

INDIGENOUS CONTINENT PEKKA HÄMÄLÄINEN

*The Epic Contest
for North America*

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Pekka Hämäläinen



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Introduction

THE MYTH OF COLONIAL AMERICA

THERE IS AN OLD, DEEPLY ROOTED STORY ABOUT America that goes something like this: Columbus stumbles upon a strange continent and brings back stories of untold riches. The European empires rush over, eager to stake out as much of this astonishing New World as possible. Even as they clash, they ignite an era of colonial expansion that lasts roughly four centuries, from the conquest of Hispaniola in 1492 to the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. Between those two moments, European empires and the nascent American empire amass souls, slaves, and territory, dispossessing and destroying hundreds of Indigenous societies. The Indians fight back but cannot stop the onslaught. Resourceful and defiant though they might be, they are no match for the newcomers and their raw ambition, superior technology, and lethal microbes that penetrate Native bodies with shocking ease. Indians are doomed; Europeans are destined to take over the continent; history itself is a linear process that moves irreversibly toward Indigenous destruction.

Indigenous Continent tells a different story. It offers a new account of American history by challenging the notion that colonial

expansion was inevitable and that colonialism defined the continent, as well as the experiences of those living on it. Stepping outside of such outdated assumptions, this book reveals a world that remained overwhelmingly Indigenous well into the nineteenth century. It argues that rather than a “colonial America,” we should speak of an *Indigenous* America that was only slowly and unevenly becoming colonial. By 1776, various European colonial powers together claimed nearly all of the continent for themselves, but Indigenous peoples and powers controlled it. The maps in modern textbooks that paint much of early North America with neat, color-coded blocks confuse outlandish imperial claims for actual holdings. The history of the overwhelming and persisting Indigenous power recounted here remains largely unknown, and it is the biggest blind spot in common understandings of the American past.

The reality of an Indigenous continent has remained obscure because European empires, and especially the United States, invested power in the state and its bureaucracy, whereas Native nations invested power in kinship. From the beginning, European arrivals judged Indians on European terms. Later historians did the same, focusing on state power as the driving force in America. Kinship could be a source of great power, and Indigenous nations possessed advanced political systems that allowed for flexible diplomacy and war-making, even if Euro-Americans often failed to see them. Time and again, and across centuries, Indians blocked and destroyed colonial projects, forcing Euro-Americans to accept Native ways, Native sovereignty, and Native dominance. This is what the historical record shows when American history is detached from mainstream historical narratives that privilege European ambitions, European perspectives, and European sources.

The traditional master narrative is entrenched in our culture and minds. Consider how Red Cloud’s War and Custer’s Last Stand are

usually understood. According to the conventional narrative, in a single decade between 1866 and 1876, the Lakota Indians and their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies defeated the United States in two wars—first along the Bozeman Trail in what became known as Red Cloud’s War, and then in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where they annihilated George Armstrong Custer’s 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment. Both defeats have entered American history as aberrations or flukes. The United States, after all, had already become a continent-spanning military-industrial power poised to expand beyond the West Coast. The Lakotas had humiliated the United States at a charged moment when the nation was shedding its frontier identity and entering the modern era of the corporate, the bureaucratic, and the scientific. The fiascos would be blamed on poor generalship and on a canny enemy familiar with the terrain.

Seen from Native American perspective, however, Red Cloud’s War and Custer’s Last Stand appear not as historical anomalies, but as the logical culmination of a long history of Indigenous power in North America. They were more expected than extraordinary. From the beginning of colonialism in North America to the Lakotas’ final military triumphs, a multitude of Native nations fought fiercely to keep their territories intact and their cultures untainted, frustrating the imperial pretensions of France, Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, and eventually the United States. This Indigenous “infinity of nations” included Iroquois, Catawbias, Odawas, Osages, Wyandots, Cherokees, Comanches, Cheyennes, Apaches, and many others. Although each nation was and is distinct, a cultural crevasse separated the European newcomers from all Indigenous inhabitants of the continent, generating fear, confusion, anger, and violence. That divide fueled one of the longest conflicts in history, while simultaneously inspiring a centuries-long search for mutual

understanding and accommodation—a search that continues today.¹

The great pitfalls in the study of Native Americans are broad generalizations on the one hand and narrow specificity on the other. For a long time, historians tended to see Indians as a human monolith cut from a single—and primordial—cultural cloth, a race defined by its tragic history of dispossession and its epic struggle for survival. This tradition informs many popular books that repackage Native American history into a morality play that is often more concerned with the United States and its character than with the Indians themselves. In these depictions of Native America, Indians appear as one-dimensional stock figures, their complexity and differences pressed flat for dramatic purposes. They are reduced to mere props in the United States' violent transformation into a global power: Indigenous resistance and suffering heighten the drama, enabling people today to glimpse how much was lost and at what cost.

On the other end of the spectrum is a venerable tradition of tribal histories, each focusing on a single Native nation and providing a comprehensive portrait of its traditions, political structures, material culture, and historical experiences. This necessary and often superb scholarship has brought to life hundreds of previously obscured Indigenous peoples as forceful, creative, and resilient historical actors, filling a half-illuminated continent with human texture. The downside of this approach is its particularity. Each nation comes across as unique, embedded in its own microworld. Multiply this by five hundred, and the problem is plain to see. Examining Indigenous America in this way is like looking at a pointillistic painting from mere inches away: it overwhelms; it loses coherence; the larger patterns are impossible to discern.

With the perspective adjusted just slightly, however, a new and sharper image of North America comes into view. *Indigenous Continent* takes a middle course between the general and the specific, uncovering a broad range of Native American worlds that rose and fell across the continent from the early sixteenth century into the late nineteenth century. In numerous realms, Indians and colonists competed for territory, resources, power, and supremacy, with survival often hanging in the balance. Each realm had its own character, reflecting the continent's astounding physical diversity: the stakes and dynamics of warfare, diplomacy, and belonging played out differently along coasts, along river valleys, in woodlands, in grasslands, and in the mountains.

This book is first and foremost a history of Indigenous peoples, but it is also a history of colonialism. The history of North America that emerges is of a place and an era shaped by warfare above all. The contest for the continent was, in essence, a four-centuries-long war that saw almost every Native nation fight encroaching colonial powers—sometimes in alliances, sometimes alone. Although the Indian wars in North America have been written about many times before, this book offers a broad Indigenous view of the conflict. For Native nations, war was often a last resort. In many cases, if not most, they attempted to bring Europeans into their fold, making them useful. These were not the actions of supplicants; the Europeans were the supplicants—their lives, movements, and ambitions determined by Native nations that drew the newcomers into their settlements and kinship networks, seeking trade and allies. Indian men and women alike were sophisticated diplomats, shrewd traders, and forceful leaders. The haughty Europeans assumed that the Indians were weak and uncivilized, only to find themselves forced to agree to humiliating terms—an inversion of common assumptions about White dominance and Indian dispossession that have survived to the present.

When war did come, Indians won as often as not. Older, discredited, and ludicrous notions of “savage” Indians or “noble savages” suggest a certain degree of brutality in battle, but it was the colonists who were responsible for most atrocities. Many colonists, especially the British, Spanish, and Americans, were guilty of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other crimes, but some adopted more measured approaches to Native peoples. There were colonists who utterly despised Indians and wanted to eradicate them, but there were also colonial regimes that sought to embrace them. There were many types of colonialism—settler, imperial, missionary, extractive, commercial, and legal—and they emerge cumulatively as the story told here progresses. Tracing the evolution of colonialism is vital: the depth and reach of Indigenous power can be truly understood only against the massive colonial challenge from Europe. I have tried to show the full potential of colonialism to destroy lives, nations, and civilizations. It is against that horrific violence that Indigenous power is revealed. Overseas colonialism was a daunting endeavor that required courage and commitment. European intruders were ruthless because they held deep-seated racist ideologies and because the stakes were so high. For most of them there was no going back.

A SINGLE-VOLUME CONTINENTAL HISTORY of North America cannot devote equal attention to all Native nations, regions, and events. Large Indigenous nations and confederacies were able to confront European empires on their own terms, and they drive much of the story through their sheer capacity to keep North America Indigenous. But the smaller nations and their resistance were also essential to the making of the Indigenous continent. Preserving Indigenous power and sovereignty was a total endeavor: every colonial intrusion, however small, could generate a domino effect

of Native retreats. Accordingly, this book zooms in frequently to local and intimate scales; it was there, in face-to-face encounters, where the hard work of colonizing and resisting colonization happened. Indigenous Americans were fighting for their land, for their lives, and for future generations. Every inch mattered.

This book covers a vast span of history—four centuries and a continent—but it is given shape, direction, and meaning by a single theme: power. Here, power is defined as the ability of people and their communities to control space and resources, to influence the actions and perceptions of others, to hold enemies at bay, to muster otherworldly beings, and to initiate and resist change. What follows is the story of a long and turbulent epoch when North America was contested by many and dominated by none. This story traces how people gained, lost, and, in rare instances, shared power with strangers, creating many new worlds in the process. The book might be best described as a biography of power in North America. The story follows critical action and key turning points across the contested continent, showing how various parts of it became geopolitical hot spots where rivalries intensified and where history turned violently.

Although the book is inclusive, focusing on both European colonists and Native Americans, the usual actors, events, and turning points of American history retreat to the background. The Stamp and Tea Acts, Boston Massacre, and creation of the U.S. Constitution figure only marginally in this history. Indians controlled most of North America, and often they did not know about the exploits of the Europeans beyond their borders. And if they did, they did not care. Instead, the Indigenous peoples were interested in the ambitions and experiences of other Indigenous peoples—the Iroquois, Cherokees, Lakotas, Comanches, Shawnees, and many others.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND STYLE

I HAVE OCCASIONALLY MODERNIZED DIRECT QUOTES WHEN spelling makes them hard to understand. Taking a cue from Nancy Shoemaker, I call Native men and women involved in war “soldiers,” not “warriors.” The settlements of more sedentary Native nations are “towns,” whereas the more mobile nomadic settlements are “villages.” Rather than “chiefs,” I use either Indigenous terms for leaders or simply “officials” or “officers” because they were Indigenous administrators. As for the names of Indian Nations, I have used what they themselves prefer: Odawas rather than Ottawas; Lenapes rather than Delawares; Wyandots rather than Hurons; Illinis rather than Illinois; Meskwakis rather than Foxes; Ho-Chunks rather than Winnebagos; Muscogees rather than Creeks; Ojibwes rather than Ojibwas. The Iroquois are also called Haudenosaunee.¹



PART ONE

**THE DAWN OF THE
INDIGENOUS CONTINENT**

(the first seventy millennia)

Epilogue

REVENGE AND REVIVAL

IN THE LONG AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE Bighorn, the Indian Office criminalized the Sun Dance in 1882, creating a gaping spiritual void in numerous Native nations. In the winter of 1889, the Lakotas heard of a new religion, the Ghost Dance, preached by Wovoka, a Northern Paiute holy man. Lakota envoys rode trains to Nevada to learn firsthand from the prophet. A blend of millenarian and modern elements, the Ghost Dance seemed to offer Indians the tools to survive in a rapidly changing world, and it began to fill the emptiness left by the U.S. government's ban on the Sun Dance. In the winter of 1889–90, the Lakotas started to dance, desperate to bring bison and their dead relatives back. The Americans still feared the Lakotas, and the Lakota agents panicked, mistaking the forward-looking Ghost Dance movement for an anti-White conspiracy. The army mobilized against the dancers and trapped a group of them at Wounded Knee Creek. The Seventh Cavalry, Custer's former regiment, occupied the higher ground and began shooting at the exposed people below. At least 270 died, and at least 170 of the dead were women and children. It was revenge

for the humiliation fourteen years earlier. Twenty soldiers involved in the massacre were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.¹

The apocalyptic Wounded Knee Massacre was a sign of American weakness and fear. When the Indian wars came to an end in 1877, the United States was simultaneously imperious and exhausted. Since the founding in 1776, there had been more than sixteen hundred official military engagements with Native Americans. Moreover, while fighting Indians, the United States had descended into a draining and demoralizing Civil War that had claimed as many as 750,000 American lives. When peace finally came, the United States committed to completing not one but two reconstructions, of the American South and of the Indigenous West. The United States had suffered a hundred-year-long crisis of authority, and it was determined to assert its hegemony. Compared to the reconstruction of the American South, which involved conciliatory elements, the Indigenous reconstruction was, on the whole, harsh and vindictive, featuring more “civilization programs,” boarding schools designed to “kill the Indian to save the man,” and land policies that labeled Indigenous territories “surplus land.” Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, wondered why the United States did not simply absorb the remaining Indians and eradicate their cultures—and he actually cared about the Indians.²

Like many other settler states throughout history, the United States tried to immobilize and contain Indigenous peoples within its borders. The Indian Office was sidelined by zealous liberal reformers, evangelical Christians, ranchers, western settlers, and railroad boosters who all wanted to see Indian reservations gone. Indigenous leaders were marginalized, and their time-honored governing systems, societies, ceremonies, dances, and feasts—the things that made Indians Indians—were either suppressed or

banned. The backlash was vast and overwhelming, revealing how powerfully Native Americans had stood their ground against White settlers and how effectively they had thwarted colonialism. There was a direct link between the Indigenous success and Americans' sense of vulnerability and scale of vengeance.³

The four-hundred-year struggle to keep the continent Indigenous had stretched colonists from the European powers, and then the United States, to the breaking point again and again. The enormous range of Native nations and the sheer depth and multiplicity of their resistance had frustrated the colonists, if it did not kill them. Some nations relied on naked force and numbers to corral and punish colonial powers, while others sought alliances with them. Some forged ties to other Native nations and reinvented themselves as confederacies. The most powerful nations and confederacies—the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Indian Confederacy, the Wyandots, Lakotas, Comanches, Muscogees, Cherokees, and Seminoles—defeated the colonists in battle repeatedly and controlled the diplomatic proceedings that followed. They possessed the authority, savvy, and will to dictate terms to the Spanish, French, British, and U.S. empires. The Iroquois were the dominant imperial power in the heart of North America for generations, and in the early nineteenth century the Comanches and Lakotas built empires of their own, in part to survive colonialism. Instead of fighting these Indigenous powers, the colonists placated them. They desperately wanted to be allies and not enemies. They sided with power.

Smaller Native nations relied on more nuanced and delicate tactics. Rather than confronting colonial powers directly in battle, they evaded them by making themselves small and inconspicuous, using the striking environmental variety of North America. The Catawbas, Shoshones, Utes, Nez Perces, Blackfoot, Seminoles, and

others found refuge in deserts, mountains, and swamps, evading the settler empires that struggled with difficult and strange terrain, while the Shawnees, “the greatest travellers in America,” countered colonial displacement with a highly organized Indigenous diaspora. In the lower Mississippi Valley, the petites nations made themselves into forceful regional powers through strategic mobility, calculated violence, and expedient alliances, keeping just ahead of the imperial gaze of the surrounding colonial empires. The Catawba population had fallen to 110 in the mid-1820s, but 110 proved to be enough for the nation to survive.⁴

Indigenous power in North America reached its apogee in the mid- to late nineteenth century, which, at first glance, appears counterintuitive. This was the period when the United States emerged onto the world stage with its “monstrous contiguous economic territories,” inspiring awe and fear in Germany and fueling an impression as the “greatest menace” in Italy. Subduing independent Native nations and erasing their sovereignty seemed to the imperial United States a straightforward problem of plying its overwhelming military might and technological advances, including railroads. But the Indigenous nations, too, reinvented themselves, in part as a response to the rising American empire. The Comanches forged an empire that reduced much of the Mexican Republic to an extractive hinterland, enabling them to reign over an oversized section of the hemisphere. The Lakotas, relying on their equestrian mobility, their broad alliance network, and their generations-long experience of blocking colonial ambitions, emerged as the leading, though inadvertent, guardians of the Indigenous continent. Over a period of seven decades, they foiled U.S. expansion again and again, protecting in the process scores of smaller and more vulnerable nations. There is no way to measure the lives saved, but given the palpable genocidal

tendencies of the American settlers, the Lakota Empire's protective presence may have been the most significant single entity keeping the continent Indigenous. Seen from the Indigenous perspective, Custer's Last Stand was neither an aberration nor an atrocity; it was expected and necessary. Looking east from the North American West, the history of North America emerges as a single story of resolute resistance that kept much of the continent Indigenous for generations.⁵

Native peoples carry on the legacy of the long history of resistance. In truth, Native Americans have fought colonialism for more than five centuries, not four, opposing and foiling numerous imperial designs and keeping the continent Indigenous into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They have turned to a vast range of strategies, shifting fluidly from diplomacy and war to appeasement and evasion. Merely surviving has been difficult. In the 1890s the number of remaining Indians was 250,000—a terrifyingly low figure that reveals the enormity of U.S. genocidal campaigns. American expansion had diminished North America's Indigenous population by seventy percent.⁶

But 250,000 was enough to sustain a revival. Today, many Native nations and communities are rapidly growing in numbers. The continent is speckled with hundreds of Native nations that preserve Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood. Each of them embodies the centuries-long Indigenous resistance to colonial violence and expansion, whether Spanish, French, British, Dutch, Canadian, or American. The colonists, after all, would have absorbed every inch of North America if not denied by the continent's Indigenous inhabitants.

A present-day map of Indian reservations in North America captures the story of the Indigenous continent. Canada has hundreds of reserves, most of them small, belonging to a single

“band”—a centralized system that differs drastically from the United States’ removal policy that created the Indian Territory in 1830. In 2016, half of Canada’s First Nation peoples lived in reserves that were fairly evenly distributed among the provinces, with the heaviest concentration on the Pacific coast. South of the forty-ninth parallel, things are different. The East Coast and the coastal plains south of the Chesapeake Bay were violently contested from the seventeenth century on, and these regions are now nearly devoid of reservations. So, too, are the places where Indigenous nations faced Americans in the time of high U.S. imperialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the Ohio Country, the Deep South, and Texas. The largest reservations in the United States are in the West and belong to Navajos, Utes, Comanches, Tohono O’odhams, Oglala Lakotas, Hunkpapa Lakotas, Sihasapa Lakotas, Eastern Shoshones, Northern Arapahos, and Crows. All of those nations fought colonial powers for generations to protect their territory and sovereignty. There are also thick clusters of reservations in the Great Lakes region, where Indigenous resistance forced the colonists to respect Native ways, cooperate, and acknowledge Indigenous authority.⁷

The Ojibwe writer David Treuer argues that when it comes to views of the continent’s wilderness, “America has succeeded in becoming more Indian over the past 245 years rather than the other way around.” It is a comment on the enduring and often unseen impact of Indigenous culture. But beyond Treuer’s specific claim, it is worth pausing to consider just how recent the United States, and its ascendancy, are. The four hundred years of colonialism that followed Columbus’s arrival failed to extinguish Indigenous sovereignty in North America. It was only 130 years ago, a brief span when compared to the long precontact history of Indigenous America, that the United States could claim to have subjugated a

critical mass of Native Americans. Iroquois power lasted from the sixteenth century deep into the nineteenth century, making the Iroquois Nation older and more historically central than the United States. On an Indigenous timescale, the United States is a mere speck.

Set against the deep history of the Indigenous continent, American history looks fundamentally different. So does the American present. Today, sovereign Indigenous America persists in the dynamism of modern Native communities, in the endurance of traditional ways of life, and in the continuation and evolution of the primary Indian response to colonialism: resistance.⁸

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The Comanche Empire

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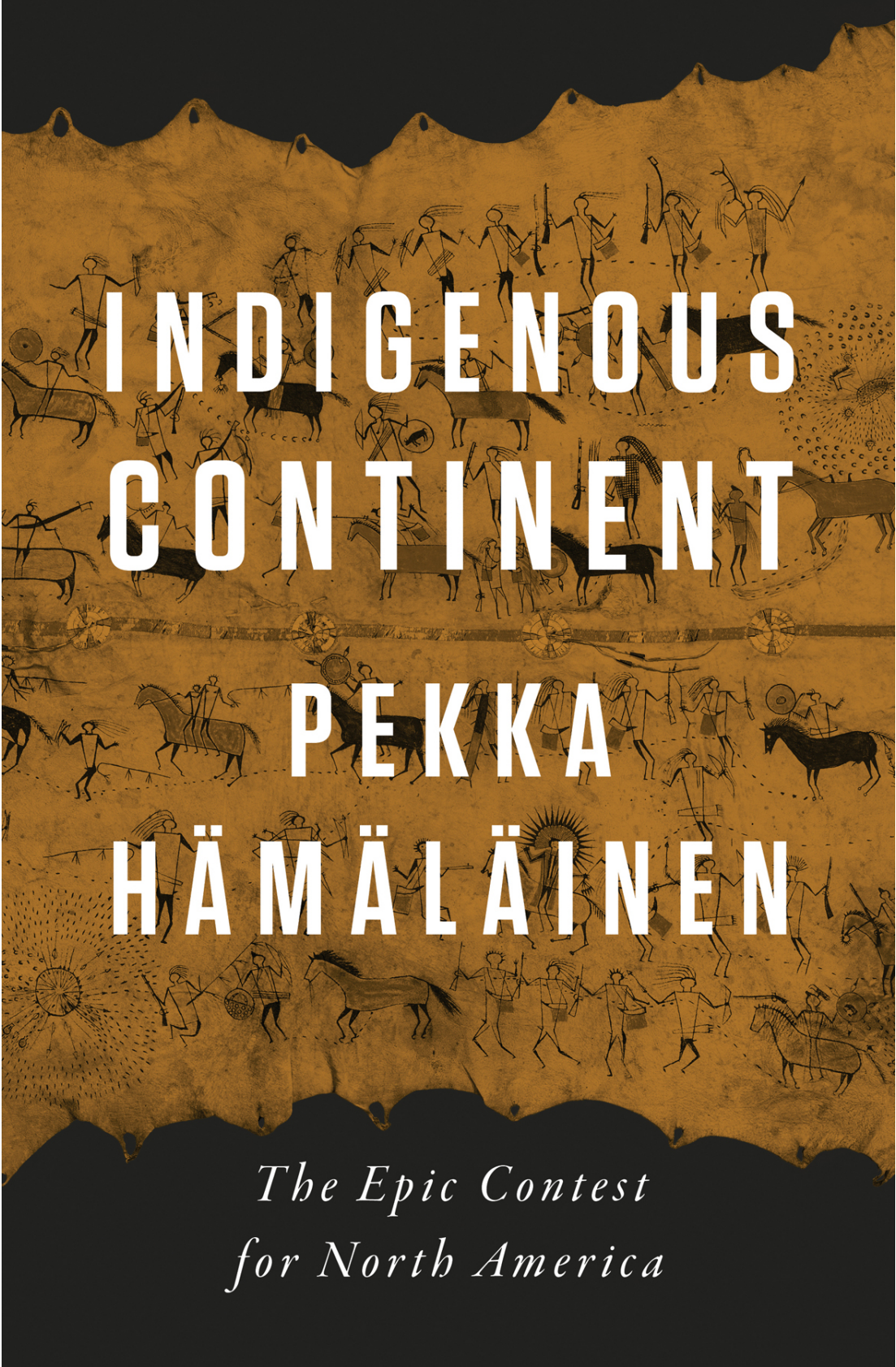
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