

# Phantom Empire

*By Johanna Lenne-Cornuez*

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**At the crossroads of ethnohistory, imperial history and U.S. history, Hämäläinen’s latest book sheds a new light on the Lakota people, arguing that they established a thriving nomadic empire in the heart of America, despite the growing presence of Europeans.**

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About: Pekka Hämäläinen, *Lakota America. A New History of Indigenous Power*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019, 544 p.

Oxford scholar Pekka Hämäläinen is probably the most acclaimed figure of the new *new Indian history*—the most recent turn in U.S. indigenous history<sup>1</sup>. A specialist of native equestrianism and “nomadic empires,” Hämäläinen caused a sensation in 2008 with his first book, *The Comanche Empire*, a thought-provoking study of Native expansion and dominance in the Southern Plains<sup>2</sup>. The concept of a stateless native empire has been discussed, but the sensation has been reverberating through academia ever since. Because *Comanche Empire* had set the tone for a history of indigenous power, *Lakota America* comes less as a surprise, yet no less as a necessary sequel, as it

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<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s, American scholars have been rewriting the history of Native Americans restoring indigenous agency, proposing alternative narratives and focusing on geographic areas traditionally considered as peripheral. The latest development of U.S. new Indian history focuses on indigenous power. See for instance: Colin G. CALLOWAY, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pekka HÄMÄLÄINEN, *The Comanche Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008. Michael McDONNELL, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Pekka HÄMÄLÄINEN, *The Comanche Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008. Review by Thomas Grillot for Books and Ideas: <https://booksandideas.net/How-the-Indians-Conquered-the-West.html>

focuses on the other half of the great American interior, this time north of the Platte River.

## Re-discovering the Lakotas

Because they occupy a special place in American imagination, Lakotas are at once incredibly familiar and utterly unknown. Popular imagery has fixed the Lakotas in collective memory as the horse-mounted buffalo hunters and fierce warriors of the Northern Plains. In history books, their story usually begins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when they became a thorn in the side of the expanding U.S. empire. The Battle of the Little Bighorn (1876) was romanticized as the culmination of Lakota military power, and the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890) as the painful resolution of their resistance to U.S. expansion in the interior. As Pekka Hämäläinen demonstrates, both the imagery and the narrative associated with the Lakotas are distorted simplifications of their long, complex experience of America in a colonial context. Hämäläinen's challenge was, in his own terms, to "make the Lakotas unfamiliar again" (p. 4) and his ambition to tell the untold story of the Lakota people from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A precious indigenous archive, the Lakotas' *winter counts*<sup>3</sup> provide us with a sense of their historical consciousness. Drawing on indigenous, colonial and U.S. sources, *Lakota America* is both an erudite piece of scholarship and a masterful narrative. At the crossroads of ethnohistory, imperial history and U.S. history, it is peopled with American icons such as George A. Custer, Red Cloud and Sitting Bull, but also by lesser known figures such as Joseph Marin, the French officer at Fort Vaudreuil who, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, "behaved, and it seemed, thought like a Sioux" (p. 78), or Thomas Twiss, a "largely Lakotanized" agent of the U.S. government who, a century later, lived up the Platte River in a house abandoned by Mormons with his Lakota wife and their pet bear (p. 236).

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<sup>3</sup> Originally drawn on buffalo hides, *winter counts* were indigenous historical timelines, pictographic records unrolled every year to help with collective remembering. Each pictograph represented a year or a significant event in a year.

## Westering Indians

The story begins at the western marches of the Great Lakes, in the prairie-forest ecotone between the Eastern Woodlands and the prairie grasslands. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a numerous, powerful people lived west of Lake Superior around a sacred lake called Mde Wakan (Mille Lacs) (p. 15). The land was fertile and game-rich, and the people were skilled hunters, boatmen and warriors. The Ojibwas called them “Nadouessioux” – “snake-like” or “enemies” – and the French called them “Sioux”. The Sioux called themselves Očhėti Šakówiŋ, or Seven Council Fires, for they were composed of seven peoples organized in three major divisions: the Dakotas (Mdewakantons, Sissetons, Wahpekutes and Wahpetons), the Yankton-Yanktonais, and the Lakotas. The Očhėti Šakówiŋ spoke dialects of the same language and shared common cultural traits. The Lakotas, the westernmost and most mobile of the Seven Council Fires, settled towards the Minnesota Valley. Every winter, they would go and sojourn in the western grasslands on communal bison hunts, before coming home again. Lakota traditions described the West as an appealing but dangerous place (p. 16).

Mde Wakan was the center of the Sioux world. Yet throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Lakotas moved the center of their world across the great American interior. To explain their westward migration, Hämäläinen uses a complex set of push and pull factors. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the French came to the Great Lakes with guns and goods. Like all indigenous nations, the Sioux were periodically attracted to the technological frontier, and repelled by its violence. The fur trade and the smallpox brought disruption west of the Lakes long before French explorers trekked the land. Neighboring Crees, Assiniboines and Sauteurs descended on the Sioux with guns and iron, poaching across their hunting grounds and raiding them for slaves. In the East, the depletion of beaver and human populations provoked violent wars which sent crowds of refugees pressing against the eastern fringes of Sioux territory<sup>4</sup>. The Sioux sought the protection of *Onontio* – the French colonial governor at Montreal – but not until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did they eventually break a long-desired alliance

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<sup>4</sup> Decimated by epidemics, the Iroquois raided the Great Lakes in the mid-17th century for plunder and captives to replenish their numbers. They also tortured captives to alleviate grief. The Iroquois *mourning wars* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were also *beaver wars*. Having depleted beaver population in the North East, the Iroquois moved west and south to conquer new hunting grounds. Refugees relocated in the “refugee triangle” between Lake Superior, Lake Michigan and the Mississippi Valley (map p. 122). See also Richard WHITE, *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

with the French<sup>5</sup>. The alliance was based on the fur trade, and the fur trade pushed the Lakotas further west. The West was teeming with beaver and bison. It was also peopled by men and women: nomads mounting wondrous animals that Lakotas called Sacred Dogs, and villagers who lived in earth-lodges in the river valleys and farmed the land. As they pushed deeper into the West, Sicangus, the pioneering division of the Lakotas, encountered resistance and violence along the way.

Lakotas became the dominant people along the Missouri at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1781, smallpox hit the Northern Plains, probably carried by equestrian Indians from the South (pp. 94-95). Lakotas were severely hit by the pox, but because of their migratory way of life, less so than their northern neighbors. Villages along the Missouri suffered from disease, violence and the harsh winters of the 1780s. Fighting for resources, the Lakotas pushed the weakened Mandans and Arikaras northward and settled in the human vacuum along the river, first on the eastern, then on the western shore. The valley of the Missouri River, or Mníšoše, was an ecological niche, a reservoir of water, grass, game and cottonwood. This was “the single most important expansion in the history of the Očhėti Šakówiŋ” (p. 99-100). There, conquest gave way to settlement, and violence to diplomacy. Mníšoše became home to the Lakotas and, for three generations, it was the center of their universe. What Hämäläinen calls “the Lakota Meridian” was “an imperial valley,” “a long, integrated south-north oriented corridor of power in the heart of the continent” (pp. 142-143).

## Bison and Gold at the Black Hills

Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lakotas made their second push into the West. This new phase of expansion centered on the Black Hills (Pahá Sápa), a paramount bison range which also appealed to Lakotas for mystic reasons (p. 165). As the American fur trade expanded, animals disappeared from the exhausted valleys. The mobile Lakotas followed the bison, and American traders, “sensing a shift in commercial geography,” followed the Lakotas into the great American interior (p. 177). Fort Laramie, the first trading post of the western plains, was built for them, and John Jacob Astor, the fur magnate, bought most of his bison robes from Lakotas (p. 177). The 1830s were a

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<sup>5</sup> Lakes Algonquians called the first French colonial governor and all his successors Onontio, or “great mountain.” Onontio and French officials were paternal figures in the indigenous sense of the term. French *fathers* were protective, generous and benevolent towards their Indian *children*. When Onontio called his Algonquian *children* and the Iroquois to the great Montreal peace of 1701, the Sioux were not invited.

booming decade for U.S. capitalists and indigenous nomads alike, each depending on the other. By the end of the 1830s, Pahá Sápa had become the religious, economic and political center of Lakota dominion in the West (pp. 191-192). It was not, however, the western edge of their domain. From the Black Hills, Lakotas continued to venture westward, clashing with the Pawnees of the Platte River country and the Crows of the Rocky Mountain foothills, “triggering enmities that would last for generations” (p. 92).

Lakotas shared a secret: gold lay in the Black Hills. At a grand council in 1857, they made a pact: whoever told the whites about the gold fields in Pahá Sápa would be put to death, along with the whites who would have been let in on the secret (p. 234). Starting in 1849, gold rushes along the Rocky Mountains drew thousands of overlanders across the plains. As Lakotas were expanding north, south, west and east (p. 240), so were the U.S. Increasingly aggressive settler colonialism caught up with Lakotas. In 1874, the Black Hills gold rush touched the heart of their country. The relationship between Americans and Lakotas, formerly based on mutual dependence, turned into open conflict. It took the U.S. more time and more casualties than they thought it would to defeat the powerful Lakota-Cheyenne-Arapaho confederacy and eventually secure the Black Hills in 1890. In 1927, Americans began carving gigantic heads of presidents on one side of the sacred mountains. The initial plans of including the faces of prominent Native figures – Red Cloud, Crazy Horse and Sacagawea – in the American pantheon were dropped (p. 382). In the 1970s, the American Indian Movement revived the Black Hills land claim.

## Imperial History

The subtitle of the book reads “a new history of indigenous power,” yet in many places *Lakota America* is also a history of contact and a piece of *new imperial history*<sup>6</sup>. In addition to using Lakota winter counts and ethnohistory, Hämäläinen has made extensive use of colonial and U.S. archives in French, Spanish and English. *Lakota America* therefore, is as well a book about French, Spanish, British, Canadian and U.S. Americas. If anything, this points to the sheer impossibility of disentangling the trajectories of indigenous peoples and European empires in colonial America. Hämäläinen’s take on the problem is that colonial and indigenous powers did not

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<sup>6</sup> Emerging in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, *new imperial history* challenged the assumptions of older *diplomatic history*, holding that the actors at the peripheries of empires dictated the course of action to imperial capitals rather than the opposite.

necessarily collide, repel each other or coexist only out of mutual weakness (p. 6). They could in fact grow together.

In Chapter 2 “Facing West”, Hämäläinen sheds light on the western recesses of the French empire in North America, resurrecting the powerful French-Sioux alliance of the mid-18th century. At Fort Vaudreuil, New France’s ambassadors Paul Marin and his son and Joseph secured the peace between old enemies, lubricated the fur trade with gifts, brandy and carefully chosen words, and invited numerous Indian groups to play lacrosse and camp in the open fields around the fort. They also sent French traders and *coureurs de bois* to Sioux villages. The peace crafted by the Marins not only created a bridge between Canada and the Illinois country (p. 78), it also created coexistence and co-evolution. The Sioux desired guns, iron and protection. The French sought profit and control of the greater West. The two created “an odd hybrid world where two peoples could simultaneously pursue their expansionist ambitions and yet coexist, cooperate, and feel secure” (p. 77).

After the Lakotas conquered the upper Missouri and its river valleys in the 1790s, they were “plugged into two enormous trade systems,” the Spanish trade “anchored in St. Louis and New Orleans,” and the British trade anchored in Hudson Bay and Montreal (p. 109). Lakotas continued to provide the British with pelts through the Dakotas. Downriver, they taxed – in fact racketed – French-Spanish merchants on their way upriver and by 1800, Lakotas and Spaniards depended on each other (p. 108 & p. 117). In the 1830s, the booming U.S.-Lakota fur trade was bolstered by American steamboats running up and down the rivers, and Native horse riders crisscrossing the plains. In the words of the author, Lakota and U.S. regimes “overlapped and interpenetrated rather than brushed against one another,” and managed to coexist well into the 1850s (pp. 6-7). The brutal Sioux Wars of the postbellum era are traditionally understood as colonial wars, pitting colonizers against colonized. Hämäläinen’s understanding of the events leading to the iconic Battle of the Little Bighorn (1876) and the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890) is that the Lakotas’ expansion had turned them into “an imperial power in the midst of another” (p. 7).

## **A Native Empire?**

Like *The Comanche Empire*, *Lakota America* is a challenge to traditional imperial history. It argues for the existence of an indigenous, nomadic empire in the heart of

America in the post-contact era – whereas the concept of Native empires usually refers to the urban societies and powerful states of Mesoamerica and the Andes, empires which did not survive European competition<sup>7</sup>. Hämäläinen’s demonstration that Lakota America was an empire can be quite convincing. Once at the intersection of the horse frontier and the gun frontier, Lakotas turned into formidable conquerors. There were low points and reversals of fortunes, but Lakotas secured and maintained dominance in the Missouri Valley for half a century before expanding again. They derived their wealth from a mixture of technological mastery, violence, resource exploitation and diplomacy. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they raided and pushed away other Indian groups, imposed themselves as commercial partners to fur traders and as preferred intermediaries to agents of the U.S. Indian Office. They were a polity with a strong sense of their place in the world, and at the same time their vision of kinship was plastic enough to integrate aliens into the social fabric through *wólakǰhota*, “bonds of peace” (p. 83). Some Native groups like the Cheyennes and the Poncas avoided annihilation by embracing the Lakota lifestyle (p. 176). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hämäläinen argues, the Lakotas were “consolidating an empire of a kind Americans could neither see nor understand,” “an empire of equals” without institutions, yet which managed to achieve “what traditional empires achieved through institutional control: harness resources, create dependencies, enforce boundaries, and inspire awe” (p. 240 & p. 243).

Limits to the imperial power of Lakotas can be found in the book’s development. Lakotas expanded because they exhausted the resources of the river valleys and plains to keep up with the demands of the European and American fur trades. Their wealth and power relied heavily on that of their imperial neighbors, so much so that they faced disappearance when the transatlantic trade was in shambles after the Seven Years War (p. 89). Dependence seems to have increased in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Lakotas relied heavily on annuities and gifts from the U.S. Indian Office (p. 314). It is difficult to reconcile the notion of a sustainable Lakota empire with that of *dependency*, i.e the conditioning of one economy by another, and the ensuing lack of economic choice, cultural distortion and political dependence

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<sup>7</sup> Hämäläinen’s predecessors have spoken of an indigenous empire, hegemony or even “winning of the West”. R. White’s 1978 article can be considered the blueprint for *Lakota America*: « The Winning of the West. The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries », *The Journal of American History*, 1978, vol. 65, n° 2, pp. 319-343. Regarding the Osages of the Arkansas Valley see Willard H. ROLLINGS, *The Osages. An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1992. Regarding the Powhatans of Tidewater Virginia see James AXTELL, *The Rise and Fall of the Powhatan Empire. Indians in Seventeenth-Century Virginia*, Williamsburg, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1995.

affecting indigenous societies in a colonial context<sup>8</sup>. Regardless of dependency, the use of the words “dominion” and “empire” to define a headless indigenous regime that relied neither on institutions nor social hierarchy challenges the tenets of Clastrian political anthropology and the traditional opposition between state and society<sup>9</sup>. It poses again an old epistemological problem, the correlation of semantic extension and restricted comprehension: the more plastic the word, the less precise the meaning. In that regard, *Lakota America* follows a trend which has been characterizing U.S. Indian history since the 1990s: the smoothing out of differences between Native and Euro-American societies – the risk of such an approach being to miss out on the specific characteristics of both. And yet, that an empire should be defined by its achievements rather than by its means definitely opens interpretative windows, especially in the field of Indian history.

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<sup>8</sup>An offshoot of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century postcolonial studies, *dependency theory* helped explain the underdevelopment of economically peripheral areas in a global, capitalist context. A summary of the theories of *dependency* and the *world-system* and their application to the field of Indian history can be found in the introduction to Richard WHITE, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1983, p. xiii-xix.

<sup>9</sup>Political anthropologist Pierre Clastres distinguished between imperial and non-imperial indigenous societies. In the latter, he saw precious examples of stateless polities where power was non-coercive, and which valued leisure, prestige or generosity rather than dominion or efficiency. Pierre CLASTRES, *Society Against the State*, Robert HURLEY et Abe STEIN (trad.), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.