

Upfront

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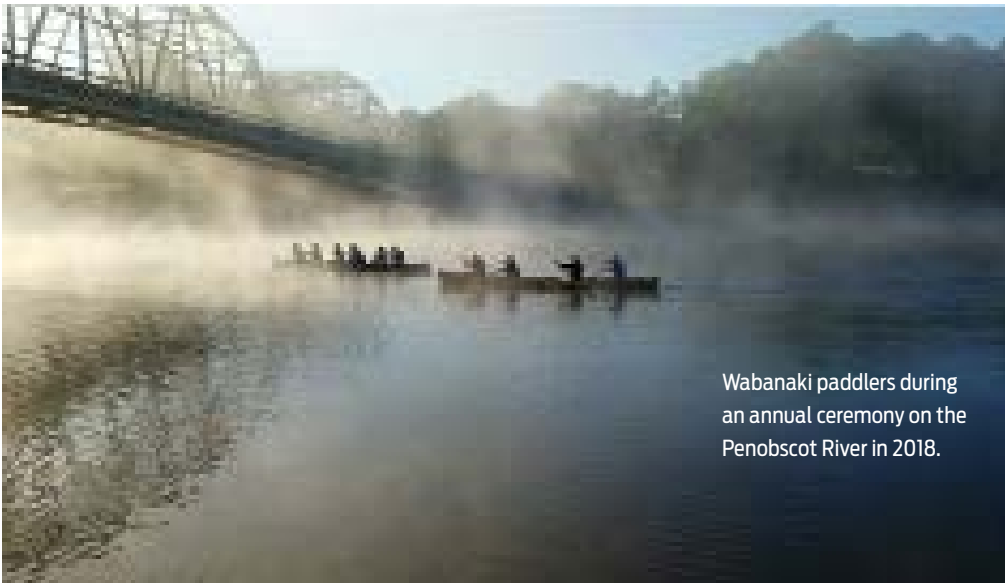
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Wabanaki paddlers during an annual ceremony on the Penobscot River in 2018.

When Patriotism Is Propaganda: A Wabanaki Insight

BY MALI OBOMSAWIN

In college, I attended a rally my friend organized to discuss the constitutionality of flag burning. Predictably, his newspaper op-ed provoked a group of militantly patriotic New Hampshire locals to attend, in defense of the American flag. During the tense gathering, I began chatting with one of the flag defenders, pointing out that the flag doesn't represent all Americans or make everyone—for example, *Native Americans*—feel safe.

To which he responded, "Come on, you can't go back that far, and there aren't even any Indians left!"

Unique among ethnic groups in the United States, Native people like me are told constantly, in myriad ways, that we are extinct, when tens of thousands of us live in this region alone. Public

cluelessness about Natives is rampant, especially in quaint, rustic New England, which romanticizes its Colonial heritage from Plymouth Rock to its charming "Colonial" bed and breakfasts. But being told to your face that you don't exist never gets any less weird.

I'm a citizen of the Abenaki First Nation at Odanak, part of the larger Wabanaki community in what has been designated as the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada. The borders declared in the Colonial era fragmented Wabanaki homelands of the Abenaki, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Mi'kmaq, and Maliseet nations. To us, our loose borders are marked by major waterways: the Saint Lawrence River (*Ktsitekwo*) to the north, the Hudson River (*Muhheakantuck*) and Lake Champlain (*Betobakwo*) to the west, and

the Atlantic Ocean (*Sobagwo*) to the east.

Thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement, the balloon of blissful ignorance encompassing white racism has been popped, at least for now. Native people have also benefited from the racial awakening that many white people are experiencing, as monuments as well as mascots and team names with racial slurs are being challenged.

Like the Black Lives Matter movement, we want more than a costume change for white supremacy: we want a fundamental overhaul and dismantling of its systems. As difficult as it may be, tackling anti-Native racism requires that white people confront the centuries-long project of *trying to get rid of us*.

Native Americans face deep-seated discrimination in this country. Beginning over 500 years ago, the settler-Colonial attempts at ethnic cleansing have incorporated tactics of systematic land theft, environmental racism, and revisionist history. Today, it's convenient to believe that Native people are extinct, because it distances white Americans from the legacy they inherit from early settlers—who committed atrocities specifically and uniquely so white people could live and prosper here today—regardless of when your family arrived.

Erasure is the art of collective forgetting, and one of the most effective tools of racism. Crucially, it absolves the United States from addressing injustices festering at its foundation—and the fact that Native people are still here resisting. Erasure nurtures ignorance through systemic miseducation, stereotyped iconography, and popular culture. Because, like the patriot at the rally, it's much easier to say the flag represents *all* Americans if "all" selectively excludes the oppressed.

The version of history that many of us learned in school perpetuates the myth of Native extinction: that after several wars, treaties, and diseases, the Indians died off. Disputed land went to the victors, locking Native people into their chapter of natural history, like dinosaurs or dodos. A neatly bookended Native existence.

What do we *really* know about the land we occupy and our Native neighbors today? How has "collective forgetting" become integral to American culture?

Ojibwe scholar Jean O'Brien's book on North-

eastern Native invisibility, *Firsting and Lasting*, points to New England's unique historiography. One of the earliest targets of English and French conquest, the region was a testing ground for settler colonialism. By the mid-1600s, self-appointed amateur historians were curating a national origin story that required tales of Native people being conquered to characterize the burgeoning society. They sought to define New England as "the cradle of the nation and seat of cultural power."

Constructing timelines of the "first" and "last real Indians," writers simultaneously conveyed the unquestionable modernity of white people and projected that the Native race would soon "vanish" from this land. The national mythos they cultivated became embedded in the tradition of US history writing and teaching, and still deeply affects how Native people are perceived (or not perceived) in New England today.

As a Wabanaki person educated in Maine public schools, I "learned" of my own extinction in these terms from my white history teachers. In middle school, I learned of "Pierpole," the "last" Abenaki—as my teacher described him—of Farmington, Maine, who lived in the late 1700s and sold his land to white people. A state law passed in 2001 required Maine public schools to teach Native American history, but my Advanced Placement US History teacher didn't even cover the names of the Wabanaki nations, whose land the school occupies.

Without incentive to glorify settler colonialism, scholars unearth less-censored histories. They identify settlers who "cleared" Wabanaki land through organized violence, biological warfare, Western agricultural practices, and coerced treaties. Some settlers attacked Wabanaki cultures and lifeways through Christianizing missions—Harvard and Dartmouth

are two that would go on to become elite American universities. These scholars find contempt for Native humanity at the core of American identity. Without it, the United States could not exist.

Colonial settlers posturing as historians wrote legends for future white generations to be proud of. Why should their descendants monumentalize Hannah Duston, who scalped six Abenaki children and four adults in 1697? Or Christopher Columbus? It suggests that *real American patriots* did the heroic work of clearing a space for white people, and excuses the genocide it entailed.

The house of cards that is American patriotism rests upon collective amnesia and the advancement of historical myths—because ignorance protects us from shame, and denial bars us from problem-solving. Today, as monuments topple and assumptions about this country falter, many people are more closely examining

their biases, finding they've been shielded from history by white supremacy in education, government, and historiography.

Time will never cure foundational injustices. Nor will monuments—although questioning them is necessary for telling honest histories. While we work to perceive our neighbors living in different realities than us, and become critical of systemic power, we must understand that allyship is a lifelong re-education. We must investigate the assumptions on which our realities are based, and our own occupation of this land. Ultimately, in a nation built upon racism, erasure, and land theft, we must pursue their antitheses: anti-racism, Indigenous knowledge and leadership, and returning land to Native peoples.

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