The English possessed tremendous power to define the places and peoples they were conquering. As they made their way westward, they developed an ideology of “savagery,” which was given form and content by the political and economic circumstances of the specific sites of colonization. Initially, in Ireland, the English had viewed savagery as something cultural, or a matter of “consent”: they assumed that the distance between themselves and the Irish, or between civilization and savagery, was quantitative rather than qualitative. The Irish as “other” was educable: they were capable of acquiring the traits of civilization. But later, as colonization reached across the Atlantic and as the English encountered a new group of people, many of them believed that savagery for the Indians might be inherent. Perhaps the Indians might be different from the English in kind rather than degree; if so, then the native people of America would be incapable of improvement because of their race. To use Shakespeare’s language, they might have a “nature” that “nurture” would never be able to “stick” to or change. Race or “descent” might be destiny.\(^5\)

What happened in America in the actual encounters between the Indians and the English strangers was not uniform. In Virginia, Indian savagery was viewed largely as cultural: Indians were ignorant heathens. In New England, on the other hand, Indian savagery was racialized: Indians had come to be condemned as a demonic race, their dark complexions signifying an indelible and inherent evil. Why was there such a difference between the two regions? Possibly the competition between the English and the Indians over resources was more intense in New England than in Virginia, where there was more arable land. More important, the colonists in New England had brought with them a greater sense of religious mission than the Virginia settlers. For the Puritans, theirs was an “errand into the wilderness” — a mission to create what John Winthrop had proclaimed as “a city upon a hill” with the eyes of the world upon them. Within this economic and cultural framework, a “discovery” occurred: the Indian “other” became a manifest devil. Thus savagery was racialized as the Indians were demonized, doomed to what Increase Mather called “utter extirpation.” Once the process of this cultural construction was under way, it set a course for the making of a national identity in America for centuries to come.\(^5\)

**A World Turned Upside Down**

Indians viewed these developments very differently. One of their legends told about a creature named Ki-wa-kwe-skwe, “woman wandering in the woods.” She was a cannibal, and a boy whom she called her brother lived with her. She always kept her back turned toward him to hide her face. She also taught him to hunt rabbits and offered him frequent meals in order to fatten him. Once a rabbit came to the boy and said: “You have already killed a great many of us. That is enough; don’t hunt us too persistently or you will exterminate us. Henceforth do not obey that woman who is ordering you. She is not your sister. On the contrary, she is a bad magician who is only lying to you and just fattening you up until you are prime, when she will kill and eat you. For her food is human beings.” That night the boy pretended to fall asleep, and he had a chance to see the woman’s face, her true cannibalistic self. The next morning he ran away, with the evil spirit woman in pursuit. A heron and a porcupine tried to protect the boy and killed the woman repeatedly, but she kept returning to life. Finally, an old man came to his rescue and ordered his dog to tear the evil woman to shreds. The old man then took the boy to the village where his father and mother lived. “And when the people saw that the boy who had been stolen was still alive, lo, there was great rejoicing and feasting.” What happened in history, however, had a much different ending.\(^4\)

Like the rabbit of this story, a Narraganset leader tried to warn his fellow Indians about the English invaders. “You know our fathers had plenty of deer and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods, and of turkeys, and our coves full of fish and fowl,” Miantonomo told the Montauks of Long Island in 1642. “But these English having gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes fell the trees; their cows and horses eat the grass, and their hogs spoil our corn banks, and we shall all be starved.” Miantonomo called for pan-Indian unity to resist the strangers: “For so are we all Indians as the English are, and say brother to one another; so must we be one as they are, otherwise we shall all be gone shortly.” They should attack the colonists, and “kill men, women and children, but no cows.” They should raise the cattle for food “till our deer be increased again.”\(^5\)

In 1735, twenty-seven Pequots complained to the governor of Connecticut that the English settlers had encroached on their lands, planting wheat fields and allowing their cattle to roam into Indian cornfields. The Pequots protested: “We see plainly that their chiefest desire is to deprive us of the privilege of our land, and drive us off to our utter ruin.” The native people of America were finding that the white strangers from across the ocean were threatening their way of life. In a 1789 petition to the Assembly of Connecticut, the Mohegans lamented that “the times” had been “Exceedingly alter’d”:  

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\(^5\) Miantonomo's account is from *The Narragansetts* by William C. G. Fred (1913).  
\(^4\) Miantonomo's account is from *The Narragansetts* by William C. G. Fred (1913).  
\(^5\) Miantonomo's account is from *The Narragansetts* by William C. G. Fred (1913).
BOUNDLESSNESS

Yea the Times have turn'd everything Upside down, or rather we have Chang'd the good Times, Chiefly by the help of the White People. For in Times past our Fore-Fathers live in Peace, Love and great harmony, and had everything in Great plenty. When they Wanted meat they would just run into the Bush a little ways with their Weapons and would Soon bring home good venison, Raccoon, Bear and Fowl. If they Choose to have Fish, they Wo'd only go to the River or along the Sea Shore and they wo'd presently fill their Cannos With Variety of Fish, both Scaled and shell Fish, and they had abundance of Nuts, Wild Fruit, Ground Nuts and Ground Beans, and they planted but little Corn and Beans and they kept no Cattle or Horses for they needed none — And they had no Contention about their Lands, it lay in Common to them all, and they had but one large Dish and they Cou'd all eat together in Peace and Love — But alas, it is not so now, all our Fishing, Hunting and Fowling is entirely gone, And we have now begun to Work on our Land, keep Cattle, Horses and Hogs And We Build Houses and fence in Lots, And now we plainly See that one Dish and one Fire will not do any longer for us — Some few there are Stronger than others and they will keep off the poor, weak, the halt and the Blind, And Will take the Dish to themselves. Yea, they will rather Call White People and Molattoes to eat With them out of our Dish, and poor Widows and Orphans Must be pushed one side and there they Must set a Crying, Starving and die.  

Aware of these changing times, Delaware leader Neolin warned Indians in the 1760s that they must either return to their original state before the arrival of white people or face slow extinction at the hands of the settlers.

What is to be done, and what remedy is to be applied? I will tell you, my friends. Hear what the Great Spirit has ordered me to tell you! You are to make sacrifices, in the manner that I shall direct; to put off entirely from yourselves the customs which you have adopted since the white people came among us; you are to return to that former happy state, in which we live in peace and plenty, before these strangers came to disturb us, and above all, you must abstain from drinking their deadly beson [liquor] which they have forced upon us for the sake of increasing their gains and diminishing our numbers. Wherefore do you suffer the whites to dwell upon your lands? Drive them away; wage war against them.

THE "TEMPEST" IN THE WILDERNESS

But by the 1760s, the strangers and their descendants had established colonies and had also begun a movement that would lead to the creation of a new nation. An emerging question was: What would be the Indians' future in the republic? One of the Founding Fathers who addressed this issue was a young lawyer and planter who would later become president of the United States. In 1781, as governor of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson declared to the Kaskaskias that whites and Indians were both "Americans, born in the same land," and that he hoped the two peoples would "long continue to smoke in friendship together." At the same time, Jefferson advocated the removal and even the destruction of hostile Indians. "Nothing will reduce those wretches so soon as pushing the war into the heart of their country," he wrote to a colleague in 1776. "But I would not stop there. I would never cease pursuing them while one of them remained on this side [of] the Mississippi. . . . We would never cease pursuing them with war while one remained on the face of the earth." In his view, Indians were to be civilized or exterminated.

To civilize Indians meant, for Jefferson, to take them from their hunting way of life and convert them into farmers. President Jefferson explained to the Shawnees why they had no choice but to accept civilization: "When the white people first came to this land, they were few, and you were many; now we are many, and you few; and why? because, by cultivating the earth, we produce plenty to raise our children, while yours . . . suffer for want of food . . . are exposed to weather in your hunting camps, get diseases and die. Hence it is that your numbers lessen." They were, in other words, victims of their own culture, not the decimation of their game to satisfy the voracious fur trade, the introduction of unfamiliar diseases, the appropriation of their lands, and the brutal warfare waged against them.

In blaming the Indians for their own decline, Jefferson insisted that the transfer of Indian lands to whites had been done fairly and legally. "That the lands of this country were taken from them by conquest," he argued in Notes on the State of Virginia, "is not so general a truth as is supposed. I find in our historians and records, repeated proofs of purchase. . . ." If Jefferson's denial of guilt contained a quality of defensiveness, there was a reason for it. In the original manuscript, he had written and then crossed out: "It is true that these purchases were sometimes made with the price in one hand and the sword in the other."

In order to survive, Jefferson declared, Indians must adopt the culture of the white man. They must no longer live so boundlessly; instead, they must enclose farms as private property and learn arithmetic so they
BOUNDLESSNESS

would be able to keep accounts of their production. "My children," Jefferson told the Cherokees, "I shall rejoice to see the day when the red man, our neighbors, become truly one people with us, enjoying all the rights and privileges we do, and living in peace and plenty as we do. But are you prepared for this? Have you the resolution to leave off hunting for your living, to lay off a farm for each family to itself, to live by industry, the men working that farm with their hands...?"

"Indians must learn how," Jefferson explained, "a little land, well cultivated, was superior in value to a great deal, unimproved." He offered a grisly analogy to illustrate his point: "The wisdom of the animal which amputates and abandons to the hunter the parts for which he is pursued should be theirs, with this difference, that the former sacrifices what is useful, the latter what is not." Possibly Jefferson did not fully realize the implications of this metaphor. Likened to "animals," Indians could survive by "amputating" their lands and leaving them behind for whites, the "hunters."\(^{61}\)

Jefferson, however, was actually more concerned about white expansion than Indian survival. Civilizing the Indians was a strategy designed to acquire land for white settlement. As president, he assured the Indians that whites would respect their territorial possessions. "We take from no nation what belongs to it," he told them. "Our growing numbers make us always willing to buy lands from our red brethren, when they are willing to sell." He elaborated: "Your lands are your own; your right to them shall never be violated by us; they are yours to keep or to sell, as you please. . . . When a want of land in a particular place induces us to ask you to sell, still you are always free to say 'No'. . . . "\(^{62}\)

However, while he offered these assurances, Jefferson worked to create conditions that would make Indians "willing to sell." In an 1803 "Confidential Message" to Congress, he explained how this could be done. First, encourage them to abandon hunting and turn to agriculture. "The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless." Second, sell more manufactured goods to Indians by multiplying the trading houses and bring them into the market. This policy, Jefferson predicted, would lead the Indians to transfer their lands to whites. On February 27, 1803, in an "unofficial and private" letter to Indiana governor William Henry Harrison, Jefferson recommended: "To promote this disposition to exchange lands, which they have to spare and we want, we shall push our trading houses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands." To destroy Indians financially, Jefferson favored federal over private trading houses. While private business had to make profits, government enterprise could sell goods to Indians at prices "so low as merely to repay us cost and charges." By this process, he continued, white settlements would gradually "circumscribe" the Indians, and in time they would either "incorporate" with whites as "citizens" or retreat westward beyond civilization.\(^{63}\)

All Indians, regardless of whether they were farmers or hunters, were subject to removal, even extermination, if they continued in their "barbarism." Should any tribe be foolhardy enough to take up the hatchet against the United States, the president wrote Governor Harrison, the federal government should seize the whole country of that tribe and drive them across the Mississippi as the only condition of peace. During a conflict between the United States and England in 1809, President Jefferson warned his Indian "children": "If you love the land in which you were born, if you wish to inhabit the earth which covers the bones of your fathers, take no part in the war between the English and us. . . . [T]he tribe which shall begin an unprovoked war against us, we will extirpate from the earth, or drive to such a distance as they shall never again be able to strike us."\(^{64}\)

But Jefferson's feelings toward Indians were complex. In a letter to John Adams, he described childhood memories of Indian chiefs visiting his home. "They were in the habit of coming often. . . . I knew much the great Outacette, the warrior and orator of the Cherokees. He was always the guest of my father, on his journeys to and from Williamsburg. . . . I was in camp when he made his great farewell oration to his people, the evening before his departure for England. . . . His sounding voice, distinct articulation, animated action, and the solemn silence of his people at their several fires, filled me with awe and veneration, altho' I did not understand a word he uttered." Jefferson explained to Adams that these early "impressions" had created "attachment and commiseration" for the Indians which had "never been obliterated."\(^{65}\)

Jefferson's hope was to save the Indians. In this letter to Adams, he noted how the Cherokees had "enclosed fields" as well as livestock and had chosen to advance themselves "in civilization." But any Indians who rejected assimilation would face a different future. "These will relapse into barbarism and misery, lose numbers by war and want, and we shall be obliged to drive them, with the beasts of the forest into the Stony mountains." Ultimately, for Jefferson, Indians as Indians would not be
allowed to remain within the borders of civilized society. A century or so earlier, Puritans had celebrated the disappearance of wolves and bears in “new” England; now Jefferson and men like him were clearing more wilderness for a new nation. The very transformation of the land emblematicized progress, the distance whites in America had come from the time when barbarism had been dominant:

Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our sea-coast. There he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from infancy to the present day."

Here was a vision of progress — a Jeffersonian version of John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” and Edward Johnson’s New England of the “wonder-working Providence.” The land was not to be allowed to “lie waste without any improvement,” the early forefathers had commanded, and now the republican “erect into the wilderness” was requiring the citizens of the new nation to subdue the land and advance their frontier westward. Such a view carried dire consequences for the Calibans of America called Indians. Jefferson, like Prospero before him, saw the triumph over the continent and the Indians as the movement from “savagery” to “civilization.”