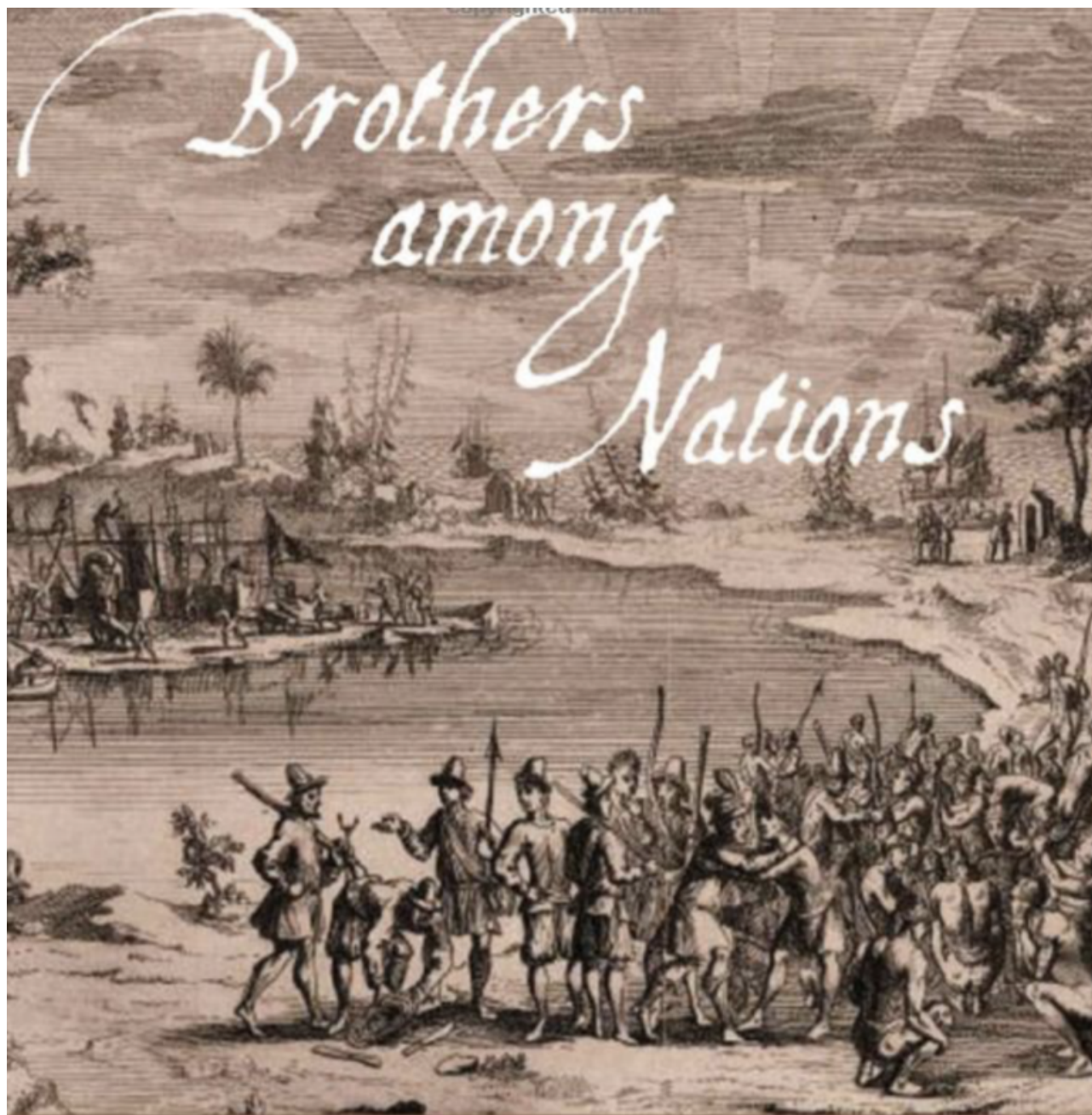


Connecting the Dots: Mapping, Mediating Figures, and Intercultural Relationships in Early America

Brothers among Nations



THE PURSUIT OF
INTERCULTURAL ALLIANCES IN EARLY AMERICA
1580–1660



CYNTHIA J. VAN ZANDT

Focusing on fascinating networks of personal ties and fictive kinship, formal alliances and imperial rivalries, Cynthia Van Zandt's *Brothers among Nations* explores the complex relationships that linked European settlements and Indian villages in eastern North America. Closely examining case studies from Virginia, Maryland, New Sweden, New Netherland, Connecticut, and Plymouth, Van Zandt presents the early period as an ongoing search by Indians and Europeans for knowledge, advantage, and profit. These motivations often led to violent reprisals and preemptive strikes on both sides, familiar features of the early period. But equally often, Europeans and Native Americans were able to forge alliances of various kinds in which Native groups occasionally played the dominant role.

Many works on the early period, especially recent works that accord a major role to Native Americans, share Van Zandt's emphasis on negotiation and mediating figures. But by doing so, the historical literature poses a distinction between the early period and the period after 1680, in which the former is marked by fluidity and possibilities and the eighteenth century by clear racial lines, clear imperial distinctions, stable governing structures, and what one can only call narrative coherence. Perhaps Van Zandt's most significant accomplishment is to show that negotiation, alliances, and mediating figures suggest a new kind of coherence to the early period, that behind formal politics in the sense of wars, treaties, and the like, lay personal relationships and intercultural alliances that other historians of the early period would be well advised to look for.

From the beginning, Van Zandt makes it clear that although her focus is on alliances, she is not offering a rosy portrait of intercultural understanding and cooperation. Fear, hunger, and the desire for profit drove Europeans and Native peoples together even as ethnocentrism and violence pushed them apart. To achieve their goals, all parties needed information about the disposition of prospective allies and rivals, their territorial claims, and their relationships with the various European, Algonkian, and Iroquoian groups of eastern North America. Van Zandt uses the term "mapping" as the "metaphorical lens" (9) through which to examine these ongoing efforts to gain knowledge of other groups, and although the metaphor is a bit strained in places, Van Zandt makes a valuable point in asserting that mapping, in this sense, was as often effective as it was faulty.

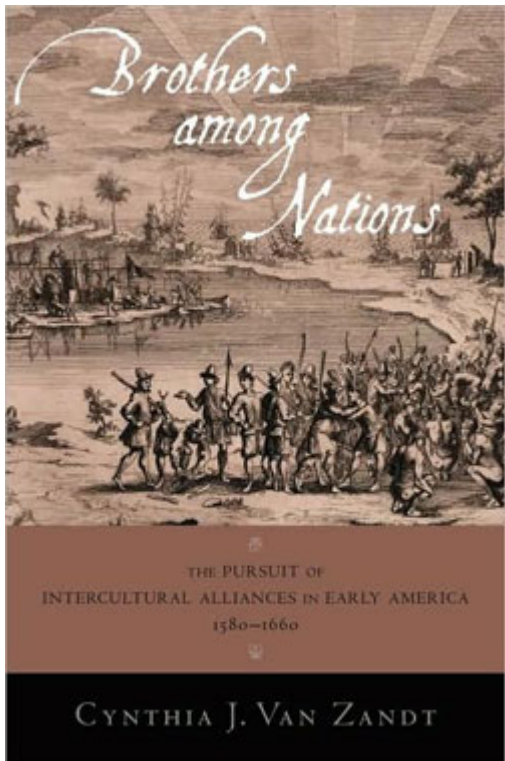
Shifting European leaders and motivations away from center stage, Van Zandt argues that Indians often asserted a dominant role in their relationships with Europeans and further that "Indian actions were often determined more by relationships with other Native Americans than with Europeans, especially when inter-Indian alliances and conflicts stretched across territory claimed by European colonies" (11).

Van Zandt makes a clever argument that the frequency of preemptive strikes and fears of conspiracy show how real these connections were in the early period. European officials recognized that they were enmeshed in a web of alliances

that they did not fully understand. In this light, the imagined conspiracies of the early period reflected “real fears, even if they were not necessarily accurate ones” (46).

Harsh tactics like preemptive strikes and violent reprisals were more likely before 1620, Van Zandt argues, because in the early years both Native Americans and Europeans were proud, suspicious, and ill-informed. Dubious tactics like kidnapping, which in hindsight “seems to have been an extraordinarily ill-conceived strategy,” offered considerable short-term gains. Captives might serve as hostages, informants, and translators, and therefore kidnapping endured because “many colonial promoters and explorers nevertheless saw it as useful for a surprisingly long time” (57).

Not surprisingly, these methods largely failed to produce the desired results, and later efforts beginning in the 1630s “benefited from the earlier period of experimentation, even (or especially) when previous models were disastrous failures” (45). Jamestown, the subject of chapter 3, offers some of the early period’s most familiar examples of fictive kin alliances, cultural mediators, and preemptive strikes. Both English and Indians in the Chesapeake tried to assert a dominant role in their relationship: Wahunsonacock, or Powhatan, staged a famous adoption ritual involving Captain John Smith, and the English under Captain Christopher Newport staged an equally famous (and equally ineffective) coronation ceremony. Here as elsewhere, the Indian leader had the advantage in understanding: “if Captain John Smith failed to understand the full implications and obligations of Powhatan kinship, Wahunsonacock himself comprehended the essential symbolism and implications of vassalage” (79). This was a lesson that later Chesapeake figures like William Claiborne would take closely to heart.



Cynthia Van Zandt, *Brothers among Nations: The Pursuit of Intercultural Alliances in Early America, 1580-1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). ix+252 pp., cloth, \$49.95.

Jamestown was the model for subsequent settlements, and the many published accounts of its experiences helped to drive the shift Van Zandt places in the 1630s. Then, virtuosic performers of the role of cultural mediator found ample opportunities for profit and forged more stable relationships. The second half of the book dwells in large part on two such figures. Chapter 4 introduces the fascinating Isaac Allerton, an official emissary of Plymouth Colony whose cultural and linguistic facility made him a welcome visitor and trading partner in England, New England, New Netherland, and among a wide range of Iroquoian and Algonkian villages. Allerton is an illuminating foil to the brittle ethnocentrism of William Bradford, whose “ideas of where the borders of Plymouth Colony lay and of how Plymouth should ally itself with others” (98) did not include any of his Dutch neighbors, let alone the Native ones. By foregrounding Allerton, Van Zandt offers a portrait of the early period that contemporaries would likely have seen as more accurate. “Bradford was the architect of a more restricted, culturally pure plan of colonization ... In contrast, Allerton’s way was much more in the mainstream of early colonial realities” (114).

Virginia’s Colonel William Claiborne is another fascinating figure whose alliances crossed cultural and national boundaries. In Claiborne’s case, fur trading profits drew him into an alliance with the powerful Susquehannocks, Iroquoian speakers who came to dominate the northern reaches of Chesapeake Bay. His alliance effectively appended Virginia to a chain of diplomatic, economic, and military alliances extending into Huron territory north of the Great Lakes.

Allies of the Hurons, the Susquehannocks were enemies of the Haudenosaunee, especially the Mohawks and Senecas. Their desire for an alliance with Claiborne was part of a long-term effort to establish trading ties with Europeans that began in the 1620s, when the Susquehannocks sought trading ties with the Dutch at New Amsterdam. After these efforts bore no fruit, Claiborne's ventures north from the Chesapeake attracted the Susquehannocks' attention and led to an alliance. Later, when Maryland officials successfully challenged Claiborne's right to trade in their territory, they hoped to replace him as the Susquehannocks' partner in the fur trade. But Maryland officials misunderstood the nature of the relationship Claiborne had initiated: the Susquehannocks were not interested solely in a trading relationship but an alliance, and when Claiborne was forced out, they shifted their attention again, this time to the fledgling settlement of New Sweden.

In a strong final chapter, Van Zandt shows how her focus on alliances like these can bring coherence to events usually described in terms of different national or regional narratives. Specifically, she argues that "the Dutch conquest of New Sweden and the Native American attack on Manhattan in 1655 were different aspects of the same event" (185). When the Dutch attacked the Susquehannocks' client, New Sweden, they invited a reprisal for several reasons. The Susquehannocks hoped to draw Dutch forces away from their client but also hoped to strike at the Dutch, their Haudenosaunee allies, and none other than Isaac Allerton. Allerton's trading ties with New Sweden and his residence in New Netherland made him a sort of traitor in Susquehannock eyes, and while in Manhattan, they ransacked Isaac Allerton's house in a "public demonstration of mockery" (179).

The "peach war" and the Dutch attack on New Sweden admittedly play a minor role, when they play any role at all, in accounts of the early period. The same is true of Isaac Allerton, William Claiborne, and even the Susquehannocks. But by revealing the complex alliances that unify these actors and events, Van Zandt makes a broader point about the interwoven strands of the early period as a whole. Approaching this period from the standpoint of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which Europeans were able in many cases to dictate terms to Native Americans and Africans alike, obscures the need for Native allies that marked all early settlement projects. As Van Zandt puts it, "interpretations that assume overwhelming European supremacy for the early colonial period can be too heavily influenced by the outcome of much later events" (185). Similarly, approaching the early history of Maryland, Virginia, New Amsterdam, and New Sweden from the perspective of later years, in which boundaries were more clearly drawn, obscures the alliances that bound the Indian and European settlements in eastern North America and the boundary-crossers who negotiated and profited from those alliances.