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# Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings

Richard White

SINCE I wrote *The Middle Ground*, it has taken on something of a life of its own. I really do believe that once a book is published, it stands in relation to intelligent readers the way an exam stands in relation to a professor. The refrain professors tell students—"I have no way of judging you on what you *intended to say*, I can only grade what you wrote"—can come back to haunt professorial authors. What I intended to say in *The Middle Ground* may be of some interest to you, yet what matters is the text: what I wrote. I am also enfeebled as an authority about *The Middle Ground* because of the thesis of the book. This book is, among other things, about mutual misunderstandings and the ways that new meanings are derived from them. It is about the virtues of misreading, which puts an author who accuses his readers of misreading in something of an awkward position. I think that there have been misreadings of the book, but one of my points is that such misreadings can be fruitful in their own right.

The phrase "middle ground," I realize now in ways that I did not really fully comprehend when writing the book, had twinned meanings. First, I was trying to describe a process that arose from the "willingness of those who . . . [sought] to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner's cultural premises." These actors sought out cultural "congruences, either perceived or actual," that "often seemed—and, indeed, were—results of misunderstandings or accidents." Such interpretations could be ludicrous, but it did not matter. "Any congruence, no matter how tenuous, can be put to work and can take on a life of its own if it is accepted by both sides." The middle ground is thus a process of mutual and creative misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup>

Second, I was trying to describe—and this attempt took up the bulk of the book—a quite particular historical space that was the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991), 52–53.

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outcome of this process. This place was the *pays d'en haut*. Because the middle ground is itself a spatial metaphor, the phrase has allowed a conflation between the process of expedient and creative misunderstanding and the actual space that I was discussing: the *pays d'en haut*, or the Upper Country of French Canada.

So, do I think that the middle ground as a process is replicable in other places and other times? Yes, I do. Is every instance where academics find this process at work the equivalent of the Upper Country? No, but sometimes other academics might think so. I was fairly specific about the elements that were necessary for the construction of such a space: a rough balance of power, mutual need or a desire for what the other possesses, and an inability by either side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to change. Force and violence are hardly foreign to the process of creating and maintaining a middle ground, but the critical element is mediation.

Other scholars have identified the process at work in places about which I know relatively little. I have absolutely no desire to become chief judge in the court of the middle ground. I think that the process is, if not a universal aspect of human communication and interaction, a common one. I am thus more than willing to think such scholarly sightings are correct.

The middle ground as process is quite common, yet the construction of a historical space in which the process becomes the basis of relations between distinct peoples is probably less common. This construction of space occurred in other places in North America, the region I know best, but it did not occur everywhere. There are instances where the process can be evident, but the space may fail to emerge. The space depended on the creation of an infrastructure that could support and expand the process, and this infrastructure was, I argue, possible only when there was a rough balance of power and a mutual need between the parties involved.

The middle ground that the French created in Canada, for example, did not penetrate much beyond the Mississippi, though the French themselves did. These Frenchmen were, in effect, graduates of the school of the middle ground. They appealed to Indian beliefs and employed the cultural tools that had helped regulate relations in the *pays d'en haut*. What they failed to create was the infrastructure of empire—from missions, to posts, to a network of alliance chiefs, to a set of mutually comprehensible and oft-repeated rituals—that is the imperial middle ground as a historical space.

The story of Henri de Bourgmont can carry my point. Bourgmont had been commander in Detroit in 1706, when the numerous nations Antoine Laumet de Lamothe Cadillac had gathered there exploded into the internecine violence that Bourgmont and the French alliance were supposed to prevent. Cadillac had established the post with his usual grand ambition and inattention to practical detail. He had left Bourgmont in charge, and Bourgmont had failed miserably. The resulting bloodbath threatened to wreck the Indian alliance that New France depended on. Fearing disgrace, demotion, or worse, and in love with the wife of another man, he deserted and pursued his lover into the forests near Lake Erie.<sup>2</sup>

Disorder in the French empire was always unregulated life in the woods. Some Frenchmen, the *coureurs de bois*, excelled at it; other Frenchmen, such as officials in Montreal or Quebec, feared it. Bourgmont, reported to be “living in the woods like a savage,” had not only failed in his duty but also become a danger to imperial order. Bourgmont was living in the woods with Madame Tichenet (also known as Elizabeth Couc, or La Chenette, but best known as Madame Montour). She was what would later be called *métis*, the daughter of a European father and an Indian mother. She would build her own reputation as a dangerous woman with a voracious sexual appetite that consumed and discarded men. Cadillac claimed she had had one hundred men, Indian and European, and left them all. She threatened not only the men she loved and left but also the careful patriarchal model of empire that the French and their allies crafted. She would, when her liaison with Bourgmont was over, travel to Albany and become a power broker along the borders where the French and English competed for influence, trading partners, and allies. She became a person much more widely known and influential than Bourgmont.<sup>3</sup>

Bourgmont made his way west, supposedly in ardent pursuit of a Missouri Indian woman, and married among that tribe and had a son, whom neighboring peoples called Little Missouri. Bourgmont’s domestic arrangements helped rehabilitate his imperial standing. He became a man who, with the aid of his relations, had traveled up the Missouri and knew more about the Missouri River country and its peoples than any other Frenchman. Having an outlaw with considerable influence among neighboring peoples created significant unease among the French authorities in the Illinois country, yet the French did not seem

<sup>2</sup> Frank Norall, *Bourgmont, Explorer of the Missouri, 1698–1725* (Lincoln, Neb., 1988), 3–17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17 (quotation, 16).

to have tried very hard to capture him. In time Bourgmont's service in imperial wars and knowledge of the Missouri country made him an asset to France.

Bourgmont was reintegrated as an agent of the French empire, and in 1723 he was trying to extend a common set of largely Indian forms—calumets, councils, the ordering of peoples as kin with the French as fathers and the Indians as children—on which the French alliance depended west of the Missouri River. Where Bourgmont was going, however, the infrastructure of this common world did not exist. There were neither French Jesuits nor French garrisons; there were no licensed traders. There were none of the common meanings of the alliance and none of its history of success against common enemies such as the Iroquois and the English. And arrayed against Bourgmont were years of hostility along the prairie-plains margins and the ambitions of other Frenchmen and other Indians. Bourgmont could achieve a temporary success—mediating peace, ending slaving in which the French were involved, and weaning the plains Apache away from the Spanish—but it did not outlast Bourgmont, who returned to France with a French title and a French wife awaiting him. With him gone, and no Frenchmen with gifts and mediation to sustain it, the peace Bourgmont negotiated on the Great Plains fell apart. The French abandoned Fort Orleans, which was his post on the Missouri near the Little Osages and the Missouri.<sup>4</sup> The Apache suffered the most. They resumed their long, slow, stubborn retreat from the plains. The middle ground as a process existed, but not the middle ground as a space.

There is, finally, a scholarly aspect of the middle ground that I have come to appreciate in the last dozen years. Historians know of the distant pasts of many colonized people largely through their interactions with colonizers. If the colonizers could not find common ground or meaningfully communicate with the people they lived among, traded with, fought with, and had sexual relations with, then on what grounds can historians make such a claim? If scholars assert that colonizers didn't get it, is it the assumption that modern historians somehow

<sup>4</sup> French missionary activity took place among people who hunted to the west, such as the Quapaws, but the missions proper remained close to the Mississippi (see Kathleen DuVal, "A Good Relationship, and Commerce': The Native Political Economy of the Arkansas River Valley," *Early American Studies* 1, no. 1 [Spring 2003]: 75–77). Extrait des Instructions données à M. Périer, Sept. 30, 1726, in Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de L'Amérique Septentrionale (1614–1754)* . . . , vol. 5, *Première formation d'une chaîne de postes entre le fleuve Saint-Laurent et le Golfe du Mexique (1683–1724)* (Paris, 1883), 452; Willard H. Rollings, *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains* (Columbia, Mo., 1992), 91, 117.

know the *it* that their own sources got wrong? If the colonizers had no valid knowledge of the other and never produced a common world, then how can modern historians, who, in effect, look into the colonizers' eyes and see the Indians reflected there, claim to know much better? Scholars might know more about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indians than the Europeans of the period because of alternative paths to knowledge: scholars can talk to modern descendants of the people in question who somehow embody unchanged aspects of the worlds the French and other colonizers encountered centuries ago. But there are several problems. First, this method assumes aspects of an unchanged tradition among descendants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century peoples who were either preliterate or only becoming literate and whose own oral traditions have been disrupted by epidemics, war, dispossession, and massive population loss. Second, asserting such a claim means indulging in what I consider the main fault of so much Indian history: marking Indian peoples a people of tradition, outside the realm of the modern, as if they had no role in forging modernity and as if their history had no part in it. And, finally, embedded in this claim is the notion that historians can understand these supposedly unchanged portions of Indian cultures though Europeans who lived among Indian peoples, often quite intimately, centuries ago, could not.

I do not suggest that these colonizers were modern ethnologists or that they had sophisticated understandings of Indian cultures, though sometimes they did. I argue that they had the ability to establish avenues of communication and creativity through the unlikely path of misunderstanding. They created with Indian peoples mutually comprehensible worlds. I do not contend that middle grounds occur everywhere, but I do demonstrate that such worlds arose. Biased and incomplete information and creative misunderstanding may be the most common basis of human actions.

There is, I think, a culturalist disease of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that amounts to a fascination with purity and otherness to which I intended *The Middle Ground* to be a partial antidote. The book assumes that people are not necessarily stupid, simple, or parochial; contact situations created not only violence, xenophobia, and, as the warden in *Cool Hand Luke* put it, a "failure to communicate," but also new cultural formations and new understandings. The warden's famous phrase sprang from the fact that Luke's ostensible misunderstandings communicated his disdain and intentions all too well. The larger problem that inspired *The Middle Ground*, and which

continues to fascinate me, is how, when historically and in modern society people get so much wrong, does the world still manage after a fashion to work?