FOREWORD

Present Haunts of an Unvanished Past

William Cronon

Among the oldest, most powerful, and most pernicious of all ideas associated with the American frontier is the Myth of the Vanishing Race. The story it tells is of settlers from across the ocean or from far corners of the continent coming to a new land and finding there an abundant Eden, rich in resources and inhabited by native peoples enjoying nature's bounty in harvests that entailed little labor to improve the soil. Sometimes the myth portrays these native inhabitants as savages who for no good reason seek to destroy their new neighbors with unjustified acts of wanton violence. Sometimes the myth presents Indians far more favorably, as a noble race choosing to live lightly on the land, behaving with great honor and generosity toward new arrivals whom they could easily have viewed as invaders but whom instead they supported with gifts of food and other necessities of life, only turning to violence after provocations so awful that no reasonable person could expect anyone to endure them. But however the frontier myth portrays American Indians, whether negatively or positively, it almost always ends in a transformed landscape in which wilderness has given way to civilization, and, strikingly, native peoples have vanished from the scene. Poignant though this narrative may sometimes seem, it has always been a cruel lie, distorting the actual lives and histories of peoples who remain fully present in the transformed landscape despite the failure of historical narratives to notice their ongoing presence in it.

Scholars and activists have been critiquing the Myth of the Vanishing Race for decades, so by now its many distortions of American Indian history should hardly come as a surprise. Yet it persists for many reasons. Its oldest ideological purpose was undoubtedly to help forgive the

invaders their invasion—by implying that whatever the intentions on either side, an "uncivilized" people could not survive their encounter with the "civilized" people who would replace them. Sad though their vanishing might be, no one was really to blame for it—or so the story would have us believe. Subtler aspects of the myth reinforce this message. By casting frontier settlement in heroic terms, with honorable men and women on both sides coming into tragic conflict in the struggle to build a new nation, Indians and settlers alike can be represented as grander, nobler, larger than life. To the extent that the frontier has served as a defining feature of American nationalism since the nineteenth century, this heroic tale has proved to be an enduring resource for American national identity. Furthermore, the American devotion to romantic nature that emerged simultaneously as part of the same nation-building process had the consequence of tying Indians to a wilderness landscape that came to symbolize an older, simpler, purer world that a fallen humanity could now no longer inhabit. Strikingly, the movement to set aside national parks and wilderness preserves was nearly simultaneous with the movement of Indian tribes onto reservations, so that human inhabitants were made to vanish from the American wilderness as a self-fulfilling prophecy of its unpeopled nature.

YET THERE IS A LESS-NOTICED ASPECT of the Myth of the Vanishing Race that is arguably just as problematic. Perhaps in part because Indian peoples have long been associated with "nature," it has been remarkably easy not to notice their presence in places that are marked as "unnatural" in American understandings of landscape. Chief among these are urban and metropolitan areas, which for more than a century have provided homes for people of American Indian descent to a much greater degree than most people realize. Although there is a widespread assumption that most Indians live on reservations, in fact, many more live outside the boundaries of those legal homelands, with a substantial fraction living in cities. In the U.S. Census for the year 2000, for instance, New York City was home to 106,444 full or mixed-blood American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians, compared with 66,236 in Los Angeles,

25,513 in Chicago, and comparably large numbers in most other cities.[1] To the extent that actual Indians did indeed "vanish" from various parts of the continent, it wasn't because they had ceased to exist; they had simply migrated elsewhere—often, like so many other Americans, to urban areas. Perhaps most strangely of all, when native peoples occupied sites where the forces of urbanization were greatest, they found themselves becoming invisible—not to themselves, of course, but to their new neighbors—in the very places that had always been their homes.

It is this ironic story—almost never told by scholars precisely because the Myth of the Vanishing Race has been so pervasive—that Coll Thrush brilliantly narrates in his remarkable and beautifully written book, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*. Beginning with the observation that few cities in the United States have placed greater emphasis on their native heritage than Seattle, he then points to the subtle and tragic processes that gradually marginalized and obscured Indian people residing in that city. Even as totem poles and Northwest Coast Indian artworks were coming to symbolize Seattle's special regional identity, native inhabitants were being assigned their traditional roles in the narrative of the vanishing race: as poignant icons of a lost past, as images of timeless beauty, but not as living residents. In a city where so many streets and sites bear Indian names and where, as Thrush wryly notes, totem poles until only recently outnumbered cell phone towers, it has been all too easy for non-Indian inhabitants and visitors to miss the fact that thousands of native people still live within the boundaries of the city.

One strand of Thrush's narrative, then, is a series of ghost stories: tales of how Seattle became a city haunted with evocative images of its native past. Among its many Indian ghosts, none has played a more prominent role than Chief Seattle himself, or Seeathl as this book prefers to call him as a reminder of his actual historical identity. Chief Seattle

1. Mark Fogarty, "Stats say Big Apple has most urban Indians," *Indian Country Today*, February 25, 2003; on-line at http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1046182689.

is associated with what is arguably the single most famous piece of Indian oratory in all of American history, a text that most Americans have encountered many times without giving much thought to its origins or authenticity, both of which are murky at best. Its closing lines explicitly describe cities like Seattle as places still perennially visited by the shades of departed peoples who still hold them dear:

> At night when the streets of your cities and villages will be silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land. The white man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead—did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.

It is hard not to be moved by the poetry of these lines (see pp. 5–6), which no doubt accounts for the frequency with which they are quoted—and yet it would also be hard to imagine a passage that more unambiguously affirms the Myth of the Vanishing Race. That is why it is so unsurprising to learn that we have no real authority for believing that Chief Seattle actually spoke these words, or that he so easily imagined a future time when his still-living people had ceased to dwell in their homeland.

This, then, leads to the second major theme of Coll Thrush's book. Tacking back and forth between myth and reality, he painstakingly demonstrates the ongoing presence of Duwamish, Suquamish, and other native residents of Seattle who have always been present, always part of its history, even as the myth was doing its work of reinventing a supposedly vanished Indian landscape to fit the frontier and regional narrative of the emerging city on the shore of Puget Sound. In so doing, he effectively turns the myth on its head by showing how intimately Seattle's native residents were involved in every stage of the city's historical evolution. Far from vanishing, they were present at the creation, they continued to make essential contributions as the city grew to metropolitan status, and they persisted in maintaining their special relationships with the local landscape right down to the present. Over and over again, Thrush discovers a geography of native use and native dwelling that the modern cityscape obscures without quite eliminat-

ing altogether. Some places in this intricate web of native relationships with the local environment eventually came to be highlighted in the imagined geography of modern Seattle, while others found no place in that geography. Among its many accomplishments, *Native Seattle* offers quiet but irresistible proof that any full understanding of the city's history must incorporate all aspects of native history and geography, not just the ones selectively celebrated by the Myth of the Vanishing Race.

The result is a history with implications far beyond Seattle. No other book does what this one does. In a world where many modern people too easily lose track of the natural ecosystems they inhabit, preferring instead to seek out "nature" in remote corners of the globe, it is useful to be reminded that even a great city has a long history of human habitation that is intimately and inextricably bound to the local lands and waters and creatures that help define such places. By seeking out the myriad ways that Seattle's native peoples related to the world around them, Thrush offers modern city dwellers an unexpectedly powerful way of seeing aspects of the urban landscape that might otherwise be entirely invisible to them. And by showing readers how human beings in the past have related to the local ecosystems even of great metropolitan areas in profoundly different ways, he reminds us not to be taken in by the seductive but all-too-selective appeals of our mythic imaginations. Just as Seattle's native peoples have never vanished from the city, neither have the geographies—natural and historical and imagined—that made those people native to this place. By helping us see the modern city at least a little through the eyes of people whose presence might otherwise be too easy to ignore, Coll Thrush invites us to revisit the histories and geographies of our own home places as well.