Primary books discussed, in order of appearance:

Brendan C. Lindsay. *Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846–1873*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 456 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. $70.00 (cloth); $35.00 (paper).


California is like America, only more so, Wallace Stegner has often been paraphrased as saying. His actual words: “Like the rest of America, California is unformed, innovative, ahistorical, hedonistic, acquisitive, and energetic—only more so.” Placed in the past tense, Stegner’s statement demands an adverb: only more violently so. During its formative period of “innovation,” the Golden State witnessed the most deplorable violence in U.S. history. Too often, the “American genocide debate” has been presented in yes-or-no format: Did the U.S. ever commit genocide? Bad questions produce stale arguments. Better to ask: Where and why did “normal” anti-Indian violence—that is, American settler colonialism—become genocidal?

The fact of asymmetric mass atrocities in frontier California has never been secret. In 1935, before Congress, John Collier summarized the record: “The world’s annals contain few comparable instances of swift depopulation—practically, of racial massacre—at the hands of a conquering race.” Since the 1970s, historians of California have produced a series of local case studies on “genocide,” using the term invented by Raphael Lemkin after WWII and codified by the United Nations in 1948. Significantly, a Native activist—Hupa historian
Jack Norton, writing for the Indian Historian Press—first conjoined “California” and “genocide” in a book title (Genocide in Northwestern California, 1979). Two textbooks associated with the New Western History—Richard White’s It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own (1991) and John Mack Faragher’s The American West (2000)—judged anti-Indian violence in frontier California to be genocidal. Ken Burns included a section on this “war of extermination” in episode three of The West (1996). And, as Holocaust and Genocide Studies became institutionalized, survey authors turned 1630s New England and 1850s California into textbook American examples, as seen in Ben Kiernan’s Blood and Soil (2007).

However, most U.S. historians have been hesitant to refer to the California catastrophe as “state-assisted” or “state-supported.” This will—this must—change after Brendan C. Lindsay’s Murder State (2012) and Benjamin Madley’s An American Genocide (2016). Both books present irrefutable proof that Californians of high station and office, including governor Leland Stanford and chief justice Serranus Hastings, actively supported the intentional mass destruction of Natives. In horrifying detail, they reinforce Patricia Nelson Limerick’s comment to the New York Times upon the Gold Rush sesquicentennial: “I would never use the word genocide in the rest of the West, because you needed a state policy. But in California you had that.” Whether this brutal episode in Golden State history should be called a state-directed and/or a federal genocide remains disputable.

Murder State advances a thesis that borrows from Michael Mann’s The Dark Side of Democracy (2005), which portrayed post-Gold Rush California as a “genocidal democracy.” After the state entered the Union, argues Lindsay, landed interests used democratic processes and institutions to create a political culture organized around the dispossession and murder of Indians. “Rather than a government orchestrating a population to bring about the genocide of a group,” he writes, “the population orchestrated a government to destroy a group” (Lindsay, p. 22). Murder State explains how a minority perverted a majority, and how vigilantes committed massacre after massacre while the larger public responded with inaction, apathy, or tacit support. Murder State places more emphasis on Sacramento than D.C., but Lindsay demonstrates how this “genocide organized from the periphery” (p. 14) succeeded in capturing certain kinds of federal assistance—namely, militia reimbursements and U.S. Army campaigns. Although military officers were typically more restrained than militia volunteers, they sided with citizen-settlers in interethnic conflicts. A sanguinary cycle followed a four-step script: 1) an inebriated white man committed a heinous, unprovoked bodily crime against an Indian; 2) in return, a small group of Indian men took personal revenge; 3) a militia organized to “exterminate” the entire “guilty tribe” in retaliation; 4) the army then intervened to end the “Indian war”—and ended up replicating exterminatory violence.
\textit{Murder State} has a tripartite thematic structure. Part one covers racism and Manifest Destiny (reminiscent of Reginald Horsman) and takes place largely outside California. Lindsay shows how U.S. emigrants arrived in the Far West with preconceived loathing, fear, and hatred of Indians, whom they imagined as hostile yet passively doomed to swift extinction. In part two, Lindsay covers direct actors, starting with state politicians who created the Orwellian “Act for the Government and Protection of Indians” (1850). A Black Code by another name, this act empowered citizen-settlers to kidnap and indenture laborers, which inevitably involved raping and killing. Lawmakers in Sacramento made it judicially impossible for Indians to seek redress for such violence. Towns and counties authorized and paid for the pillage of people by vote and taxation. In Lindsay’s analogy, local governments acted like homeowners’ associations, enacting democracy by and for white property owners. Alcohol and humor served as additional social lubricants that allowed volunteer militias—“roving death squads”—to go beyond normal moral bounds. Part three considers the auxiliary roles of the press and the federal government. In response to grassroots genocide, San Francisco’s \textit{Daily Alta California} printed condemnations, but most local newspapers egged on the killers. As for federal “bystanders,” they forsook their California Indian wards at every turn: failing to ratify eighteen treaties signed in 1851–52, failing to feed and clothe refugees on temporary military reservations, and failing to stop the slaughter. By the conclusion of the Modoc War (California’s so-called “last Indian war”) in 1873, every level of society and every branch of government had been implicated in the killing.

Arriving four years after \textit{Murder State}, Madley’s \textit{An American Genocide} covers the identical topic, period, and region, albeit with more detail and less analysis. Given the similarities, it is striking that only Madley has garnered national media attention. Why? Timing helps: the election year 2016 was “better” than 2012 for sharing histories of racial violence—a year when newsfeeds broadcast videos of police killings, not to mention hate speech from the GOP presidential nominee. There’s also a promotional gap between the two historians. Lindsay, a professor at Sacramento State with public-school training and a land-grant publisher, gives extensive credit to generations of scholars, including Jack Norton, before deferentially offering his contribution. Madley, a UCLA professor with Ivy League support, glosses over forerunning scholars, relegating Lindsay’s 400-page monograph to a single sentence—barely pausing from proclaiming five times in the first twenty pages that his work is the “first” of its kind.

Technically, Madley has written the first comprehensive account of white men killing indigenous men—the androcidal component of California’s genocide—from 1846 to 1873. The research by itself deserves a prize. Madley’s content-centric approach makes for tough reading—monotonously nauseating—but his aim is prosecutorial rather than literary. By treating the Golden
State as a whole and by moving chronologically, Madley accumulates overwhelming proof. He documents massacres overlooked by earlier historians. Instead of motive, Madley focuses on method. Better than Lindsay, he explains how the twenty-four major volunteer state-militia campaigns between 1850 and 1861 were arranged and financed, how the U.S. Army collaborated, and how army regulars took the lead during and after the Civil War. His prodigiously researched tome reads like a deposition on illegitimate war. Madley uses the term “pedagogic violence” (borrowed without attribution from Enrique Dussel) to describe how settlers justified their preemptive attacks on noncombatants, and their punitive “chastisements” of starving Indians who took livestock. He emphasizes the personal guilt of killers and their sponsors, including elected officials. With the notable exception of the short (1860–62) term of John Downey, who condemned the “indiscriminate slaughter,” California’s revolving-door governors come across as mercenaries (Madley, p. 287).

Unfortunately, Madley resorts to exaggeration when his mountainous pyre of evidence requires none. He takes the worst and makes it “worser.” His key descriptor, used more than twenty times, is “killing machine”—wording that evokes the Final Solution. This seems inap propriate to the author’s own argument, because the 1948 definition of genocide—which hinges on intent to kill rather than numbers killed—requires neither efficiency nor effectivenes s. Although Californians did create an apparatus that made mass killing legally and socially permissible, it hardly resembled a piece of high-performance Bavarian engineering. In Madley’s depiction, California’s volunteer militias seem to presage Einsatzgruppen, whereas previous historians likened them to unruly gangs of crapulous louts. That these swaggering libertines wreaked havoc with the imprimatur of local and state governments, acquired some of their Colts and Winchesters from federal programs, and were eligible for reimbursements after the fact from Congress—are all further indictments of U.S. herrenvolk democracy in the nineteenth century. But none of this, though reprehensible, merits comparison to occupied Europe. California does not loom large in Carroll P. Kakel’s The American West and the Nazi East (2011) or Edward B. Westermann’s Hitler’s Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars (2016). The Holocaust histories that come to my mind are Bloodlands (2010) and Black Earth (2015) by Timothy Snyder, who stresses how statelessness enables violence. The opening half of the California genocide—after the U.S.–Mexico War, during the U.S. sectional crisis, and before the overland telegraph and transcontinental railroad—was a time of weak, diffuse governmental authority; and that weakness surely belongs in any explanation of the killing. Even after the Civil War, appointees of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs were no match for anti-statist locals in California.4

Where Lindsay sees federal complicity in genocide, often in the form of inaction, Madley sees culpability through action. To make his bolder claim, Madley marshals evidence from four groups of state actors:
• U.S. Indian agents who presided over “institutionalized malnutrition and lethal starvation” (Madley, p. 258);
• U.S. soldiers and federalized California volunteers who committed atrocities;
• the Senate, which categorically and unprecedentedly refused to ratify any treaties with California tribes; and
• Congress and the Executive, in providing arms and ammunition to state militias, in granting bounty land warrants to California militiamen, and in approving reimbursements for California’s “war debt.”

The evidence is not without ambiguity. One can find counterexamples of agents who acted as protectors, and of soldiers who exhibited restraint. Even Congress may be less censurable than Madley contends. For example, he presents the 1855 Land Bounty Act as an incentive for Indian killers in California without explaining that this nationwide program was primarily designed to reward the families of veterans of the War of 1812. In reference to appropriations, Madley claims that Congress “sanctioned,” “catalyzed,” “rejuvenated,” “emphatically endorsed,” “resoundingly underscored,” and “generously financed” the “hunting and indiscriminate killing of California Indians” (Madley, pp. 251, 289–90, 320–21). By itself, reimbursement was not exceptional. From 1828 to 1886, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, U.S. territories and states petitioned successfully for refunds for expenses and damages related to “suppressing” Indian “hostilities” and “outbreaks,” including direct payments to volunteer militias. The national government was liable for such tort claims because of its policy of treating tribes as dependent nations. Before Congress relieved itself of indemnification claims regarding “Indian wars” and “depredations,” California received the most money over the shortest period. Nonetheless, the Golden State did not get all its requested funds, and Congress did not respond in timely, reliable fashion. This ad hoc legal system had the effect of rewarding genocidal killers, but not everywhere and not always.5

Even in frontier California, genocide occurred unevenly. The worst of it took place in the northwestern counties. Many of the most experienced and despicable killers—white men who shot Indians on sight, like vermin—were Oregonians who came to California with specific anti-Indian hatred because of the Whitman Massacre and the Cayuse War. Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee by Gray Whaley (2010) complements An American Genocide and especially Murder State. Whaley’s concept of “folk imperialism” deepens Lindsay’s depiction of popular genocide. A different historiography applies to coastal California south from Monterey, where the Spanish mission system had been systematically violent in its own way. After secularization in the 1830s, surviving emancipados were impoverished and exploited, yet partially integrated into Mexico society as workers at rachos and colonias. When Anglo Americans seized control of Alta California, they did not “chastise” these former Mission Indians. Militias intended to exterminate independent Indian men on valuable
“unclaimed” land, not all Indians. In Southern California, where cattle and fruit substituted for gold, and where Californios outnumbered Anglos until the 1860s, the local economy relied on Indian wage labor. Such geographical nuances get buried in An American Genocide due to the book’s chronological rigidity and legal orientation.

By turning the Golden State into a uniform box—a coffin—Madley cannot see out, though he urges other scholars to look. California after U.S. conquest represents the extreme end of a spectrum of anti-Indian violence that stained the American land for three centuries. Historians know more about how and when a “society with slaves” became a “slave society” (to use Ira Berlin’s terms) than how and when a “settler-colonial state” became a “murder state.” John Grenier’s The First Way of War (2005) explicates the British colonial origins of the U.S. tradition of “extirpative war,” which included both privatized scalp hunters and irregular military units that specialized in destroying Indian noncombatants and their resources. Grenier’s analysis needs to be pushed westward. Working with eighteenth-century sources from the Ohio River Valley, Jeffrey Ostler has recovered Native perceptions—and allegations—of this genocidal tendency. Rather than another monograph that tries to settle the “American genocide debate,” we need a comparative, continental history—one including northern Mexico and western Canada—one of the political economy of extirpative violence. In addition to the rationales for seizing indigenous land and removing indigenes, there were also sometimes monetary incentives to simply kill. In various western U.S. territories and northern Mexican states, governing officials outsourced murder to scalp hunters through land bounties or cash rewards. Building on Lindsay, Madley, and the edited collection by Alexander Laban Hinton et al., Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America (2014), future historians should integrate the metaphysics of Indian hating with the capitalist structures of Indian killing.

“Settler-colonialism is inherently eliminatory but not invariably genocidal,” writes Patrick Wolfe. American invaders rarely had opportunity and incentive to exterminate whole indigenous populations. In northern California in the 1850s, they had both. The incentive came from mineral discoveries; the opportunity was provided by the rapid influx of well-armed single white male citizens into remote, rugged locales populated by diverse, subdivided Native groups who lived without horses, firearms, or warrior societies. In this situation, gun-toting American men probably would have committed atrocities in the absence of encouragement from the state assembly (which in 1854 forbade the sale of firearms and ammunition to Indians). Claiming and defending land with deadly force was for male U.S. settlers a birthright of democratic citizenship. Unintentionally, perhaps, An American Genocide contributes to the U.S. gun debate. It is hard to imagine a more devastating depiction of the ruinous potential of “a well regulated militia.”
Given the magnitude of Madley’s research, it may be unfair to fault him for sidestepping settler-colonial theory, masculinity studies, and the topic of sexual violence against women. But certainly this book about mortality wants for epidemiology. This criticism has been leveled by Gary Clayton Anderson, Madley’s rival in investigative assiduousness and interpretive tendentiousness. Anderson’s *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian* (2014) contains a chapter on the Golden State that rebuts *An American Genocide* in its dissertation form. Anderson objects to Madley’s legal definitions, demographic estimates, and murder counts. I agree with Anderson that, of currently available legal terms, “ethnic cleansing” most accurately describes U.S. policy and practice toward Indians across the long nineteenth century—although I’m baffled by his denial that the California case does not meet the definition of genocide; it’s the exception that seemingly proves his point. Anderson is more convincing on the research. As he notes, Madley is the latest in a long line of scholars to uncritically accept the historical demography of California Indians by anthropologist Sherburne Cook. Anderson derides Cook for his admission that these numbers were “personal estimates, based upon outright interpolation.” Using archival sources, Anderson argues that Native populations declined dramatically in the couple of decades before the Gold Rush due to malaria and smallpox. However, Anderson’s causative distinction becomes problematic after 1848, when many Indians got deathly sick and hungry while fleeing from killers. Epidemiological historians such as Paul Kelton have shown how disease, violence, and enslavement operated together, and how blunt concepts like “virgin soil” and “genocide” fail as monocausal explanations for Amerindian demographic collapse. In any case, Anderson is rightly skeptical of Madley’s main (and often only) source for murder tallies: the perpetrators. As Anderson says, bands of socially disconnected men who preyed on others for status and honor and who consumed large quantities of alcohol were inevitably “prone to braggadocio” (Anderson, p. 216).

Madley’s cast of killers includes terrible specimens of humanity, but some deserve more nuanced portrayal. I’ll pull out one example: Henry M. Judah, a U.S. Army officer who served as acting superintendent of a fort-cum-reservation. In Lindsay’s *Murder State*, Judah makes a cameo as a well-meaning but ineffectual figure who, stymied in his efforts to care for massacre victims, relies on the generosity of settlers to make up for federal neglect. In Anderson’s *Ethnic Cleansing and the American Indian*, Judah is heroically active, investigating atrocities, feeding and clothing refugees, mediating between settlers and Indians, driving off predatory miners, and freeing bound laborers. Finally, in Madley’s *An American Genocide*, Judah is Janus-faced: one month preventing attacks on Indians, the next month waging war with a combined force of soldiers and volunteers. George Crook remembered one such campaign: Captain Judah, normally a “demigog” [sic], was deliriously drunk and barely in charge
of the shambolic venture. Who was the real Henry Judah? Probably all the above—a personification of the U.S. involvement in California’s genocide.

Readers who endure Madley’s hellish narrative are rewarded with seven sprawling appendices of death data—nearly 200 pages. The author divides the first three tables between reports of “nonspecific numbers” of Indians killed, fewer than five, and five or more. For the nonspecific reports, Madley assigns numbers to words and phrases to come up with mortality “estimates.” Thus “a good many” equals ten while “a great many” equals twenty, and a “sad havoc” somehow equals one. Appendix 5, “Selected Massacres with Contested Death Tolls,” should likewise give any cliometrician pause, for the low and high numbers are often extremely divergent: 600 killed or maybe 20; 800 dead or perhaps 60; 1,000 slaughtered or possibly 120. Madley’s appendices might have been more useful as an online database; as a reader, I would have traded them for a data-derived violence-density map.

Numerical data raise moral questions: Would it be any less catastrophic if Anderson’s low approximation of 2,000 killed is more accurate than Madley’s high guesstimate of 16,094? By quantifying genocidal violence, do historians reinforce rhetorical violence? As Jean M. O’Brien shows in Firsting and Lasting (2010), the American script for the “last wild Indian” was composed long before Ishi was unwillingly cast as a California reality star in 1911. Although Madley does include a few heart-rending eyewitness accounts by survivors, the Natives in his history are overwhelmingly nameless, voiceless murder victims. To counter this effect, he reproduces—without theorizing, puzzlingly—several photographic portraits by Edward S. Curtis. Madley presumably agrees with Shamoon Zamir’s The Gift of the Face (2016), which interprets The North American Indian (1907–30) as a record of Native agency and “creative perdurance” rather than an instrument of “collective vanishing.” But Madley’s illustrations do little to alter his overall picture. Although readers know that California Indians persisted—he dedicates his book to them—the structure of the narrative permits little space for resilience, adaptation, and ethnogenesis. Read in isolation, the death-tallying text gives the impression that scholarship on Native California has come full circle to the point before Albert L. Hurtado wrote his then-revisionist Indian Survival on the California Frontier (1988); the “terminal narrative” (to borrow a phrase from Michael V. Wilcox) has returned.

After the enlargement and then the reduction of Richard White’s “middle ground,” the historiography on indigenous America pivots between stories of Indian power and Indian powerlessness, with the California genocide now serving as the antithesis of the Comanche empire. Less totalizing narratives remain available—evidenced, in fact, by recent histories of western massacres. Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh’s Massacre at Camp Grant (2007), Ari Kelman’s A Misplaced Massacre (2013), Andrew R. Graybill’s The Red and the White (2014), and David W. Grua’s Surviving Wounded Knee (2016) all emphasize the role
of survivors. William J. Bauer Jr.’s *California through Native Eyes* (2016) uses Depression-era oral history interviews to recover Pomo and Owens Valley Paiute narratives of violent resistance—not just survival—to nineteenth-century genocide. Akin to Gerald Vizenor’s use of “survivance,” Bauer shows how place-based stories about violence can be empowering, and how local persistence can be a kind of power. Similarly, Tony Platt’s *Grave Matters* (2011) considers one Yurok village in Humboldt County, and moves the narrative from genocide and grave-robbing to repatriation and sovereignty.

In Madley’s telling, violence is a one-way, world-shattering force. His killer-first narrative does not even allow room for Native perpetrators—although the book’s prefatory massacre was committed by a large expeditionary force, led by John C. Frémont, that included nine Lenapes and two unidentified local Indians. Are such actors incidental to American genocide, or constituent? I’m reminded of the Oregon Paiute scout called Louie who appears in Boyd Cothran’s eloquent and masterfully concise *Remembering the Modoc War* (2014). Attempting to receive a pension and citizenship, Louie petitioned the government with testimonial support from U.S. Army officers. Louie was one of some fifty Natives who applied for benefits as reward for aiding the defeat of the Modoc people. Were these indigenous veterans small, redundant cogs in the killing machine? Or does the metaphor break down? Ned Blackhawk’s *Violence over the Land* (2006) and Karl Jacoby’s *Shadows at Dawn* (2008) have demonstrated how historians can interpret violence committed by Indians in the context of settler colonialism without diminishing the trauma of colonized peoples. Surely it is possible to shine a spotlight on California’s genocide without reanimating, as Madley practically does, a prelapsarian image of Native California.

Ultimately, the greatest importance of *An American Genocide* and *Murder State* may be in education and politics. Madley and Lindsay should compel a belated revision of U.S. history textbooks used in colleges nationwide, and of social studies textbooks assigned in middle and high schools in California. One can imagine #NativeLivesMatter activists using information from these books to demand commemoration of massacre sites, or the renaming of the University of California’s Hastings School of Law, or reparations for existing California tribes, or federal recognition for non-tribal Native communities—or, at the very least, an apology from Sacramento. Such concessions could serve as remedies to the flawed land-claims process that played out after the 1928 California Indian Jurisdictional Act.

Within academia, though, the legalistic question of genocide in California is no longer generative. Lindsay and Madley have closed the case. Going forward, the broader subject of racial violence in the Golden State seems more interesting in comparison to the U.S. South than Rwanda or Cambodia. As Stacey L. Smith details in *Freedom’s Frontier* (2013), California before the Civil
War was a free state in name only. Where one historian sees a state-supported genocide program that facilitated slavery, another might see a state-supported slave system that facilitated genocide. This latter interpretation accords with Andrés Reséndez’s *The Other Slavery* (2016). Comparing the West to the South has the added advantage of explicating other kinds of violence. Ken Gonzales-Day’s *Lynching in the West, 1850–1935* (2006), Scott Zesch’s *The Chinatown War* (2012), and William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb’s *Forgotten Dead* (2013) have moved the southern historiography of lynching westward, where so many victims were Native, Latino, and Chinese. As in the South, race-based violence happened judicially as well as extralegally. In several books, the late Clare V. McKanna demonstrated that California Indians and Californios were more likely to be convicted and executed than similarly accused Anglos.

In the geography of personal violence, frontier California rivals the postbellum South as the most homicidal in U.S. history. Randolph Roth summarized the mortal facts of Golden State noir in *American Homicide* (2012). The murder capital of frontier California was not any mining camp, but El Pueblo de Los Ángeles. From the 1840s through the 1870s, L.A.’s homicide rate was on a par with Ciudad Juárez in the early twentieth-first century. Before his untimely death, Eric Monkkonen compiled the historic data, and now John Mack Faragher has done the archive-based storytelling. Faragher’s *Eternity Street* (2016) is slyly revisionist—neither a story of lawmen and outlaws, nor conquerors and conquered. Faragher narrates a multicultural borderlands milieu where state power (Mexican, then U.S.) was weak, and where honor-based male codes of violence were strong. He recounts Californios lynching Americanos, Southerners shooting Northerners, whites and Latinos stringing up Cantonese men, and, time after time, men abusing and murdering women they once desired. Of all the bloody dynamics described by Faragher, the one that haunted me most was intra-indigenous. Former Mission Indians—citizens under Mexican and U.S. law—found themselves trapped in a two-tier day-labor economy. On weekends, when cheap local brandy overflowed from cantinas on Calle de los Negros, a down-and-out *emancipado* more than occasionally committed murder by ritually mashing the head of a fellow Native, evicting his victim’s spirit with angry blows. The worst thing about violence in twice-conquered California may be that “genocide” does not capture the half of it.

Jared Farmer teaches history at Stony Brook University.

4. See Kevin Adams and Khal Schneider, “‘Washington Is a Long Way Off’: The ‘Round
Valley War’ and the Limits of Federal Power on a California Indian Reservation,” Pacific
5. See “Indian Wars, Their Cost, and Civil Expenditures,” in Report on Indians Taxed and
Indians Untaxed in the United States (except Alaska) at the Eleventh Census: 1890 (Washington:
GPO, 1894), 641–44.
6. Jeffrey Ostler, “‘To Extirpate the Indians’: An Indigenous Consciousness of Genocide in
the Ohio Valley and Lower Great Lakes, 1750s–1810,” William & Mary Quarterly 72 (October
8. Anderson and Madley continue their debate in a roundtable in Western Historical
Quarterly 47 (Winter 2016).
10. See Clifford E. Trafzer and Michelle Lorimer, “Silencing California Indian Genocide in
11. See Michael F. Magliari, “Free State Slavery: Bound Indian Labor and Slave Trafficking