was not reckoning with slavery and black-white relations but coming to terms with the inclusion of the Hispanic and Indian peoples who lived in the West, along with Asian people who migrated there.<sup>22</sup> The vast size of America's Western territorial acquisitions and the racial, cultural, and religious diversity of the people who lived there created a problem unprecedented in scale.

19. *Ibid.*, 250–51.

20. *Ibid.*, 243, 248–50.

21. Haney, *Congressional History of Railways*, 54–55.

22. West, "Reconstructing Race." See also Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism*, 80–85.

As the boundaries of the American nation expanded, so too did the frontiers of scientific understanding. The observational methods pioneered by Alexander von Humboldt percolated through the American scientific establishment, precipitating new ways of gathering, organizing, and deploying scientific knowledge. Humboldt took science out of the laboratory and into the field.<sup>23</sup> By amassing small, meticulous observations made in the real world, he taught, scientists could build general theories explaining the intricate relationships that composed the physical and biological world.<sup>24</sup> To discover those natural laws, Humboldt demonstrated a new willingness to generate and discard theories, relied on new conceptual tools to organize and understand masses of data, and, finally, applied these elements to the world outside the laboratory—all significant breaks with past scientific practices.

Science and scientific exploration have long been key elements of state and imperial projects, which aim to describe and categorize.<sup>25</sup>

23. More than fifty years ago, William Goetzmann argued that the scientists who participated in the American survey expeditions of the nineteenth century worked in Humboldt's model. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration*, 6–7. Historian of science Susan Cannon argues that Goetzmann mistook Humboldt's interest in minutia for “vague and unfocused” Romanticism. On the contrary, Cannon argues, Humboldt's emphasis on accurate measurement was serious and deeply scientific. Cannon, *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period* (New York: Science History Publications, 1978), 77–78.

24. Cannon, *Science in Culture*, 104–5. In its emphasis on incorporating discrete personal knowledge into comprehensive natural laws, Humboldtian science in some ways prefigures the impersonal codified operations of the post–Civil War American corporation. See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982).

25. On scientific exploration, see Goetzmann, *Army Exploration*. For a non-American example, see Napoleon's *corps des savants*, which documented Egypt with the goal of modernizing it, discussed in Charles Coulston Gillispie, “Scientific Aspects of the French Egyptian Expedition 1798–1801,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133.4 (1989), and by Nina Burleigh, *Mirage: Napoleon's Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). For the importance of science, especially botany, to the imperial project, see Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); David P. Miller and Peter H. Reill, eds., *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Humboldtian science supported these goals, and some scholars have argued that Humboldt's assimilationist drive and search for interconnections were little more than the scientific face of European imperialism, an attempt to impose "Western, rationalist, colonialist concepts on peoples and places that in reality could not fit into any unified pattern," in the description of historian Aaron Sachs.<sup>26</sup> In the expanding American West, scientific cataloging of natural resources went hand in hand with mapping the routes required to access and exploit those resources.<sup>27</sup> For some, Humboldt's new tools became weapons by which to advance Manifest Destiny. Three nascent scientific institutions, the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, West Point, and the Smithsonian Institution, demonstrate the changes in scientific practices that occurred during this period, as well as the new imperial uses for science that emerged.

The U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers was created to support American military interests. Before the reorganization of the Army in 1838, topographers served as members of the Army's Engineering Department. In part because of their usefulness in conducting surveys, producing maps, and directing road construction during the Second Seminole War (1835–1842), the Army's ten topographers were moved into a separate corps.<sup>28</sup> During the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), topographers guided troops, scouted enemy positions,

26. Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006), 12–13. For critiques of Humboldt's science, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), and James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). For Sachs's defense of Humboldt, see Aaron Sachs, "The Ultimate 'Other': Post-Colonialism and Alexander von Humboldt's Ecological Relationship with Nature," *History and Theory* 42 (December 2003).

27. White, *It's Your Misfortune*, 126. White also argues that the "the West itself served as the kindergarten of the American state" (58). Similarly, European colonies in Africa have served as "laboratories of modernity." See Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 314. For theoretical discussion of colonies as laboratories of modernity, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).

28. Frank N. Schubert, *The Nation Builders: A Sesquicentennial History of the Corps of Topographic Engineers, 1838–1863* (Fort Belvoir, Va.: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1988), 4–8, 23–24.

and created maps. After the war, the corps administered the Mexican Boundary Survey. Its topographers conducted reconnaissance surveys throughout the American Southwest and built roads in California, New Mexico, and the Pacific Northwest.<sup>29</sup> By 1853, when Congress approved the Pacific Railroad Surveys, the corps had years of experience using science and engineering to support national projects.

Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point staffed the Topographical Corps. Founded in 1802, West Point operated as a mostly informal school until Sylvanus Thayer was appointed superintendent in 1817 and set out to remake the academy on the model of the *École Polytechnique*, the French military and civil engineering school. Thayer revised the curriculum to emphasize math, science, and military and civil engineering, partly out of the belief that these subjects “honed the reasoning power of cadets.” Thayer also introduced new regulations and brought consistency to student life. Cadets had to pass an entrance test, work through a uniform four-year curriculum, and pass regular examinations in order to receive a commission.<sup>30</sup> As America’s only engineering school until the 1840s, Thayer’s West Point produced a professional, nationalized officer corps with the military training and scientific skills necessary to support national expansion.<sup>31</sup>

A very different type of scientific organization, the Smithsonian Institution, was founded in 1846, the result of a bequest from a British patron, with the stated goal of increasing and diffusing scientific knowledge. Its first director, Joseph Henry, listed meteorology, geology, topography, and natural history as subjects within the institution’s purview. And, Henry added, the Smithsonian would conduct

29. *Ibid.*, chaps. 3–5.

30. William B. Skelton, “West Point and Officer Professionalism, 1817–1877,” in *West Point: Two Centuries and Beyond*, ed. Lance Betros (Abilene, Tex.: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2004), 23, 27; George S. Pappas, *To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802–1902* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 275.

31. While these officers stood ready to advance Manifest Destiny, historian Samuel J. Watson argues that “they did so as members of a bureaucratically structured and constitutionally accountable organization under national control, not as individuals or representatives of a single sectional and economic interest (slaveholding Southerners or land-hungry yeoman farmers), and they did so without the ardent enthusiasm that characterized the officers of the 1810s or the civilian expansionists of the 1840s.” See Watson, “The Uncertain Road to Manifest Destiny: Army Officers and the Course of American Territorial Expansionism, 1815–1846,” in Haynes and Morris, eds., *Manifest Destiny and Empire*, 71.

“ethnological researches, particularly with reference to the different races of men in North America.” This anthropological research, although ostensibly scientific, rested heavily on notions of white superiority and Indian savagery.<sup>32</sup> Among the scientific projects the young Smithsonian supported were the Pacific Railroad Surveys, for which its scientists conducted anthropological and natural history research. By lending scientific support to notions of Indian inferiority, the Smithsonian helped justify Manifest Destiny.

In summary, the Pacific Railroad Surveys, organized by the Topographical Corps, conducted by West Point graduates, and supported by the Smithsonian, deployed Humboldtian scientific observations and analysis to advance American territorial expansion. The shared backgrounds and outlooks of the participants would define the *Reports*.

#### TO KNOW THE PLACE FOR THE FIRST TIME

The *Pacific Railroad Reports*, as a collection of multiple letters, journal entries, essays, and images, do not speak with a single voice, but several common themes emerge. Their authors understood that non-white people lived in the lands they explored, but examined territory with an eye toward white use and settlement. They advanced an ideology of white superiority even as they acknowledged the ethnic complexity they encountered. And they were aware of the national and international dimensions of their expeditions, even though almost every interaction was deeply personal. These contradictions structured the *Reports*.

The volumes describe four potential transcontinental railroad routes. The northern-most route ran roughly from St. Paul to Seattle, between the 47th and 49th latitudinal parallels. Isaac Stevens (1818–1862), who had recently resigned from the Topographical Corps to assume the governorship of Washington Territory, led the exploration of this course en route to his new post, while simultaneously serving as President James Polk’s first Indian commissioner—a neat triplex of jobs. Under Stevens’s command, Captain George B. McClellan (1826–1885) sur-

32. Joseph Henry quoted in Geoffrey T. Hellman, *The Smithsonian: Octopus on the Mall* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1966), 61. On the racial ideologies that influenced Smithsonian ethnologic and ethnographic research, see Curtis M. Hinsley, *The Smithsonian and the American Indian: Making a Moral Anthropology in Victorian America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). Ethnologic research compares different groups of people, while ethnographic research describes an individual culture.

veyed the western half of the route, starting near Seattle and working east. The survey of the central route along the 39th parallel, between San Francisco and a terminus at Council Bluffs, Iowa, or Fort Smith, Arkansas, was led by Captain John Gunnison (1812–1853) and Lieutenant E. G. Beckwith (1818–1881). Gunnison and several members of his party were killed by Indians while traveling through Utah—the only such incident to occur during the surveys—and data for this route is less complete than for others.<sup>33</sup> There were two southern routes: a party headed by Lieutenant A. W. Whipple (1818–1863) explored a south-central route from Fort Smith to Los Angeles along the 35th parallel, while Captain John Pope (1822–1892) and Lieutenant John G. Parke (1827–1900) surveyed a route that extended farther south along the 32nd parallel from Fulton, Arkansas, to San Diego.<sup>34</sup>

The leaders had all graduated from West Point between 1837 and 1849, many within a year or two of each other (see table 1). All were Northerners (except for Pope, from Kentucky) and would serve on the Union side in the Civil War. Except for Beckwith (who joined the Artillery), every man received a commission for the Topographical Corps or the Army Corps of Engineers. Four of the seven leaders had served in the Mexican-American War; another had participated in the Mexican Boundary Survey. These men entered the American West with a shared educational, professional, and cultural background, which affected how they perceived and portrayed it.

Eleven artists accompanied the expeditions to document the landscape, important events, and natural specimens.<sup>35</sup> John M. Stanley

33. For more on Gunnison's death, see Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 458.

34. For a brief summary of the routes, see John Hoyt Williams, *A Great & Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, 1988), 24–25. Historians have debated whether Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, soon to become president of the Confederate States of America, was so biased toward a southern route that his mind was made up before survey parties entered the field. Goetzmann contends that Davis was biased; see *Army Exploration*, 302–4. In contrast, George Leslie Albright argues that Davis was “absolutely unpartisan” in his selection of a route; see Albright, *Official Explorations*, 158. I think this question misses the point of the surveys, as I discuss in this essay's conclusion.

35. For more on the artists and visual culture of the *Reports*, see Robert Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850–1900* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), esp. chaps. 1–2. See also Wallace, *Great Reconnaissance*. For the impact of such visual elements on the public imagination, see Martha A. Sandweiss, “The Public Life of Western Art,” in *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American*

TABLE 1

## Educational, Professional, and Cultural Backgrounds of the Leaders of the Expedition

<i>Rank and Name</i>	<i>Route Explored</i>	<i>Birth State</i>	<i>West Point Graduation</i>	<i>Commission</i>	<i>Relevant Prior Experience</i>
Governor Isaac Stevens*	Northern (47th/49th Parallel)	Mass.	1839	Corps of Engineers	Mexican-American War
Captain George B. McClellan	Northern (47th/49th Parallel)	Pa.	1846	Corps of Engineers	Mexican-American War
Lieutenant Edward G. Beckwith	Central (39th Parallel)	N.Y.	1842	Artillery	Mexican-American War
Captain John Gunnison**	Central (39th Parallel)	N.H.	1837	Artillery; later joined Corps of Topographers	Second Seminole War; Great Lakes Survey
Lieutenant A. W. Whipple	South-Central (35th Parallel)	Mass.	1841	Corps of Topographers	Northeastern Boundary Survey; Mexican Boundary Survey
Captain John Pope	Southern (32nd Parallel)	Ky.	1842	Corps of Topographers	Second Seminole War; Mexican-American War
Lieutenant John Parke	Southern (32nd Parallel)	Pa.	1849	Corps of Engineers	None

\* Stevens was a brevet captain when he resigned his military commission in 1853 to accept the governorship of Washington Territory. He rejoined the Army as a colonel in 1861.

\*\* While conducting their portion of the survey, Gunnison and several members of his party were killed by Indians.

(1814–1872), who traveled with Stevens’s expedition, was an accomplished, professional artist who had toured extensively in the West and the Pacific islands (including Hawai’i) before joining the surveys. H. B. (Heinrich Balduin) Möllhausen (1825–1905), the primary artist among the three in Whipple’s party, was a German who, like Stanley, had spent significant periods in the American West. Unlike the other artists on the surveys, Möllhausen had some training in natural history and ethnography. His illustrations in Whipple’s extensive report depict Indians of at least ten different tribes, along with their clothing, dwellings, artifacts, and cultural practices. The numerous West Point graduates staffing the surveys also had training in drawing from classes at the academy. Altogether, the surveys’ artists produced an extraordinary number of images: the published *Reports* included 547 lithographic plates distributed over twelve volumes. Most of these—just over 400 plates—depict scientific specimens. The remaining 146 plates show the American West in all its grandeur.<sup>36</sup>

Even though many different contributors produced the *Reports*’ images, including amateur and uncredited artists, there are some common themes. For example, Möllhausen’s individual images of Indians are unusual. Most expedition artists depicted Indians generically, if at all; their landscapes often contain no sign of humans.<sup>37</sup> In the vast majority of the plates, people seem to be included only to provide a sense of scale or contrast with the enormity of nature—a few men on horseback near the horizon, or two men regarding a waterfall

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*West*, ed. Jules David Prown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). For more on the visual elements of government publications during this period, see Ron Tyler, “Illustrated Government Publications Related to the American West, 1843–1863,” in Carter, ed., *Surveying the Record*.

36. These numbers do not include illustrations, such as woodcuts, printed in-line with the text, of which there are a dozen or so. Given the thousands of copies of the *Reports* that were printed, Martha Sandweiss estimates that 6,660,000 individual images of Western landscapes were produced, or one for every five Americans; even this number, she notes, represents a conservative calculation. See Sandweiss, “Public Life of Western Art,” 119–20.

37. Of the seventy landscape plates produced for Stevens’s northern route, people are entirely absent from twelve. (The likelihood that a scene would omit humans seemed to increase as the expeditions moved farther west.) It is possible that artists were less likely than other expedition members to encounter Indians directly and that this absence accurately reflects their experiences, or that certain artists (like Möllhausen) intentionally sought out Indians as subjects.

a dozen times their height.<sup>38</sup> A generic Indian body depicted at the edge of a meadow could help viewers determine the landscape's scale while also lending the scene an exotic air. In these visual representations, Indians were, literally, shrunken and marginalized. An empty, uncivilized landscape awaited white appreciation and settlement.

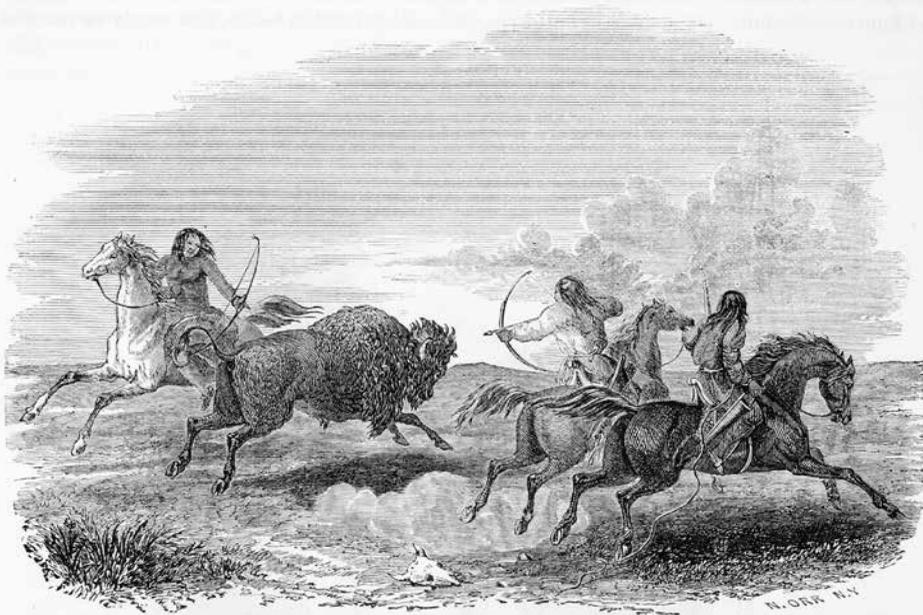
The artists sometimes exaggerated or altered reality. Whipple's "Report Upon the Indian Tribes," for example, includes a plate by Möllhausen showing Kiowa Indians hunting a buffalo (fig. 1). The scene was staged, as Whipple and his coauthors acknowledged: "We gave them a cow, and they said they would show us how they killed buffalo.... The scene is sufficiently indicated, except that the artist has transformed the game into that which we were desired to imagine."<sup>39</sup> The production process could also distort the images, revealing the preconceptions of the eastern engravers who transferred the original sketches and watercolors to printing plates. In one case, Indian tipis appear taller than the neighboring American fort.<sup>40</sup> Images like these reminded white viewers that powerful, savage Indians existed throughout the American West.

Although the reports from each route note the presence of Indians, two leaders, Stevens and Whipple, paid particular attention to native peoples in their discussions of the territory they surveyed. Whipple's report aspires to a comprehensive ethnographic account of the native peoples his party encountered; Stevens's portrays Indians as barriers to white settlement and a problem to be solved. The explorers understood that Indians occupied the land, even as they considered how best to expropriate Indian territory. Whipple, in a report co-authored with

38. The artists accompanying the Mexican Boundary Survey produced similar images, pictures that "portrayed the landscape, making it intimate and knowable up close, while indicating the vastly expansive territory beyond." See Susanna Newbury, "Drawing a Line: Encounters with the U.S.–Mexico Border," *KCET: Artbound*, November 13, 2012 ([www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/san-diego/us-mexico-border-geography.html](http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/san-diego/us-mexico-border-geography.html)).

39. A. W. Whipple, Thomas Ewbank, and William W. Turner, "Report Upon the Indian Tribes," *Reports*, vol. 3, pt. 3, p. 28.

40. Taft, *Artists and Illustrators*, 18. David Weber, writing about a different Western expedition, identifies a case in which a lithographer charged with copying an expedition artist's watercolor of a Navajo man, altered the man's stance, bearing, and facial expression to suggest a warlike disposition. Noted in Sandweiss, "Public Life of Western Art," 120–22.



Kiowa buffalo chase.

1. H. B. Möllhausen, "Kiowa's Buffalo Chase." In "Report Upon the Indian Tribes." In *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, 12 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States War Department, 1855–1860), vol. 3, pt. 3, p. 29, plate 19. Rare Book Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Smithsonian scientist William Turner (1811–1859), acknowledged Indian interests even as he warned of settler-led genocide. In the case of the Yuma Indians who lived along the Colorado River, Whipple wrote that "the rude, untutored savage ... can see no reason why he should yield up his home and the graves of his ancestors to the first grasping white man who covets the spot." These people, he wrote, "prefer peace to war, and fight only upon their own soil for the preservation of their independence and the protection of their homes." The Yuma believed they owned the land, Whipple noted, but so too did American settlers. If the Yuma title was not secured, "or some satisfactory compensation substituted, another Indian war may be the result, and the tribes upon the Colorado annihilated." Whipple hoped that "they

may be saved from such a melancholy fate by the prompt and generous interference of the government.”<sup>41</sup>

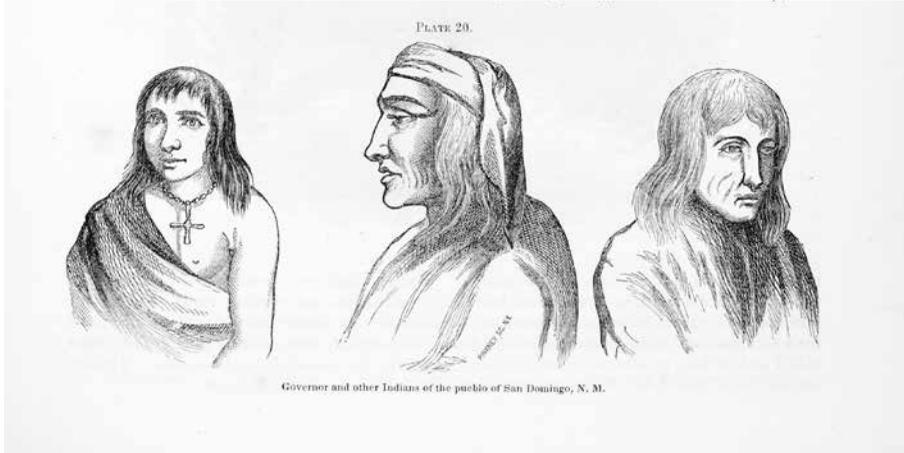
Whipple did not suggest a specific course of action, but Stevens had one in mind: treaties and reservations. He devoted pages of his reports to the pursuit of treaties extinguishing Indian land titles. The ultimate goal of this Indian commissioner was that his charges be “reclaimed from a wandering life to permanent homes.”<sup>42</sup> Stevens and Whipple believed that Indian lands rightfully belonged to white Americans, or that they were at least destined for white settlement. Notions of racial superiority supported these beliefs. By characterizing the Indian as a “wandering” or a “rude, untutored savage,” these authors emphasized their own difference and superiority, and justified paternal acts.

The expeditions encountered Indians, Mexicans, Indian-owned Mexican slaves, French fur traders, and people of mixed racial heritage—*métis* people in the north and *mestizos* in the south. The explorers also recognized the ethnic variations among Indians. Whipple’s report included an extensive, illustrated essay in which he identified, categorized, and explained differences among Indian tribes. The essay leaned heavily on physiognomy, the belief (then science) that appearance revealed character. The facial features of Pueblo Indians, for example, imputed “mildness and a considerable share of intelligence” (fig. 2). A Comanche Indian’s “furtive glances express cunning, if not treachery” (fig. 3).<sup>43</sup> In style and perspective, the artists’ portrayals of Indians followed the pattern used for animals elsewhere in the *Reports* (fig. 4). Animals, like Indians, were generally depicted in pairs to communicate variations among the species, and a grassy foreground suggested a natural setting. Racial hierarchy is implicit in this ethnographic study: Indians are the only non-white people described this way. The *Reports*’ authors saw Indians as suitable objects of scientific

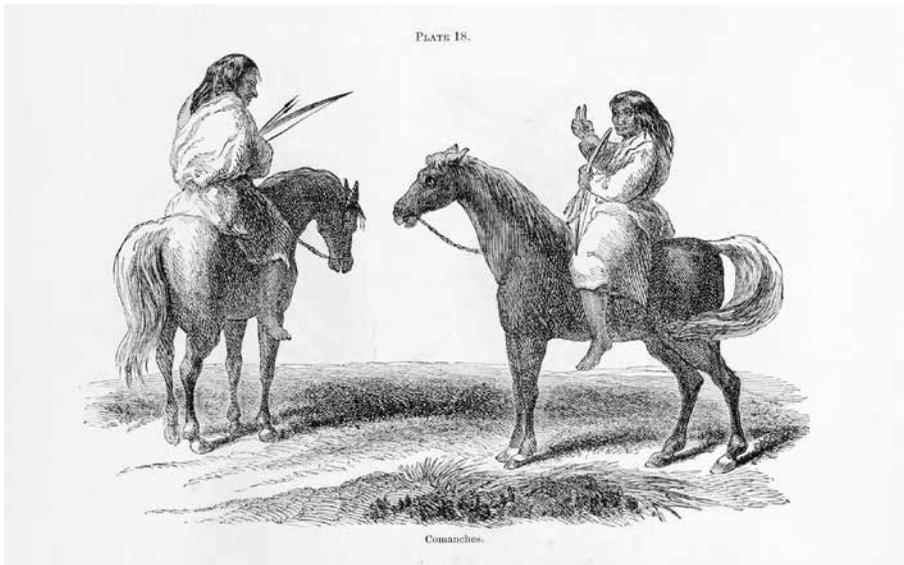
41. Whipple, Ewbank, and Turner, “Report Upon the Indian Tribes,” 18. The contemporary name for this tribe is the Quechan.

42. Isaac Stevens, “[Order] No. 10,” *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 39. Isaac Stevens, *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, chaps. 16, 17. In these parts of Stevens’s reports, it is difficult to disentangle his role as surveyor from his assignments as territorial governor and Indian commissioner. For a summary and contextualization of Stevens’s activities, see Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 421–23, and West, *Last Indian War*, 60–70.

43. Whipple, Ewbank, and Turner, “Report Upon the Indian Tribes,” esp. 20–34.



2. H. B. Möllhausen, "Governor and other Indians of the pueblo of San Domingo, N.M." In "Report Upon the Indian Tribes," p. 29, plate 20.



3. H. B. Möllhausen, "Comanches." In "Report Upon the Indian Tribes," p. 28, plate 18.



J. H. Richard del.

H. Motteroth sc.

4. J. H. Richard, "Pouched jumping mouse" (*above*) and "Bushy-tailed rat" (*below*).  
In *Reports*, vol. 12, bk. 2, pt. 3, plate 9, tipped in between pp. 138 and 139.

study because they believed Indians, as a group, to be less developed or civilized than whites, regardless of nationality.<sup>44</sup>

As they navigated and depicted this complex racial and ethnic landscape, the explorers stuck to simplistic methods of categorization. Depending on the context, the *Reports* present Indians generically, as the impersonal other, or specifically, as named individuals with specific affiliations, such as kin, band, tribal, linguistic, religious, cultural, or economic ties. At one point, for example, Stevens mentions hiring “Paul Bouieau, a half-breed Chippewa, of collegiate education, who has filled a seat in the territorial legislature with credit, and also been long in the service of the Fur Company.”<sup>45</sup> More often, the *Reports*’ authors treat Indians generically, as when Beckwith writes of “the Indians who inhabit the country.”<sup>46</sup> The images in the *Reports* also oscillate between specific and generic depictions. By resorting to generic depictions, these writers held Indians apart from themselves, rhetorically as well as racially.

The authors of the *Reports* also distinguished between good Indians and bad Indians. Good Indians were helpful and subservient. They worked as guides (like Sam An-ax-shat) or interpreters, offered information or supplies, and did as they were asked. The authors acknowledged these Indians’ aid and recorded their own gratitude. Bad Indians were willful. Sometimes their disobedience seemed a harmless manifestation of inferiority, as when members of Whipple’s expedition needed the services of their young guide Vincente: “We sought for Vincente, but, as usual when wanted, he was chasing buffalo or deer over the prairies. That is his passion.”<sup>47</sup> But perceived transgressions of white authority, especially when coupled with tribal identity, could be dangerous. One member of Stevens’s party, Lieutenant John Mullan (1830–1909), argued that Blackfoot Indians had a propensity to

44. This view was supported, in part, by the scientists of the Smithsonian Institution. See Hinsley, *The Smithsonian and the American Indian*.

45. Isaac Stevens, “Narrative of 1853,” *Reports*, vol. 12, pt. 1, p. 44.

46. E. G. Beckwith, “General summary of the line explored,” *Reports*, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 87.

47. A. W. Whipple, “Itinerary,” *Reports*, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 30. Whipple noted that Vincente was Mexican, but had been kidnapped by Comanche and raised among them as a slave. He added: “It is easy to see that his character has been formed among the savages, for he displays in a marked degree the apparent indifference and obstinacy peculiar to the Indian race” (22).

attack and raid. As a consequence, he recommended that American troops “should be sent among them, [to] put every man, woman and child to the knife, burn down their villages, and thus teach the nation that since persuasion will not, force must and shall.” “They had better by far be totally exterminated,” Mullan declared, “than left to prowl the mountains, murdering, plundering, and carrying everything before them.”<sup>48</sup> At the other end of Mullan’s rigid hierarchy, the “good” Flathead impressed him with their Christian piety, and a few years later he adopted a young Northwest Indian boy, whom he named John, after his uncle.<sup>49</sup> Classifying Indians as “good” or “bad” minimized Indian agency, suggesting that white needs and desires were more important.

The *Reports*’ authors saw nomadic Indians as less civilized than settled Indians. In the Southwest, Whipple suggested that efforts to encourage settlement among “the wild tribes” would lead Indians to farming, herding, and trading, permitting them to develop “a community of interests with whites.”<sup>50</sup> Another member of Stevens’s party, writing about the Blackfoot, explained that they were savages because they were nomadic. Settlement, he wrote, would pacify them: “A treaty with these Indians and the establishment of an agency and farm in their country will do much towards changing them from a warlike and nomadic to a peaceable and agricultural nation.”<sup>51</sup> Conveniently enough, settled Indians required less land than nomadic Indians, and an agrarian lifestyle bound Indians to a system of capitalist exchange.<sup>52</sup>

48. John Mullan, “Report of Lieut. John Mullan,” *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 438.

49. Keith C. Petersen, *John Mullan: The Tumultuous Life of a Western Road Builder* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2014), 82, 190. John’s tribal affiliation is not recorded, but he was likely Spokane, Coeur d’Alene, or Palouse. When Mullan first met the Flathead, he was impressed by their Christian faith. “Every one was upon his knees, and in the most solemn and reverential manner offered up a prayer to God,” wrote Mullan. “For a moment I asked myself, was I among Indians? Was I among those termed by every one savages? I could scarcely realize it. To think that these men should be thus imbued, and so deeply too, with the principles of religion, was to me overwhelming.” Mullan, “Report of an Exploration from Fort Benton to the Flathead Camp,” *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 311.

50. A. W. Whipple, “Extracts from the [Preliminary] Report of Lieutenant A. W. Whipple” (brackets in original title), *Reports*, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 13.

51. James Doty, letter to Isaac Stevens, December 29, 1853, *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 445.

52. Richard White argues that the forces of white capitalism first ensnared and then gradually marginalized Indians, contributing to the economic and social break-

The emphasis on settlement demonstrates an inability to accept native cultural practices and a desire to force native ways of life into compatibility with those of future white settlers.

The belief that proper land use, race, and level of civilization are intertwined is also evident in how the explorers discussed white settlement. They portrayed the natural world as raw material for the productive use of civilized settlers. Describing the agricultural prospects of northern Idaho, a member of Stevens's party wrote that "altogether it seems but to require the advent of the white man to make it a place of considerable importance."<sup>53</sup> Whipple, writing about the Canadian River basin in northeastern New Mexico and northern Texas, believed that settlers could easily displace nomadic Indians: "If the fertile valleys were thrown open to settlers, and an outlet secured for the products of the soil, this region would form the nucleus of new States, and the roving tribes of Indians that now occupy it would give place to a flourishing population."<sup>54</sup> The belief that settlement civilizes territory is key to settler colonialism.

The explorers entered a world where personal encounters had international dimensions. Before American possession of the Pacific Northwest, writes historian Gray Whaley, "nationality often mattered less than personal conduct in an evolving colonial world where neither the people nor the relations among them remained fixed for long."<sup>55</sup> For the explorers of the 1850s, though, nationality carried new meaning in a region where Britain's Hudson's Bay Company continued to enjoy a monopoly on the fur trade. Lieutenant Rufus Saxton (1824–1908), a member of Stevens's party, warned that "the power and influence of that company over the inhabitants of the country which I traversed is

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down of Indian societies. "In the end," White writes, "whites specified what was to be exchanged, how it was to be exchanged, what the Indians were to receive, and how they were to use it. At its most extreme, the process rendered the Indians utterly superfluous—a population without control over resources, sustained in its poverty by payments controlled by the larger society, and subject to increasing pressure to lose their group identity and disappear." See White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), xix.

53. John Lambert, "Report of the Topography of the Route," *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 168–69.

54. Whipple, "Itinerary," 132.

55. Whaley, *Oregon*, 13.

greater than that of the government of the United States.” Concerned about British encroachments, Saxton urged the American government to sign treaties with Indian tribes to avoid the possibility that “the powerful tribes might be made the instruments of incalculable injury to our frontier settlements” in some future international conflict.<sup>56</sup> Indians were both an obstacle to American settlement and a prize to be won in a proxy battle with Britain.

Ambivalence shoots through the *Reports*. It was one thing to believe in Manifest Destiny, but quite another to confront the native people who lived where Americans were expected to settle. Whipple foresaw a clash of races—one the Indians would lose: “The advancing tide of emigration will soon take possession of it [the Indians’ territory], and, unless the strong arm of government protects them, the native population will be driven to the mountains or be exterminated.”<sup>57</sup> “The time is now arrived when we must decide,” Whipple continued, “whether they are to be exterminated.” If the government decided to protect Indians, Whipple believed, it should force them to abandon traditional cultural practices. “The powerful arm of the law must be extended over them,” he wrote, “to secure their right to the soil they occupy; to protect them from aggression; to afford facilities and aid in acquiring the arts of civilization, and the knowledge and humanizing influences of Christianity.”<sup>58</sup> While the men of these expeditions understood the Indians’ situation, they could not envision legitimate native land ownership.

Individually, the men who staffed the surveys had mixed feelings about Indians. One representative example is Thomas Adams (1830–1900), a skilled civilian engineer who accompanied Stevens’s survey of the northern route.<sup>59</sup> Adams supported the expedition’s topographers and artist, and his journals offer another view on the Indians his group encountered. As a civilian writing privately, Adams seems to have felt

56. Rufus Saxton, “Report of the Route of Lieutenant R. Saxton,” *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 251, 268.

57. Whipple, “Itinerary,” 124.

58. Whipple, Ewbank, and Turner, “Report Upon the Indian Tribes,” 7.

59. Adams seems to have been a mid-level staff member. Stevens described him as “a young gentleman attached to the civil engineers’ party.” The *Reports*’ authors typically use the honorific “Mister” to refer to Adams, in contrast to references to laborers, guides, or interpreters, who were usually referred to by first name or by last name without an honorific. Stevens, “Letter to the Secretary of War, July 4 1853,” *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, sec. 1, p. 19.

less constrained to express opinions that a politician or military officer might have considered rash to include in a government report.<sup>60</sup> For example, when a band of Assiniboine Indians invited Stevens and some of his men to a council, Stevens, in his official narrative, described the soup offered to the visitors as “made of buffalo and *Typsina*, a species of turnip.” He found it “rich and greasy but quite palatable.”<sup>61</sup> Adams was less impressed: “it might have been dog meat, for all we knew.”<sup>62</sup>

While Adams recognized their humanity and tribal diversity, Indians seemed to him “queer critters,” people both strange and degraded.<sup>63</sup> Their impatience baffled him, and he took it as proof of racial limitations. Several Flathead Indians, worried by low food supplies and Blackfoot threats, asked Adams how the U.S. government planned to help them. Adams told them, vaguely, that the government knew of their condition and that aid would arrive sometime in the future. “An Indian does not reason much, he can not look far ahead,” Adams subsequently wrote. “They want immediate and tangible assistance; they can not comprehend the unavoidable delay of the Government.”<sup>64</sup>

60. Four journals and a letterbook compose the Thomas Adams Papers in the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. It is unclear how private Adams considered his journals. Stevens instructed “each officer and scientific man” of his expedition to “keep a daily journal, noting everything worthy of observation of a general character. These journals will be deemed a part of the results of the expedition, will be turned over as a part of its archives, and will be made use of in preparing the report.” Stevens, “General Organization of the Expedition,” *Reports*, vol. 1, pt. 2, sec. 1, p. 4. Adams was not a military officer, and his variety of assignments—many of them non-scientific—make me suspect that he was not what Stevens would consider a “scientific man.” Whether Stevens (or any other member of the expedition) consulted Adams’s journals in the course of preparing the *Reports* remains unknown; but even if Adams kept his journals knowing that his superiors might read them, his writings are still valuable because they offer a more personal perspective than the *Reports*, which were prepared with public consumption in mind.

61. Stevens, “Narrative of 1853,” 74.

62. Entry for July 27, 1853, in Journal, May 5, 1853–May 19, 1854, p. 43, Adams Papers, box 1, folder 2.

63. Entry for January 5, 1855 (1 a.m.), in Journal, “Volume II,” June 26, 1854–April 26, 1855, p. 42, Adams Papers, box 1, folder 3.

64. Entry for December 15, 1854, in Journal 1854–1855, p. 22. Following Adams’s work on the surveys, Stevens appointed him Indian agent to the Flathead in 1854. The Flathead are today known as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation.

In both cases, Adams concluded, Indians' lack of racial development hindered their ability to wait.

Indians' uncleanliness surprised Adams. The same Assiniboine who offered him meat and turnip stew seemed "dirty beyond description." Adams had expected noble savages, but the Indians he met "impressed one with a feeling of disgust rather than of romance."<sup>65</sup> He described Gros Ventre Indians as "well formed men; but very dirty, and have the reputation of being great cowards and great rascals."<sup>66</sup> Only a troupe of young female Flathead dancers, decorated for a ceremony, struck him as "painted to perfection."<sup>67</sup> Even when Indians did not appear physically unclean, Adams sometimes recoiled from unfamiliar practices. Those attractive Flathead dancers were accompanied, he wrote, by "alternate drumming and *singing*, both being horrible discords, to even my uncultivated ear."<sup>68</sup> Along the Columbia River, Adams's group encountered Chinook Indians netting salmon. The smell overwhelmed him: "The scent of fish in their vicinity is insupportable to civilized senses."<sup>69</sup> In Indians' uncleanliness, whether physical or environmental, Adams saw, heard, and smelled degradation and filth.

He also found Indians untrustworthy. He worried that even the helpful ones were prone to theft. After a group of Indians helped Adams's party ferry supplies across the Snake River, the white men trekked another ten miles before camping, to remove the "temptation of stealing out of their way."<sup>70</sup> Later, Adams recorded his concerns that Blackfoot Indians might use their camouflage and "cunning" to raid his expedition. The Blackfoot, he explained, "may be very close to you for days, and even weeks, and you will not know of their presence, until some morning you wake up and learn that all of your animals are missing."<sup>71</sup>

65. Entry for July 27, 1853, in *Journal 1853-1854*, p. 42.

66. Entry for August 26, 1853, in *ibid.*, p. 55.

67. Entry for April 14, 1855, in *Journal 1854-1855*, p. 58. It is entirely possible that the dancers' youth and gender, and not their race or cleanliness, encouraged this description.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 59 (emphasis in original).

69. Entry for July 14, 1854, in *Journal 1854-1855*, p. 7. "Chinook" is today understood to denote a language group, not a tribal or band affiliation.

70. Entry for August 27, 1854, in *Journal 1854-1855*, p. 14. Adams was not alone in this opinion. The day after meeting with the Assiniboine, Stevens expressed relief that "Nothing to-day of the slightest value has been missed." Stevens, "Narrative of 1853," p. 76.

71. Entry for December 19, 1854, in *Journal 1854-1855*, p. 27.

The Blackfoots' tactics, rooted in deep knowledge of the natural world, seemed both threatening and undeveloped.

In short, Adams believed Indians were uncivilized, and according to him, some of them knew it. "These natives feel, and acknowledge, the superiority of the white race," he wrote of the Flathead. "The Indians here desire to be taught 'the ways of the white man.' ... They will say, 'We are too old to learn, but help our children, and we will be glad.'" <sup>72</sup> In Adams's telling, the degraded natives beseech the civilized white man to save their race. Adams found this situation compelling and believed that his work advanced the banner of civilization. On the last pages of his journal for 1853–1854, he copied a Flathead translation of the Lord's Prayer. <sup>73</sup> Indians might be heathen, but they were not beyond redemption.

Here, ambivalence enters Adams's story. While Adams believed in a racial hierarchy that placed whites above Indians, he also knew that his journey would have been unspeakably difficult without the numerous native guides and interpreters on whom his party relied. And he knew that, despite his personal feelings, a successful survey depended on strategic alliances. This tension is apparent in one journal entry, written after a long winter when Adams's party was low on supplies. The Americans were encamped near a band of Flathead. "It is true that there are plenty of cattle in the valley, but they belong to Indians, and they need them," Adams wrote. "If we were in an enemy's country, we could fall on the country for supplies, but we ought not to prey upon our friends." <sup>74</sup> Indians could even be par-amours. Years after his work on the surveys, Adams fathered a son with a Flathead woman named Louise. <sup>75</sup> Adams believed Indians to

72. Entry for December 15, 1854, in *ibid.*, p. 23.

73. Undated appendix to *Journal 1853–1854*, p. 161. Annotations indicate that Adams copied the prayer from Pierre-Jean De Smet's account of religious work in the American West. See De Smet, *Oregon Missions and Travels over the Rocky Mountains, in 1845–46* (New York: Edward Dunigan, 1847), 409.

74. Entry for April 1, 1855, in *Journal 1854–1855*, p. 55.

75. George F. Weisel, *Men and Trade on the Northwest Frontier as Shown by the Fort Owen Ledger* (Missoula: Montana State University Press, 1955), 88–89. Adams and Louise married on February 26, 1862, but they agreed to dissolve their marriage a month later. Evidence suggests that Louise gave birth to their son before she and Adams were married. The child stayed with Louise and the Flathead after Adams returned east in 1864. This relationship postdates Adams's journals. My thanks to Gabriel Swift for pointing me to this reference.

be senseless, dirty, shifty savages. But savages could still be friends (fig. 5).

The exploration parties of the Pacific Railroad Surveys entered the American West as the vanguard of settler colonialism. Whatever the men of the surveys thought of Indians—settled or savage, good or bad—they did not believe that Indians had a right to the land they lived on. Their accounts reveal the beliefs of racial superiority and territorial entitlement that drove the project, and the fears and ambivalence that haunted its edges.

#### A NEW IMAGINED WEST

The Pacific Railroad Surveys did not fulfill their stated goal. Instead of nominating a single transcontinental railroad route and untangling a political knot, the *Reports* described several possible routes. But by documenting and describing a region foreign to many Americans, the *Reports* offered a way to imagine and understand the West.

White Easterners were disappointed that the *Reports* did not depict a verdant garden. These Americans sought a kind of useful romanticism, in which traditional notions of pastoral beauty equated with productive agricultural use.<sup>76</sup> But while the explorers did not deliver an environmental paradise, the *Reports* promised white Americans something more elusive: a racial Eden. Despite their extensive documentation of the numerous non-white people—Indians, Mexicans, and *métis* and *mestizos*—who already populated the region, the *Reports*' authors envisioned a racially white future West. This white-wash trickled outward and helped harden the assumption that American identity was racially white,<sup>77</sup> an apparent reality accomplished largely through the construction of a transcontinental railroad.

After secession emptied the Senate of the most ardent opponents to internal improvements, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act in 1862, the first of several bills authorizing the construction of a transcontinental line from Council Bluffs to San Francisco. Along with the land-grant provisions of the 1862 Homestead Act, the railroad encour-

76. Anne F. Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), esp. chap. 2.

77. See Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890–1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), and Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).



5. Thomas Adams, sketches of Parl che-nar, or White Buffalo Calf (*left*), and Mary “Qucle-lox,” or Red Gown (*right*), pasted onto blank pages in the back of “Volume II” of his journal (June 26, 1854–April 26, 1855), pp. 99, 100. Thomas Adams Papers, box 1, folder 3, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Adams described Mary as “A heroine of Father De Smet Oregon Missions.” Parl che-nar, according to Adams, “was one of the best friends the whites ever had in the Indian country; and he had much influence not only among his own people but in the neighboring tribes. He could converse in the Blackfoot, Crow, Snake, and Nez Perces languages. He was killed in the spring of 1863 by the Bannack Indians, while following a party who had stolen his horses.”

aged white migration to the West and contributed to the marginalization of non-white people and the destruction of non-white culture, both along its route and throughout the West.<sup>78</sup>

78. See Pablo Mitchell, *Coyote Nation: Sexuality, Race, and Conquest in Modernizing New Mexico, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and William Deverell, *Railroad Crossing: Californians and the Railroad, 1850–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3. Richard White argues that America’s transcontinental railroads should not have been built when and where they were: “Quite literally, if the country had not built transcontinental railroads, it might not have needed them until much later, when it could have built them more cheaply, more efficiently, and with fewer social and political costs.” White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 517.

But these waves of white migration did not subsume the West's non-white inhabitants, and American identity remained unstable. This instability is particularly evident along America's borders with Canada and Mexico. Whites, Indians, and Asian immigrants flowed back and forth across the U.S.–Canadian border for decades after the boundary settlement in 1846.<sup>79</sup> Farther east, communities along the Alberta-Montana border were similarly interwoven, hindering their nationalization.<sup>80</sup> This instability is also evident in communities along the U.S.–Mexican border, where both countries have tried (and frequently failed) to use the boundary to control the movement of goods, migrants, and citizens.<sup>81</sup>

The early marginalization of non-white people presaged in the *Reports* continued to influence power relations into the twentieth century. In California, for example, Los Angeles's economic and cultural white elites appropriated or obscured the region's Mexican past and segregated the city's Mexican and Mexican-American population to support their vision of a racially white city.<sup>82</sup> Similar restrictions in Santa Clara County sought to render Mexicans and Mexican-Americans socially invisible by means of spatial exclusion.<sup>83</sup>

79. See John Lutz, "Work, Sex, and Death on the Great Thoroughfare: Annual Migrations of 'Canadian Indians' to the American Pacific Northwest," in *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies*, ed. John M. Findlay and Ken S. Coates (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), and Chang, *Pacific Connections*. See also Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

80. See Michel Hogue, "Between Race and Nation: The Creation of a Métis Borderland on the Northern Plains," in *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories*, ed. Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), and Shelia McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

81. Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.–Mexico Border* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Oscar J. Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), and Omar S. Valerio-Jiménez, *River of Hope: Forging Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013). See also Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.–Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

82. William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

83. Stephen J. Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

## EPILOGUE; OR, A RECKONING

The *Reports* express the central problem of nineteenth-century America: How to become a larger nation. By situating the reports within a period of Greater Reconstruction, we can see them as national—not Western—documents. The *Reports* are inflected with an expansionist ideology, Manifest Destiny, that fermented in the South. Like the region they describe, the *Reports* were the outcome of sectional and regional political discord. Although the *Reports* did not result in the immediate construction of a railroad, they helped build the mental infrastructure that countless Americans used to understand the West. This vision of American history emphasizes the deep connections between the North, South, and West. It suggests that the Civil War between the Union and the Confederacy was one of many civil wars during this period, a conflict more fruitfully considered alongside this period's numerous American-Indian and American-Mormon battles, as well as against the Mexican-American War.

As the American state expanded, it relied on new scientific methods and ideas to document and justify its spread. The U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, West Point, and the Smithsonian Institution all came of age in this period, incubated modern science, and gave government agents a way to deploy it against native peoples and support the expropriation of native land. The *Reports* capture how a small group of highly trained white American men encountered the West. Applying the concept of settler colonialism helps us understand the world they saw.

Reading the *Reports* as settler-colonial documents opens up global and transnational comparative possibilities. How did other settler-colonial societies explore, record, incorporate, and settle their territorial acquisitions? How did they perceive, portray, and interact with the people already living there? Just as European colonies in Africa functioned as laboratories of modernity, developing modern technologies and refining ideas that then circulated from colony to metropole, similar patterns may be evident in the relationships between the United States and its territories, possessions, and insular areas, including the contiguous American West, Alaska, Hawai'i, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

Sam An-ax-shat, the young man who led Henry Abbot's group through the mountains, does not appear again in the *Reports* or, as far

as I can tell, anywhere else in the historical record. Understanding the workings of settler colonialism helps us to recover the voices and viewpoints of native people who, like An-ax-shat, are trapped in these and similar government documents. Remaining critically aware of the ideologies that structured the ways our sources apprehended and represented their world helps us to read their accounts more skeptically and lends additional weight to the perspectives of the people they encountered.

Movement has meaning.<sup>84</sup> The ways the men of the Pacific Railroad Surveys chose to move across the land, and the understandings they brought to that movement, informed their project. The *Reports* show that exploration is an activity freighted with cultural meaning and politics. Despite their scientific distance, the men of the surveys were not apart from the land. Neither are they apart from history. Explorers are part of a deep chronology of circulation and interchange in the American West, a history that also includes traders, Christian missionaries, nomadic Indian empires, and white settlers. After the *Reports* were published, that history gradually grew to include a robust national railroad network, hardened national borders, an interstate highway system, and an archipelago of airports, small and large.

Infrastructure has politics.<sup>85</sup> The infrastructure that developed from the surveys, and out of projects like them, is not neutral or unfixd. It is an articulation of the views of its creators, powerful people—almost always white men in this period—for whom personal opinions and policy debates informed each other.<sup>86</sup> In a way, the academics writing about Western exploration in the 1950s were right. Federal survey projects helped “clear away the Indian barrier” and “win the West” for white settlement. By taking a critical view of the *Reports*, we can see the West these projects helped to create as unsettled and uncertain. The ways we organize our world, from the presence and location of

84. On the meanings of movement in the Civil War–era Confederate South, see Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012). For the multiple meanings of movement in the Pacific Northwest borderlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Chang, *Pacific Connections*, and Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*.

85. See, for example, White, *Railroaded*. See also Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

86. See Barbara Young Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

railroad lines to the justifications of land ownership, have a deep history and a complex morality.

Finally, and most importantly, understanding the United States as a nation born of white settler colonialism promotes a moral consideration of uncomfortable aspects of national history. In the pages of *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates recently argued for reparations to African Americans in order to “reckon with our compounding moral debts” stemming from slavery. “To proudly claim the veteran and disown the slaveholder is patriotism à la carte,” Coates wrote. “We believe white dominance to be a fact of the inert past, a delinquent debt that can be made to disappear if only we don’t look.”<sup>87</sup> His argument applies as well to the non-white people in the American West who were killed, terrorized, or otherwise forcibly dispossessed.

Re-evaluating the *Reports* as national documents of a settler colonial society sensitizes us to the different histories and perspectives of native peoples. In so doing, it forces us to see their displacement by white settlers as uncertain and encourages us to reckon with the post-settler colonial society we inhabit today. What does that mean for us, not just as historians or as Americans, but as people?

87. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (May 2014).