Colonialism and Race in America
John Wood Sweet

One of the things that motivated me to begin research on the topic of race and colonialism was the importance of understanding how we got where we are. Today, racial categories are taken for granted, seen as immutable. Race is viewed as an irreducible problem, something we're stuck with. I think it's important to think about how race became obvious in this way and what in our history has made it seem that way.

The deeper I get into the study of American history, the more I'm convinced we need to better understand the colonial roots of race in the North. We often take the Civil War as the central drama of American history, pitting the South as the bastion of slavery against the North as the land of liberty. This polarity exaggerates the differences between the two regions. Settlers in the North, as well as in the South, displaced native peoples, enslaved Africans and divided their society by hierarchies of race. The abolition of slavery in the North after the American Revolution did not lead to the development of an egalitarian society. The American North emerged in the early years of the Republic as a place where people of color would be free, but not equal.

It is tempting to think that someone talking about "Indians" in 1730 meant the same thing as a person talking in 1630, or 1830. But that's not necessarily true. Before encountering Europeans, the indigenous peoples of North America didn't have any name to describe themselves as a group. "They have often asked me, Why we call them Indians, Natives, etc.," wrote the leader of the first English settlement at Providence: "And understanding the reason, they will call themselves Indians in opposition to the English."

So there is a moment when racial labels are being explained to-and appropriated by-native groups. But what exactly "Indian" means in the 1630s is not entirely clear in that passage. In the most localized setting, a racial label, say "Indian" vs. "Anglo" or "white" could differentiate simply two different cultural groups in contact with each other-and this could vary at the village level.

Interaction with English people, however, contributed to broaden patterns of racial identities among both natives and Africans throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, in the seventeenth century, though the term "Indian" was in use, the Naragansett continued to think of themselves as members of the Naragansett Confederacy, as members of local villages, as members of lineage descent groups. They
continued to fight wars with other local Indian groups, for instance, the Pequot and the Wampanoags. All three of those groups had lived in the area for thousands of years; they shared a common language, ceremonies, gender systems, agricultural modes. They described themselves in very similar ways, though they thought of themselves as different. Their political life was defined in relation to each other and to the English in terms of those identities.

After the English conquest, native political identities in New England were dramatically re-structured. Many local communities disintegrated, and people tended to group together—either in enclaves, like the Naragansett in Charles Town, Rhode Island—or in the cities. In the cities, they tend to be known as Indians and only Indians; but in the enclaves they tend to be known as the Naragansett Indians or the Pequot, or the Mashpee. Significantly, this notion of "tribe" was one that had not existed in that way until the late 17th century; it was a new political category.

By the time of the American Revolution, new racial identities emerged. This had a lot to do with development of Christianity among Indians and native American Christian networks. The native peoples of New England began to organize together, to communicate with Iroquois and other native peoples across the English frontier. They developed a very powerful sense of common cause as "Indians" with the Iroquois with whom they shared much less culturally. The Oneida were interested in English culture and Christianity, but they didn't want English people living near them. So they thought they would have Indian Christians provide a model of that type of life. They invited the Naragansett and so-called seven tribes of New England to move to what is now upstate New York, to settle the land and provide an example of a Christian community. That is much closer to approaching a continental consciousness of identity and alliance with other native peoples than an abstract sense of race. It is an identity based largely on the word "Indian" in contrast to the term "English," rather than a specific cultural heritage or historical circumstance—an oppositional category.

In terms of racial categories associated with Africans, "negro" was the most common label. "African" tends to be used to lend a more dignified air, by both colonists and Africans, as in "my African brethren." "Black" tends also to be used, and "colored" tends to be used increasingly in the early 19th century. We also see some more exotic terms: "Ethi-opian" is appropriated at certain points as a term for black or African, presumably because of the Old Testament. So there are different terms available. There are also some intermediate categories, like "mustee" or "mulatto," which increasingly fall into disuse by the turn of the 19th century.
One thing that really interested me was how Rhode Islanders and Africans had developed a consciousness of themselves as African Americans and as black. It is quite obvious that enslaved persons in an English household, kidnapped from a different continent, would think of themselves as different. They were treated as different, and would probably sense some alliance with local blacks of the same status. One of the concerns I had was how race and nation become conflated progressively in ways parallel to the Indian case.

By the 1790s there's a clear sense of identity among the free African community in Newport, and in Philadelphia and in Boston. You see a clear sense of themselves as Americans of African descent—a sense of common cause with their "colored brethren," which included three groups-other local blacks, the enslaved of the southern colonies, and West Africans. Members of the Free African Union Society of Newport and Providence were Africans newly freed and living very modestly, but having a deep Christian piety, austere piety, and very deep bourgeois values. Their goal was to become respectable and put the lie to white racism. Their hope was that if they acted respectable they would overcome white prejudice. So it's a long-term strategy that they have for achieving integration into American society, a deferred claim to citizenship. They felt they were weighed down by the "curse of God" against their pagan ancestors and that his righteous wrath accounted for their present economic misery, the suffering of their countrymen who were still enslaved, the devastation of the slave trade in West Africa. They prayed and fasted, and held annual days of humiliation. This shows an expansive notion of racial identity—and an extraordinary way of thinking about their place as Africans in America.

Racism is full of paradoxes. One general theme I've noticed in this country is that as people of color became more and more like the English in terms of religion, culture and work, racial categories assumed much more importance. This was a real paradox for me. You would have thought that as groups of people began to share common ways of life, they would see themselves as increasingly similar to each other: the melting pot theory. In fact, I found the reverse.

As one might expect, through processes of religious acculturation, natives and Africans blended their traditions with the Christianity they adopted. But they didn't think of it in these terms. The Narragansett—

who by the 1760s had an independent Native American church—

talked about having rejecting their pagan past. They talked about other Indians as pagans. They also pointed out that the British themselves in their past had been heathens.
But the English found it very difficult to recognize the Narragansett as authentic Christians. The Reverend Samson Occom had been converted to Christianity and become a minister, toured England and raised money to found the Indian school that became Dartmouth College. He bitterly resented the way he was treated by English people who were just amazed that an Indian could be a Christian and treated him as a spectacle—in his words, as "gazing stock." An English Bostonian merchant visiting the school misses seeing one of the particularly pious students and he wrote how sorry he was to have "missed seeing the image of Christ in this tawny man." So there was a sense of the uncanny among the English that an Indian could become a Christian. Others said that the only way to convert Indians was with "powder and balls." So some English felt threatened by the Christian Indians.

English missionaries among Narragansett Christians were telling them how to revise their worship, focusing on matters of style that were otherwise contested among many English congregations. A prospective missionary came to visit the Narragansett Indian church in 1768 and described their practices, showing that it was very similar to other evangelical Baptist churches in the area. One native man accosted him: "So what do you think about our worship?" And the young Englishman replied that while it was good in general, they should not all pray at the same time and should sing in harmony. And the Indian man replied: "This is the way that we Indians have to get to Heaven. You white people have another way. I don't know if your way will bring you there, but I know that our way will bring us there." So here is a sense that their religious styles—from the perspective of an objective historian—to all appearances, are all in the nature of English culture. The categories and concepts, however, are racialized and thought of in terms of Indian vs. white. A paradoxical situation.

This is in some ways the paradox between democracy and white supremacy in the American republic. There is powerful evidence that as Africans became free in the early years of the republic, and as English settlers demanded a more egalitarian polity, it becomes increasingly important for them to differentiate themselves from blacks.

The paradox about white supremacy and democracy is that society between the 1730s and the 1830s—Anglo-American society—becomes increasingly hierarchical by class. In 1730, the English population of North America was very egalitarian according to standard indexes of wealth distribution and access, and social mobility. But by the 1830s it's the world of Karl Marx. You have classes increasingly self-conscious, increasingly opposed; and social mobility becomes increasingly constrained. Poverty becomes an important issue for larger numbers of working class white people. At the same time, in the 1730s, Anglo-American society is a deferential society marked by different ranks of
people. You were divided by rank, that was part of a just social order. When you walked down the street you bowed to your superiors, you received bows from your inferiors. Hats would be doffed, you would step aside or not step aside. Your public display represented your status and your relationship to others in the hierarchy.

By the 1830s there was a notion that all whites should be equal, that all should have the right to vote. Displays of rank and distinction became anathema to Americans. But precisely at this time you have Jim Crow-style segregation being enforced with increasing violence. There are major paradoxes in the ways in which as the lives of blacks, whites and Native Americans become increasingly intertwined, they become increasingly divergent.

What I've tried to show in my work is how the logic of this white supremacist system emerged out of the logic of colonialism.

John Wood Sweet is Mellon Post-doctoral Fellow in African American Studies at the Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power and History at Johns Hopkins, and Assistant Professor of History at Catholic University. He recently completed his dissertation at Princeton University on Bodies Politic: Colonialism, Race, and the Emergence of the American North. Rhode Island, 1720-1820.