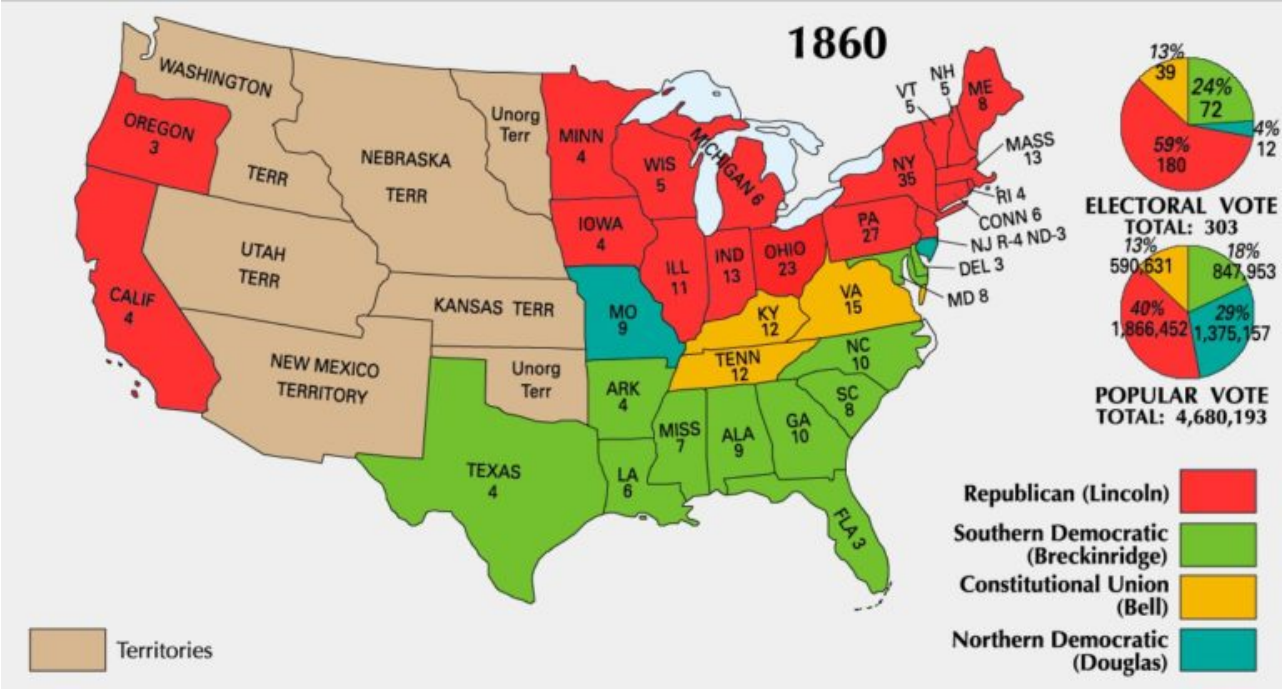
Fun with Political Geography



My students and I had fun discussing political geography today. For instance, take a look at these two maps side by side. First, we have the presidential electoral map from 1860, from the *National Atlas of the United States*:

Then we have this recent study, from Open Left, depicting how white men (the only ones eligible to vote in 1860) voted in 2008:

Now, obviously it would be very easy to overdraw an analysis from these two maps. And indeed, I think Open Left is a bit too Whiggish (despite trying not to be Whiggish) about the links between the expansion of voting rights and the election of Progressive presidential candidates—after all, the expanded electorate has certainly elected its share of conservative Presidents.

But it's still pretty interesting.

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Jeffrey L. Pasley is associate professor of history at the University of Missouri and the author of *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (2001), along with numerous articles and book chapters, most recently the entry on Philip Freneau in Greil Marcus's forthcoming New Literary History of America. He is currently completing a book on the presidential election of 1796 for the University Press of Kansas and also writes the blog Publick Occurrences 2.0 for some Website called *Common-place*.

Reviving the Folk Revival



"In part, the recurring taste for folk music has to be explained by a recurring desire in American culture: the desire to strip away the awful effects of consumer culture and return to a simpler, harder, more authentic time."

The World in a Grain of Sand: Archival research in Dominica



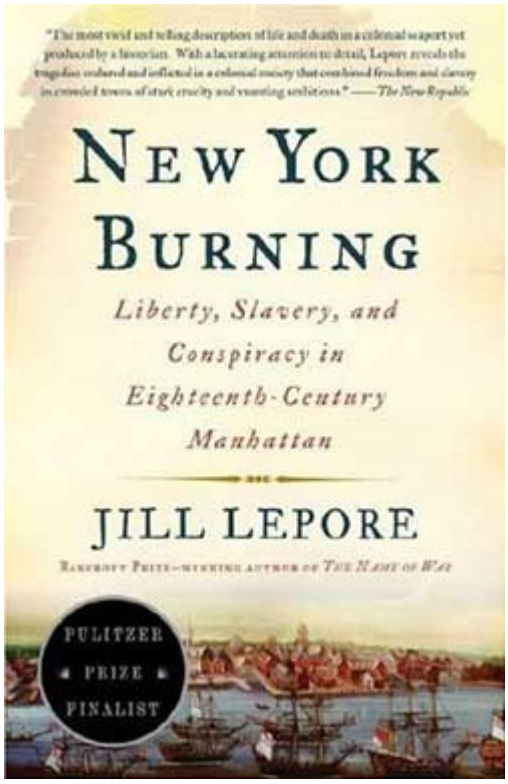
The archive does not have an online or printed catalogue, which is probably why its visitors’ sign-in book has so few entries. More the pity, since it is one of those rare places with a collection broad enough to cater to a wealth of interests, and yet manageable enough to really work through.

The Balancing Act



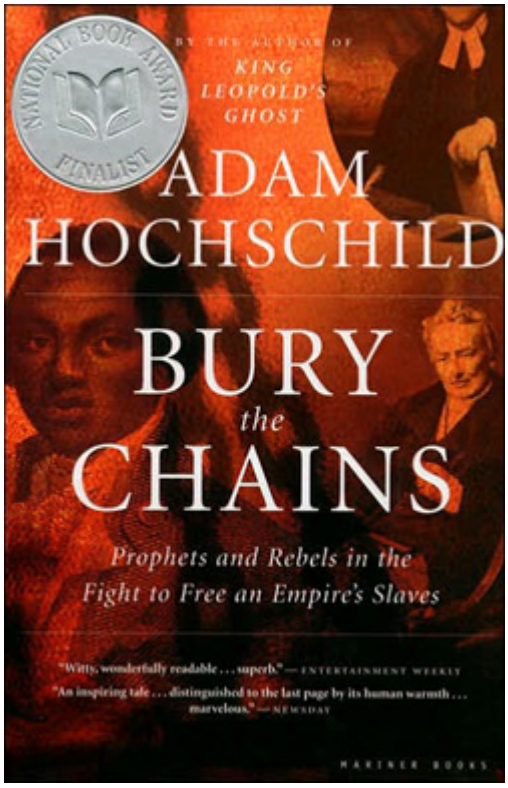
How can belief in such oddities be allowed any place in scholarship?

Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire



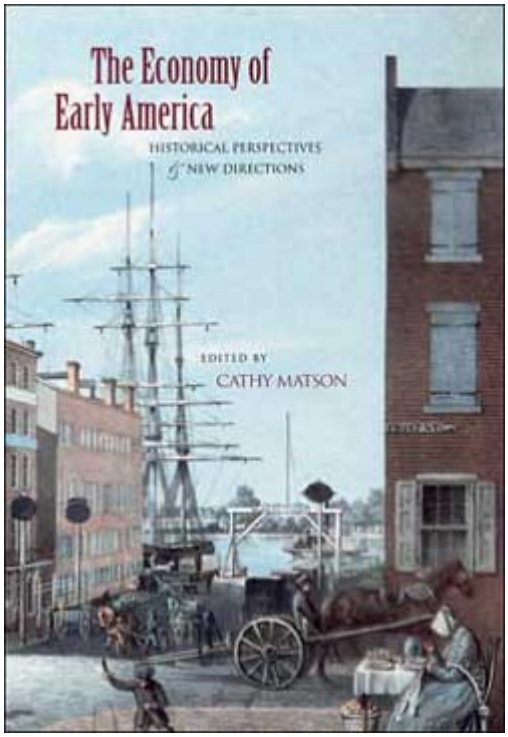
By broadening her narrative to encompass the wider urban context in which the trials took place, Lepore brilliantly reveals what theatrical plays men like Horsmanden saw, what accounts of other slave conspiracies they read about in local newspapers (most especially the recent plots and rebellions in Antigua and South Carolina), and how they regarded other faiths.

Undermining an Empire



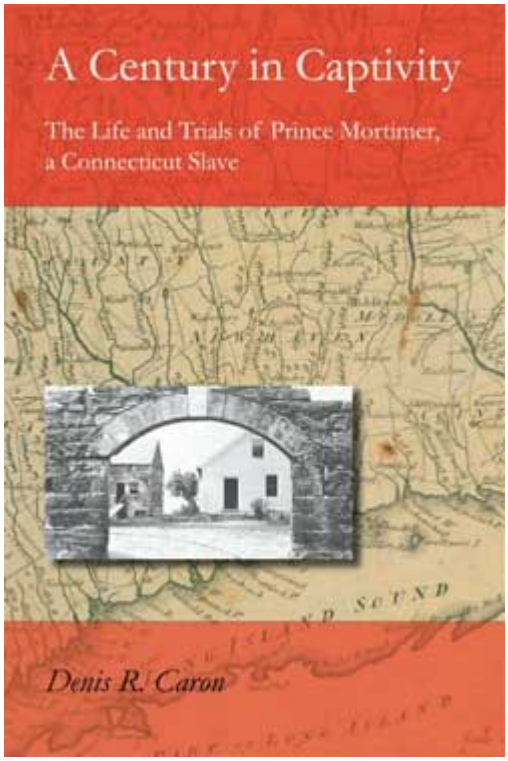
What Hochschild does is not so much revise our understanding of the British abolition movement as humanize it.

Capitalism and Econometrics in Early American Economic History



Economic history still has something to tell us.

The Life of Prince Mortimer (in Brief)



Caron’s speculation and his reliance on outdated literature lead him to significant interpretive errors.

Reconsidering Identity in the Early American Republic

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Unbecoming British



HOW REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA BECAME A POSTCOLONIAL NATION

KARIANN AKEMI YOKOTA

Copyrighted Material

Unbecoming British offers an ambitious and interdisciplinary history of identity formation in the United States between the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Yokota casts the young United States as a postcolonial nation, though one burdened by its citizens' dual role as both "colonizer and colonized" (12). This is the story of a cultural separation that was ugly and awkward. The messiness of American identity formation is clear in the introductory consideration of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. In addition to describing Jefferson's juxtaposition of Old World ideals and New World specimens in his house, Yokota highlights the irony that his visitors tasted "Old World refinement" in the food prepared by James Hemings, an African slave taught to cook in France (7-8). Her analysis recasts Jefferson and his peers as post-colonial figures seeking to establish their own cultural legitimacy. She further asserts that the post-colonial nature of society in the United States caused elite Americans, like Jefferson, to "place a premium" on European goods. However, this cultural dependence triggered insecurities. According to Yokota, "Americans feared being seen by the rest of the world, not least the British, as still mired in colonial dependence; they grappled over what constituted the proper balance between innovation and emulation for a free people" (8-9). *Unbecoming British* features historical figures who, like Jefferson, send conflicted messages about their own identities, fail in their attempts to establish cultural legitimacy, and maintain a world-view reinforced by the oppression of the non-Anglo populations of North America. What Yokota delivers is a complex, messy, and fascinating history of the early republic of the United States.

In order to overcome their uncertain position in a triangle with "'civilized' Europeans and 'uncivilized' Native Americans and blacks," Americans of European descent turned to whiteness as a concept that could both unify citizens with one another, and connect Europeans to Americans.

Yokota examines how Americans created an "interstitial space between their former identity as British subjects and the new political and cultural context in which they now found themselves" (11). It is, thus, a story of nation building in which the nation remains inchoate. Similarly, through her proposed paradigm of "unbecoming," Yokota seeks to create a methodology that inhabits the "interstitial spaces" of current scholarship. Throughout the text, she gathers a diverse range of evidence (from plants to school primers to historical documents) to consider each historical topic, object, or person introduced. She weaves her historical narrative through the accretion of these multilayered sources of evidence. By reading political history through the production of ceramic housewares, or considering scientific education as evidence of postcolonial power relationships, Yokota seeks out unexpected relationships that break down residual, secure notions of "Americanness" in the post-colonial world she explores. Likewise, she utilizes a range of historical paradigms, introducing whiteness theory alongside cultural, political, oceanic, and material culture history. This eclectic methodology allows Yokota to tease out the breadth and complexity of "unbecoming British" such that cultural identity is identified through these multilayered sources.

In the first chapter, “A New Nation on the Margins of the Global Map,” Yokota considers how Americans attempted to counteract the threat that uncharted areas on maps posed to their nation’s perceived civility. She proposes that individuals created a “subversive American geographical narrative” to undermine British intellectual dominance (61). American attempts to create their own geographical narratives often failed and, ultimately, British maps remained the authoritative source of geographic knowledge. Significantly, however, the American geographies, such as Jedidiah Morse’s *Geography Made Easy* (1784), on which Yokota concentrates, were often compilations of plagiarized material interspersed with inaccuracies and geographical hear-say. Yokota argues that these “sly and populist” texts were constructions of American identity, which functioned by slightly altering “what were essentially reprints of British works.” Further, they “replicated colonial hierarchies” by maintaining clear boundaries between civilized Anglo-American and “savage” American Indian (61).

Chapter two, “A Culture of Insecurity,” considers the familiar territory of the conjoined attraction and aversion to material goods in Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary America. This chapter presents a string of material objects and historical narratives with the self-professed intent of refocusing the lens of the political history of the early national period onto “the enduring aspects of America’s colonial culture” rather than on its “new political system of governance” (63). Because of its numerous examples, this chapter lacks cohesion, though it contains a wealth of interesting information. Yokota analyzes the negative impact-over-time that international politics had on the American manufacture of ceramics, textiles, and glasswares. Despite attempts to produce these luxury items in the United States, the young nation continued primarily to export raw goods and to import finished products from Britain. Furthermore, success in American manufacturing was measured by the ability to imitate British goods (94). Although clearly no longer a British colony, the United States acted like one with respect to its practices of material consumption, a phenomenon that “encouraged the development of a common transatlantic identity” (72). But the uneven exchange of goods also reinforced extant power relationships and exposed Americans to international mockery when they misused items (72) or eagerly purchased European products of inferior quality (102). In this chapter, elite Americans and, increasingly, their middle class counterparts, are represented as keen consumers of European luxury goods, avidly pursuing such products in order to maintain the appearance of cultural legitimacy and independence, while serving the purposes of astute British merchants who profited by adroitly manipulating American consumers.

In chapter three, “A Revolution Revived,” Yokota follows the attempts by American merchants to open trade with China. By tracing a series of cultural gaffs, confused identities, and missed opportunities in the U.S.-China relationship, she shows that independence from Britain left American merchants vulnerable in an international market. The ginseng trade is central to this chapter. As a rare plant native to North America, ginseng should have offered American merchants a valuable commodity in the Chinese marketplace. Yet, British merchants more successfully marketed North American ginseng. Yokota

ends with a discussion of the success of American trade with China after the conclusion of the War of 1812 and the development of the trade in seal hides, which made the China trade “a new arena for the formation of national identity and for the negotiation of America’s place in the world” (152).

Chapter four, “Sowing the Seeds of Postcolonial Discontent,” continues to consider the “raw” commodities that Americans provided. Here Yokota primarily examines the fraught relationships between British and American scientists. American scientists felt they “toiled in obscurity” while contributing significantly to European scientific knowledge. Europeans decried the misinformation provided by their American colleagues (155) or lamented their general incompetence. For example, the naturalist William Bartram succeeded in sketching a rare Florida sandhill crane for his British patron from a bird that his traveling companions killed. However, the travelers ate the carcass and discarded its skin and feathers rather than preserving them as a specimen to accompany the drawing.

More troubling than the unfortunate fate of the crane is one of the chapter’s lengthiest examples, which considers the tensions between the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Missionary Society of Connecticut (CMS), both serving the Congregationalist Church. Here Yokota proposes that “the souls of Native Americans had a value similar to that of ‘natural’ objects,” a concept that allows her to introduce this story into the chapter’s focus on natural history, though a reader might well wonder if American Indian souls and botanical sketches truly belong in the scope of this single chapter as cognate commodities (159). Members of the CMS, we learn, resisted the urgings of the LMS to live and work as missionaries among the Native Americans, because “proximity to ‘savage’ populations disturbed Americans who were trying to demonstrate to the world that theirs was a civilized society” (159). Later, members of the CMS initiated the desired missionary contact with Native Americans, but further disappointed their British counterparts by failing in the attempted conversions. Yokota argues that these seeming failures by the CMS allowed its members to successfully keep American and indigenous cultures distinct. This chapter as a whole demonstrates that Americans used raw commodities (be they cranes or American Indians) to obtain access to the European scientific community, but that they found these products did not grant them “the status of civilized equals” (191). For Yokota these flawed exchanges of commodities become another lens through which to view the impact of the postcolonial situation of the United States.

The final chapter, “A Great Curiosity,” argues that a European education was one of the “commodities the American post-revolutionary cultural elite most coveted” (196). Yet higher education became another way through which European institutions “maintained their cultural hegemony over America” (196). The first part of the chapter describes the experiences of four physicians—Benjamin Rush, his son James Rush, Benjamin Smith Barton, and David Hosack—who sought intellectual polish in Scotland only to find themselves perceived as minority “others” in the British Isles. These and other American intellectuals realized

their position in transatlantic markets for knowledge circulation could only be solidified by the creation of a precise socio-cultural identity. “The irreducible object to protecting elite Americans’ aspirations to civilization,” Yokota explains, “became whiteness—the foundational symbol of national belonging in postcolonial America” (225). This effort to sort out Americans’ racial identities explains the sensational effect of Henry Moss, an African American man who was said to have become completely white. In order to overcome their uncertain position in a triangle with “‘civilized’ Europeans and ‘uncivilized’ Native Americans and blacks,” Americans of European descent turned to whiteness as a concept that could both unify citizens with one another, and connect Europeans to Americans (219).

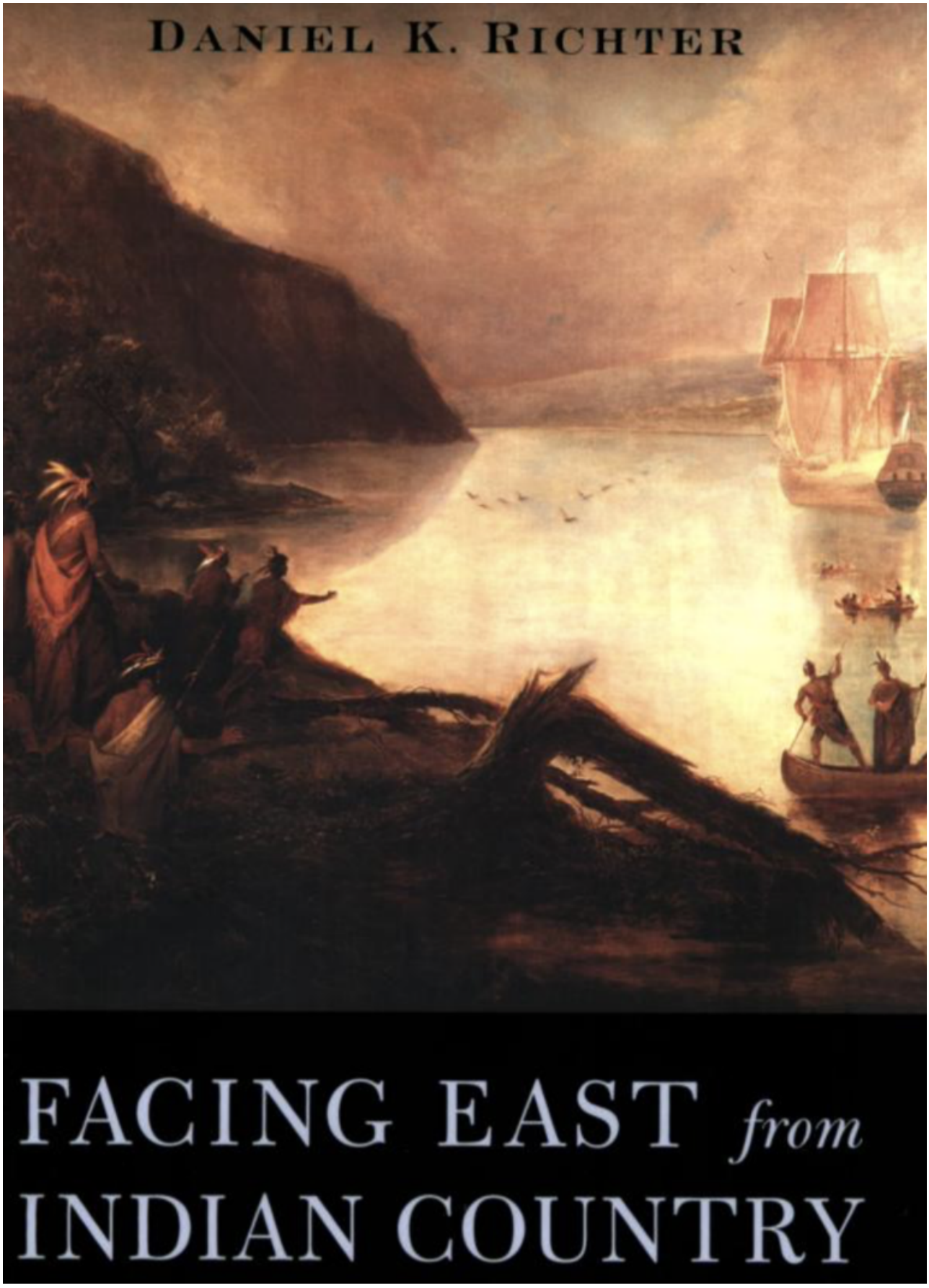
The ambition and breadth of *Unbecoming British* greatly contributes to the interest of the text, but also to its weaknesses. At moments its narrative seems too sweeping and fast-paced. In every chapter readers follow stories about multiple protagonists and encounter far-ranging discussions of politics, economics, and material culture. Closer attention to the material objects represented in the many illustrations—including a greater dose of formal analysis and comparison—could surely have sharpened several instances within Yokota’s text, though it would not necessarily have contradicted her conclusions. The treatment of multiple topics per chapter also prevents Yokota from subtly treating the racial questions that she introduces. Although she is concerned with postcolonial identity, oddly none of the minority figures introduced within the narrative have a voice. Hemings and Moss, for example, appear as silent figures within narratives about the identity struggles of their Anglo-American contemporaries. They function as token counter-points in the larger, Anglo-centered web of unbecoming British. The reader is left wondering what this history of the interstitial space of American identity might look like if the book were told from the perspective of Hemings or Moss rather than that of Rush and Jefferson. Finally, the book ends somewhat oddly by looking with a rapid eye toward the 1830s and 1840s. Quick allusions to the American Landscape Painting tradition and to transcendentalism do not produce a closure that does justice to the multifaceted analysis that the book practices in its other chapters. A more satisfying conclusion is contained within Yokota’s recounting of the dramatic interlude from the War of 1812 in which elite members of the invading British Navy evaluated the sumptuous décor of the White House and helped themselves to a lavish feast in its dining room before lighting fire to the Federal buildings later that day. This messy war narrative more aptly reflects the nuances, difficulties, and dynamics of “unbecoming British.”

Unbecoming British contributes significantly to the ongoing project of breaking down any belief that the nature of identity in the United States after the Revolution was monolithic, static, or inevitable. It will be an invaluable resource to scholars of both British and American history, as well as a model of interdisciplinary scholarship of interest to scholars throughout the humanities and allied fields.

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The View from Indian Country



“Richter shows that the effort to transform the traditional narrative of

American history from one of the westward expansion of white settlement to one that looks eastward from Indian country is not only possible, but essential for understanding this nation’s past in all its complexity.”