

**Douglas Hunter. *The Place of Stone: Dighton Rock and the Erasure of America's Indigenous Past*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 344 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4696-3440-1. <https://www.uncpress.org/book/9781469634401/the-place-of-stone/>**

In *The Place of Stone* (2017), Douglas Hunter tells the story of Dighton Rock, a forty ton boulder, originally located on the shore of the Assonet River, which is covered in petroglyphic markings. In Algonquin, *Assonet* translates to “the stone place,” or “the place of stone,” and, it is likely that the river that washed and submerged the rock twice daily in tidal waters not only offered its original geographic and cultural context, but was significant to its original and ongoing interpretations. However, in 1963, Dighton Rock was forcibly removed from the river, “dragged in chains” and held in “virtual captivity . . . within a bunker-like museum structure” that now claims for it Portuguese, and not Indigenous, provenance (4). Long before its 1963 removal, Dighton Rock had become an object of inquiry and misinterpretation for European and American antiquarians, seeking to invalidate Indigenous claims to past and place and to assert Euro-American narratives of belonging. From the outset, Hunter explains that in *The Place of Stone*, readers will not find his own non-expert interpretation of the glyphs or “some exciting technological breakthrough in examining the rock’s surface,” noting, instead, that Indigenous provenance “was apparent from the beginning of European and Anglo-American inquiries” (3). Rather than a conventional work of rock art scholarship, then, Hunter sets out to tell “the story of Dighton Rock’s many stories and storytellers,” a story that “uniquely illuminates processes of *belonging*, *possession*, and *dispossession* from the first decades of the colonial period to the present day” (emphasis added; 5-6). Tracing this story of settler misinterpretation from 1680 to the present, Hunter offers a detailed and lucid historical narrative focused on the antiquarians who have long attributed non-Indigenous provenance to the rock’s markings, from Phoenicians to eleventh-century Norsemen to a series of “lost” peoples: the Lost Tribes of Israel, the Lost City of Atlantis, and the lost Portuguese explorer Miguel Corte-Real.

Although Hunter claims that his book is not “about Indigenous cultural survival,” *The Place of Stone* contributes meaningfully to American Indian studies (5). At the center of his historiography are the questions: “who belongs in America?” and, “to whom does America belong?” (14). By raising these questions, Hunter marks Dighton Rock as emblematic of much larger settler colonial projects that assert Euro-American *belonging* and *possession* and Indigenous *dispossession*. Defaced with centuries of graffiti and forcibly removed from its original location, Dighton Rock, as the book’s subtitle suggests, bears the marks of Indigenous erasure and displacement, while its history of non-Indigenous misinterpretation extends to other palimpsestic erasures and re-inscriptions. By recognizing the history of Dighton Rock’s many misinterpretations as a contested and ongoing *process*, rather than a finished or inevitable outcome, Hunter *unsettles* the settler discourse of *belonging* and *possession*. Hunter’s primary objective may not be to tell the story of “Indigenous cultural survival,” but his historiography of Dighton Rock makes a meaningful contribution to the growing canon of scholarly efforts to critique historical and ongoing processes of Indigenous dispossession and to affirm projects of Indigenous reclamation, repatriation, and political recognition. Specifically, Hunter’s project interrogates the fallacies undergirding the rise of object-based archaeology in the U.S. and actively discredits the erroneous, often absurd, misinterpretations and misattributions of Dighton Rock by European and American antiquarians, whose competing narratives shared the common goals of legitimizing Euro-American conquest and dispossessing Indigenous peoples of past and place.

With its emphasis on settler hermeneutic strategies in American archaeology, *The Place of Stone* draws immediate comparison to Jean M. O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (2010). For some readers, Hunter's methodology, which privileges non-Indigenous interpretations of Dighton Rock and proclaims to document "the erasure of America's Indigenous past," may risk reifying the long-standing trope of the "vanishing Indian." As Hunter himself explains in the introduction, Dighton Rock "does not speak in this book in the sense of conveying a message from an Indigenous antiquity," but, instead, "it speaks in the voices of its many Western interpreters," who Hunter asserts "have employed the rock in a never-ending act of cultural ventriloquism" (6). However, in his richly textured and thoroughly researched account, Hunter reveals and critiques these "never-ending act[s] of cultural ventriloquism" through ten chapters that span over three-hundred years. In this ambitious undertaking, we find that Dighton Rock has held many "places" in the settler imagination, where it has been assigned to many non-Indigenous "pasts." And, with its emphasis on settler interpretations of antiquity, *The Place of Stone* might serve as something of a companion piece to Chadwick Allen's recent Indigenous-centric methodologies for interpreting and engaging with Indigenous Earth Works as vibrant, multiply-encoded sites of historical and ongoing "trans-Indigenous" meaning-making (as discussed in Chadwick Allen's chapter "Siting Earthworks" in his monograph).

For scholars of American Indian and Indigenous studies, Hunter's research methodologies are not as immediately relevant as those of O'Brien and Allen. Whereas Hunter's work tells the story of Dighton Rock through its "many Western interpreters," O'Brien develops Indigenous-centric frameworks for interpreting settler historiography and the "vanishing Indian," while Allen develops "trans-Indigenous" methodologies for reading the ongoing presence and relevance of Indigenous Earth Works, and other forms of Indigenous writing on the land and "by the land" (Allen). However, Hunter's book is relevant, both as a detailed reference and a resourceful guide, for scholars whose work seeks to understand and critique settler-colonial discourse through archaeology, anthropology, and historiography. Moreover, in *The Place of Stone*, Hunter demonstrates how the eccentricities of biography inform the broader discourse of historiography—or how the settler story of antiquity interpreted in Dighton Rock is inseparable from the personal and political motivations of its settler storytellers.

For instance, throughout the book's ten chapters, Hunter introduces (or reintroduces) readers to the migration theorists who used scriptural hermeneutics to promote theories to discredit Indigenous claims to antiquity, such as the Bering Strait Land Bridge and the Lost Tribes of Israel. We meet (or are reacquainted) with Cotton Mather, John Winthrop, Samuel Danforth, and other notable New Englanders who interpreted Dighton Rock to promote versions of Transatlantic Gothicism, as well as linguistic interpreters such as Samuel Harris, who died before completing his work which, Hunter notes, seemed "suspiciously like an attempt to turn Dighton Rock into an American Rosetta Stone" (113). Moreover, we see the rise of American archaeology and its new "object-based epistemology" through the work of Samuel Latham Mitchill and other nineteenth-century archaeologists, who developed theories based on interpretations of objects, from "cabinets of curiosities" to large-scale cartographic surveys of Earth Mounds. In chapter 6, titled "Vinland Imagined," Hunter traces how Carl Christian Rafn's *Antiquitates Americanae* (1837), became "one of the most important scholarly works on American antiquity of the nineteenth century," in which Rafn reinterpreted Norse sagas to claim a "Norse presence in the America's some 500 years before Columbus" (133). And, in

particularly noteworthy chapters (ch. 7 and 8) focused on nineteenth century ethnologist and philologist, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, we find the only documented account of an Indigenous reading of Dighton Rock by Shingwauk, member of the Ojibwe Crane Clan. However, Hunter warns that because Schoolcraft was infamous for “shaping (and reshaping) ... his Indian legends for publication,” there is “little doubt that he took the information he gleaned from Shingwauk and composed a literary narrative as much as an ethnographic report” (169). Taken more broadly, Hunter’s work casts doubt (and ultimately discredits) the claims to antiquity interpreted and promoted by colonialist thinkers who have long used the marks on Dighton Rock to shape and reshape narratives of settler belonging and policies of Indigenous dispossession. As Hunter asserts, “the story of Dighton Rock gathers in other places, other artifacts, and illuminates the much larger and more consequential story of how a colonizing society (through its most educated and politically empowered elite) has defined Indigenous people at both the biological and cultural levels, and to what ends” (5).

Through the competing accounts of migration theorists, linguistic and object-based archaeologists, and other professional and amateur interpreters of American antiquity, *The Place of Stone* raises and re-casts the questions “who belongs in America?” and “to whom does America belong?” Perhaps most successfully, Hunter introduces the methodological term “White Tribism,” which he uses to critique settler hermeneutic strategies grounded in the faulty migration theories and racist “ethnogenesis” discourse developed by “writers and theorists largely trading in *imagined* migrations, and *imagined* infusions of White or European genes” (35). As a lucid and detailed account of settler *imagination*, Hunter’s *The Place of Stone* makes for a compelling read, archiving the many “places” Dighton Rock holds in settler-colonial interpretations of antiquity, and the many “pasts” into which it has been assigned. In its pages, readers will discover the story of how Dighton Rock became (and continues to be) a site for settler place-making and home-making, and a strategically misinterpreted symbol for perpetuating and authenticating settler claims to land and history. Moreover, readers will find eleven figures—the interpretative drawings, engravings, and historical photographs of Dighton Rock—that not only add visual detail, but historically served as the basis for ongoing interpretation, at times replacing Dighton Rock itself as the primary text for interpretation. What Hunter leaves to other scholars, however, is the story of Dighton Rock as remembered or re-interpreted by the Indigenous peoples of what is now New England, where the rock remains both a historic and ongoing site of Indigenous meaning-making and place-making, likely with multiple and changing interpretations closely tied to its specific geographic location. As Hunter asserts, “the utility of Dighton Rock to contemporary Indigenous culture is charged with great possibility” (6). *The Place of Stone* does not follow through on this possibility, but it does lay the foundation for future scholarship that builds from Hunter’s efforts to tell the vexed and varied history of Dighton Rock.

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Allen, Chadwick. *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*. U of Minnesota P, 2012.