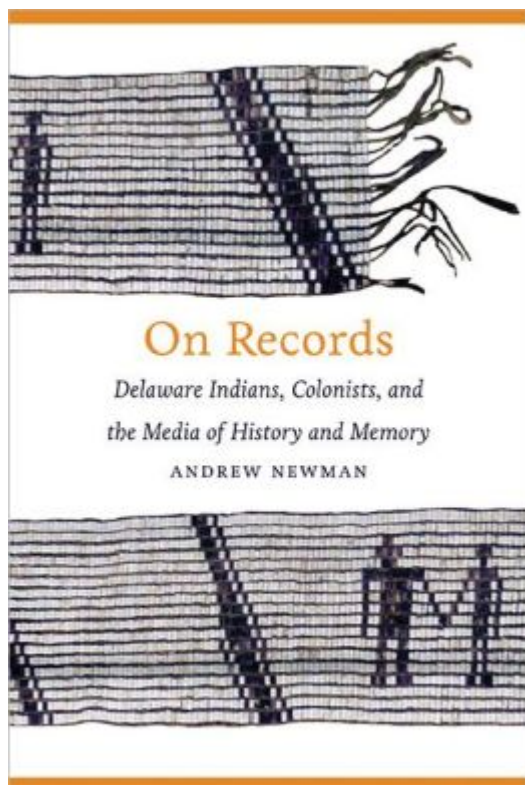


The Matter of Records



Andrew Newman, *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 328 pp., \$45.

Early Americanists have long acknowledged the contingent and mediated nature of our archives, and yet we cannot avoid producing truth claims based upon “proof” of past events. In early American Indian or Native Studies in particular, both our longing for authentic Native voices and our frequent reliance upon interpretations, translations, and transcriptions of oral or written speech amplify questions about access to the past. Perhaps this is why early Native Studies scholarship has recently turned toward the concrete object of the Native-authored book, the material evidence of the Native-authored manuscript, the traceable processes of print production and reproduction, the quantifiable indicators of Native literacy. Such scholarship has helped revise long-held assumptions that American Indians did not write, did not have histories, or did not contribute to the creation, distribution, and consumption of print materials. But in *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory*, Andrew Newman reminds us that written records are only one piece of the evidentiary puzzle, and that historical consciousness does not require writing. Of course, Newman cannot abandon documentary evidence. But he explores the limits and possibilities of annals, archives, and histories by thinking through what such media as oral histories, anachronistic paintings, and dubious documents tell us about past communities. In the process, he offers a timely reminder about the desires tied up in scholarly approaches to records

and representations.

Newman's subject is memory practices among Delaware Indian and colonial European communities. He seeks to initiate dialogue between memory studies, a field usually focused on twentieth-century Europe, and Native Studies. He analyzes the recording, reception, and reproduction of four stories about the Lenni Lenape (Delaware Indians) told by various communities: colonial Delawares and their descendants, colonists, early historians, and contemporary scholars. At times, he calls his claims "farfetched." But therein lies the power of the book: by focusing on memory rather than writing, Newman refreshingly embraces the uncertainty of *all* evidence and indulges in a sustained meditation on what that uncertainty means.

Newman begins with stories that raise questions about origins and time, citing two Lenape origin stories recorded by European settlers. The first story claims that the original man and woman sprouted from a tree on a turtle's back. It takes place in what we might call "deep time," the term literary scholar Wai Chee Dimock employs to describe a "cumulative history" of the world's existence that exceeds the confines of nations, periods, and modern taxonomies. The second story, in contrast, indicates that the Lenape migrated to their current location in historical time. In chapter 1, "Lenape Annals," Newman focuses on this contested second story that Moravian missionary John Heckewelder recorded and published in 1819 and that James Fenimore Cooper incorporated into *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). During Cooper's era some white Americans used the story to justify the displacement of Native communities: they claimed that Native Americans were in fact not native, but rather were recent arrivals to North America and, like Europeans, conquerors of an indigenous race.

This migration story also appears intriguingly in the *Walam Olum*, a manuscript that antiquarian and naturalist Constantine Samuel Rafinesque claimed in 1833 to have "translated word for word" from etched Lenape cedar sticks. Newman is interested in "the fantasy of the *Walam Olum*," the desires wrapped up in the reception of this controversial text from the early nineteenth century to the present (54). Although in 1994 David M. Oestreicher convincingly demonstrated the *Walam Olum's* inauthenticity as a Lenape document, Newman analyzes why it "has been repeatedly brought back from the brink of obscurity, retranslated, and republished" (27). The rejection of the *Walam Olum*, according to one of Newman's Delaware sources, corresponds to a widespread "skepticism about native literacy," while claims for the text's credibility reveal a longing for authentic Native voices in writing (50).

Chapter 2, "An Account of a Tradition," treats a Delaware oral tradition concerning the first Dutch colonists' land acquisition in the New York area. According to the narrative, the colonists asked the Delawares for only as much land as a bull or an ox hide could cover. They then cut the hide into strips and claimed as much land as the strips could encircle, where they built a fort. This story, which corresponds to the classical tradition of Queen Dido's acquisition of land for her citadel at Carthage, does not appear in primary

source documents authored by Dutch colonists. Because of this lack of written evidence, scholars have omitted the story from “the history of New Netherland and early modern imperialism” (56). Yet the story appears in a number of sources from imperial contexts across the globe. Newman studies the story’s pattern of distribution and, by treating the oral tradition as history rather than folklore, argues that the hide trick became a “ceremony of possession” the Dutch employed to create imperial outposts. Newman repeatedly cautions that he has hardly “cinched” his case, and yet this chapter makes one of the book’s most compelling claims: that Native oral traditions tell us not only about Native histories but also about global imperial conquest and can be interpreted as literal accounts of colonial interaction. Newman’s hesitancy to solidify his claim ironically bespeaks a scholarly distrust of oral traditions, even as his book refutes this assumption and joins a host of Native Studies scholars who have demonstrated the crucial place of oral history in recovering the past.

Chapter 3, “The Most Valuable Record,” continues to think through the significance of oral tradition as it deals with Pennsylvania’s “civic myth”: the memory of William Penn’s treaty with the Delawares that supposedly took place underneath a “Great Elm” tree at the Indian village Shackamaxon in 1682 (20). Written records indicate that a treaty meeting occurred around that time, and no evidence contradicts the story. Yet because no treaty document exists, historians since the colonial era have doubted the popular tradition. Less conventional evidence of the treaty meeting includes paintings, wampum belts (Native communicative belts made of purple and white shell beads), and Delaware hunting practices. Newman’s approach to such evidence is invigorating. For instance, Benjamin West’s painting [*William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians When He Founded the Province of Pennsylvania in North America*](#) (1771-72) elevated the treaty story to mythical status with numerous embellishments and anachronisms. But Newman wants to consider the painting not as an inaccurate representation of a past event but as a “visual expression of an oral tradition” that flattens time, “making the past simultaneous with the present” (104). Indeed, both a Pennsylvanian and a Delaware oral tradition come under scrutiny in Newman’s analysis and contribute to the history of memory surrounding the Great Elm treaty. This methodological focus on the communicative traditions of various discourse communities offers a valuable alternative to simplistic Indian/white and oral/written dichotomies.

Chapter 4, “Writings and Deeds,” moves from the famous Elm treaty to the “infamous” Walking Purchase of 1737 (133). Pennsylvania Proprietors and Delawares agreed that the Delawares would grant William Penn a tract of land measured by a day and a half’s walk. The Proprietors liberally interpreted the terms of the treaty: they hired athletic walkers who, pushed to their limits, gained approximately 500,000 acres for Pennsylvania. Newman explores conflicts over memory between the Proprietors, Quakers, and Delawares that resulted from the Walking Purchase. For instance, during the French and Indian War, Delaware spokesman Teedyuscung used the volatile relationship between Quakers and Proprietors to contest the Walking Purchase in a series of treaty meetings. Teedyuscung chose Quakers for allies and suggested two “innovations in treaty

protocol": that his messages be composed in writing and read aloud, and that he have a clerk of his own "as a check against the official minutes and a proxy in the examination of documents" (168). Colonial leaders and Teedyuscung remained skeptical about one another's sources throughout the meetings, not least because Teedyuscung's insistence on literacy defied stereotypes of Indian oral communication. Today, documents surrounding the treaty meetings continue to present a puzzling combination of records.

As the previous paragraphs indicate, *On Records* amasses a startling number of exciting, under-studied records. Discussing stories of Lenapehoking, the traditional homeland of the Delaware, in his "Afterword," Newman observes, "When memory, as opposed to the past, is the object of study, one cannot simply peel off layers to arrive at a primeval green" (187). Newman accumulates, rather than peels back, layers of memory; at times, however, one seeks a bit more "green" in the form of robust claims about the stakes of Newman's analysis. For instance, in Chapter 1, why does Newman leave behind the Lenape origin story to focus on the Lenape migration story? These stories' competing (or intriguingly cumulative) temporal registers raise important questions about periodization, a thorough discussion of which would surely contribute much to early American studies and to Native Studies. Moreover, although Newman deftly interweaves theoretical concepts from memory studies with the particularity of colonial history, I am not sure that memory studies offers Native Studies something new. Concepts like "language ideology," the "insight that linguistic practices ... are attended by value judgments and implications for the social order," are certainly relevant to Native Studies but have long been taken for granted by Native Studies scholars, for whom language has always been a colonizing or liberating force (8). That said, the memory studies approach productively unsettles commonplace scholarly assumptions about colonial documents. If sifting through *On Records*' layers of memory for a glimpse of "green" can become dizzying, the value of doing so lies in Newman's fresh approach to records that embraces both the missing past and the process of remembering as history.