

**Indigenous American Cultures: Cross-Pollination with European Thought<sup>1</sup>**  
**OLLI Fall 2020 Semester**  
**Session One**  
**Class Notes**



**Fall 2020 OLLI Indigenous Cultures**  
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**Plan for today**

- Berkshire Land Acknowledgment  
<http://www.mfw.us/blog/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-Berkshire-Land-Acknowledgment.pdf>
- Housekeeping – chat, raise hand, email
- Disclaimers: America glorified; Europe villainized
- Outline of topics to be covered
- Source materials
- Brief review of historical events and people

All of the slides used in this week's class can be found [here on my website](#).

### **Notes on Week One**

We first went over the housekeeping announcements relating to how to use Zoom during this course. Questions or comments should be typed into the **Chat** box, which Ellen will be monitoring. If you wish to make an oral comment, you can use the “raise hand” function, and Ellen will also be watching for that. She will

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<sup>1</sup> <https://berkshireolli.org/IndigenousFall2020>

There is much we can learn from Native American cultures that can help us address some of the world's most pressing problems. When European colonists arrived on these shores, they found Native populations who had already been literally decimated by European diseases. They also encountered sophisticated civilizations that they misunderstood, or chose to ignore, often with disastrous consequences. In this course, we will examine the cross-pollination of European and American cultures. European Enlightenment thought was heavily influenced by misconceptions of Native American cultures. This has contributed to our current crises of climate change, pandemics, and social unrest.

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interrupt me at her discretion; I will not be watching for the messages or hands.

Please also feel free to email me with any questions or suggestions that you may have between classes.

## Land Acknowledgment

I then read my Berkshire Land Acknowledgment, making a few side comments along the way. You can read **my revised (OLLI) version here** on my website. In these class notes, I will explain a little more about some of the statements I made about language, population density and subsequent depopulation, as well as systems of land ownership.

## Place Names

We may have time later in the course to discuss some details of the Algonkian languages; such as their structure and sophistication. For now, I will simply make a few comments about some of the place names I used in the acknowledgment.

I am most familiar with the Abenaki orthography, and I will use that here. It was first developed by French-speaking people, to the north of us, whereas the Mahican dialect was first written out by English colonists. So the spellings often differ, but the words are often pronounced exactly (or at least nearly) the same. Keep in mind that any spellings of Native words are simply Colonial attempts to document sounds; the Americans of the Northeast did not have written languages, and any transcriptions can only be approximations.<sup>2</sup>

Europeans and Colonists, understandably, had difficulty replicating the strange (to them) sounds of the Algonkian dialects. So they often abbreviated the long words (Muhheconneok became Mohican, for example), or pronounced (and spelled) them in ways more familiar to them.

- Pitabagok<sup>3</sup> [bit-AH-ba-gahk] from pita- [double, or between two things] -bagw [a still body of water, as opposed to -tekw, a moving waterway, such

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2 Written English is full of words that are not pronounced as they are written, and provide examples of how language influences the way we think – or, in this case, the way we speak. It drives me nuts to hear people pronounce “Comptroller” the way it is spelled rather than the proper way, which is identical to “Controller” – the etymology of the words is nearly identical.

Other examples, in which the spelling reflects the written etymology but not their pronunciation, include handkerchief {hankerchiff} forecastle {fohksil} cupboard {cubburd} and many more.

3 Pitawbagw = Lake Champlain and Lake George, NY, the lake between lake (lake between the Adirondacks and Green Mountains and the Mohawk and Abenaki), double lake (in reference to Lake George being considered the other half of the same lake to the Abenaki)

Bowman Books (2020) Abenaki Dictionary; Abenaki-English

Also: Pitawskog = Champ, the double or between snake, the Lake Champlain Monster

as Pocumtuck<sup>4</sup> "the short river" or Connecticut<sup>5</sup> "the long river"] – the "ok" ending [or "ik" or "ic"] is a locative (meaning "at the place of") – there are many alternate spellings, depending on the reference used; see the footnote for one variation.

- Housatonic means "the place over the mountain" and comes from Awass'adenik (Awassa = Over or Beyond; Aden = Mountain or Hill; ic or ik = to/at/in the place of)
- Esquatak (Schodack<sup>6</sup>) Island: there are many, many word groups<sup>7</sup> in the Algonkian language relating to fire. That observation confirms for me the importance of fire in their pre-Colonial culture. They used it for many things; clearing the forest floor (as mentioned in my acknowledgment), felling trees, hollowing out logs for seaworthy canoes, and making maple syrup and sugar. For that last one, they would heat stones over a fire and then immerse them in containers of sap, hastening the evaporation of water and increasing the viscousness of the syrup.

## Population Issues

The numbers mentioned by me in the acknowledgment were derived by me, after garnering relevant information from the two primary books I am recommending

4 or Pocumtuc, also known as the Deerfield River; from Pokwômtekw

5 Connecticut means long river; Kwni = long + tekwa = river + ik/ic = to/at/in

6 "Esquatak" is from <https://esquatak.org/> and purports to be the Mahican word from which Schodack derives. The Mahican language became extinct about 75 years ago, and is being revitalized. There are no native speakers to verify this or other words that were recorded prior to 1946, when the last native speaker died. My Abenaki dictionary contains a word closer to the present name: Skwedaigok = Castle Island near Albany, New York, where two fires once burned

7 The word group in the Abenaki dictionary most closely related to the Schodack name is skwedaal a council fire

Skweda paskhōzik Midsummer Day, shooting the fire, Saint Jean-Baptiste Day

skweda pl skwedaal fire, a fire

skwedaôbo pl skwedaôboal whiskey

skwedaabi pl skwedaabiak firewater

skwedaibakol pl skwedaibakok fire leaf, a plant which grows up after a fire, Aletris farinosa

skwedaibapmaksek airplane, fire glider or sailer

skwedaichogeleskw pl skwedaichogeleskok redstart, fire blackbird

Skwedaigok Castle Island near Albany, New York, where two fires once burned

skwedaigokw pl skwedaigokwak fire's kettle

skwedainebi firewater

skwedaipegda pl skwedaipegdaal fire smoke

skwedaipegwi ashes, fire sand

skwedaipegwis small ashes

skwedaiwagin pl skwedaiwaginak an automobile, fire wagon

skwedaoo there is fire

skwedas pl skwedasak redstart, a little fire

skwedasis a little fire

skwedawabi firewater, whiskey

skwedawalôdi pl skwedawalôdial a bomb

(1491<sup>8</sup> and *Changes in the Land*<sup>9</sup>), as well as the sources they cite and other research I've done.

Cronon and others provided density figures for different regions. Southern New England, for example, could support a larger population per square mile than was possible in the North because a larger proportion of the diet came from agriculture. Any numbers derived are estimates, since we have no records from pre-Colonial days.

It is now generally agreed<sup>10</sup> (perhaps not so much when Mann published his book) that European diseases killed off 90 to 95 percent of the original population of the Americas. The majority of this depopulation occurred within the first decades after Contact, though the diseases continued to devastate native populations here and there well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some would say right through to the present day, with Colonial diet-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity.

## **Land Ownership**

I made passing reference to the contrast in concepts of land ownership. We will take this up in greater detail later in the course. Although the idea that land could be owned by individuals or organizations was an ancient one in Europe, it was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that it became widely possible for commoners to own the land on which they resided. Before that, land was owned by the monarch or other members of the aristocracy, or by the Church.

Many of the same principles applied to what we now think of as intellectual property. Musicians, for example, freely copied the work of others, without any thought of compensation.

The idea that individuals could own land was, literally, a foreign one to Native Americans. For some information on one aspect of the confusion this caused, please see [\*\*my short essay on usufruct rights\*\*](#).

## **Disclaimers: America glorified; Europe villainized**

My purpose in this course is to show that American cultures were and are more sophisticated than is generally recognized, and that their differences from European traditions were often superior for various reasons. I also want to show how European and Colonial attitudes led to a misunderstanding of American

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8 Mann, Charles C. (2011) *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*; Vintage Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (1<sup>st</sup> Edition was in 2005)

9 Cronon, William (1983) *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, Hill and Wang

10 Koch, Alexander et al (2019) [\(PDF\) Earth system impacts of the European arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492](#) Quaternary Science Reviews 207 pages 13-36

culture, so that much of what could have been learned was not. Beyond that, the incorrect stereotypes of American Natives misled European thinkers (especially the Enlightenment Philosophers) and these misconceptions found their way into Colonial thinking. The Founding Documents and traditions of our country contain many errors, based on fundamental misunderstandings of human nature and social needs. These errors can help to explain the crises we now face in climate change, income inequality and racism.

All of that said, I want to emphasize that I am by no means interested in romanticizing or glorifying American cultures to the exclusion of recognizing their flaws. Nor do I wish to villainize European and Colonial culture to the exclusion of the good that has come out of them, in terms of arts, literature, science, and technology. My complaint lies in how the benefits of these things have been apportioned, not to their creation.

### **End of Slide One**

The last three bullet points will be covered in later slides.

### **Slide Two: Topics to be covered**



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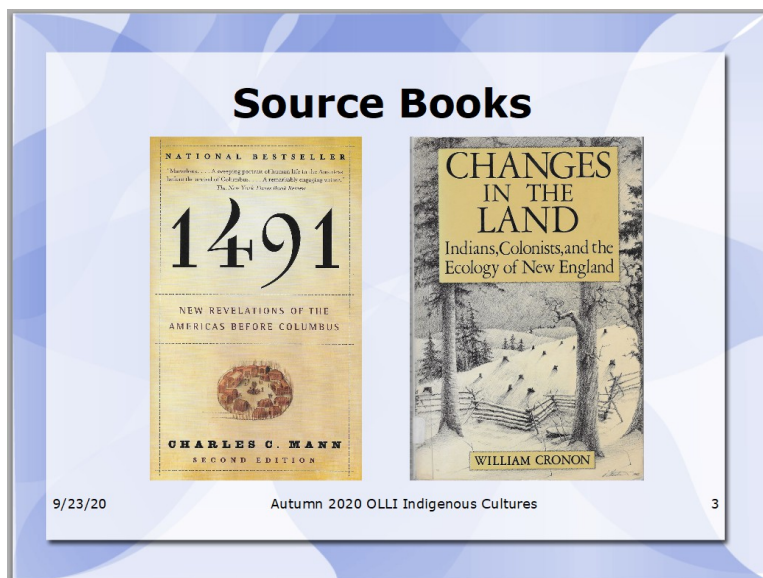
- The role of language (it reveals and shapes our values)
- Social values embedded in mythology and other teachings
- Land (mis)management: contrasting American & Colonial practices
- Colonial values, including racism and slavery
- The influence of Colonial observations on European thinking
- The highly developed system of private property and markets in Europe; unknown in the Americas

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## Slides Three and Four: Source Books

Previous footnotes gave the publishing information on the first two; the next 3 (slide 4) are in this footnote.<sup>11</sup>




11 [1] Moses, Daniel Noah (2009) *The Promise of Progress: The Life and Work of Lewis Henry Morgan*, University of Missouri Press

[2] Frazier, Patrick (1992) *The Mohicans of Stockbridge*, University of Nebraska Press

[3] Pritchard, Evan T. (2009) *Henry Hudson and the Algonquins of New York*, San Francisco and Tulsa: Council Oak Books

## Slide Five: Brief review of historical events and people

I made comments on several of the items on this list, so those who were in class have a bit of a preview of things that will be covered later in the course. I did tell the story of the Peacemaker, and that (The Great Law of Peace) may come up again later, when we discuss forms of government. For now, let me confine the remainder of my remarks here to the first item, which I covered in some detail.



**Partial list of historical events and people**

- Migration of the Algonkian people into North America
- Eratosthenes (276-194 BC)
- The arrival of 3 sisters [maize, beans, squash] in the Northeast ~1000 AD
- Nicole Oresme (1320-1382)
- Hiawatha (*Ayenwatha*), the Peacemaker (*Deganawida*) and *Tododaho* ~1451 {earlier?}
- Little Ice Age (*Nature's Mutiny*) peaked 1570 to 1680s
- Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) & John Locke (1632-1704)
- Baruch (*Bento*) *de* Spinoza 1632-1677 [*killed God before Darwin*]
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) *The Social Contract*
- Hendrick *Aupaumut* (1757-1830)
- Daniel *Ninham*, Jacob *Cheeksaunkun*, Solomon *Uhhaunauwaunmut*, and John *Naunauphtaunk* (*to London in 1765*)
- Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881)

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## Slide Six: Ice Sheet Maximums

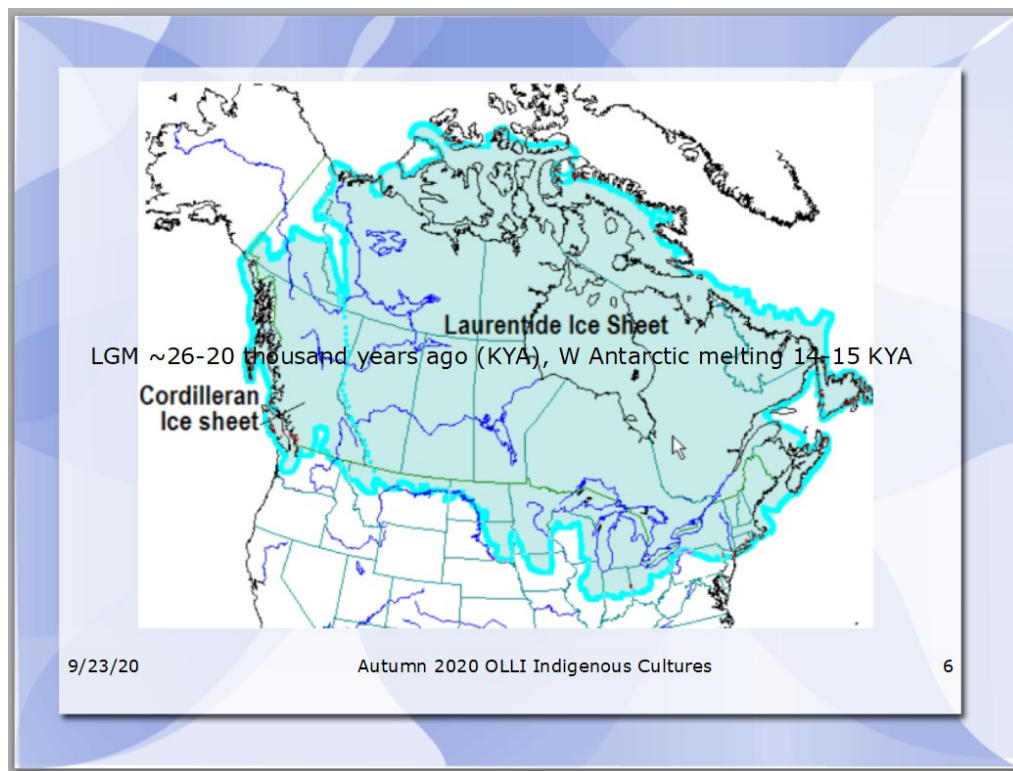
The Last Global Maximum (LGM) of ice in North America is shown on this map, although the state, province, and coastline boundaries are as of the present day, so do not reflect how much land was exposed. In the time illustrated (20 to 26 KYA), the two ice sheets covering northern North America extended as far south as the 37<sup>th</sup> parallel in places, and covered all of New England and the Great Lakes.

Global sea levels at that time were ~100 meters below their present levels. The ice extended beyond current coastlines, but was not floating on the ocean; it rested on parts of the continental shelf that are now underwater. To the south of the ice sheets, there were already people living. They had arrived, not over the ice sheets (that would have been too treacherous a journey) but along the coastline, by boat. They traveled along what is known as the Kelp Highway, a coastal ecosystem that extended from Asia down into South America.

Around 15 thousand years ago, the global climate reached a tipping point, and dramatic ice loss in Antarctica and North America, as well as elsewhere, contributed to a rapid rise in sea levels, the creation of the Great Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River, and the end of large pools of meltwater that had existed in the Utah area.

Thanks to an astute observation by one of our students, I located **the story of the emptying of Lake Bonneville** (the remnants of which are now the Great Salt Lake). Native legend has it that there was a people who had been dependent of the waters of Lake Bonneville, and when it disappeared, so did their ability to grow crops. Known as the Bitter Water Clan, they migrated into the newly-opened lands to the east of the new Great Lakes, staking out most of what is now New York state as well as both sides of the Saint Lawrence. We now know these people as the Haudenosaunee.

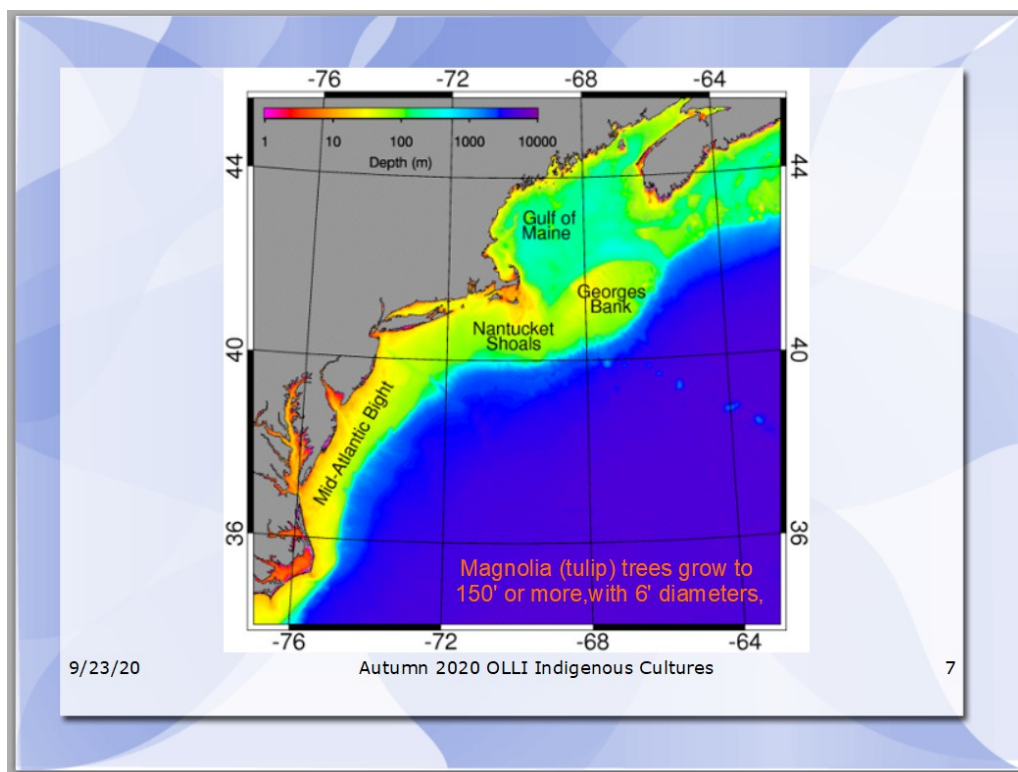
They were soon joined (and surrounded) by new migrants from Asia, who had taken advantage of the opening that had been created in western Canada between the two ice sheets. They settled into that opening, and bands of them kept splitting off and moving east. They also expanded their territory to the north as the ice retreated, and moved all the way to the Atlantic seaboard, and down as far south as present-day Virginia. We know the people who settled in this area as the Algonkians. More on that in a moment.





Please note that all of what I have just mentioned about the migrations of people is speculation, much of it my own. I base my observations, including those that follow, on stories I have heard from indigenous people, reading I have done, and my own hunches.

### Slide Seven: Map of current sea depths



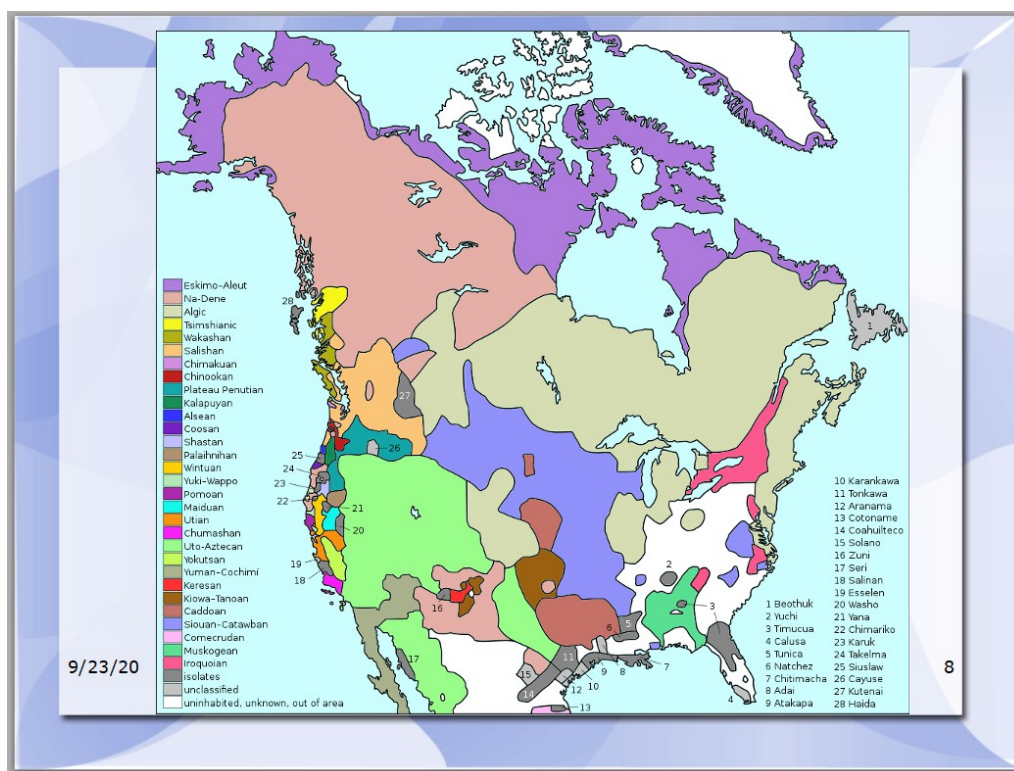
All of the areas colored orange or yellow on this map, as well as some of the light green, were probably dry land during the LGM. There are places, now under seawater, where evidence of human activity, such as mastodon hunting, have been found. It is likely that the Algonkian people moved into this area while much of the continental shelf was still exposed.

I told of my speculation on the use of dugout canoes (made from magnolia logs) for ocean fishing.

### Slide Eight: Map of Language Groups

This slide shows the impressive array of languages in North America. I called attention to the four northernmost groups, which include the light-brown Algonkian (Algonkian) and the red Iroquoian (Haudenosaunee).

The great variety of languages on the West Coast is a testament to the idea that these peoples have been here for a much longer time than the northern groups, and their languages have evolved into separate entities.

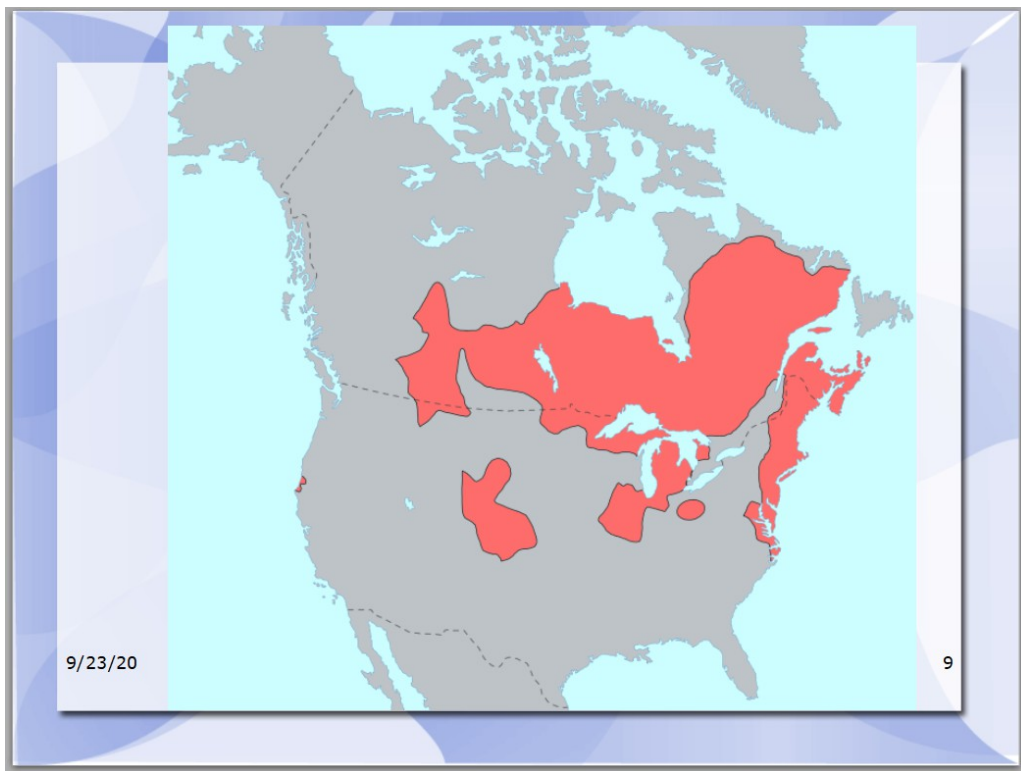


## Slide Nine: Map of Algonkian Languages

This map is obviously based on the prior one, and shows (in red) only the Algonkian (Algonquian) group of languages. The fact that this picture does not extend to the west coast is more anecdotal evidence that the migrants came down the corridor between the ice sheets, having come by land across **Beringia** from Asia.

The fact that these languages are related does not mean they are all mutually understandable. Those of the eastern seaboard do have enough similarity that they share much of the same vocabulary and are comprehensible to each other, despite regional differences.

Out to the west, however, the languages have had enough time to diverge and evolve into completely separate species. Likewise, the Haudenosaunee language group is distinct from any Algonkian language. They may have all shared a common ancestor back in Asia, and their common structure seems to be related to certain Siberian languages, and possibly even to some European languages such as Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian, and Basque.

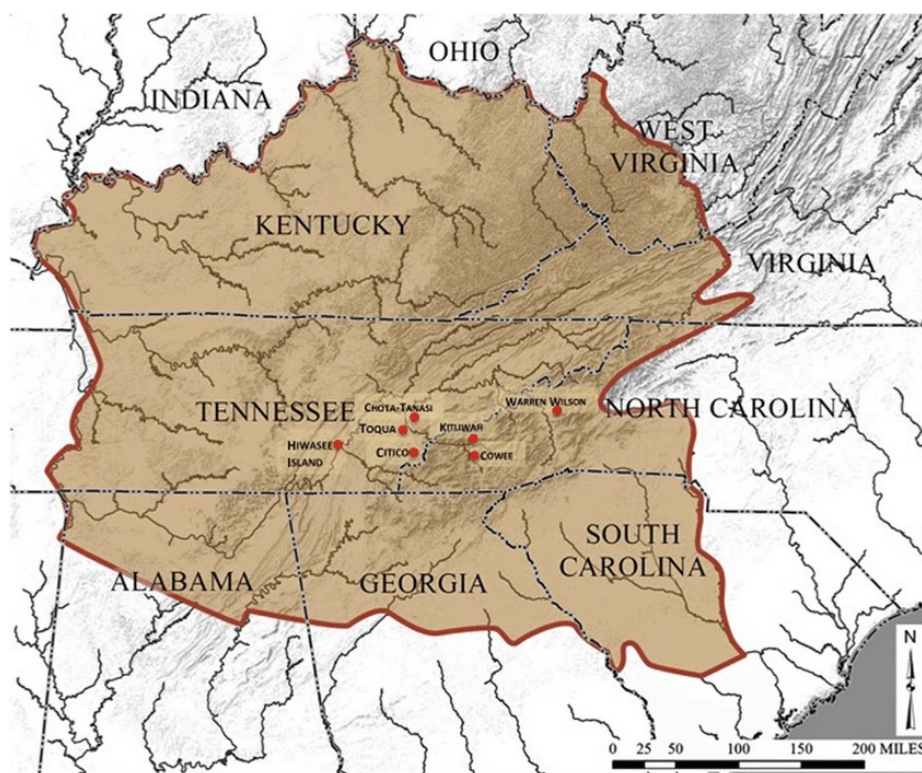


### Slide Ten: Map of Haudenosaunee Languages



As mentioned, the Haudenosaunee languages are distinct from the Algonkian. Their family and clan customs, however, are nearly identical with those of the Algonkins, suggesting, again, a common cultural ancestor.

The two red blobs in the South represent two different groups that, pre-Contact, had split off from the Haudenosaunee and separately migrated (1) to eastern North Carolina (the Tuscarora) and (2) to the area shown on the map below. This second group became known to us as the Cherokee. You probably know the sad and disturbing story how, in 1838, the Cherokee (and many other tribes) were gathered up and evicted from their homelands, beginning their journey west on the infamous Trail of Tears.



The Tuscarora, on the other hand, feeling the heat of the unfriendly English Colonists, had retreated north to rejoin the Haudenosaunees, becoming the sixth tribe in what had originally been a five-tribe confederation.

There is a science called glottochronology that uses vocabulary changes to estimate how long two languages have been separated from each other. By that method, it appears that the Tuscarora had moved south several hundred years ago; they still shared about 70% of the vocabulary. The Cherokee, on the other hand, had but 20%, and had probably split off several thousand years ago.

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Next Week (Session Two):

**A Quick Review of the Maps**

**The Origins of Race and Racism**