The past is about untold stories. Countless events, memories, and experiences have yet to be retrieved, explored, and understood. Some stories will remain untold forever because the sources have been lost or have never existed. Other stories remain untold because our perspectives, too often, have tended to downplay or suppress certain groups or individuals – change the perspective, and the story changes.

In *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America*, Pekka Hämäläinen recenters North American history on Native peoples, their agency, and their “overwhelming and persisting” power. The result is a compelling counternarrative to a familiar story.

First, Native peoples did not live in harmony in some cultural and ecological paradise destroyed by Europeans. They manipulated nature to adapt to climate conditions, soil limitations and a growing population. They diverted water to the desert. They selected seeds and domesticated plants. They had sophisticated methods of keeping soils fertile through cultivating corn
combined with beans and squash. They had vast and complex trade networks and established regional centers of power, often with thousands of inhabitants. For example, the city of Cahokia (present-day Missouri) had 40,000 inhabitants at its peak in the eleventh century. After its demise, such hierarchical social organization gave way to more horizontal societies with leaders selected according to their capacities of mobilizing, convincing, and distributing surplus.

Second: even after the arrival of Europeans, Native peoples retained their ascendency with alliances, diplomacy, manipulation, and wars. They have held the Europeans in check for many more centuries than they have been controlled by Europeans. As Hämäläinen says in the introduction: “Time and again, across centuries, Indians blocked and destroyed colonial projects, forcing Euro-Americans to accept Native ways, Native sovereignty, Native dominance. This is what the historical record shows when American history is detached from mainstream historical narratives that privilege European ambitions, European perspectives, and European sources” (p. x).

Hämäläinen argues that Europeans had a place in North America as long as they made themselves useful to Native Americans, mostly through trade. This argument is thoroughly explored in the book through the analysis of a succession of treatises, alliances, conflicts, and wars. The author concludes that often, when Europeans thought they were subjugating Native tribes, they were being manipulated and controlled by them. He does not shy away from addressing the difficult and often brutal dimensions of the contest for North America: the violence, dispossession, disease, and displacements inflicted upon Indigenous nations by Europeans and, later, the United States. He also highlights the enduring impact of colonization on Indigenous nations and their ongoing struggles for justice. Certainly, in the end the Europeans dominated; Hämäläinen’s point, though, is that the contest for North America was less a “colonial conquest” but rather a clash between European and Indigenous empires.

Hämäläinen is the Rhodes Professor of American History at Oxford University. He has written several books on Native North American history, among them Lakota America and the Comanche Empire (2009 Bancroft Prize). Indigenous Continent is structured chronologically in eight sections, starting with pre-history, but centered in the period between Metacom’s war of resistance (1675-76) and what Hämäläinen calls the “equestrian empires” (Comanche and Lakota) of the early nineteenth century. The book combines historical accounts, personal stories, and cultural insights in a vivid and fast-paced narrative. Its 600 pages are a pleasure to read. Hämäläinen is careful with the terminology in a conscious effort to avoid reproducing prejudices (for example, preferring soldier to warrior, and town to sedentary settlement).

For the historian of technology, Indigenous Continent also offers fresh and interesting insights on the role of technology in shaping power and trade relations. Exchanges of certain technological artefacts often resulted in deep shifts: while Europeans were adopting corn,
tomato, and smoking tobacco, the Native nations moved to using iron tools, guns, powder, and horses. Other technologies did not further mutual understanding, and contributed to various encroachments: for example, the settlers’ domestic animals tended to devastate Indigenous plantations, and land surveying was perceived as a hostile act, among others.

*Indigenous Continent* has received some criticism. Largely reduced to the East and South, it barely has any reference to the Pacific Northwest nations. The book has also been criticized for its long and broad view, and for being too dense. Perhaps more importantly, the book does not entirely meet Hämäläinen’s aim of detachment from “mainstream historical narratives.” It focusses more on European than on Native ambitions and the sources remain mostly European.

Still, the book is remarkable. It dramatically changes our views. In line with recent post-colonial scholarship, *Indigenous Continent* unveils a more complex and sophisticated mutual struggle for power and land, shattering the myth of monolithic Indigenous passivity and restoring their diversity and historical agency.