

# Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America

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## Review

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**Witgen, Michael John.** *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America.* University of North Carolina Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$34.95 ISBN: 9781469664842 pp. 366.

Michael Witgen's new monograph, *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America*, offers an important analysis of Indigenous resistance to U.S. colonialism in the lands that would become Michigan and Wisconsin during the first half of the nineteenth century. Witgen draws on a range of primary sources, including treaties between Native nations and the United States, missionary and trader letters and diaries, the writings of Native leaders and mixed-race Anishinaabeg, correspondence between federal and territorial officials and treaty negotiators, territorial and state court cases, and key pieces of federal legislation. The author concludes that the geographical expansion of the United States, especially in the northern Great Lakes homelands of the Anishinaabeg, depended not so much on military violence or even the immediate physical removal of Indigenous peoples. Rather, conquest was facilitated by a "political economy of plunder" in which a coercive and duplicitous treaty process combined with the debt claims made by Indian agents, traders, and merchants to systematically separate Native nations from their land and annuity payments (19). As insidious as this political economy of plunder was, Witgen reveals the various strategies Indigenous people, particularly those from mixed-race families, employed to negotiate their ongoing colonization during the early and middle decades of the century.

Proceeding roughly chronologically, Witgen's five chapters examine the emergence and immediate consequences of the political economy of plunder. The first chapter explores the conflicts between the United States and Indigenous peoples in the Ohio country, which established the patterns of colonial occupation in the Old Northwest. The United States' colonial project was animated by the enduring myth of America as an uninhabited wilderness and, somewhat ironically, by the civilizing mission—a "totalizing ideological project" that implicitly acknowledged Native title to the land while demanding the complete transformation of

Indigenous cultures and homelands (88). The subsequent chapters form the core of the study and focus on the efforts of Indigenous and mixed-race peoples, white adoptees, and traders and missionaries to shape treaties between Native nations and the United States. While officials like territorial governor Lewis Cass worked alongside Indian agents and traders to force Native polities in Michigan Territory to cede land, mixed-race people and adoptees struggled to carve out a place in a declining fur trade economy and an Indigenous society threatened by U.S. territorial ambitions.

Treaties often provided individual allotments or annuities to mixed-race individuals who were recognized by the United States as simultaneously Native and white, and thus at least partially civilized (144). Increasingly, the white traders and Indian agents linked to Indigenous peoples through marriage helped to facilitate negotiations and worked to ensure that they too would receive land grants or cash payouts and future annuities. Whereas the colonial project elsewhere demanded the transfer of Native land to white settlers and the removal of Indigenous communities, Witgen convincingly shows that the political economy of plunder in Michigan and Wisconsin territories depended on Native peoples' continued presence in their homelands so that white traders might regularly use trade or debts to claim portions of annuity payments and to facilitate future land cessions from the Anishinaabeg. By the late 1810s, Witgen explains, "the management and exploitation of a subordinated population of Indigenous, noncitizen subjects was becoming the economic engine of the Michigan Territory" (148).

Witgen's analysis is most compelling when it explores how Native and mixed-race individuals navigated this colonial occupation by at least partially embracing the civilizing mission of U.S. missionaries and Indian agents. Indigenous women regularly served as translators, guides, and providers of food for these outsiders. They gained connections and opportunities while enabling the United States to expand its influence into lands it controlled only on paper. Mixed-race Anishinaabeg, potentially marginalized by their dual identities, also frequently acted as a bridge between Native peoples and would-be colonizers in return for the educational and economic opportunities offered by missionaries and government officials. In petitions, treaty negotiations, and court cases, mixed-race individuals claimed identities as U.S. citizens and willingly subordinated themselves to the laws of the United States in order to access annuities or gain title to individual parcels and thus remain in their homelands.

Analyzing a raft of court cases, Witgen observes an important change in policy toward these mixed-race Anishinaabeg as state and territorial courts began refusing to adjudicate cases involving mixed-race people. During the 1820s and 1830s, the courts increasingly regarded Anishinaabeg of mixed heritage as “Indians,” meaning that they fell under Indigenous rather than U.S. jurisdiction in the Native-dominated lands of Michigan and Wisconsin. Witgen concludes that this trend signified an abandonment of the civilizing mission and systematic denial of mixed-race individuals’ U.S. citizenship. The exclusion of mixed-race Anishinaabeg from the settler body politic solidified their positions as colonial subjects and made the removal of Indigenous peoples a far likelier prospect (271). Nevertheless, the Anishinaabeg refused to disappear. Petitions by mixed-race Natives for annuities, land, and recognition as U.S. citizens and agitation by Anishinaabe leaders to remain in their homelands despite deceitful treaties, forced the United States to “continually negotiate” the colonial relationship (337). In the end, many Anishinaabe people remained in their Great Lakes homelands despite the loss of most of their land, paltry annuity payments, and denial of citizenship.

Witgen makes clear that his project is concerned with analyzing the mechanisms that effected a rapid transfer of land from Native nations to white settlers. He concludes that the plundering of both Black lives and Indigenous lands and resources enabled the creation of a republic for white men and the consolidation of wealth in their hands (346). For readers of this journal, this final argument suggests the book’s value for students of the Civil War era. Witgen points out the extractive nature and human costs of U.S. westward expansion. Native peoples’ “active subjugation as colonized subjects,” he argues, “reveals that the freedom struggle embodied in the free-soil movement among white settler citizens in the North was predicated on Native dispossession” (271). This insight foregrounds the ways dominant political ideologies espoused by slaveholders and free-soilers alike naturalized the U.S. colonial project and traces the decades-long evolution of the political economy of plunder in the upper Midwest, leading perhaps to the 1862 Dakota War.

Witgen’s nuanced, yet forcefully argued study deserves a wide readership. However, it will be of particular interest to students of American Indian history, settler colonial studies, and the history of the early American Republic.

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