
Blood quantum has long been an influential and contested issue, one that has divided and disenfranchised American Indians in a variety of ways. In *Blood Will Tell*, Katherine Ellinghaus clearly details and demonstrates how, time and again, the U.S. government utilized the discourse of blood as a means to rationalize the theft of Native lands and reduce the number of American Indians through redefinition. In addition, blood was used to promote division in Native communities as well as to undermine the authority of tribal governments. Ellinghaus convincingly argues, “It is time to add the discourse of blood with its devastating impacts to the other assaults—removal of children, boarding schools, forbidden languages, land loss, poverty—endured by Indigenous peoples during the assimilation period” (119).

Ellinghaus begins by providing an excellent summary of the various blood tropes that operated during the assimilation era and traces the complex ways in which blood became entangled with ideas about race. She does not answer the question, “Who is an Indian?” Instead, she astutely unpacks the colonial tropes that were created and employed from the 1880s to the 1930s. Importantly, she asks why the U.S. employed these tropes, both revealing and analyzing the history of this settler colonial phenomenon.

At the turn of the twentieth century, scientists, politicians, and the general American public conceived of race according to a set of confusing and contradictory ideas about blood, civilization, nation, and culture. While these ideas changed in scientific and academic circles, they remained prominent in the Office of Indian Affairs and in the American public discourse. Many Americans believed that “full-bloods,” those who had no European or African ancestry, were the “pure, authentic Indians” (xxi). “Full-bloods” were assumed to be lower on the evolutionary scale than those with some European ancestry. They were treated as simple people with low intelligence levels who were all but helpless and in need of the U.S. government’s supervision and aid. Conversely, Natives who did have some European ancestry were seen as exploitive, cunning, inauthentic, and, perhaps most importantly, undeserving of the legal and political status that came with being Indian. Those with some African ancestry were treated much differently than those with European ancestry. Having African ancestry did not bring people up the evolutionary scale. Natives with African ancestry were more closely associated with “savagery,” and yet, like those with some European ancestry, they were regularly denied recognition as being Indian by the United States.

Ellinghaus draws upon a wide array of specific examples from the Anishinaabeg, Arapaho, Cherokee, Eastern Cherokee, Cheyenne, Chickasaw, Chocotaw, Creek, Lakota, Lumbee, Seminole, and Virginia tribes, meticulously demonstrating the various ways in which the U.S. government attempted to control and regulate American Indian identity. She shows that Native ideas about identity, kinship, and membership/citizenship were routinely suppressed, ignored, and dismissed as irrelevant, undermining the authority of tribal governments as well as the autonomy of individuals. Yet she notes that there were also instances in which American Indians utilized the U.S. discourses of blood to their political advantage. For example, both the Eastern Cherokees and the Mississippi Choctaw emphasized their racial purity in order to demonstrate their authenticity to Congress.

Ellinghaus joins other scholars who have convincingly argued that the U.S. utilized the allotment process to reduce the power of tribes to control their own membership/citizenship and created a process mired in chaos and fraud that has an enduring legacy today. There were undoubtedly American Indians of mixed descent who should have
been allotted and/or enrolled, but she takes care to note that it is quite difficult to know in which cases American Indians with mixed ancestry were no longer recognized as part of a tribe and were engaging in or attempting to engage in fraud, and when they were refused enrollment by the U.S. simply because of their ancestry. This remains a contentious issue today, with people asserting that their ancestors were wrongly left off the list; ultimately, this issue must be resolved by individual tribes.

Blood Will Tell engages with and makes important contributions to the historical scholarship and contemporary political debates on race and citizenship in the academy, as well as in American Indian families, communities, and nations. Ellinghaus ends by asserting that it is time to “hand control of the discourse of blood back to Native American communities, for them to do with as they wish” (119). Only when we all have a thorough understanding of how and why the various discourses of blood have operated will this be possible, and Ellinghaus brings us one step closer to that reality by clearly and compellingly articulating the ways in which the U.S. constructed and employed discourses of blood. This book is appropriate and accessible for both undergraduate and graduate courses. It would pair well with work by Alleen Moreton-Robinson, Jennnnniss, David A. Chang, Audra Simpson, Rose Stremlau, and Scott Richard Lyons, to name a few, but could also stand on its own in an undergraduate survey course.

JILL DOEFLER
University of Minnesota Duluth


In Building an American Frontier, Paul Frymer explores U.S. expansionism as a project of state and race formation. Nineteenth-century Americans certainly promoted ambitious views of what the United States might become. John L. O’ Sullivan’s newspaper tract “The Great Nation of Furocity” (1839) foresaw the American republic to be a “hemisphere,” an idea Frederic Edwin Church suggested in the intimate, yet imperious, exhibition of his landscape painting The Heart of the Andes (1859). Such designs rarely imagined anything but a white republic, despite there being a racially diverse population across the Americas. Yet the U.S. government did not pursue such grandiose designs, often unable or unwilling to absorb certain territories and (often nonwhite) inhabitants who might threaten the idea of a white settler nation. For Frymer, examining discussions about territories, both those obtained and those that might have been, helps illustrate, he argues, that national state formation “evolved not so much linearly but rather in fits and starts, with successes and failures” (2).

Frymer’s focus is on how federal policymakers advanced an expansionist empire. In this vein, his study fits within an increasingly entrenched literature that emphasizes the importance of the federal government, with its diverse institutions, to the expansionist enterprise. In this historiography, scholars have dived into narrowly defined eras and embraced sweeping studies of the whole of American history. Frymer’s study leans toward the latter, examining American expansionism from the revolutionary-era through “the end of the frontier” and the statehood of Arizona and New Mexico in 1912. He argues that “the United States’ use of land policy to pursue the project of territorial expansion illuminates novel understandings of the workings of both state and racial formation over the course of the long nineteenth century” (11). Although this might suggest a metropole-heavy study, he also explores local political debates that reveal dynamic influences on the expansionism of the nation. It is in these debates—local and national—that Frymer finds rich commentary on how decisions about expansion were firmly entrenched in an idea of the republic as a white settler nation.

Throughout the book, Frymer argues that the early American national state was “importantly weak” because “it did not have a powerful military or large bureaucracy . . . to effectively pursue and implement its expansionist and imperial ambitions” (12). Whereas other scholars have emphasized the successes of the national state to illustrate the strengths of the national state, Frymer wants to use failures, as well as successes, to implement its ambitions, in part to show how limited that government was. Taking a nuanced approach, he possesses an “ambivalent” view of American state formation that emphasizes the capacity of government to use law and legislation effectively to assert sovereignty rather than weighty bureaucratic authority or acute military might (13). As illustrated in my own work, I disagree that the early national state was weak. But setting aside the weak-strong dichotomy, there is much value in examining the interplay between local and national authorities and institutions to sort out both how effective the national state was and how, together, they shaped an expansionist bureaucratic state over time. Frymer’s contribution in this vein is among the strengths of this book.

The chapters are divided largely along moments of expansion. After the introductory chapter, chapters 2 and 3 examine America’s spread from the East Coast to the Mississippi River. The roots of the white settler nation were forged here, as Britain and its colonies, then the states and federal government, expropriated land from Native Americans and developed land policies to foster a degree of measured expansionism. Somewhat independently, local and federal legal systems developed complementary means to facilitate land transfer from indigenous peoples to settlers. The fourth chapter turns to lands obtained via the Louisiana Purchase and pursues two general narrative threads to argue that the “politics of controlled movement” (74) was about both fostering white settlement and diminishing and disappearing nonwhite populations. One thread traces debates about how Louisiana statehood might incorporate foreign peoples into a white settler nation (increased white settlement solved this problem for policymakers, facilitating entry into the Union). The other examines the many indigenous Trails of Tears that opened land to whites and led several territories to become states. The “manufacturing of white racial majorities” (29) guides the