

At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–1763.
By Jane T. Merritt (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press,
2003) 352 pp. \$39.95 cloth \$19.95 paper

It has been more than a decade since White published *The Middle Ground*, a monumental study of the shared world of colonists and Indians in the Great Lakes region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ The middle ground, argued White, was called into existence by the mutual dependence of Indians and colonists. So long as Britain and France contested control of North America, a pragmatic accommodation prevailed. The persuasiveness and significance of White's work is reflected by the abundance of middle grounds that scholars have since brought to light. Among the most recent contributions is Merritt's *At the Crossroads*, which wed the middle ground to the transatlantic world of empires and subjects. Drawing largely on the wealth of sources in the Moravian mission archives, Merritt's study provides a richly detailed look into the complex relations of Indian and white individuals and communities on the mid-Atlantic frontier from 1700 to 1763. *At the Crossroads* is one of a string of recent works—starting with Jon Sensbach, *A Sepate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763–1840* (Williamsburg, 1998)—that draws on the vast but virtually untapped sources of the relatively obscure Moravian communities to explore issues of race, culture, and religion in colonial and revolutionary America.

The thesis of Merritt's book is familiar: In the late seventeenth century, Indians and whites met along the Pennsylvania frontier and, for a time, co-existed peaceably, their lives increasingly linked by bonds of commerce and kinship. These bonds eventually frayed because “in negotiating their differences, they redefined themselves and each other” (4). In the end, diverse native peoples—the Munsee, Unami, Shawnee—came to identify as “Indians” while the equally diverse European settlers—Scots-Irish, German, English—all became “white.” Ironically, the very closeness and familiarity of the middle ground fertilized racialist thinking, which, in turn, fueled violent outbursts like the Paxton Boys' massacre. Interwoven with the story of the deterioration of the middle ground is an account of the relationships of empires and their subjects.

Merritt's book is structured into pairs of chapters that chart the deterioration of Indian–white interactions. Part I tells the story of the immigrant Indian and white peoples who sought refuge in Pennsylvania during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Whether Shawnee, Delaware, German, or Irish, these immigrants found themselves struggling to construct autonomous communities while negotiating their status as subjects of a remote empire (whether British or Iroquois) and as neighbors to people far different from themselves. The

1 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991).

similarities of circumstance—recent migration and status as colonial subjects—created a temporary and fragile middle ground of accommodation, if not mutual understanding. This middle ground was forged as native peoples drew Europeans into kinship networks and European settlers involved native peoples in market economies.

Part II explores the contours of the spiritual middle ground, focusing largely on Delaware peoples and their involvement with Moravian missionaries. These chapters detail how Indian individuals and communities negotiated a new spiritual landscape, selectively adapting and mobilizing cultural and spiritual resources introduced by Moravian missionaries and deploying them in the project of cultural survival. The missionaries, Merritt argues, were forced to adapt to Indian realities and never succeeded in imposing their vision of a model Christian society.

Part III pulls back from the mission communities and returns attention to the increasingly complex imperial relations during the years leading up to the Seven Years' War. British and Iroquois imperial powers found it more and more difficult to maintain control over the farther reaches of their realms as white settlers demonized their Delaware neighbors, and Quakers futilely protested fraudulent claims on Indian lands. The resulting hostilities culminated in the violence of the Seven Years' War. Finally, Part IV surveys the landscape at the end of the war, finding racial identities firmly entrenched—and Indian lands almost entirely in white hands.

The greatest strength of Merritt's work is her careful attention to the diversity within white and Indian populations and their changing relations with each other and with various imperial powers. Merritt tracks the changes in how various residents of the Pennsylvania frontier recounted the early history of Indian–white contact. As the middle ground crumbled, Indian residents attempted to resurrect the golden era of William Penn. But by the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, Indians and whites had settled on an account of history that asserted irreconcilable differences.

Merritt occasionally undermines her own thesis by not allowing her Indian and white characters a diversity of motivations. Merritt presents detailed depictions of Indians and whites, but they often fail to come to life as complex individuals with complex motivations. Instead, Merritt tends to ascribe instrumentalist explanations for Indian and white actions, thereby subtly replicating the dichotomized identities that her work sets out to historicize and deconstruct. Indians always act to preserve culture; whites always act to supplant Indian culture. For example, Indians deployed baptism as a “tool for survival” (98), “manipulated the new morality [of the missionaries] to exercise power within the community” (142), and strove to “reposition the balance of power in their favor” (266). Europeans sought to manipulate Indians, attempting to “enforce behavior” (213), created “ideal Indians for whom they had a variety of uses” (270), and wished Indians would “somehow fade into the background of a larger white world, or even die” (271). These de-

pictions are undoubtedly apt at one level, but they do not capture the more intimate and conscious motives of historical actors that can be unearthed by asking not only, for example, how Christianity functioned but also what it meant.

In the end, *At the Crossroads* is a successful application of the revisionist agenda. The book rests on an impressive body of research in various primary sources, which it enlists to reconstruct the intricate webs of human relationships that bound individuals and communities on the Pennsylvania frontier, ably demonstrating how Indian actors exercised agency.

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