

Truth Lies Bleeding: Anti-Racist Historians and the Destruction of Wendake

The destruction of Wendake (Huron) in 1648-49 is one of the seminal events in Canadian history, uniting the histories of English Canada, French Canada, and Indigenous Peoples. The dispersal of the Wendat in 1648-49 took place in what became English Canada, and involved the deaths of Jesuit priests who became central figures in French - Canadian history and mythology. This clash of the two most powerful Indigenous confederacies in Eastern Canada, the Hodinohsyó:ni (Iroquois) and the Wendat (Huron), echoes down the centuries to our own day.

For centuries the common perception has been that the Wendat were either wiped out, or that the few survivors gradually assimilated into 'white' society. In recent decades a whole new body of work has emerged to contest what is now perceived as a racist, colonial reading of what happened to the Wendat. This anti-racist, anti-colonial reading, part of the effort to 'decolonize' Canadian universities, claims to present a more accurate depiction of events.

In the process, however, anti-racist historians have been making arguments that are more problematic than the arguments they are claiming to debunk. In recent years an entire discourse has been constructed that hides and justifies the destruction of Wendake. Even more unsettling is the fact that Wendat historians, and non-Indigenous historians claiming to be allies of the Wendat, have embraced this claim and presented it as historical truth.

This new discourse revolves around the justification of Iroquois imperialism, a justification that can be traced back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century.

We can begin with American ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan's classic works *The League of the Iroquois* and *Ancient Society*. Morgan accepts the claim of the Iroquois that they originated the clan system and "that they forced, or introduced this social organization among the Cherokees, the Chippeways, (Massasaugas) and several other Indian nations."¹ To Morgan, the enfolding of all other Indigenous Peoples in the Iroquois Confederacy is justified by the fact that the Iroquois clan system is the source of the "principle of democracy."² In so arguing, Morgan employs the same justification for Iroquois imperialism that Euro-Americans used to justify Manifest Destiny and the subjugation of Native Americans.

Lewis Henry Morgan's legacy has lived on into our own day. In his 1983 article in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Daniel Richter endorses Morgan's advocacy of Iroquois cultural imperialism, approving the desire of the Iroquois to extend the Great League of Peace to all other Indigenous Peoples. Richter's main justification of the Iroquois assault on Wendake is his claim that they were more interested in captives than they were in destroying the Wendat or taking control of the fur trade.³ In this 'mourning wars' argument the destruction of Huronia is given a positive spin as a vehicle for the re-generation of the Iroquois.

Jon Parmenter, in his 2010 book *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701* takes Richter's argument to new – and disturbing – heights. Parmenter has no

¹ Lewis Henry Morgan, *League of the Iroquois* (New York: Corinth Press, 1962), 91.

² Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1907), 72.

³ Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (October 1983), 534-35.

qualms about taking up Morgan and Richter's advocacy of Iroquois imperialism, as he acknowledges the desire of the Iroquois to become 'masters everywhere.'⁴ Employing a euphemism the American military would be proud of, Parmenter characterizes Iroquois imperialism as "engaging others beyond communal boundaries."⁵ In their assault on the Wendat the Iroquois demonstrated "the dramatic range of free movement they enjoyed."⁶ The destruction of Wendake in 1648-49 demonstrated "the enhanced spatial range" of Iroquois warfare.⁷

According to Parmenter, the Five Nations "ordered the space of northeastern North America in terms of Iroquois relational patterns and established the League nations as arbiters of human movement within that space."⁸ Not satisfied with endorsing Iroquois imperialism and justifying the destruction of Wendake, Parmenter quotes the Onondaga leader Teganissorens saying that when the Iroquois declared war on an enemy they tried 'to destroy them utterly.'⁹ About the genocidal intent of the Iroquois, which the Iroquois themselves acknowledged, Parmenter has nothing to say.

⁴ Jon Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 57.

⁵ Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods*, 5.

⁶ Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods*, 70.

⁷ Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods*, 72.

⁸ Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods*, 64. Presumably, when Parmenter wrote these words, he was not cognizant of the way in which his argument can be used to justify Israeli control of the movement of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

⁹ Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods*, 74.

In 2013 Canadian author Joseph Boyden published *The Orenda*, a fictional account of the destruction of Huronia in 1648-49. On the eve of the destruction of the Wendat, Boyden has one of his protagonists say: “I don’t imagine they’re done with us yet. They’re so close to ridding themselves of the Wendat.”¹⁰ Boyden is more forthright in his acknowledgement of the genocidal intent of the Iroquois in a work of historical fiction than are Richter and other professional historians who advance the ‘mourning wars’ argument. When historical fiction becomes a more reliable guide to the past than the work of professional historians, questions need to be asked.

Joseph Boyden tells us that Wendat historian Georges Sioui read “different drafts” of his novel.¹¹ Sioui, a retired University of Ottawa history professor, has a rather different take on the destruction of Huronia; he claims it never happened. In his 2019 work *Eatenonha*, Sioui makes this claim as part of his effort to rescue the Hodinohsyó:ni from a longstanding stereotype of the Iroquois as bloodthirsty savages. Sioui believes that he is justified in doing so because he is exposing “the myth of the victorious Iroquois,” in the process denying “the so-called destruction of the Huron by the Iroquois.”¹²

¹⁰ Joseph Boyden, *The Orenda* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2014), 420.

¹¹ Boyden, *The Orenda*, 489.

¹² Georges Sioui, *Eatenonha: Native Roots of Modern Democracy* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 129.

Sioui goes so far as to rename the Iroquois the Nadowek, an Algonkian term that Sioui claims means ‘people of a different stock.’¹³ By renaming the Iroquois he believes he is relieving his “Hodensaunee kinfolk” of “the immense, oppressive, unjust, and undeserved historical burden” of these “terminological contraptions.”¹⁴ In the process, however, Sioui may have created his own terminological contraptions. The term ‘Nadowek’ may or may not be a term the Algonkian-speaking peoples used themselves. The Sulpician priest Jean-André Cuoq, for example, gives the Algonkian term for the Iroquois as ‘Natowe.’¹⁵ Sioui claims the term includes the Wendat, and the Saint Lawrence Iroquoian peoples Jacques Cartier encountered in the 1530s at Hochelaga (Montréal) and Stadacona (Québec), as well as the Six Nations.¹⁶

Sioui does not stop there. He goes on to argue that before the European invasion there was a “Nadowek-Algonquian civilization” in northeastern North America. He also calls it a “society of nations” and an ‘Aboriginal Commonwealth.’¹⁷ This civilization did not, in fact, exist. In order to relieve his racial brothers and sisters of the burden of history, of having massacred his own people, Sioui believes he can rewrite the past by changing the language we employ to describe the past.

¹³ Sioui, *Eatenonha*, 118.

¹⁴ Sioui, *Eatenonha*, 120.

¹⁵ Jean-André Cuoq, *Grammaire de la Langue Algonquienne* (Ottawa: Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada: Délibérations et Mémoires de la Société Royale du Canada, Section I, 1891), 96.

¹⁶ Sioui, *Eatenonha*, 119-20.

¹⁷ Sioui, *Eatenonha*, 143, 159.

I understand why Georges Sioui does not want Canadians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to know that his ancestors were decimated and dispersed. That said he is disrespecting his own ancestors, minimizing their pain and suffering in an honest, yet misguided, effort to change the image of Indigenous Peoples in 'white' eyes. Georges Sioui is denying the history of his own people and other Indigenous Peoples in order to magnify their racial identity. The approach has short - term benefits for the Indigenous Peoples of this country, but in the long run will aid and abet the destruction of Indigenous history, culture and identity that anti-racist historians mistakenly believe they are defending.

Thomas Peace, in his 2023 book *The Slow Rush of Colonization: Spaces of Power in the Maritime Peninsula, 1680-1790*, repeats Sioui's claim. Peace argues that it is "a myth that the Wendat were a people defeated by the Iroquois in the mid-seventeenth century and had subsequently assimilated into Canadian society."¹⁸ It is true, as Peace infers, that the Wendat did not disappear into Canadian society and still exist as a distinct people. The claim that they were not 'defeated' by the Iroquois, which echoes Sioui's claim, is simply wrong. They were massacred, and the Wendat people were dispersed across a vast expanse of North America, from Québec to Oklahoma.

Even more disturbing is that Peace goes beyond Sioui in his denial. Incredibly, he claims that "we know little about Wendat history after they dispersed

¹⁸ Thomas Peace, *The Slow Rush of Colonization: Spaces of Power in the Maritime Peninsula, 1680-1790* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2023), 20.

their Confederacy, with some people moving west and others heading eastwards.”¹⁹ Peace’s claim that we know little about Wendat history after they were massacred is incomprehensible, and validates the racist, colonial discourse that he claims to be opposing. Seven years before *The Slow Rush of Colonization* was published, Peace co-edited a collection of articles with Kathryn Magee Labelle.²⁰ According to the University of Oklahoma Press website, Peace and Labelle’s book provides “a rich and coherent narrative” of the Wendat People after the destruction of Wendake, a history that Peace himself now claims we know ‘little’ about. The fact that he denies his own work, and the University of British Columbia Press would publish it, tells us all we need to know about the state of historical writing and publishing in this country.

It is perhaps in the work of Thomas Peace’s co-editor of *From Huronia to Wendakes*, Kathryn Magee Labelle, we encounter the greatest need for a full-scale confrontation with the way in which Indigenous history is now being written in this country.²¹ At the end of her 2013 book *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, Magee Labelle argues that she is critiquing the “patterned discourse” that has characterized colonial histories of the Wendat, not “historical fact.”²² Magee Labelle’s argument is

¹⁹ Peace, *The Slow Rush of Colonization*, 80.

²⁰ Thomas Peace and Kathryn Magee Labelle, *From Huronia to Wendakes: Adversity, Migrations, and Resistance 1650-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016)

²¹ Kathryn Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

²² Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 214.

truly welcome, given the widespread attacks on the facts of history as a 'white,' Western, racist invention. Two examples demonstrate her commitment to the facts. First, she relies on the *Jesuit Relations* for her description of the devastation of Wendake. Second, she provides a stirring description of the impact of the Iroquois taking Wendat captives, an impact that is rationalized or ignored by the advocates of the 'mourning wars' argument.

The *Jesuit Relations* are full of lurid descriptions of the massacre of the Huron-Wendat by the Iroquois, so it is not difficult to refute the claims of the deniers. According to the Jesuit Paul Ragueneau, "our Hurons are distressed not only by war, but by a deadly famine and a contagious plague; all are miserably perishing together. Everywhere, corpses have been dug out of the graves ... even the dung of man or beast is not spared."²³ Magee Labelle paraphrases Ragueneau, admitting that the Wendat were forced to eat human and animal excrement, dug up the corpses of animals, and engaged in cannibalism.²⁴ Like Parmenter, she acknowledges, but does not condemn, the fact that the goal of the Iroquois was "Wendat eradication."²⁵

The second important acknowledgement we find in Magee Labelle's book is her refutation of the 'mourning wars' argument, which has become ubiquitous in the work of anti-racist historians. Quite rightly, she evokes the true impact of the loss of

²³ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 vols. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901), 35:21.

²⁴ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 62.

²⁵ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 66.

community members: “On some occasions the loss of a close family member or friend could have devastating effects back home. The news of such a loss could send relatives into a spiral of depression, unable to cope with the reality.”²⁶ This reality is denied by most anti-racist historians, who in the process deny the humanity of the Wendat people.

On one hand, therefore, Magee Labelle is challenging anti-racist efforts to justify the destruction of Wendake; on the other, she does the same thing herself. The major example of this concerns the way in which she writes about the impact of Christianity on the Wendat people. We begin by going back to what the Jesuit Paul Ragueneau means by ‘our Hurons.’ He means Christian Hurons; the deaths of the traditionalists and the apostates, the Hurons who have converted to Christianity and gone back to the old ways, he celebrates. Ragueneau writes: “This calamity of our people was, though destructive to their bodies, salutary to their souls, - for, up to this time, our labors have not yielded greater fruits; never before has faith gone more deeply into hearts, or the name of Christian been more glorious, than in the midst of the disasters to a stricken people.”²⁷ For Christianity the massacre of the Wendat has been a good thing, brought about by those agents of God, the Iroquois.

The single greatest impact of European colonialism on Indigenous Peoples was Christianity’s relentless campaign to destroy the traditional belief systems of Indigenous Peoples and convert them to Christianity. Magee Labelle, far from

²⁶ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 43.

²⁷ Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 35:23.

condemning this core aspect of European colonialism, actually condones it. Magee Labelle praises Jesuit priests for their dedication to converting Indigenous People.²⁸ She writes from the perspective of Christian Wendat, and mutes the voices of Wendat traditionalists. Magee Labelle expresses little concern that the traditionalists “became a marginalized faction in the post-dispersal period as Christians dominated the policies and culture of the majority.”²⁹ The Wendat, she notes approvingly, “created a fundamentally Christian identity.”³⁰ Labelle’s approach is difficult to reconcile with the goal of decolonizing Canadian history.

Magee Labelle’s most disturbing argument, however, takes us back to Georges Sioui’s efforts to absolve the Iroquois of responsibility for the destruction of Wendake. Magee Labelle writes: “It was not that the Iroquois wanted to fight the Wendat, but rather that they were forced to fight because of the actions of the Wendat.”³¹ It is true, as the author states, the Wendat “were far from submissive victims.”³² Her desire to depict the Wendat as having agency is, in and of itself, laudable. The great irony is that, in her efforts to highlight the agency of the Wendat, she is ‘blaming the victim.’ For decades now anti-racist academics in this country have characterized ‘blaming the victim’ as ‘white,’ racist, and Western. Seemingly, this is no longer the case.

²⁸ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 3.

²⁹ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 183.

³⁰ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 174.

³¹ Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 123.

³² Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 33.

Magee Labelle picks up Georges Sioui's renaming of the Iroquois as the Nadowek, and early on in her book describes the 'culture of war' that was shared by the Hodinohsyó:ni and the Wendat. She gives as an example the Battle of the Richelieu River, also known as the Battle of Sorel, on 19 June 1610, when Samuel de Champlain and his Wendat allies were victorious in a battle with the Iroquois. Magee Labelle's version of this battle has little to do with what actually happened. As Champlain's own depiction of the battle demonstrates, the Iroquois were defeated by Algonquin and Montagnais (Innu) warriors, not Wendat warriors.³³ Eighty Wendat warriors arrived too late to take part in the battle.³⁴

One of the great benefits of being an anti-racist historian is that there is no need to acknowledge historical evidence that disagrees with your 'truth.' Magee Labelle writes the Algonquin and Montagnais warriors out of history because they have no place in her 'truth' telling about the 'culture of war' shared by the Wendat and the Iroquois. Twenty-first century anti-racist historians condone this writing of other Indigenous Peoples out of history, because it is done in the name of a greater cause, protecting the collective 'racial' identity of Indigenous Peoples. The problem, of course, is that this collective Indigenous truth is not 'collective' at all, because it involves the writing of other Indigenous Peoples out of history in order to tell a particular Indigenous Peoples' 'truth.'

³³ David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009), 277.

³⁴ Edmund F. Slafter, ed., *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, Vol. 1, 1567-1635 (Boston: The Prince Society, 1880), 102.

In Canadian university history departments and the offices of major Canadian academic publishers, the truth no longer has anything to do with the historical evidence. Evidence and argument have been replaced in the study of Canadian history by the overwhelming desire to protect the 'image' of Indigenous Peoples. As Indigenous author Chelsea Vowell points out, it is a formula for the erasure of Indigenous diversity, because the decolonizing of the Canadian university that is taking place is racial, not historical. Vowell, in her book *Indigenous Writes*, gets to the heart of the problem when she says: "Romanticizing ourselves as a collective, unfortunately, plays into 'noble savage' stereotypes and does damage in the long run. With so many Indigenous people disconnected from their specific traditions, even so-called positive stereotypes are a form of continuing erasure."³⁵

Canadians who know little or nothing about Indigenous history need to understand that the issue being dealt with has global implications, and that the way Indigenous history is being rewritten in this country has disturbing similarities to other dangerous rewritings of history. Perhaps the best example of this is in India, where the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its militant wing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) are in the process of rewriting Indian history to legitimate a Hindu nationalist reading of the past. Hindu nationalists, like anti-racist historians in this country, justify this rewriting in the name of decolonization, as a corrective to centuries of destruction of the Hindu past by Muslim and Christian rulers.

³⁵ Chelsea Vowell, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg: Highwater Press, 2016), 110.

Destruction of the Hindu past, like the destruction of the Indigenous past in this country, is very real. However, the history that is being written about that past is more mythology than history. A great deal of it simply does not stand up to serious historical enquiry. Hilal Ahmed, an associate professor at New Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, argues that 'the discovery of the past always lies in the future – as long as proper historiographical methods are followed.' He explains: 'Since history writing is a complex process, serious historians have evolved methods and protocols, including the requirements to verify the veracity of the sources, introducing the sources, and explaining how the information is being interpreted and connections are being made.' Ahmed is pointing out that 'proper historiographical methods' are the stock-in-trade of the professional historian, methods that are not required of 'amateur' or local historians who are not university trained, and whose work is not peer reviewed. As the reviews of the work of Sioui, Parmenter, Peace, and Magee Labelle reveal, book reviewing in the Canadian academy has become more about cheerleading than getting as close to the reality of the Canadian past as human frailty will allow.

Ahmed points out that the BJP and the RSS believe they have discovered 'the final truth of the past.'³⁶ Anti-racist historians in this country believe they have discovered the same thing. That 'truth' is racial, not historical. Kathryn Magee Labelle, Georges Sioui, Jon Parmenter, and Thomas Peace are not actually defending the Wendat people; as Chelsea Vowell suggests, in their defense of the Iroquois they

³⁶ Snigdhendu Battacharya, "How RSS Textbooks Are Reshaping Indian History and Science Under Modi," *Al Jazeera*, 19 February 2024.

are constructing a romanticized racial conception of Indigenous People as a collective. They are, going all the way back to Lewis Henry Morgan, essentially claiming that Iroquoian 'truth' is historical truth. They are speaking for the conquerors, not the conquered; they are blaming the victims, not the perpetrators; they are aiding and abetting the destruction of Indigenous diversity, not defending it.

When truth becomes a function of race and not of evidence and argument, what then distinguishes the worldview of anti-racist historians from the worldview of white supremacists and neo-Nazis? How do we know the Holocaust is not a hoax? How do we know the bodies of Communists and people accused of being Communists clogged the rivers of Indonesia in 1965-66? How do we know Wendake was destroyed in 1648-49? Academic historians, people who tend to think they are more knowledgeable than everyone else, know better than anyone else that once a lie is told enough times it becomes the truth. Rather than countering this trend, anti-racist historians would have us believe that it is racist to question their efforts to make a lie the truth. Even George Orwell could not have imagined doublethink ceasing to be the problem and becoming the solution.