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Transform and Rebel: The Calico Indians and the Anti-rent War

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Dear Reader,

Think of this article as a preview of coming attractions excerpted from the upcoming Autonomedia anthology, "Gone to Croatan"; an excursion deep beyond the liminal vagaboundaries which mark the seriocomic unfolding of that theatre of survival/resistance/disappearance known as North American history. At a bookstore near you by the Winter of '92. — Ron Sakolsky, co-editor, "Gone to Croatan"

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The remains: a costume and mask stored behind glass like a saint's garments in a reliquary. A scarlet linen vest, a gown of printed broadcloth, and a mask made of sheep skin. Fabric flowers ornament the mask, along with faded blue ribbons, leather fringe, mesh over the eye holes, a goatee, sideburns and eye brows made from fur.

In a photograph, sixteen men pose in similar costumes. Most brandish knives, all wear grotesque masks and gowns or jackets of brightly colored calico. Horns of leather, drooping mustaches, long false beards, wolf-like snouts, stag antlers, plumes of horse hair, tassels hanging from pointed ears, and hard fierce animal-like mouths.

They were farmers, many of them teen-aged boys, all of them little better than serfs. And for a few years in the early eighteen forties, while similar anti-authoritarian movements brewed in Europe, these self-styled Calico Indians roved the countryside of eastern New York State, flouting law, order and social norms.

After the American War of Independence, a semi-feudal system remained firmly in place along the Hudson River Valley, reaching from New York City to Albany, through the Catskills and to the Massachusetts border. Three hundred thousand farmers, working almost two million acres, lived like serfs with little hope of ever escaping their bondage to the land's owners. This patroon system had its origins in the Dutch colonial efforts of the 1600s, when huge blocks of land were "purchased" from the indigenous inhabitants, and tenants were brought in to secure Holland's hold.

In 1664, the Dutch colony was seized by the British, but the feudal system remained largely unchanged, farmers paying a yearly rent (in food stuffs or its equivalent in cash) yet never having the opportunity to actually own the land. In 1695, the governor granted a patent which transformed the patroonship of Rensselaerwyck into a manor and the patroon into its lord. At the same time, the British further entrenched the system by granting patents to millions of acres of new land. The last colonial governor of New York expressed the thinking of the time when he wrote that giving these huge tracts of land to the aristocracy would “counterpoise in some measure the general levelling spirit that so prevails,” making reference to the antinomian and proto-anarchist Ranters, Diggers, and Levellers of Great Britain.

After the Revolutionary War, some land was taken from the Tories, but the most valuable tracts were given to Federalists as payment for their war claims, and other sections were sold to speculators. The most powerful landowning families – Van Rensselaer, Livingston, Schuylf, and Hamilton – continued to tighten their hold on the area through intermarriage and further purchases. In 1839, Stephen Van Rensselaer, known as the Good Patroon, died. Realizing that the patroon system was fragile and that only so much pressure could be put on it before it collapsed, he often had allowed tenants’ rents to lapse during times of bad harvest or other ill fortune. At his death, it was found that he’d accumulated large debts. Owing him nearly a half million dollars in back rents, his tenants were seen by the Van Rensselaer heirs as a likely way out of their financial predicament. In the Helder-bergs, on the west side of the Hudson, where farming was particularly difficult, resentment against the heirs’ new demand for total payment rose quickly, developing within the year into what is now known as the Anti-rent War.

The first anti-rent meetings were called in Berne, the highest place in the Helderbergs. In a Declaration of Independence dated July 4th, which the newly-formed anti-rent association sent to Stephen Van Rensselaer IV, they compared his oppressive rent measures to the Stamp Act of 1765 and themselves to the self-named Sons of Liberty, who fought against British economic oppression by tarring

At the killing of undersheriff Osman Steele, the Indians shouted, “Down with the laws, we are here to break them.” For a few years, they lived out the fantasy of the disenfranchised. By mixing their playfulness with criminality and righteous defiance, they were able to claim their land and a small, but significant, measure of dignity.

Like the “Indians” who took part in the Boston Tea Party, the Catskill rebels disguised themselves for practical purposes, to prevent being identified and punished. However, they also chose to transform themselves into creatures who could do what no law-abiding citizen would dream of doing. By putting on ridiculous costumes, taking false names, and swearing melodramatic oaths, they escaped centuries of social constraint.

The view of Indians that the farmers exhibited is clearly quite skewed/Boyish enthusiasm, romantic notions of the noble savage, and simple ignorance shaped the Calico Indians’ idea of themselves. The costume itself points to a gross misunderstanding of what “Indian” meant. Looking more like animals dressed in women’s clothing than the original inhabitants of the land they worked, the Calico Indians embraced freedom by embracing otherness. Decked out in gowns, flowers, wigs, ribbons and tassels, they allowed themselves, most likely without knowing it, to play at being women. Wearing masks made from animal parts (sheepskin, horse hair, stag horns, pig ears and feathers) they were more beasts than men. And a few of the most brave even played at being demons: wearing horns, fangs and scarlet talons. Half-drunk, converting their farm implements into weapons, they had strength where before they had only servitude and the prospect of endless toil.

For them the word “Indian” meant something far larger than Native American. It was a label that denoted wildness, lack of restraint, the ability to follow one’s desires. Some took names that were overtly Arabic (The Prophet), or Mexican (Santa Anna). With their secret oaths, midnight forays, bizarre costumes, their violence mixed with grandiose heroics; they clearly believed that to be an Indian was not merely to be non-white, but also something bigger than life. Crossing racial, gender, even species lines, all expectations were overturned. Anecdotes were told of parents talking for hours with their sons, and of girls being overwhelmed by the kisses and caresses of their own brothers, without anyone suspecting their true identity. Drunken farm boys could be, for a few hours, powerful chieftains; warriors rather than serfs. Armed sheriffs could be mocked, humiliated and treated as buffoons. Even family ties meant nothing. Social, as well as political law was overthrown.

and feathering the King’s functionaries, ransacking their homes and hanging them in effigy.

Quickly, the anti-rent associations had thousands of dues-paying members and their influence was felt throughout all the leasehold lands. The governor of New York sent in armed militia to put down the rebellion and the Anti-rent War began in earnest. Disguising themselves in costumes of brilliant calico, covered with fur, feathers, and tin ornaments, wearing sheepskin masks or with their faces painted red and black, parties of self-proclaimed Indians struck back against the patroons/un-derlings.

When sheriffs would approach a farmer’s land, intending to sell off some of his livestock in order to pay back rents, the Calico Indians would surround the lawmen — usually on horseback — or ambush, disarm and drive them away. And on the few occasions when the auctions did occur, the Indians deployed snipers to kill all the cattle and sheep that had been sold. The Indians’ tactics were a mixture of guerrilla warfare and adolescent playfulness. They kidnapped sheriffs and held them prisoner in taverns until they agreed to jump up and down three times and shout “Down with the rent!” They stole and destroyed legal papers, threatened farmers who paid their rents, and harassed sheriffs whenever they appeared.

Adopting pseudo-savage names (Red Jacket, Black Hawk, Yellow Jacket, Blue Beard, Little Thunder, White Chief) the Calico Indians bound themselves by an oath. “I do of my own free will and accord come forward to join this body of men and will reveal no secrets of the society made known to me necessary to be kept.” Farm-wives and daughters were enlisted to make gowns and masks, the more outlandish the better. At their peak, the Indians numbered over ten thousand, yet no two costumes were alike. The chiefs’ garments were the most flamboyant, however, because the anti-rent associations provided money to buy calico (as well as ornaments and pistols) anyone was able to deck himself out as outrageously as he pleased. When a prominent Rennselaer county Indian died, an escort of his fellows — ninety-six men strong, mounted and in full battle dress — formed the vanguard of his funeral procession. In 1844, when Governor William Bouck held a conference to meet with local residents,

over a hundred Indians stood at the edges of the crowd, shouting and jeering.

Armed with muskets, pistols, scythes, axes, clubs, hatchets and knives, the Indians were able to mobilize quickly whenever sheriffs approached to serve writs or seize property. As a primitive communication network, the Indians convinced (sometimes by the use of force) farmers to use their tin dinner horns only as a warning signal that the law was near. The message could be quickly relayed over many miles, the blaring of the horns (normally used to call workers in for their meals) reaching across the hills and valleys of the Catskills. The organization of the Indian bands followed the cell structure which one of the most important anti-rent leaders, Thomas Devyr, had used while a Chartist agitator in Scotland. The Indians divided into ten-to-fifteen man units, the identity of individuals known only to the chief of the cell, who was in turn known only by his mock-Indian name.

Devyr, born in Donegal, Ireland in 1805, published a pamphlet called "Our Natural Rights," in which he stated: "I saw that the earth if vigorously tilled would yield plenty of the comforts of life. Willing labor and fertile soil would produce plenty to eat, drink and wear." After publishing the pamphlet, he fled from Ireland, and went to work in London, working for the liberal papers in which he attacked Irish Landlordism. Working class rebels in Newcastle-upon-Tyne asked him to join them. He left London, calling it "that great social wen," and quickly rose to prominence among the Scots fighting for social and political reform. In 1840, he fled Scotland to avoid arrest and landed in New York. Within months, he was at the forefront of the anti-rent struggles in the Hudson Valley.

Another prominent anti-rent leader was Dr. Smith Boughton, who came to be known by his Indian name, Big Thunder. A brilliant public speaker and organizer, he traveled up and down the Catskills, addressing meetings, exhorting farmers to join or support financially the Indians' efforts. Targeted by the lords of Livingston manor, he was eventually arrested for robbery (after a sheriff was relieved of his warrants and writs by a band of Indians) and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor.

In 1844, the hostilities had increased to such a high pitch that Governor Silas Wright issued a proclamation declaring Delaware County (the epicenter of Indian activities) to be in a state of insurrection and ordered in the military to "preserve order." Then, in early 1845, he requested that the legislature pass a law making it illegal for any individual to appear with "his face painted, discolored, covered or concealed," or to refuse help to a law enforcement officer in the pursuit of "seizing, arresting, confining . . . every person with his face so painted." Though anti-rent forces were building strength in the legislature, the measure passed easily. The Calico Indians, however, continued their guerilla war. As in most insurgency movements, the rebels remained hidden and highly mobile, striking only when they had sufficient force to overcome their enemy, then evaporating as quickly as they'd gathered.

The Anti-rent War continued until August of 1845, when Sheriff Green More and Osman Steele (his jailor and undersheriff) rode to the farm of Moses Earle near Andes, to sell off some of Earle's livestock in order to satisfy a warrant for two years' back rent. The Indians gathered in force, blaring their horns, and surrounded the two sheriffs. Steele resisted and shots were fired. Three bullets hit him and he died late that day. The Indians scattered. As soon as the news got out, public opinion turned against the rebels. The cells disbanded, thousands of masks were burned and buried, and the calico gowns were converted overnight into curtains and quilts. Mass arrests followed the death of Steele and eventually eighty-four men were convicted: two sentenced to the gallows and thirteen to prison terms.

Yet, though the Indians' violence was condemned by the general population, their goals were still popular and the anti-rent forces continued to work their way into state government. In 1846, John Young was elected governor of New York on an anti-rent platform and a few weeks after taking office, had pardoned all the Calico Indian prisoners still in jail. In 1848, the legislature abolished the tenure rent system.

In retrospect, it is clear that in order to throw off the two hundred year old feudal system, the Catskill and Hudson River Valley farmers needed to transform themselves, physically as well as emotionally.