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AN  
INDIGENOUS  
PEOPLES'  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

REVISIONING AMERICAN HISTORY

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the United States as a colonialist settler-state, one that, like colonialist European states, crushed and subjugated the original civilizations in the territories it now rules. Indigenous peoples, now in a colonial relationship with the United States, inhabited and thrived for millennia before they were displaced to fragmented reservations and economically decimated.

This is a history of the United States.

## ONE

### FOLLOW THE CORN

*Carrying their flints and torches, Native Americans  
were living in balance with Nature—  
but they had their thumbs on the scale.*

—Charles C. Mann, 1491

Humanoids existed on Earth for around four million years as hunters and gatherers living in small communal groups that through their movements found and populated every continent. Some two hundred thousand years ago, human societies, having originated in Sub-Saharan Africa, began migrating in all directions, and their descendants eventually populated the globe. Around twelve thousand years ago, some of these people began staying put and developed agriculture—mainly women who domesticated wild plants and began cultivating others.

As a birthplace of agriculture and the towns and cities that followed, America is ancient, not a “new world.” Domestication of plants took place around the globe in seven locales during approximately the same period, around 8500 B.C. Three of the seven were in the Americas, all based on corn: the Valley of Mexico and Central America (Mesoamerica); the South-Central Andes in South America; and eastern North America. The other early agricultural centers were the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile River systems, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Yellow River of northern China, and the Yangtze River of southern China. During this time, many of the same human societies began domesticating animals. Only in the American continents was the parallel domestication of animals eschewed in favor of game management, a kind of animal husbandry different from

that developed in Africa and Asia. In these seven areas, agriculture-based "civilized" societies developed in symbiosis with hunting, fishing, and gathering peoples on their peripheries, gradually enveloping many of the latter into the realms of their civilizations, except for those in regions inhospitable to agriculture.

### THE SACRED CORN FOOD

Indigenous American agriculture was based on corn. Traces of cultivated corn have been identified in central Mexico dating back ten thousand years. Twelve to fourteen centuries later, corn production had spread throughout the temperate and tropical Americas from the southern tip of South America to the subarctic of North America, and from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean on both continents. The wild grain from which corn was cultivated has never been identified with certainty, but the Indigenous peoples for whom corn was and is their sustenance believe it was a sacred gift from their gods. Since there is no evidence of corn on any other continent prior to its post-Columbus dispersal, its development is a unique invention of the original American agriculturalists. Unlike most grains, corn cannot grow wild and cannot exist without attentive human care.

Along with multiple varieties and colors of corn, Mesoamericans cultivated squash and beans, which were extended throughout the hemisphere, as were the many varieties and colors of potato cultivated by Andean farmers beginning more than seven thousand years ago. Corn, being a summer crop, can tolerate no more than twenty to thirty days without water and even less time in high temperatures. Many of the areas where corn was the staple were arid or semiarid, so its cultivation required the design and construction of complex irrigation systems—in place at least two thousand years before Europeans knew the Americas existed. The proliferation of agriculture and cultigens could not have occurred without centuries of cultural and commercial interchange among the peoples of North, Central, and South America, whose traders carried seeds as well as other goods and cultural practices.

The vast reach and capacity of Indigenous grain production im-

pressed colonialist Europeans. A traveler in French-occupied North America related in 1669 that six square miles of cornfields surrounded each Iroquois village. The governor of New France, following a military raid in the 1680s, reported that he had destroyed more than a million bushels (forty-two thousand tons) of corn belonging to four Iroquois villages.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the nutritious triad of corn, beans, and squash—which provide a complete protein—the Americas were densely populated when the European monarchies began sponsoring colonization projects there.

The total population of the hemisphere was about one hundred million at the end of the fifteenth century, with about two-fifths in North America, including Mexico. Central Mexico alone supported some thirty million people. At the same time, the population of Europe as far east as the Ural Mountains was around fifty million. Experts have observed that such population densities in precolonial America were supportable because the peoples had created a relatively disease-free paradise.<sup>2</sup> There certainly were diseases and health problems, but the practice of herbal medicine and even surgery and dentistry, and most importantly both hygienic and ritual bathing, kept diseases at bay. Settler observers in all parts of the Americas marveled at the frequent bathing even in winter in cold climates. One commented that the Native people "go to the river and plunge in and wash themselves before they dress daily." Another wrote: "Men, women, and children, from early infancy, are in the habit of bathing." Ritual sweat baths were common to all Native North Americans, having originated in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Above all, the majority of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas had healthy, mostly vegetarian diets based on the staple of corn and supplemented by wild fish, fowl, and four-legged animals. People lived long and well with abundant ceremonial and recreational periods.

### UP FROM MEXICO

As on the two other major continental landmasses—Eurasia and Africa—civilization in the Americas emerged from certain population centers, with periods of vigorous growth and integration

interspersed with periods of decline and disintegration. At least a dozen such centers were functioning in the Americas when Europeans intervened. Although this is a history of the part of North America that is today the United States, it is important to follow the corn to its origins and briefly consider the peoples' history of the Valley of Mexico and Central America, often called Mesoamerica. Influences from the south powerfully shaped the Indigenous peoples to the north (in what is now the United States) and Mexicans continue to migrate as they have for millennia but now across the arbitrary border that was established in the US war against Mexico in 1846–48.

The first great cultivators of corn were the Mayans, initially centered in present-day northern Guatemala and the Mexican state of Tabasco. Extending to the Yucatán peninsula, the Mayans of the tenth century built city-states—Chichen-Itzá, Mayapán, Uxmal, and many others—as far south as Belize and Honduras. Mayan villages, farms, and cities extended from tropical forests to alpine areas to coastal and interior plains. During the five-century apex of Mayan civilization, a combined priesthood and nobility governed. There was also a distinct commercial class, and the cities were densely populated, not simply bureaucratic or religious centers. Ordinary Mayan villages in the far-flung region retained fundamental features of clan structures and communal social relations. They worked the nobles' fields, paid rent for use of land, and contributed labor and taxes to the building of roads, temples, nobles' houses, and other structures. It is not clear whether these relations were exploitative or cooperatively developed. However, the nobility drew servants from groups such as war prisoners, accused criminals, debtors, and even orphans. Although servile status was not hereditary, this was forced labor. Increasingly burdensome exploitation of labor and higher taxes and tribute produced dissension and uprisings, resulting in the collapse of the Mayan state, from which decentralized polities emerged.

Mayan culture astonishes all who study it, and it is often compared to Greek (Athenian) culture. At its core was the cultivation of corn; religion was constructed around this vital food. The Mayan people developed art, architecture, sculpture, and painting, em-

playing a variety of materials, including gold and silver, which they mined and used for jewelry and sculpture, not for use as currency. Surrounded by rubber trees, they invented the rubber ball and court ball games similar to modern soccer. Their achievements in mathematics and astronomy are the most impressive. By 36 BC they had developed the concept of zero. They worked with numbers in the hundreds of millions and used extensive dating systems, making possible both their observations of the cosmos and their unique calendar that marked the passage of time into the future. Modern astronomers have marveled at the accuracy of Mayan charts of the movements of the moon and planets, which were used to predict eclipses and other events. Mayan culture and science, as well as governmental and economic practices, were influential throughout the region.

Mayan civilization appeared during the period (2000 BC to 200 of the present era) of the Olmec civilization in the Gulf area of Mexico. The Olmecs established the template for future civilizational development by building cities and villages. Out of the cross-fertilization of these cultures rose the grand metropolis of Teotihuacán located in the Valley of Mexico around 200 BC and grew into the largest city in the world outside of China at the time, inhabited by many different peoples. The Valley of Oaxaca was another location of rise of civilization by 100 BC, the home of the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples. Long-distance trade generated by these city-states connected them with each other and the far north. The Toltecs, a Nahuatl-speaking people, migrated from the northern desert region to central Mexico around 900, dominating many of the cities of central Mexico and establishing their capital at Tula, north of present-day Mexico City. The Toltec migrated as well to Central America, the people there largely Nahuatl speakers today. In the early 1300s, the Aztecs from the far north (today's Utah-Colorado area) migrated to central Mexico, and by 1345 had established their capital of Tenochtitlán on an island in Lake Texcoco, which the Spanish destroyed and upon which they built the present Mexico City.<sup>4</sup>

In 1426, the Aztecs of Tenochtitlán formed an alliance with the Texcoco and Tlacopan peoples. These allies proceeded to wage war against neighboring peoples and eventually succeeded in gaining control over the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs emerged as

dominant in the Triple Alliance and moved to bring all the peoples of Mexico under their tributary authority. These events paralleled ones in Europe and Asia during the same period, when Rome and other city-states were demolished and occupied by invading Germanic peoples, while the Mongols of the Eurasian steppe overran much of Russia and China. As in Europe and Asia, the invading peoples assimilated and reproduced civilization.

The economic basis for the powerful Aztec state was hydraulic agriculture, with corn as the central crop. Beans, pumpkins, tomatoes, cocoa, and many other food crops flourished and supported a dense population, much of it concentrated in large urban centers. The Aztecs also grew tobacco and cotton, the latter providing the fiber for all cloth and clothing. Weaving and metalwork flourished, providing useful commodities as well as works of art. Building techniques enabled construction of enormous stone dams and canals, as well as fortress-like castles made of brick or stone. There were elaborate markets in each city and a far-flung trade network that used routes established by the Toltecs.

Aztec merchants acquired turquoise from Pueblos who mined it in what is now the US Southwest to sell in central Mexico where it had become the most valued of all material possessions and was used as a means of exchange or a form of money.<sup>5</sup> Sixty-five thousand turquoise artifacts in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, are evidence of the importance of turquoise as a major precolonial commodity. Other items were also valuable marketable commodities in the area, salt being close to turquoise in value. Ceramic trade goods involved interconnected markets from Mexico City to Mesa Verde, Colorado. Shells from the Gulf of California, tropical bird feathers from the Gulf Coast area of Mexico, obsidian from Durango, Mexico, and flint from Texas were all found in the ruins of Casa Grande (Arizona), the commercial center of the northern frontier. Turquoise functioning as money was traded to acquire macaw and parrot feathers from tropical areas for religious rituals, seashells from coastal peoples, and hides and meat from the northern plains. The stone has been found in precolonial sites in Texas, Kansas, and Nebraska, where the Wichitas served as intermediaries, carrying turquoise and other goods farther east and north. Crees in the Lake

Superior region and communities in what is today Ontario, Canada, and in today's Wisconsin acquired turquoise through trade.<sup>6</sup>

Traders from Mexico were also transmitters of culture and features such as the Sun Dance religion in the Great Plains, and the cultivation of corn by the Algonquin, Cherokee, and Muskogee (Creek) peoples of the eastern half of North America were transmitted from Central America. The oral and written histories of the Aztecs, Cherokees, and Choctaws record these relations. Cherokee oral history tells of their ancestors' migrations from the south and through Mexico, as does Muskogee history.<sup>7</sup>

Although Aztecs were apparently flourishing culturally and economically, as well as being militarily and politically strong, their dominance was declining on the eve of Spanish intrusion. Being pressed for tribute through violent attacks, peasants rebelled and there were uprisings all over Mexico. Montezuma II, who came to power in 1503, might have succeeded in his attempt to reform the regime, but the Spanish overthrew him before he had the opportunity. The Mexican state was crushed and its cities leveled in Cortés's three-year genocidal war. Cortés's recruitment of resistant communities all over Mexico as allies aided in toppling the central regime. Cortés and his two hundred European mercenaries could never have overthrown the Mexican state without the Indigenous insurgency he co-opted. The resistant peoples who allied with Cortés to overthrow the oppressive Aztec regime could not yet have known the goals of the gold-obsessed Spanish colonizers or the European institutions that backed them.

## THE NORTH

What is now the US Southwest once formed, with today's Mexican states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua, the northern periphery of the Aztec regime in the Valley of Mexico. Mostly an alpine, arid, and semiarid region cut with rivers, it is a fragile land base with rainfall a scarce commodity and drought endemic. Yet, in the Sonora Desert of present-day southern Arizona, communities were practicing agriculture by 2100 BC and began digging irrigation canals as early as

1250 BC. The earliest evidence of corn in the area dates from 2000 BC, introduced by trade and migration between north and south. Farther north, people began cultivating corn, beans, squash, and cotton around 1500 BC. Their descendants, the Akimel O'odham people (Pimas), call their ancestors the Huhugam (meaning "those who have gone"), which English speakers have rendered as "Hohokam." The Hohokam people left behind ball courts similar to those of the Mayans, multistory buildings, and agricultural fields. Their most striking imprint on the land is one of the most extensive networks of irrigation canals in the world at that time. From AD 900 to 1450, the Hohokams built a canal system of more than eight hundred miles of trunk lines and hundreds more miles of branches serving local sites. The longest known canal extended twenty miles. The largest were seventy-five to eighty-five feet across and twenty feet deep, and many were leak-proof, lined with clay. One canal system carried enough water to irrigate an estimated ten thousand acres.<sup>8</sup> Hohokam farmers grew surplus crops for export and their community became a crossroads in a trade network reaching from Mexico to Utah and from the Pacific Coast to New Mexico and into the Great Plains. By the fourteenth century, Hohokams had dispersed, living in smaller communities.

The Ancestral Puebloans of Chaco Canyon on the Colorado Plateau—in the present-day Four Corners region of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah—thrived from AD 850 to 1250. Ancestors of the Pueblos of New Mexico, they constructed more than four hundred miles of roads radiating out from Chaco. Averaging thirty feet wide, these roads followed straight courses, even through difficult terrain such as hills and rock formations. The highways connected some seventy-five communities. Around the thirteenth century, the Ancient Puebloans abandoned the Chaco area and migrated, building nearly a hundred smaller agricultural city-states along the northern Rio Grande valley and its tributaries. Northernmost Taos Pueblo was an important trade center, handling buffalo products from the plains, tropical bird products, copper and shells from Mexico, and turquoise from New Mexican mines. Pueblo trade extended as far west as the Pacific Ocean, as far east as the Great Plains, and as far south as Central America.

Other major peoples in the region, the Navajos (Diné) and Apaches, are of Athabaskan heritage, having migrated to the region from the subarctic several centuries before Columbus. The majority of the Diné people did not migrate and remain in the original homeland in Alaska and northwestern Canada. Originally a hunting and trading people, they interacted and intermarried with the Pueblos and became involved in conflicts between villages engendered by disputes over water usage, with Diné and Apache groups allied with one or another of the riverine city-states.<sup>9</sup>

The island peoples of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Basin were an integral part of the cultural, religious, and economic exchanges with the peoples from today's Guyana, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Water, far from presenting a barrier to trade and cultural relations, served as a means of connecting the region's peoples. Precolonial Caribbean cultures and cultural connections have been very little studied, since many of these peoples, the first victims of Columbus's colonizing missions, were annihilated, enslaved and deported, or later assimilated enslaved African populations with the advent of the Atlantic slave trade. The best known are the Caribs, Arawaks, Tainos, and the Chibchan-speaking peoples. Throughout the Caribbean islands and rim are also descendants of Maroons—mixed Indigenous and African communities—who successfully liberated themselves from slavery, such as the Garifuna people ("Black Caribs") along the coast of the western Caribbean.<sup>10</sup>

From the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River and south to the Gulf of Mexico lay one of the most fertile agricultural belts in the world, crisscrossed with great rivers. Naturally watered, teeming with plant and animal life, temperate in climate, the region was home to multiple agricultural nations. In the twelfth century, the Mississippi Valley region was marked by one enormous city-state, Cahokia, and several large ones built of earthen, stepped pyramids, much like those in Mexico. Cahokia supported a population of tens of thousands, larger than that of London during the same period. Other architectural monuments were sculpted in the shape of gigantic birds, lizards, bears, alligators, and even a 1,330-foot-long

serpent. These feats of monumental construction testify to the levels of civic and social organization. Called "mound builders" by European settlers, the people of this civilization had dispersed before the European invasion, but their influence had spread throughout the eastern half of the North American continent through cultural influence and trade.<sup>11</sup> What European colonizers found in the southeastern region of the continent were nations of villages with economies based on agriculture and corn the mainstay. This was the territory of the nations of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Choctaw and the Muskogee Creek and Seminole, along with the Natchez Nation in the western part, the Mississippi Valley region.

To the north, a remarkable federal state structure, the Haudenosaunee confederacy—often referred to as the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy—was made up of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk Nations and, from early in the nineteenth century, the Tuscaroras. This system incorporated six widely dispersed and unique nations of thousands of agricultural villages and hunting grounds from the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River to the Atlantic, and as far south as the Carolinas and inland to Pennsylvania. The Haudenosaunee peoples avoided centralized power by means of a clan-village system of democracy based on collective stewardship of the land. Corn, the staple crop, was stored in granaries and distributed equitably in this matrilineal society by the clan mothers, the oldest women from every extended family. Many other nations flourished in the Great Lakes region where now the US-Canada border cuts through their realms. Among them, the Anishinaabe Nation (called by others Ojibwe and Chippewa) was the largest.

The peoples of the prairies of central North America spanned an expanse of space from West Texas to the subarctic between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. Several centers of development in that vast region of farming and bison-dependent peoples may be identified: in the prairies of Canada, the Crees; in the Dakotas, the Lakota and Dakota Sioux; and to their west and south, the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples. Farther south were the Ponca, Pawnee, Osage, Kiowa, and many other nations, with buffalo numbering sixty million. Territorial disputes inevitably occurred, and

diplomatic skills as well as trade were highly developed for conflict resolution.

In the Pacific Northwest, from present-day Alaska to San Francisco, and along the vast inland waterways to the mountain barriers, great seafaring and fishing peoples flourished, linked by culture, common ceremonies, and extensive trade. These were wealthy peoples living in a comparative paradise of natural resources, including the sacred salmon. They invented the potlatch, the ceremonial distribution or destruction of accumulated goods, creating a culture of reciprocity. They crafted gigantic wooden totems, masks, and lodges carved from giant sequoias and redwoods. Among these communities speaking many languages were the Tlingit people in Alaska and the salmon-fishing Salish, Makah, Hoopa, Pomo, Karok, and Yurok people.

The territory between the Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountains in the West, now called the Great Basin, was a harsh environment that supported small populations before European colonization, as it does today. Yet the Shoshone, Bannock, Paiute, and Ute peoples there managed the environment and built permanent villages.

#### GOVERNANCE

Each Indigenous nation or city-state or town comprised an independent, self-governing people that held supreme authority over internal affairs and dealt with other peoples on equal footing. Among the factors that integrated each nation, in addition to language, were shared belief systems and rituals and clans of extended families that spanned more than one town. The system of decision making was based on consensus, not majority rule. This form of decision making later baffled colonial agents who could not find Indigenous officials to bribe or manipulate. In terms of international diplomacy, each of the Indigenous peoples of western North America was a sovereign nation. First the Spanish, French, and British colonizers, and then the US colonizers, made treaties with these Indigenous governments.

Indigenous governance varied widely in form.<sup>12</sup> East of the Mississippi River, towns and federations of towns were governed by

family lineages. The male elder of the most powerful clan was the executive. His accession to that position and all his decisions were subject to the approval of a council of elders of the clans that were represented in the town. In this manner, the town had sovereign authority over its internal affairs. In each sovereign town burned a sacred fire symbolizing its relationship with the spirit beings. A town could join other towns under the leadership of a single leader. English colonists termed such groupings of towns "confederacies" or "federations." The Haudenosaunee people today retain a fully functioning government of this type. It was the Haudenosaunee constitution, called the Great Law of Peace, that inspired essential elements of the US Constitution.<sup>13</sup> Oren Lyons, who holds the title of Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan and is a member of the Onondaga Council of Chiefs, explains the essence of that constitution: "The first principle is peace. The second principle, equity, justice for the people. And third, the power of the good minds, of the collective powers to be of one mind: unity. And health. All of these were involved in the basic principles. And the process of discussion, putting aside warfare as a method of reaching decisions, and now using intellect."<sup>14</sup>

The Muskogees (Creeks), Seminoles, and other peoples in the Southeast had three branches of government: a civil administration, a military, and a branch that dealt with the sacred. The leaders of each branch were drawn from the elite, and other officials were drawn from prominent clans. Over the centuries preceding European colonialism, ancient traditions of diplomacy had developed among the Indigenous nations. Societies in the eastern part of the continent had an elaborate ceremonial structure for diplomatic meetings among representatives of disparate governments. In the federations of sovereign towns, the leading town's fire represented the entire group, and each member town sent a representative or two to the federation's council. Thus everyone in the federation was represented in the government's decision making. Agreements reached in such meetings were considered sacred pledges that the representatives made not only to one another but also to the powerful spirit looking on. The nations tended to hold firm to such treaties out of respect for the sacred power that was party to the agreements. Relations with the spirit world were thus a major factor in government.<sup>15</sup>

The roles of women varied among the societies of eastern North America. Among the Muskogees and other southern nations, women hardly participated in governmental affairs. Haudenosaunee and Cherokee women, on the other hand, held more political authority. Among the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras, certain female lineages controlled the choice of male representatives for their clans in their governing councils. Men were the representatives, but the women who chose them had the right to speak in the council, and when the chosen representative was too young or inexperienced to be effective, one of the women might participate in council on his behalf. Haudenosaunee clan mothers held the power to recall unsatisfactory representatives. Charles C. Mann, author of 1491: *New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*, calls it "a feminist dream."<sup>16</sup>

According to the value system that drove consensus building and decision making in these societies, the community's interest overrode individual interests. After every member of a council had had his or her say, any member who still considered a decision incorrect might nevertheless agree to abide by it for the sake of the community's cohesion. In the rare cases in which consensus could not be reached, the segment of the community represented by dissenters might withdraw from the community and move away to found a new community. This was similar to the practice of the nearly one hundred autonomous towns of northern New Mexico.

#### STEWARDS OF THE LAND

By the time of European invasions, Indigenous peoples had occupied and shaped every part of the Americas, established extensive trade networks and roads, and were sustaining their populations by adapting to specific natural environments, but they also adapted nature to suit human ends. Mann relates how Indigenous peoples used fire to shape and tame the precolonial North American landscape. In the Northeast, Indigenous farmers always carried flints. One English observer in 1637 noted that they used the flints "to set fire of the country in all places where they come."<sup>17</sup> They also used torches for



night hunting and rings of flame to encircle animals to kill. Rather than domesticating animals for hides and meat, Indigenous communities created havens to attract elk, deer, bear, and other game. They burned the undergrowth in forests so that the young grasses and other ground cover that sprouted the following spring would entice greater numbers of herbivores and the predators that fed on them, which would sustain the people who ate them both. Mann describes these forests in 1491: "Rather than the thick, unbroken, monumental snarl of trees imagined by Thoreau, the great eastern forest was an ecological kaleidoscope of garden plots, blackberry rambles, pine barrens, and spacious groves of chestnut, hickory, and oak." Inland a few miles from the shore of present-day Rhode Island, an early European explorer marveled at the trees that were spaced so that the forest "could be penetrated even by a large army." English mercenary John Smith wrote that he had ridden a galloping horse through the Virginia forest. In Ohio, the first English squatters on Indigenous lands in the mid-eighteenth century encountered forested areas that resembled English parks, as they could drive carriages through the trees.

Bison herds roamed the East from New York to Georgia (it's no accident that a settler city in western New York was named Buffalo). The American bison was indigenous to the northern and southern plains of North America, not the East, yet Native peoples imported them east along a path of fire, as they transformed forest into fallows for the bison to survive upon far from their original habitat. Historian William Cronon has written that when the Haudenosaunee hunted buffalo, they were "harvesting a foodstuff which they had consciously been instrumental in creating." As for the "Great American Desert," as Anglo-Americans called the Great Plains, the occupants transformed that too into game farms. Using fire, they extended the giant grasslands and maintained them. When Lewis and Clark began their trek up the Missouri River in 1804, ethnologist Dale Lott has observed, they beheld "not a wilderness but a vast pasture managed by and for Native Americans." Native Americans created the world's largest gardens and grazing lands—and thrived.<sup>18</sup>

Native peoples left an indelible imprint on the land with systems

of roads that tied nations and communities together across the entire landmass of the Americas. Scholar David Wade Chambers writes:

The first thing to note about early Native American trails and roads is that they were not just paths in the woods following along animal tracks used mainly for hunting. Neither can they be characterized simply as the routes that nomadic peoples followed during seasonal migrations. Rather they constituted an extensive system of roadways that spanned the Americas, making possible short, medium and long distance travel. That is to say, the Pre-Columbian Americas were laced together with a complex system of roads and paths which became the roadways adopted by the early settlers and indeed were ultimately transformed into major highways.<sup>19</sup>

Roads were developed along rivers, and many Indigenous roads in North America tracked the Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado Rivers, the Rio Grande, and other major streams. Roads also followed seacoasts. A major road ran along the Pacific coast from northern Alaska (where travelers could continue by boat to Siberia) south to an urban area in western Mexico. A branch of that road ran through the Sonora Desert and up onto the Colorado Plateau, serving ancient towns and later communities such as those of the Hopis and Pueblos on the northern Rio Grande.

From the Pueblo communities, roads eastward carried travelers onto the semiarid plains along tributaries of the Pecos River and up to the communities in what is now eastern New Mexico, the Texas Panhandle, and West Texas. There were also roads from the northern Rio Grande to the southern plains of western Oklahoma by way of the Canadian and Cimarron Rivers. The roads along those rivers and their tributaries led to a system of roads that followed rivers from the Southeast. They also connected with ones that turned southwestward toward the Valley of Mexico.

The eastern roads connected Muskogee (Creek) towns in present-day Georgia and Alabama. From the Muskogee towns, a major route led north through Cherokee lands, the Cumberland Gap, and the Shenandoah Valley region to the confluence of the Ohio and

Scioto Rivers. From that northeastern part of the continent, a traveler could reach the West Coast by following roads along the Ohio River to the Mississippi, up the Mississippi to the mouth of the Missouri, and along the Missouri westward to its headwaters. From there, a road crossed the Rocky Mountains through South Pass in present-day Wyoming and led to the Columbia River. The Columbia River road led to the large population center at the river's mouth on the Pacific Ocean and connected with the Pacific Coast road.

## CORN

✓ North America in 1492 was not a virgin wilderness but a network of Indigenous nations, peoples of the corn. The link between peoples of the North and the South can be seen in the diffusion of corn from Mesoamerica. Both Muskogees and Cherokees, whose original homelands in North America are located in the Southeast, trace their lineage to migration from or through Mexico. Cherokee historian Emmet Starr wrote:

The Cherokees most probably preceded by several hundred years the Muskogees in their exodus from Mexico and swung in a wider circle, crossing the Mississippi River many miles north of the mouth of the Missouri River as indicated by the mounds. . . . The Muskogees were probably driven out of Mexico by the Aztecs, Toltecs or some other of the northwestern tribal invasions of the ninth or preceding centuries. This is evidenced by the customs and devices that were long retained by the Creeks.<sup>20</sup>

Another Cherokee writer, Robert Conley, tells about the oral tradition that claims Cherokee origins in South America and subsequent migration through Mexico. Later, with US military invasions and relocations of the Muskogee and Cherokee peoples, many groups split off and sought refuge in Mexico, as did others under pressure, such as the Kickapoos.<sup>21</sup>

Although practiced traditionally throughout the Indigenous ag-

ricultural areas of North America, the Green Corn Dance remains strongest among the Muskogee people. The elements of the ritual dance are similar to those of the Valley of Mexico. Although the dance takes various forms among different communities, the core of it is the same, a commemoration of the gift of corn by an ancestral corn woman. The peoples of the corn retain great affinities under the crust of colonialism.

This brief overview of precolonial North America suggests the magnitude of what was lost to all humanity and counteracts the settler-colonial myth of the wandering Neolithic hunter. These were civilizations based on advanced agriculture and featuring polities. It is essential to understand the migrations and Indigenous peoples' relationships prior to invasion, North and South, and how colonialism cut them off, but, as we will see, the relationships are being reestablished.