CONSTRUCTING COMANCHE: IMPERIALISM, PRINT CULTURE,
AND THE CREATION OF THE MOST DANGEROUS INDIAN
IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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CONSTRUCTING COMANCHE: IMPERIALISM, PRINT CULTURE, AND THE CREATION OF THE MOST DANGEROUS INDIAN IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Anglo-American print sources during the antebellum era framed the Comanche as “the most powerful” or “the most dreaded” Indian whom settlers encountered on the frontier. This research examines the pivotal role that American print culture played in constructing dubious stereotypes of Comanche Indians in American intellectual and popular culture during the nineteenth century, such as we find embedded in English language newspapers and captivity narratives. Though some scholars have examined the role that American media has played in constructing spurious images of Native Americans, this current research is the first of its kind that specifically examines the birth and development of Comanche stereotypes in American print culture during its formative years. This process of typification
robbed Comanches of their own voice and identity. It marked them with indelible, negative impressions in the American imaginary – impressions that have lasted to this day in popular images of the Comanche. During the antebellum period, newspaper editors and authors often deemed Comanches as the most dangerous Indians in need of removal or possible extermination. Furthermore, Comanche captivity narratives that touched on Comanche prowess often insinuated that the ascendancy of the American nation might not be assured in Comanche lands – therefore, Comanche removal from the frontier was essential for the ascendancy of the American empire. This, in turn, unleashed violent Anglo-American forces of subjugation against this Native group with the aim of bringing the region firmly under the grip of the United States. The strength of the printing press as an epistemological tool of American empire in reifying these images cannot be discounted in the history of American continental imperialism.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Constructing Comanche: Imperialism, Print Culture, and the Creation of the Most Dangerous Indian in Antebellum America,” presented by Joshua Christopher Mika, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Nestled in the bosom of the Deep South, Americans in the twenty-first century hold the city of New Orleans in special regard. Though fraught with crime and ongoing systemic problems in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Americans still flock to this idyllic city that, for many, is one of the most unique and dynamic places in the country. However, for Americans in the antebellum United States, New Orleans was more than a picturesque city. It was an important port situated on the liminal frontier of Anglo-American westward expansion. Far from being tucked within the middle of the American nation state and protected by a large expanse of American territory and the Gulf of Mexico, as it is now, New Orleans in the early nineteenth century lain on the edge of the expanding American frontier of Texas and beyond. And as a result of its position, the optics of New Orleans were firmly fixed on the west and the destiny of the growing numbers of Anglo-American emigrants who travelled beyond the republic’s frontier.

Established in the 1837, New Orleans *The Daily Picayune* has remained, in various guises, one of the oldest continuing and best-known dailies situated in the American South. Born on the frontier of what was then the American Southwest, and a few years before the annexation of the Republic of Texas to the United States, the paper and its editors acted as scrutinizing gazers who witnessed and reported on some of the most important events in the expanding American West. Of particular interest, the newspaper frequently reported on the Anglo expansion into the further reaches of Texas and the transformation of the fertile
Southern Plains from the domain of various Native American groups to the God-granted agricultural purview of Texans and other Euro-American emigrants. By 1846, New Orleans had a telegraph connection to the major cities in the United States, thus allowing relatively short yet oftentimes suspenseful news to reach other American papers within a matter of minutes for reprinting to their respective local audiences.¹

In 1848, *The Daily Picayune* published just this sort of article, entitled “The Camanches [*sic*],” that cited information on Comanche Indians gleaned from a letter that had passed through several sources before reaching the paper’s anonymous editors and their printing press. This letter contained information about two redeemed Mexican captives from Comanche captivity by an American command based at Fort Ouachita in Louisiana. The Mexican boys painted a vivid and pitiful picture of their capture by the Comanches to their American saviors: “The Camanches [*sic*] came upon them [the Mexicans] while encamped, and killed all but themselves; afterwards they ripped open the sacks, and turning coffee and sugar on the ground, dressed their persons in them; and then, taking the boys, shoes and mules, they decamped.” According to the American redeemers of the Mexican captives, the article further stated, the Comanches “consider themselves the most powerful people in the world. As for the whites, they [the Comanche] say there are but few of them, and they live scattered; and other tribes of Indians before them are as impotent as the dry grass of the prairie before fire.” Finally, the article concluded with a view into Comanche-Mexican relations: “The Camanches [*sic*] have a very large number of Mexican prisoners, whom they

treat with great severity, compelling them to do the most menial labor under the greatest discouragement.” Concerning this relationship, the Mexican boys were allowed the last word and framed their own feelings on Comanches, since they knew “sufficient English to say – ‘Camanche [sic] no good.’”

This article was hardly an aberration within American print culture in the Antebellum Era. The tropes of the violent, erratic, raiding, captive-taking, “no-good” Comanche had become established themes in American newspapers and other English language print mediums by the late 1840s. The purported Comanche superhuman self-identification as the superlatively “most powerful people” on the continent, by the 1840s, had become a common phrase printed across the country in a variety of different sources. True or not, by this time, and after several decades of public discourse on the Comanche in the world of print, many Americans believed Comanches to be the most dreaded Indian on the frontier. The experience and words of their Mexican captives merely reiterated what had been present already for some time in American print culture: the savage Comanche were a fantastical problem.

By the early nineteenth century, the Comanches – more so than other Native groups of the era – arguably represented the greatest challenge to American expansion in the American west. Recent scholarship has suggested that Comanches had a de facto empire that checked the imperial expansion of both Spain and Mexico in the early nineteenth century and stopped the seemingly interminable Anglo-American push westward during the age of

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2 American newspapers during the antebellum very rarely printed the author or editor’s name with the article; articles seldom had a title. I have provided as much information within the citations as printed in the original. Original taken from *The Cherokee Advocate*, “The Camanches [sic],” *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), February 3, 1848, America’s Historical Newspapers.
manifest destiny. Arriving in growing numbers by the 1820s, emigrant Anglos to Texas and
the Southern Plains discovered that Comanches were an impediment to expanding settler
colonies. In fact, Anglo-American encroachment into fertile Comanche lands – like that of
Spain and Mexico – seemed to stall at the hands of this native group which sought to retain
the possession of their own lands.³

Comanche prowess proved not to be a mere local concern for Anglo-Americans on
the Southern Plains, however. The powerful Comanche became a growing feature for all
Americans embedded within the printed word across the nation. The phenomenon of the
jaundiced image of the Comanche in American print culture created an Indian who seemed
more mythic than real and who appeared more powerful than any other native group resisting
the encroachment of Anglo settler colonies on the Southern Plains. An explosion in the
printing press in the United States during the first six decades of the nineteenth century and
an attendant deluge of printed English language materials articulated in the psyche of
American readers that the sole purpose of the Comanche was simply to undo the westward
push of Anglos on the frontier through terror tactics. This process reified Anglo inability to
effectively ‘tame’ the frontier of Texas and the Southern Plains in the face of the powerful
Comanche. Only rarely did print works paint a sympathetic image of Comanches as mere
human agents behaving in ways to promote their own self-interest and who often chose to
resist the onslaught of American transcontinental imperialism. Yet, these renderings
coincided with the eventual Anglo eclipse of Comanche supremacy by the 1850s: once

³ For recent scholarship that has posits Comanche strength, see Brian DeLay, War of a Thousand Deserts:
Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); and Pekka Hämäläinen,
The Comanche Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
Americans determined that the Comanches were ‘beaten’ was it finally safe to claim they were more pitiful than powerful through the printing press. This fact notwithstanding, purported Comanche violence and threats were often based on rumors or dubious sources. In turn, these sources became established facts to the readers of the printed word. Not all print materials created a monstrosity out of the Comanche, however.

We find some scattered evidence of attempts to understand Comanche society, motives behind Comanche actions, and a yearning to understand the Comanche as part of larger geopolitical processes. These topics, as well, played out in the public forum, enabled by the printing press and its owners. However, the overwhelming majority of the popular images of the Comanche constructed them as a demonic presence with the potential to disrupt the spread of the American empire and to withhold the promising bounty of the land which they occupied from Americans. These images became so pervasive that they eventually coalesced into editorial pieces that simply called for the destruction or removal of the Comanches from their homelands on the Southern Plains in Texas – something that Americans, and namely Texans, attained by 1859 with the banishment of the Comanche to reservations inside Indian territory, later Oklahoma. Thus, by the 1850s, it is no surprise that we find articles from across the United States that encapsulated similar frustrations and sentiments as an editorial printed in *The Georgia Telegraph* in 1854 that suggested potential solutions to America’s ponderous Comanche problem: “We believe as we have heretofore expressed ourselves, that the only policy to be adopted by our government…[is to arm other Native Americans and] to penetrate the stronghold of the Camanche [sic], chastise them severely…[for bartering] the stolen property of our [Anglo-American] citizens.” Fed up by seeming inability of the United States to reign in the Comanches, chastisement of the latter –
including by native agents – seemed to be the best solution, according to the anonymous author. This, the editorial argued, would compel the Comanches “to turn their attention to hunting, or…[would force them to] sustain themselves by agricultural pursuits. If this plan should fail, then the only alternative – extermination, or driving them into the Pacific” was the only logical solution. Those who controlled the printing press and its content not only suggested such a solution to tame the frontier, they also encouraged their readers this might be the desired outcome in a borderland where the success of Anglo-American supremacy and civilization was at stake. The printing press, thus, became an epistemological tool of the American empire, and it could force government’s hand in its own relations with Comanches. Print materials could both manifest the problem of and solution for the Comanche – and it did this by shrouding its content as the self-purported will of the public and thus the electorate.⁴

The pervasiveness of these images cannot be understated. American popular culture to this day still relies on biased, skewed images of demonic, almost-superhuman Comanches to fulfill their role as the consummate “bad Indian” in film and literature. One need look no further than John Ford’s 1954 film, The Searchers, or Cormack McCarthy’s 1985 novel, Blood Meridian, to find evidence of persisting, negative stereotypes that painted the Comanche as two-dimensional murderers sent from hell to disrupt Anglos and the winning of the West. Even in recent films, such as the 2013 version of The Lone Ranger and Hostiles, released in 2017, we find the Comanche still present the most translatable, common Indian

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⁴ Original taken from The Valley, “From Texas,” The Georgia Telegraph (Macon, GA), August 29, 1854, America’s Historical Newspapers.
caricature to audiences: in the former, an Indian who is a comical subject with superhuman abilities; and in the latter, a faceless, unrepentant scalper of both Anglos and peaceful, defeated Native Americans in an ahistoric setting of the late-nineteenth century American West – an era by which time Comanche supremacy on the Southern Plains had long abated. These current constructs find their nascence in the spurious images of Comanches embedded within print sources during America’s antebellum era. Their legacy is still quite potent.\(^5\)

This research examines a plethora of print sources that created the Comanche social construct for English language readers between 1803, arguably the first instance of the Comanche in an American newspaper, and 1861, the beginning of the Civil War. The latter year denotes a disjuncture in the trajectory of press coverage of this native group. Given the voluminous number of newspaper articles that discussed Comanches between 1803 and 1861, I have broken the investigation into two chapters.

The initial chapter examines the birth and development of the Comanche presence from afar, between 1803 and 1836 with the establishment of the Anglo-dominated polity of Texas. During this time, relatively few Americans had contact with Comanches and had a limited presence on Comanche lands. Early Anglo curiosity of Comanches in the American press eventually gave way to the perception that Comanches were (probably) numerous, dangerous – yet relatively unknown – and they had the ability to block Americans’ westward progress. Judging by the ability of the Comanches to halt Spain’s and Mexico’s march of

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empire in the region, the American press framed the Comanches as a potential barrier on the horizon of American expansion. It is within this era we find the first calls in the American press for Comanche removal.

The second chapter examines an era of rapid Anglo encroachment into regions that were dominated by the Comanche – this, in turn, spurred a large increase in the number of newspaper articles that seemed obsessed with the Comanche threat. Spurious articles on fiendish, murderous Comanches became commonplace, and the frontier was awash in frenzied rumor, intrigue, and fear of the spectral Comanche: they would stop at nothing to destroy Anglo commerce and civilization to satisfy their natural bloodlust. Newspaper articles also began publishing articles on the potential bounty of the lands inhabited by Comanches. The American press framed the Comanche presence on these lands as a curse, and different voices in the American press arose to demand that government authorities intercede by removing or exterminating the Comanche to ensure Anglo-American ascendancy in Texas.

In addition to these chapters, I also include a third chapter that examines the genre of print captivity narratives that emerged between 1836 and 1859. Though quite fewer in number than newspaper articles, these important sources allowed for lengthier discourses on Comanche society, direct Anglo interaction with natives, and object lessons for Anglo civilization on the frontier. These narratives, ostensibly reflecting the voice of frontier women who had escaped Comanche clutches, echoed similar patterns of rhetoric which we find in the press: both mediums framed the Comanche as a formidable enemy on the frontier worth removing to ensure Anglo dominance of the American West.
The many primary sources, of course, are invaluable for this investigation. However, within each section – that is, within the examination of newspaper articles and captivity narratives – I call upon important secondary sources to help contextualize the history of each print medium and the world in which Anglos and Comanches encountered one another. As a general statement, my research examines how Anlgo-Americans have historically envisioned their own encounters with indigenous peoples – the “other” – in the Americas by relying on themes embedded in more current scholarship on the topic. Philip Deloria posits that natives have always had a bifurcated effect on Anglo-American typification of Indians: Americans, who desperately tried to eschew their archaic European trappings, romanced an essence of an independent spirit embedded in Indians; they represented a certain “spirit of the continent” for Americans. Conversely, Indians also represented a people who were uncivilized and savage. This, for Deloria, renders a subject who has historically represented a dialectic of desire and repulsion for Americans: Indians’ presumed freedom from civilization denied the shackles of antecedent, stifling European society; yet, their ‘nature’ also represented barbarism and savagery. It is within this dialectic that superior, civilized American identity emerged in juxtaposition with both European and Native American essences.  

According to Alan Trachtenberg, Euro-American relations with Native Americans had always been one of imperial conquest. By the nineteenth century, any pretense to native self-government was “severely abrogated by [Anglo] conquest.” During this era of burgeoning American nationalism and imperialism, American racism radiating from the American East articulated the inability of non-Anglos to civilize or govern themselves.

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Many saw the plunder and murder of Native Americans as legitimate means of nation-building and promoting civilization in former regions of savagism. This dovetails with the argument of Clifford Trafzer and Joel Hyer, who state that the American press in California during the nineteenth century promoted graphic stories of native violence against Anglos “in hope[s] of casting Native Americans as savage brutes who killed whites for no reason…[and this process] encouraged the destruction of Indian people and their cultures…as barbaric savages who deserved to be extinguished…to make way for superior, civilized people.” The case of the Anglo-American press calling for the destruction of the Comanche in Texas proves no better example for comparison.

Lastly, Pauline Strong states that the genre of the captivity narrative is one of the oldest literary methods of framing the threat of native demonic forces against “Christian civility” at the frontier. Women, considered the “weaker sex,” required rescue from native clutches through heroic violence enacted by a white male redeemer. This process reified unequal gender roles at the locus of the frontier: it was a white man’s world, and fragile civilization could only prosper and spread through his presence and necessary violence against Native Americans.

My study also follows changes in the historiography of the American West. Since the 1980s, new western historians have debunked long-established tropes and suppositions that

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have produced a history of the American West based more on myth than reality – this was the historiography of the Old West. In response to this change in trajectory, my research echoes these broad changes in scholarship by examining the birth and development of knowledge production of the Comanche – a process itself that rendered a subject more shrouded in myth than in reality.¹⁰

CHAPTER 2
COMANCHE IN THE PRESS, 1803-1836

In 1820, a newspaper article entitled “Texas Indians” appeared in the City of Washington Gazette that quoted a memorandum on the population estimates and traits of different Native American tribes in the vast Spanish province of Texas. The published memorandum in the newspaper, whose nameless author was attributed to “an [American citizen] Indian agent lately resident in Natchitoches,” provided its readers with a brief article on the Comanches – a Native American people who were beginning to appear with increasing frequency in the American press. According to this article, “Comanchees [sic] or I-etans – total population 12 to 14,000; number of warriors 23 to 2500. This nation is divided into three parties or tribes, to wit: Comanchees, Yamparacks and Tennways; are altogether erratic, range from the head waters of the Red river of Natchitoches to the Colorado of Texas.” The article concluded by stating that “[the Comanches] subsist for the most part on Buffaloe [sic]; are at war with the Spaniards, the Osage and the Tonkawas Indians; abound in mules and horses.”

Where did this American curiosity stem from in a group of Natives who lived beyond the fringes of the American empire in 1820? The United States and the Spanish Empire officially delineated their common border in 1819 with the Adams-Onis Transcontinental Treaty. Thus, in order to settle outstanding border claims between both nations since the

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purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, by 1820, the United States had officially drawn closer to the Comanche orbit within Spanish Texas through the ratification of the Adams-Onís Transcontinental Treaty a year before. On the surface, the Comanche presence in the article seems perfunctory and commonplace. Its relative briefness makes it seem no more than a concise dossier. However, lurking between the lines of this article, we find a genuine concern for understanding Comanches and Comanche society – that is to say, Comancheness. To know the Comanche, according to this article, was important. The article delineated some basic ethnographic contours of Comanche society and revealed what were most likely the greatest interests that American readers had in Comanches: The various names and divisions that the Comanches comprised evinced that this was not a monolithic native group that Americans could treat as such. In fact, dealing with such a multifarious group might require astute diplomacy and possible contradictory stances by the Americans. Comanches, a people who inhabited a large area on the American-Spanish border between two large river systems, possessed an “altogether erratic” nature and were therefore dangerous and unpredictable. Their abundant wealth in domesticated animals insinuated that Comanches could be potential friends or possible foes of American traders. The natives’ dependence on “buffalo” – the American bison – clearly established the Comanches within the geographic realm where the animal thrived, and this is an area that the Comanches would most likely defend for their survival. Frayed Comanche relations with both European and Native American neighbors could affect the geopolitical relations that the United States had with all of the stated entities in the article – warring parties within Spanish Texas could problematize, or at the very least affect, the machinations of statecraft and diplomacy in the American borderlands. And most importantly, the article touched on the sheer number of the Comanche population. The large
number of their warrior class is particularly of note. Obviously, this latter portion proffered how the Comanches could affect the nature and control of the borderlands between New Spain and the United States. In fact, given such a large number of warriors, the national border delineating two sovereign nations, as officially prescribed by the Adams-Onís Treaty, might become a moot point with the presence of so many powerful natives who would fight for supremacy to maintain their hunting grounds. After several decades of ongoing native issues during American territorial aggrandizement, the United States was now faced with a potentially new challenge with the Comanche.²

Far from being bit players who eventually acquiesced in the face of struggles between mightier nation-states, historians now recognize that Comanche power led to Mexico abandoning its claim on territories, once ravaged by Comanche raids, to the United States. Within the Comanche homeland – which the Spanish called La Comanchería – the Comanches had actually created de facto empire in which they attained economic and cultural supremacy until the early nineteenth century, according to historian Pekka Hämäläinen. Comanche control over this vast area was unprecedented. Through their successful adoption of Spanish horses and their esteemed horsemanship, Comanches established and maintained this control over other native powers and Hispanic settlements through episodes of raiding for human captives, horses, livestock and other goods, combined with alternating patterns of relatively peaceful trade between these same groups. And in light of Comanche proclivity for violent raiding, Spanish authorities regarded the Comanches as

particularly ferocious and unredeemable natives. Anglo-Americans would come to share this view decades later, and they used the press to articulate their feelings on Comanches.³

The article from 1820 acts as a synecdoche for larger, more sustained processes of knowledge production by Americans of Comanches in the nineteenth century. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the period of investigation for this chapter, the presence of the Comanche within American newspapers – and thus within the American imaginary – grew concomitantly with an explosion in the number of newspapers in the United States and with burgeoning American colonial interests in Texas and the Southwest. It was during this time that we find a growing concern and unease in the American press about Comanche power on the proverbial and literal horizon of American empire, so encapsulated in the 1820 article. By the mid-nineteenth century, the American press had, to a large extent, constructed all-enveloping images of the Comanches as rapacious, ferocious, and the most dreaded Indian who could stymie the growth of the benevolent American empire. These often-dubious stereotypes embedded themselves firmly on the Comanche character in the American mind with long-lasting consequences.⁴

One avenue of scholarship that scholars have yet to examine thoroughly, however, remains how the American populace came to know, and thus formulate popular opinion on, Comanches in the nineteenth century. Clearly, the spread of print capitalism in the guise of


the newspaper was one of the greatest modes of creating and conveying knowledge to the American public. Though circulation records of newspapers in the early nineteenth century are nonexistent, the fact that the number of newspapers in the United States nearly doubled between 1800 and 1820 – from approximately three hundred to six hundred – spoke to the revolution of the printing press in spreading knowledge within the expanding nation. The federal government encouraged the spread of newspaper articles by subsidizing newspaper exchanges from town to town. Thus, the newspaper presses at the frontier and urban core had the ability to communicate with one another and use each other’s content without charge. This blurred the relationship between postmaster and printing press and was a phenomenon unique to the United States in facilitating communication and intellectual life. Furthermore, newspaper articles detailing the savagery and struggle against natives on the frontier proved to be catalysts that – through juxtaposition – both defined civilized Anglo-American society and helped solidify the nebulous concept of white American nationhood. This holds especially true with the birth of cheap penny papers in 1836 that greatly reduced the price of the newspaper, and thus greatly increased newspapers’ reach to all rungs of American society. To grasp how important and pervasive newspapers had become to the American by the 1840s, essayist Henry David Thoreau lambasted the press by stating, “I believe that, in this country, the press exerts a greater and more pernicious influence than the Church did in its worst period. We do not care for the Bible, but we do care for the newspaper.” Thoreau continued by exclaiming, “The newspaper is a Bible which we read every morning and every
afternoon... It is, in short, the only book which America has printed, and which America reads. So wide is its influence.\(^5\)

As for the Comanche presence in the Anglo-American press, we find many instances of initial newspaper reports on Comanches who have committed violence, or who intended on committing violence, debunked mere days after frightening the masses into hysteria. Regardless of the veracity of the newspaper stories, regardless of the dubious nature of frontier reportage and its habit for finding a welcome audience to be promoted and spread by other newspaper editors, the Comanche ultimately became the spectral boogeymen on the frontier. They became the most dreaded Indian.

The years spanning 1803 to 1836 represent the nascent years of encounter between English speakers and the Comanches – a nomadic people divided into several bands who, by the early nineteenth century, traveled great distances for trade and sustenance and encountered many non-Comanche Natives, Hispanics, and Anglo-Europeans within the central and southern Great Plains. It is during this time that American interests began to focus on the newly acquired Louisiana Territory and Texas, large swaths of which were de facto controlled by the Comanche. The region was vast, amorphous, and populated with myriad of unknown peoples, and not least the Comanche. The acquisition of the Louisiana Territory by the United States ultimately caused the birth of the Comanche presence in the

American press in 1803. The curiosity in both of the unknown quantities – the Louisiana Territory and the Comanche – was reflected in the earliest newspaper articles on the region and its people.

During the approximate thirty years of this time, we find newspaper articles on the Comanche fall within three basic chronological sections: initial Anglo curiosity on the relatively unknown Comanche led to sometimes wild suppositions on the Comanche range and character; this led to the press suggesting that Comanche influence and prowess could affect larger geopolitical machinations of other native groups and Mexicans, and needless to say, the Americans in their commercial adventures; in the last phase, we find the press printing sensational articles that conjured wild stories about Comanche strength which could threaten American interests and territorial expansion. The strands of these categories sometimes overlapped – but in the end, the hyperbolic tone and audacious claims of Comanche power within the American press eventually led Anglos to believe that the Comanche – the most powerful Indian – must be removed by American conquest.

The decade of years spanning 1803 to 1813 witnessed the birth of several short newspaper article descriptions of the Comanche. Though few in number, taken as a whole, the topics about Comanches in these sometimes mundane newspaper articles foreshadowed the major themes Americans began to associate with Comanches. These themes embedded in the newspaper articles eventually established common tropes that the press utilized in describing the Comanche. This process, in turn, coalesced into a sort of prism that dictated how Americans should know and should fear the Comanche. Comanche identification – which was often problematic – geographic range, demographics, nomadism and their diet, relations to other tribes, Hispanics and Anglos, their apparent appetite for violence and
captive-taking, and even myths associated with the Comanche all emerged during this initial
time span and would become hallmarks of methods for knowing and understanding the
Comanche during the first half of the nineteenth century. These would also have great
impact on eventual federal Indian policy and frontier attitudes concerning the Comanche.

The history of the Comanche within the American press began at the dawn of the
nineteenth century, but it actually did not begin with Comanche at all. The nomenclature to
described the Comanche people has been as varied and ambiguous as the Comanche presence
in the American press during the nineteenth century. The very first English language
newspaper articles that possibly discussed the Comanche did not employ the term Comanche
at all. The first English language articles that touched on the presence of the Comanche
people on the Great Plains appeared between 1803 and 1806. Several newspaper articles that
discussed the exploits of early European explorers and Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery
expedition utilized the terms Padouca and Ietan, and variants of both terms – two terms,
according to scholars, that might refer to Comanches in the early years of Anglo-American
encounters. These somewhat ambiguous terms were borrowed from both French and non-
Comanche native sources alike for usage by some of the earliest Anglo explorers who might
have encountered Comanches during the early Anglo exploration of the Great Plains.
Padouca, a term for Comanche whose origin scholars have attributed to disparate native
groups, such as the Pawnee, Kansa, Osage, Siouan peoples, via French explorers to Anglos,
seemed to have fallen out of fashion in the English language press by the first decade of the
nineteenth century. To problematize the issue even more, anthropologist George Grinnell
claims that Padouca most likely referred to Plains Apaches and not Comanches, though this
present research includes the Padouca with the Comanche under investigation, given that
historical research has assumed parity between Padouca and Comanche within several historical events of the early nineteenth century.⁶

Like the term Padouca, the term Ietan, and its many variants, including the homophones Aliantan/Aliatans, Allatan/Allatans, Hietan/Hietans, L’Ietan/L’Ietans, and many more permutations, has occluded the early history of the Comanche in the English language print culture of the United States. We find the earliest remnants of the term from French explorers. Even over the period of a century, scholars still seem not to have reached a definitive conclusion on the meaning of Ietan. Some scholars, such as Gary Clayton Anderson, Daniel Gelo, George Grinnell, state that Ietan and its variants are simply approximations for Comanche by way of other non-Comanche native sources, such as the Pawnee, to the French. Later, two possibilities arose concerning the spread of the term to English speakers: either the French introduced the term to English speakers during the earliest years of contact between Anglo-Americans and the Comanches; or English speakers adopted the term from other non-Comanche native groups who utilized the term for the Comanche and who had some level of relation with Comanches while discussing the Comanche with English speakers. Thomas Kavanagh, citing research by anthropologist James Mooney, suggests that the Wichita language term for Comanche, Na’taa, bears a resemblance to the variants of Ietan, yet the evidence is too scant to make a definitive identification as being part of a specific Comanche political organization. That fact

notwithstanding, this present research includes an examination of Ietan and its variants for the earliest years of investigation as certain historical events occurred wherein parity between the Comanches and the Ietan is beyond dispute. No better or earlier example exists than that of such as the forthcoming discussion of Dr. John Sibley’s famous encounter with Comanche traders – *Hietan* – in Louisiana. Without a doubt, his lengthy discussion of a visit of the Ietan from Texas referred to the Comanche. Though some historical events under investigation are suspect for using Ietan as a possible synonym for Comanche, this research includes the term for investigation to see how the Comanche might have appeared to an early nineteenth-century readership. Moreover, the use of the term Ietan, though employed slightly more in the articles under investigation than Padouca, waned by the second decade of the nineteenth century and was replaced almost entirely by the term Comanche by this point.⁷

The Comanche refer to themselves as *Nümünü* – literally, “the people.” This ethnolinguistic group of Numic people share relations with other Numic peoples, such as the Shoshone and the Ute of the American Northwest, and, more distantly, with Aztec peoples of Central Mexico. However, as discussed with the terms Padouca and Ietan, nearly every native or non-native group has described the Comanche in exonymic terms – names that the Comanches themselves have never used to self-identify. In English, we have formed the term Comanche based on a corruption of the Spanish *Komántcia*, itself an eighteenth-century name based on the Ute term for their ethnolinguistic kin – the *Kimantsi* – hence, the

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Comanche. This term itself translates to “anyone who wants to fight me all the time” in the Ute language – though it may not only be a Ute appellation for their apparently rowdy brethren, the Comanche, as it might be a term used to refer to the Arapaho and the Cheyenne, as well. Regardless of this historical, linguistic footnote, the term that the English language has for the Comanche is a twice-removed bastardization of a non-Comanche derogation for the Comanche people – a term in itself that paints the Comanche, and possibly other natives, as a monolithic, insatiably violent people without distinction. In fact, in this survey of nearly eight hundred English language newspaper articles during the first six decades of the nineteenth century, Nümünü, or any variant thereof, did not appear a single time. Needless to say, this simple fact demonstrates that the authors of these many articles never once sought to understand the Comanche literally on their own term; the corrupted term Comanche, like the corrupt image of the Comanche in the American press, became the indelible mark placed on the Nümünü in the American psyche. What did appear in these early newspapers, however, were nearly thirty variants of Comanche/Comanches – such as Comancha/,/Comanchas, Commanchee/Comanchees, and the most common variant, Camanche/Camanches. It is not until the dawn of the twentieth century, an era beyond the scope of this present research, that we begin to find the standardized usage of the English terms Comanche/Comanches in the American press. This discussion of the verbiage of the Comanche in print is telling, as it plainly shows that Anglos struggled to understand the Comanche; yet, in doing so, Anglos rendered their subject as a literary puzzle.⁸

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In 1803, an English translation of *Concise history of part of Louisiana*, by Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, appeared in serial publication within the *Vermont Gazette*. It is within this publication that Americans got their first glimpse of a native group that was most likely the Comanche. Pratz’s history discussed the travels that fellow Frenchman Etienne de Veniard de Bourgmont made onto the Great Plains in the 1720s from the French outpost of Fort Orleans on the Missouri River, northwest of St. Louis. The translated passage was largely a description of the flora and fauna of the Missouri river. However, using portions of Bourgmont’s diary, Pratz touched on Bourgmont’s departure from Fort Orleans west onto the Great Plains “in order to go to the Padoucas,” the only natives he mentioned specifically by name in this passage. These people, as well as other “Indians of the country” had a habit of crafting a pipe by “fashioning them with knives and awls” out of “red stone with white spots, like Porphyry…[and is] almost soft and tender like sand stone [sic].” The end product, according to Bourgmont, was a pipe with a “socket two or three inches long, and on the opposite side the figure of a hatchet,” which rendered a “sort of pipes…[that are] highly esteemed among them.”

Though the passage is a brief ethnological note on Padouca practices – and the identity of the Padoucas is somewhat of a contentious argument between scholars – this article most likely introduced the American public to the Comanche in the guise of the Padouca for the very first time. Historical ethnographic data from several Comanche sources

standardized nomenclature, I have henceforth opted not to incorporate *sic* to designate name variations within the research.

9 “Concise history of part of Louisiana,” *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington, VT), August 8, 1803, America’s Historical Newspapers.
show that Comanches utilized both malleable white and red stone pipes, possibly from catlinite mudstone, carved with special knives into straight pipes for smoking. Though Kavanagh argues that the term Padouca in the eighteenth century probably refers to the Plains Apache, and not the Comanche, we know that Bourgmont made it as far as, what is now, central Kansas from Fort Orleans, a region over which the Comanche had hegemony at this time. Given this evidence, it is most likely that Bourgmont visited the Comanche – the Padouca – somewhere on the central Great Plains due west from Fort Orleans on the Missouri River and made this observation, most likely the first any American had ever read in a published newspaper. Though the content is brief, and the path it took to reach an American audience was circuitous – by way of two Frenchmen and an unnamed American editor – this article’s significance cannot be understated through its relative passivity of tone, because it marked the birth of a native group who would eventually be used to strike such terror in American print culture over the next two centuries.¹⁰

Probably the greatest catalyst for promoting interest or consciousness about Comanches in the early years of investigation was the excitement surrounding Lewis and Clark’s Corp of Discovery expedition between 1804 and 1806. Even before the successful return of the explorers, the American press began to ask questions about the yet-unknown lands and peoples of the Louisiana Territory. The duty fell to the Corps of Discovery to see if Indians, such as Padoucas, actually existed, as posed by an article published in the Political

Observatory in 1805. Still largely an unknown people who were thought to exist somewhere “between latitudes 40 and 42” – that is, between the central and upper Great Plains and possibly in the vicinity of the upper Missouri River – a myth began to spread from “Indians, fur-traders and travellers [sic]” about the origin and relations of the unknown Padoucas, following a suggestion published in a “Gazetteer [sic].” This myth, actually, was “not improbable…that there exists a tribe of Welsh people in the heart of North-America,” due to the belief in a story of “one Madoc, a Welsh prince, with a number of people,” who sailed from Europe to discover the New World “a considerable time before Columbus.” The suggestion for this contained a hallmark of truth, the editor of the article claimed, as “Padoucas, Paduca, or Padoca, as it is sometimes spelt on maps, bears a near affinity to Madoc.” These people, the article suggested, were possibly one in the same. This bizarre connection between the Padouca – if and wherever they might exist – seemed not to take the still-nascent American press by storm, as this appears to be one of only times the Padouca-Welsh connection was proposed. However, this curious article did foreshadow the later American press tradition of proposing outlandish attributes and myths of the Comanche, an Indian who would remain spectral and seemingly supernatural to many of the reading public. Comanches existed where the hazy frontier emerged, and contemporary knowledge was therefore based more on wild speculation, rumor, and possibly latent fear.\textsuperscript{11}

The successful return of the Corps of Discovery in 1806 and an increase in Anglo encounters of the Comanche during the first decade of the nineteenth century naturally led to an increase of Comanche presence in the American press. Between 1806 and 1811, several

\textsuperscript{11} Italics original in “Welsh Indians,” Political Observatory (Walpole, NH), January 26, 1805, America’s Historical Newspapers.
more articles appeared in newspapers that provided demographic, ethnographic, and political information of this Native group. We also find a discussion of Comanche prowess in relation to their Mexican and native neighbors. Even Comanche captive-taking practices, a subject that would engulf a hungry Anglo readership by the 1830s, were briefly introduced during this first period of investigation. During these early years of the Comanche in American print culture, Comanche identity – and needless to say, basic Anglo appellations of Ietan, Padouca, and Comanche in the English language – still appeared jumbled and opaque as understood by American informants and spread by newspaper editors.

Citing information relayed to him by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Thomas Jefferson’s published message to Congress touched upon the Corps of Discovery’s encounters with “Allatans or Snakes” who were “very numerous and trade with the Spaniards in New Mexico,” though they “reside for the most part among the rocky mountains [*sic*].” Jefferson obtained this information specifically from Clark, but this proved an example of the confusing and conflated nature of the term Ietan – whose homophone Allatan, or as Clark construction of the name “Lhiatars” – found its way into Jefferson’s published message and thus into several American newspapers. In his diary, Clark unveiled the true identity of this specific native group, not as being Comanche, but as referring to the Shoshone, given the fact that Clark recorded in his diary that “one French man,” Toussaint Charbonneau…[acted as] “interpreter [for the Corps of Discovery]…[along with] his two wives…who are Lhiatars or Snake.” This reference clearly indicated the Shoshone wife of Charbonneau, Sacagawea. Moreover, given the Allatans’ nature of residing in the Rocky Mountains, according to Jefferson, rather than on the Great Plains, we see that Jefferson was unwittingly reiterating the state of confusion of trying to identify relatively unknown Native groups in the Louisiana
Territory. Conflating the Allatan identity with Snakes, as well, evinces that nomenclature of native groups was extremely problematic for Americans. Depending on the context, various Plains Indians groups and traders applied the term “Snakes” to the Ute, the Shoshone, and the Comanche, depending on the context of who was interacting with whom. What confuses the issue even more, though it did not appear in any newspaper articles, was Clark’s mention of their encounter with John McClallen – “Captain McClellin [sic],” an associate of General James Wilkinson – on his way to find and initiate a commercial passage to Santa Fe. According to Clark, McClallen also intended on establishing trade relations with the “Panas” – the Wichita – and through this native group establishing relations with “Eleatans” by bestowing the latter with gifts as an overture of friendship. Clark’s usage of Eleatans in this case, which was certainly a homophone with Lhiatars, or Ietans, specifically indicated the Comanches as the topic of his diary passage. It was this native group that utilized the trading node of Santa Fe to meet other non-Comanche traders and had extensive trading relations with the Panas, or Wichitas, for French firearms and other goods in the early nineteenth century.¹²

Jefferson’s contribution was one of the few print sources to include variants of both Ietan and Padouca. As an addendum to his message, Jefferson also included vital correspondence from Dr. John Sibley, Jefferson’s appointed Indian Agent in the newly created Louisiana Territory. Sibley’s published communication provided the earliest detailed

ethnography on Comanches, based on his personal interaction with them while they were visiting American traders in Natchitoches. Sibley, utilizing the term Hietan, described them as “strong and athletic” whose elderly men of the group are “as fat as if they had lived upon English beef and porter.” Nothing their taste for “buffaloe [sic]” and how “[the Hietan] catches the blood and drinks it while warm; they likewise eat the liver raw, before it is cold,” he admitted that “they are, for savages, uncommonly clean in their person.” Sibley also articulated some of the most important Comanche attributes which gave later Americans great cause for concern as Anglo settlers began encroaching into Comancheria – that of the nomadic and pastoralist nature of Comanche society: “They never remain long enough in the same place to plant any thing [sic].” The trope of the dreaded “roving, unsettled Comanche” who stalked the plains for food and to terrorize Anglos apparently found its origin within American print culture with Sibley’s brief account. Embedded within this trope, we find the construction of the Comanche as the uncivilized antithesis in juxtaposition with the civilized American yeomanry who would settle and cultivate the fertile lands of the American West. This damning testimony of Comanche nature became more and more amplified with increased Anglo observation after the mid-1830s.\footnote{“Discoveries in Louisiana,” \textit{Concord Gazette} (Concord, NH), August 9, 1806, 19\textsuperscript{th} Century U.S Newspapers; Anderson states that Sibley was referring to the Comanche with his usage of “Hietan,” in \textit{The Indian Southwest}, 225.}

In another reprint of Jefferson’s message, the \textit{Connecticut Journal} also contained an anecdote relating to Comanche relations to their Spanish neighbors and the first published account of Comanche captivity. The anecdote detailed how twenty years before – in the 1780s – Hietans, passing “over the river Grand [Rio Grande],” abducted the daughter of the
Governor General of “Chewawa [Chihuahua]” within “her coach [on her way] to mass.” The governor sent a messenger to the Hietan and offered to buy her freedom for “1000 dollars in merchandize [sic].” But much “to his surprise, she refused to return with him to her father.” The Hietans had “disfigured her face by tattooing it according to their fancy and ideas of beauty.” She was also pregnant and “had become reconciled to their mode of life…[and] she was well treated by her husband.” Leaving Hietan society would be devastating and she “would be more unhappy by returning to her father, under these circumstances.” Subsequently, the captive-turned-wife of the Hietan “is now living with her husband in that nation, by whom she has three children” – “Half-Hietan,” the article assured the reader as a postscript.14

Regardless of the veracity of this story, the path that it took to be included with Jefferson’s message to Congress remains unclear. This point notwithstanding, the brief story outlined several forthcoming themes for the Comanche presence in the American press during the first half of the nineteenth century – the ability of the Comanche to subdue competing peoples in the Southwest and beyond. Crossing the Rio Grande, the Comanche descended upon the seemingly defenseless Mexican woman – the daughter of a high official, no less – whom the Comanche transformed from captive to an integral part of their society. Far from being able to hold back Comanches, the river proved no barrier to the Mexican interior – and the Mexicans themselves proved unable or unwilling to repel the attack by native agents. This last claim as insinuated by the article, that congenitally deficient

14 The Connecticut Journal (New Haven, CT), May 29, 1805, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; James F. Brooks confirms that the Hietan of this story are actually Comanche, see Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands (Williamsburg: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 190.
Hispanics were at the mercy of Comanches and other natives, was an accusation that Americans grew fond of by its frequent regurgitation in the press during the nineteenth century. This was one of the favorite American press casus belli for the eventual invasion of Mexico in 1846. Not only did Comanches subsume her within their society, they literally marked her for Comanche society – to the point where her tattooing might dissuade her from hoping to rejoin the landed political class of New Spain. Her transformation into Comanche society became complete by bearing “Half-Hietan” children and enabling the growth of the Comanche by the sacrifice of her Mexican identity. This may have suggested that Mexican society itself was hopelessly popish and degenerate, possibly worse than that of the roving Comanche society. Why else would she have opted to remain with Native “heathens?”

Anecdotes and metaphors involving Comanches and their relations to Mexicans became commonplace in the antebellum American press. As Anglo-Americans pursued valued land in Texas during the first half of the nineteenth century – an issue that would captivate the United States in the forthcoming decades – their imagination of territorial conquest was justified through comparison with the uncivilized, mobile Comanches and their victims, “mongrel” Mexicans who were unable to defend and cultivate the land.15

However, at this stage, not all viewed the Comanche as a potential threat. In fact, some recognized the necessity of understanding Comanche relations and geopolitics with their neighbors. In a letter dictated to Lieutenant Zebulon Pike from the aforementioned General Wilkinson, and printed in the press, the latter commanded Pike to “interview and

establish a good understanding with the Ya.i.tans, I,e.tans or Cammanches,” as their presence, “probably...[on the] head branches of the Arkansaw [sic] and Red Rivers...[and in proximity] to the settlements of New-Mexico,” was of utmost necessity in a general conference with other Plains Indians to establish friendly trade relations and peace on the frontier. This was to be effectuated, according to Wilkinson, as to promote Thomas Jefferson’s “desire...to cultivate the friendship and harmonious intercourse of all the nations of the earth, and particularly our near neighbors the Spaniards,” now that the borders of the United States touched those of Spanish Mexico in the waning days of Spain’s North American empire. Thus, the press also framed the Comanche as a possible key to establishing commercial relations and intertribal peace of the region. Though this native group remained somewhat unknown, the nature of the Comanche at this juncture had not totally transformed into an object of fear which necessitated their removal.16

Wilkson’s published letter also displayed that the Comanche had a range of nebulous iterations ranging between variants of Ietan to Comanche – and Pike should be prepared to employ any of these, and possibly more, in order to ensure successful location and communication between an agent of the United States and this native group. This letter contained another remarkable quality, however, as it was most likely to first published in the American press that accurately pinpointed the domain of the Western Comanche by the early nineteenth century at the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red rivers, then in the northeastern reaches of Spanish New Mexico. These were two of the most important waterways on the

Southern Plains. Trade between Americans and the Western Comanche in this region began in 1796, which was actually a violation of Spanish law. By criminalizing trade with individuals or entities based in the United States, Spain hoped to encourage internal trade between commercial nodes of Chihuahua and the far-flung colonial outpost of Santa Fe and trade with the various Native peoples in the northern portion of New Spain – something that even Jefferson alluded to in his published message to Congress. This state of trade even culminated with Spanish New Mexico legalizing gun trade with Comanches by 1786. This was something the Spanish had hesitated in allowing, given the sometimes-violent nature relationship of raiding Comanches and the often-indefensible Hispanic settlers on the geographic fringes of New Mexico. Yet, by the turn of the nineteenth century, interloping American traders began to trickle into the western extent of Comanchería to trade American manufactured goods for Comanche horse stock.\(^{17}\)

The years between 1808 and 1810 represent something of a lull in the presence of the Comanche, or their guises, the Ietan or Padoua, in the American press. Though the aforementioned articles concerning the Comanche between 1803 and 1807 were few, there was a deafening silence in the public forum of American newspapers on Comanches in the years that followed. This may be partly answered by the fact that only a single known encounter occurred between an American and the Comanches in 1808. American trader Anthony Glass came across a band of Comanches on the Colorado River in Texas during that year. Though his diary detailing American interactions with the Comanche would eventually

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appear in print – and it would prove an invaluable, early source of information on Comanches – this work was not published until the twentieth century. This lull belied the fact that the American press would eventually see Comanche activity as an important factor within the shifting geopolitical realities of Texas and northern Mexico. And Comanche interest in increasing numbers of Americans was apparently mutual, as Anthony Glass described Comanches being “particularly attached” to American traders and their wares that they would trade for Comanche horses.¹⁸

Beginning in 1813, and notwithstanding a few gaps, the Comanche presence in American newspapers became an increasingly prominent feature over the next half of a century for American readers. This occurred concomitantly with rapidly changing landscape of, what would become, the American Southwest and the explosion of cheap penny papers reaching a critical mass of Americans by the 1830s. Between 1810 and 1821, Mexico waged a successful revolution to throw off the yoke of imperial Spain. Yet, after establishing independence, Mexico spent the next several decades in the throes of political growing pains as it dealt with rebellious regions, political cleavages within the constitutional makeup of Mexico, Native American raiders, and insatiable Anglo-Americans who were keen on swallowing Mexican territory to serve imperial dictates of manifest destiny. Due to American filibuster interest in wrestling Texas from Mexico and increased Anglo-American emigration to Texas in the late 1810s and 1820s, Americans increasingly traveled into

¹⁸ For a chronology of Anglo encounters with the Comanche, see Gerald Betty, Comanche Society: Before the Reservation (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005), 165-6; Dan L. Flores, ed., Journal of an Indian Trader: Anthony Glass and the Texas Trading Frontier, 1790-1810 (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1985); early Anglo trader-Comanche relations are also covered in F. Todd Smith, From Dominance to Disappearance: The Indians of Texas and the Near Southwest, 1786-1859 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 93.
Comanche lands. The increase in Comanche encounters became readily apparent in the
growing number of articles that touched on all facets of Comanche life and activity.
However, Comanche strength in number and their influence in the political outcomes of the
region undergirded most of the articles from this era.19

Comanches had generally been at peace with Spain during the late eighteenth and
early nineteenth centuries. In fact, when hostilities broke out between Mexican
insurrectionists and royalist Spanish forces in 1810, Comanches initially sided with royalist
forces to subdue Mexican insurgents. Citing peace accords with the Comanche of 1807,
Spain convinced its Native allies that only peace was in the Comanches’ best interest by the
time that revolution broke out. However, by 1812, Texas was faced with a multi-pronged
war in the midst of the Mexican rebellion. Comanches felt slighted and double-crossed by
Spain’s inability during wartime to pay tribute to the Comanche in gifts and goods – a
process that had sustained an uneasy Comanche peace with the Spanish for decades. As a
result, indiscriminate Comanche raids of Texas ranches became commonplace. A de facto
Comanche war in Texas against Hispanics settled in for several years. This downturn in
Comanche-Spanish relations, combined with the invasion of Texas by a joint Mexican and
Anglo-American filibustering cabal, created an untenable situation for the royalist Spanish
forces that attempted to stifle a growing number of crises.20

In the midst of this chaos, which essentially lasted until Spain gave up its Mexican
realms in 1821, American newspapers began to frame Comanche activities and prowess in

19 Concerning penny papers, see Huntzicker, 12; for growing Anglo interest in the region, see Weber, 2.

20 For a general discussion of the history of Texas between 1810-1820, see Betty, 166-7; and Hämäläinen, The
Comanche Empire, 185-9.
increasingly hyperbolic tones. Though the rebellion in Texas had several contending sides, the generalized state of fear of “Comanchees or I-etans,” their “rapacity” and their “altogether erratic” nature started a practice of coining bywords used to frame and understand the unfolding war in Texas and the very essence of the Comanche in the American press. The situation deteriorated so much, the Spanish “sent all their herds in the interior [away],” leaving American traders “no cattle to purchase,” unless they waited an inordinate amount of time. As Spain dealt with its growing insurgency, Comanches – these “strolling savages” – seemed to have a preternatural disposition of a constant state of stealing from their former allies, the Spanish. This led some articles to deem Comanches, now, the “eternal enemies” of the Spanish. Even worse, Comanches were “becoming quite expert in fire-arms,” due to traders from the United States exchanging guns for Comanche “horses and mules, which these Indians would, from time to time, plunder the Spanish settlements of.” Furthermore, it was during this time we find the birth of a common trope of Comanche superlative self-actualization that would reappear many times in the English language press over the next several decades: “These Indians consider themselves the most powerful nation in the world, and, next to them, the Americas, (as they call the people of the United States.).” If the United States was looking for a potential foe to fight for eventual hegemony in Texas, the American press indicated who would be there to challenge Anglo supremacy.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) “Erratic” Comanches originally taken from the *Louisiana Courier*, reprinted in the *New-York Daily Advertiser* (New York City, NY), August 8, 1818, 19\(^{th}\) Century U.S. Newspapers; Comanches as “strolling savages” and Spain’s “eternal enemies” printed in “Texas Indians,” *City of Washington Gazette* (Washington, D.C.), May 27, 1820, America’s Historical Newspapers; italics original in “SOUTH WESTERN INDIANS,” Hallowell Gazette (Hallowell Gazette, ME), September 27, 1820, 19\(^{th}\) Century U.S. Newspapers.
Naturally, the number of Comanches – particularly of their warrior class – became a great interest as the press began narrating the struggles Spain had with their Texas Indian problem. Between 1818 and 1820, newspaper articles claimed the Comanche warrior numbers totaled anywhere from “2,300” to “4,000 warriors” alone. The total Comanche population itself was estimated at upwards of “14,000,” as reported “by an Indian agent lately resident at Natchitoche” in an article published by the *City of Washington Gazette* in 1820. This anonymous source, the nameless editor claimed, provided information that was “predicated on a data entitled to credit” and was therefore “acceptable to [their] readers.” The press blared that Comanches were prepared to “go against St. [San] Antonio…[to] revenge the death of their chief [by the Spanish]…[and] would not leave a soul alive, or a house standing at St. Antonio” and threatened to turn the settled region “which was once a prairie…[back into] a prairie.” The range of warriors in the American press practically doubled in estimation, thus displaying great uncertainty in the knowledge or familiarity of Comanche society. Wide-ranging estimations in newspaper articles could not necessarily be faulted on sensational practices by newspaper editors, however. Specific demographic information on the Comanches was impossible for Americans to know concretely, given the relatively limited encounters between Anglos and Comanches and the incredibly large domain of Comanchería itself – a geographic mass of 240,000 square miles that was mostly inaccessible to Anglo traders during this time. Most trade with Anglos occurred in east Texas, outside of the realm considered to be the Comanchería heartland. Even from the vantage point of historical investigation of multiple sources, Comanche estimates during this time wildly ranged between four-thousand and thirty-thousand souls. Current scholarship seems to agree that during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Comanches
ranged anywhere from F. Todd Smith’s estimation of ten thousand in 1816 to demographer William Brown’s estimation of seven to eight thousand by 1830. This range within these fourteen years is most likely congruous, given the fact that smallpox decimated Comanche populations starting in 1816 and 1817. Some Americans were apparently aware of this fact, as W. A. Trimble, western section commander of the 8th Military Department, specifically commented in an official communique to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, presumably via American, French, and Spanish traders, on the *thousands* of souls that the Comanche lost due to the smallpox epidemic of 1816. One would assume that the unnamed Indian agent in the 1820 *City of Washington Gazette* article would have had some knowledge of thousands of Comanches dying by 1816 and 1817 from smallpox, given official communication between the War Department and its underlings on the frontier. This knowledge, however, seems to have stopped at the War Department and its staff, since the American press apparently never received this information from their unnamed Indian Agent source. No mention of a smallpox outbreak appeared in the press during this time. Rather, according to contemporary newspaper articles, the Comanches were rumored to have a somewhat robust, though nebulous, number of fighting stock ready to best Spain in Texas – a number that now seems grossly inflated, as it almost doubled the number of Comanches we now presume to have lived in Comanchería by 1830.22

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The Mexican and Spanish fear of their erstwhile Comanche allies established itself firmly in the American press during this era. These fears were often based on direct Comanche activities aimed at Hispanics, or potential Comanche alliances with other groups that, when combined, would work against Spanish interests in Texas during the Mexican revolution. Given the fact that Americans were, by this point, the only viable source of manufactured goods for the Comanches, their Texas raids on both Mexican communities and Spanish royalists for livestock continued apace. According to a translated English letter taken “from a Natchez paper,” the de facto Comanche war in Texas became so frenzied that “Don Jacquin de Arradona y Miono [Texas governor Jose de Arredondo]” implored the native “Caddo nation,” whose “great captain…Dehahust” had earlier professed friendship for “the Spanish government and [its] subjects,” to “punish all evil minded Spaniards [including Mexican rebels], French & Americans” who provided powder, ammunition and knives, and other things” to the Comanches, which by then was against Spanish law. The Comanches, in turn, would use these items to carry out “hostilities against us” – and therefore Governor Arredondo’s published letter empowered the Caddo to “seize all classes of people, without distinction” and “to kill and destroy them as enemies: - taking from them the beasts they may be carrying to the United States, and whatever merchandize they may be taking to the Comanches,” whereupon they would receive rewards from the Spanish authorities in San Antonio. Illicit Comanche trade became such a concern that “500 [Mexican republican?] men” were dispatched on an expedition “to intercept as much as possible, the trade of the Comanches.” But fear of the Comanches apparently overwhelmed “100 men” left as a garrison “at a plantation” from the expedition to guard the main road back to their fort, and their commander refused “to approach nearer to the [Comanche] frontier for fear of
desertions.” Reporting from an increasingly dire situation in 1819 – merely two years before Spain lost its Mexican territories – *The Brookville Enquirer and Indiana Telegraph*, citing an article received from the *Texas Republican*, the first English language newspaper established in Texas, reported that other Mexican soldiers abandoned their frontier posts, leaving their “garrison…in a total state of defection,” as most soldiers “wanted only for an opportunity to run away…[from] the Camanche Indians, their eternal enemies.” The Comanches kept the soldiers “continually annoyed on every side, so that they cannot go more than one mile in safety.” At this delicate stage late in the Mexican revolution, the voices of the American press – stretching from the western frontier in Kentucky, in communication with the Texas press and continuing all the way to the East Coast press – constructed an image of the Comanche as the greatest enemy of both the royalist Spanish and Mexican insurgents. This “eternal enemy,” it seemed, had the ability to affect the outcome of internecine warfare in Texas. How could Spain be expected to retain its empire in the face of an apparently stronger foe? It seemed certain that Spain – personified earlier by the Governor of Chihuahua’s daughter in the first published narrative of Comanche captivity – would succumb to its Comanche enemy in the eyes of the America press readership.23

There was a growing, morbid curiosity about Comanches in the English language press as Spain struggled and later failed to quash the Comanche in Texas. Hispanics were

23 The fluidity of Comanche relations during this time is covered in Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 190; “punish all evil minded Spaniards” in *The Western Monitor* (Lexington, KY), August 9, 1817, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; “500 men” in “Attack upon Gen. Lallemand’s Establishment at Galvezton [sic],” *New-York Daily Advertiser* (New York, NY), December 7, 1818, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; original taken from the *Texas Republican*, reprinted in *The Brookville Enquirer and Indiana Telegraph* (Brookville, IN), November 5, 1819, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; there are no extant copies of the *Texas Republican*, see Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *Lone Stars and State Gazettes, Texas Newspapers before the Civil War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), 34.
neither strong enough nor as civilized to contain their own Comanche threat. This said as much about ineffectual Spanish rule in Texas as it did about noted Comanche strength.

These articles during the last decade of Spanish rule in Mexico are not important merely for posterity – they also foreshadowed similar fears that Anglo-Americans would come to have concerning the Comanche presence as the number of Americans grew exponentially in Texas during the following decades. Mirroring processes established by the American press of the late Spanish era of Texas, American and English language Texas newspaper articles articulated great concern about similar Comanche activities with increasing vociferousness as more and more Anglos settled in Texas. Newspapers such as the *Daily National Intelligencer*, which would shortly become a stalwart Whig paper that was against further American encroachment into Texas, decried “the Camanchee Indians” who were “killing and plundering the Spaniards daily.” The daily urged its readers “to stay home [from migrating to Texas], and abandon the idea of trying new experiments of this kind.” Yet, Anglo emigration to Texas and the increasing Anglo trader and military presence on the newly established Santa Fe Trail continued into the 1820s and 1830s with reckless abandon. Anglo-Americans would replace the role of Spain in Texas over the next few decades, and the press would be there to report the successes, failures, and dread.24

In 1822, independent Mexico inherited the ruinous state of affairs of Texas, a province that was teetering on the verge of collapse due to continued Comanche pressure. In

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attempting to stabilize Texas and create a buffer state against the Comanche and secure the Mexican interior, the Republic of Mexico legalized Anglo-American emigration and colonization in the now-joined province of Coahuila y Texas in 1825. This plan backfired, however, as the rate of Anglo emigration quickly outpaced the local Hispanic in population. Over the next decade – to the birth of the independent, Anglo-dominated Republic of Texas in 1836 – the Anglo population skyrocketed from 1,200 to 30,000 persons. The vast majority of the Anglo emigres were single men, usually indebted, with a ratio of ten Anglo men to every Anglo woman in the settled, eastern portion of Texas. In the western Texas hinterlands that overlapped the borders of Comancheria, the ratio jumped up to twenty Anglo men to every Anglo woman. Historian Mark Carroll argues that this acute imbalance created an especially violent milieu between contending groups who used the prism of race to envision a racial hierarchy of authority in Texas, governed by the growing numbers of Anglo men at the top. An explosion in the sheer number of English language newspaper articles interested in the Comanche occurred within both the United States and Texas due to the rapid pace of Anglo colonization during this era.25

Between 1822 and 1836, one the most common manifestations of the Comanche in the American press discussed the ability of the Comanches to disrupt the newly founded trade link of the Santa Fe Trail between the United States and Mexico. Commerce between these two entities had been illegal during the days of Spain’s empire. However, in 1821, Missouri trader James Becknell inaugurated the trail to Santa Fe, now that commercial traffic

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25 Hämäläinen discusses the final years of Spain’s rule in Texas in *The Comanche Empire*, 190-1; for population estimates and early Anglo emigration into Mexican Texas, see Mark M. Carroll, *Homesteads Ungovernable: Families, Sex, Race, and the Law in Frontier Texas, 1823-1860* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 3-7.
and trade were legal between the United States and newly independent Mexico. Over the next five decades, countless traders crossed between both commercial nodes of Santa Fe and Independence, Missouri to trade manufactured goods, livestock, precious metals, and other goods. The trail happened to pass through the northern extent of the Comanche heartland situated between the Arkansas and Cimarron rivers in present-day Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Though Comanches had been quite open to American traders in eastern Texas in the 1810s and early 1820s, the Comanches apparently disliked how Santa Fe Trail traders withheld the bulk of their wares from trade with the Comanche for more profitable trade in Santa Fe. The Comanches thus saw the traders as fair game for raiding and plunder.  

Even within the first few years of trade, the American press throughout the country, from the Missouri frontier to newspapers on the East Coast, was full of stories about the potential gain of trade and very real danger that the Comanches presented on the dangerous trail. One of the first American trains to Santa Fe ran afoul of “Camanche Indians” who killed “a son of Col. Cooper,” which caused a melee between the Anglo-Americans and the Natives.” The same article tempered the passions of anger at Comanches by stating that the danger was worth it – “the enterprise of our western citizen has opened a channel direct to the source of the precious metals, by which they already begin to flow in upon this section [St. Louis] of the Union” and beyond to the eastern United States. In 1823, news from St. Louis spurred the printing of several articles on the murder of “Mr. John McKnight,” an “old and respectable citizen of St. Louis,” who was on the “upper sources of the Arkansas

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“River” and had been “murdered by Indians…[and] nearly robbed of all his merchandize [sic]” when all he was attempting to do was established “trade with the Indians” on that section of the river. Whom did the article blame? “The Indians, by whom this atrocity was committed, are called the Camanches.” How this particular information reached the press was not stated. But the article elaborated further that these Natives, who had formerly friendly relations with Americans, comprised a “numerous and warlike nation, bordering on the heads of the Arkansas, and spreading through a great portion of Texas.” Furthermore, the Comanches could call up “at least 15,000 warriors” whom the Spanish never bested. In fact, “Spaniards have never been able to do any thing [sic] with them and have almost relinquished the country to their possession…The Camanches roam at large the undisputed masters of the soil.” And it had been rumored, according to the article, that newly crowned Mexican Emperor Iturbide had inexplicably goaded the Comanches into creating a hostile environment so that they – the Comanches – might have an empire of their own, allied with Mexico. The Daily National Intelligencer also added its voice to the story in repeating the claim – apparently merely reiterating the original, uncorroborated news story from ten days previous – that the “Camanches…had destroyed an American trader…and plundered him of all his goods.” After restating the Comanches’ “warlike” nature and numerical superiority,” the nameless editor of the story shocked its readers by informing that the Comanches have “entirely checked the ingress of Europeans [into Texas], by the fears which they [the Comanches] inspired.” The article, however, debunked a claim that somehow the Spaniards or British were behind the scheme of encouraging the Comanches to attack Americans to disrupt trade, as “the Spaniards are said to be killed on all occasions by those Indians; and there is no evidence that they have intercourse with the British.” The Indians, the article
claimed, are merely “indiscriminate plunderers.” Comanche raids continued to make news and frighten potential traders, as Comanches stole “one hundred and seventy mules and horses” after killing both American and Mexican traders. Dire warnings in newspaper articles implored traders that fanciful descriptions of Texas were “subject to so much exaggeration” without discussion…[of] its disadvantages hidden from view,” and that “every travelling party should be strong in numbers and well armed,” given the “danger from the Comanche Indians.”  

Embedded in these articles and spurred by their content were audacious statements, stereotypes, half-truths, bold lies, and debunked claims about Comanches. During this era of increasing American reportage on Comanches, new subjects and effusive prose fed into hungry American readers who were witnessing the birth and evolution of the sensational Comanche in the English language press.

Mere days after Americans between Missouri and the East Coast read about the uncorroborated murder and plunder of John McKnight, the *Daily National Intelligencer* printed a story about “Mr. Bartow and three others” who had recently arrived in St. Louis from “Santa Fee [sic]” with a party originally “consisting of 40,” who, after traveling “a distance of about twelve hundred miles [roundtrip to Santa Fe],” had only lost a single man in their party – “a victim to his intemperate habits.” Though the party had stopped on the Arkansas River, the “party heard nothing of Mr. McKnight, supposed to have been killed by

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the Camanches,” and in fact, the “Spaniards and all the Indians which they met with were friendly.” A fellow traveler of McKnight’s, Thomas James, later provided testimony that Comanches had actually robbed him and his entourage, including John McKnight, of their goods, but they escaped with their lives with the intervention of the Spaniards. Thus, it would appear that the *Daily National Intelligencer* tacitly aimed to correct that narrative of the brutal murder of McKnight by the Comanche, though it only did so by injecting new testimony that fellow travelers had heard nothing of the supposed murder. Rather than retract the original story that had spread so widely in a seemingly short time, the second article on McKnight still implied that it *might* have happened – he *might* have been murdered by Comanches – though some of the travelers on the same route and roughly the same time had not heard of the brutal Comanche act.\(^{28}\)

Grossly inflated Comanche descriptions and an inflated Comanche domain became even more absurd by this time. Recalling the discussion that Comanches most likely totaled no more than seven to ten-thousand souls in all – including all categories of Comanche society – by 1830, due to the ravages of smallpox several years before, both articles that discussed the murder of John McKnight also provided dire evidence of the Comanche threat in stating the Indians could call upon “15,000 warriors” alone to foil Anglo attempts at travel to Santa Fe for trade. If the warrior class was assumed to take up only a portion of the entire Comanche nation, then both articles implied the actual Comanche nation would have been the largest single military entity beyond America’s western frontier in Missouri. The

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Comanches became larger than life and had the manpower to deflect anything, as implied in these articles. This claim dovetailed with an 1826 article from the Daily National Journal, via the Louisiana Messenger, that stated Comanches “are the most powerful and warlike tribe of Indians in America” who could call upon “15,000 fighting men…as ascertained by the Mexican Government.” The Comanches “inhabit a country…which extends to the sources of Red River…and even beyond that to the western ocean [Pacific Ocean].” The source of the absurd claim to a geographic domain that had no precedence in known literature of the time was most likely embedded in the article’s claim that Comanches “are tall, robust, and muscular – some of them measuring six feet six inches in height…they are said to be the largest race of men in North America.” This power and stature meant that “most of the Indians between this and the ocean are of that tribe.” It seems that the grossly inflated stereotype of the Comanche as the superlatively tallest race in America not only subsumed all other distinct natives between Louisiana and the Pacific, but it therefore constructed the Comanche domain as stretching to the Pacific itself. These were erroneous claims, as a contemporary American visitor to the Comanche described them as “rather low, and in person often approach corpulency…The men are short and stout.” This fact notwithstanding, the article created a Comanche that was a giant among men and a master of the West in the mind of the newspaper reader.29

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All of these often spurious claims – of the murderous, indiscriminate plundering enemy of the Spanish and Americans; of the larger-than-life Comanche who were too numerous and gigantic; of the their domain that was the vast remainder of the continent in which all Indians were Comanche – were buttressed by constant, negative Comanche attributes repeated time and again in the press. Comanches, the insatiable “Bedouin Arabs of America, forever mounted,” were at their very nature “warlike, ferocious, and sanguinary” who would commit “various depredations” against residents of Texas. However, this should not stop “the emigration of American settlers…[to] the province of Texas,” because “the Mexican government should facilitate every means of settlement, in their power, and thus fashion down to the yoke of civilization, [on] those hordes [of Comanches],” which could only be tamed or destroyed by Americans. Foreshadowing many years of growing conflict with Anglos in Texas, The Farmers’ Cabinet proclaimed that Comanches would be “The most formidable and troublesome tribe” for Anglo colonists in Texas.” This article, published shortly before the promulgation of the Anglo-dominated Republic of Texas, would become the template for how Americans would act in their relations to the Comanche over the next twenty-five years. And the newspaper would become a valuable tool of American empire for creating a native monster worth destroying.30

30 Comanches as “Bedouin Arabs” in Louisville Public Advertiser (Louisville, KY), October 6, 1829, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; “warlike, ferocious, and sanguinary Comanches” in Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser (Baltimore, MD), October 20, 1831, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; original taken from the Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post, “An Indian Battle.,” The Farmers’ Cabinet, September 13, 1833, America’s Historical Newspapers.
CHAPTER 3
COMANCHE IN THE PRESS, 1837-1861

The decade before the outbreak of the Civil War was a time of great transformations in Texas. Violence between Anglos, Hispanics, and Native Americans, expanding settler colonies, and disease outbreaks all transformed the landscape and demographics of Texas in the decades after the birth of the Republic of Texas in 1836. The region was awash in agricultural and mineral wealth. As Anglos became ascendant in Texas, the land and its potential riches became the prime vectors in understanding Anglo desire for control of the land. In this dynamic milieu, the promise of fortune was in the air. However, this promise was tempered by the fact that the paths to fortune were often blocked by the menacing presence of the Comanche, as articulated by the press.

In 1852, a Texas newspaper based in Galveston, the *Weekly Journal*, published a brief article altering its readers to a great find in the state: “a mining company is organizing in Bastrop for the purpose of digging a silver mine which has been discovered about two hundred miles above Austin. A number of individuals have already…met with sufficient success to induce them to return [to mine the silver].” The exciting news, however, had a dire proviso: “[the mine] is in the midst of the Comanche hunting grounds, [and] they [the miners] will doubtlessly run some personal risk.”

By this time, though Comanche numbers had been shrinking through frontier violence with other groups, outbreaks of disease, and famine, the Comanche still posed the greatest wall to Anglo exploitation of the state. The press in the era of Anglo dominance in Texas
still relied on the established tropes of the threatening Comanche to warn its readers of the dangerous nature of the Comanche. The mere mention of the Comanche in the press instilled feverish panic on the frontier. This, in turn, caused many bogus Comanche threats to materialize amongst a fearful Anglo populace – a process that often relayed the false threat or event back to the press, who in turn, would whip up hysteria on the frontier by warning its readers that murderous Comanches aimed to turn Anglo establishments into a bloodbath. However, new strands of concern emerged in the press. Even Vast riches smackdab in the middle of Comanche lands proved a daunting target for which many were willing to risk their lives – and many of them did. The newspaper in these years before the outbreak of hostilities between North and South was an indispensable agent that taunted Anglos with Comanche threats and Texas abundance – and it was also the prime agent that suggested Comanches had to be wiped clean from the region, if one seek such promising treasure. Comanche land occupancy was therefore an anathema to state development, as the American press constantly reminded its readers across all regions of the United States in the 1850s.¹

With the promulgation of the Republic of Texas, the floodgates to Anglo emigration to the region blew wide open. What had been a steady stream of Anglo and European migration to Texas during the previous years turned into a deluge of white settlers that would continue over the next several decades, resulting in over half-a-million Anglo residents by 1860 on the eve of the outbreak of the Civil War. Anglos became the single-most populous racial category in the Republic and later State of Texas in 1845. Vast Texas had seemingly endless tracts of valuable land that only became more valuable with greater settlement and

¹ “Mining Company,” *Weekly Journal* (Galveston, TX), November 5, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers.
agricultural transformation. Land speculation was one of the greatest factors, if not the greatest, behind the Anglo desire to throw off the yoke of de jure Mexican rule in 1836. Texians – as Anglo-Texans referred to themselves in the antebellum period – had accused the centralist Mexican government of dispossessing the most valuable public lands from sale in Texas to create a land monopoly for the Mexican government. Limited land ownership would keep the Texians just poor enough and beholden to Mexico, the government assumed, to keep them from gaining too much power to wrest the province from Mexico. The plan backfired, however. By the 1830s, Anglos had become too numerous in Texas to sit idly by and take dictates from Mexico City. Texians and many Tejanos revolted – the Republic of Texas was born.²

The Republic was short-lived. To many of its original Anglo legislators, the real goal for Texas was ascendancy into the United States. Not only would this give the new, weak republic security in the bosom of the United States, but it would increase land values and investment even more. Republic of Texas legislators were some of the greatest land owners in Texas, and thus they had a vested interest to increase their profits even more. Greater security within the United States would lead to greater stability, which would eventually lead to greater revenue for land sales, argued proponents of land speculation. However, Texas annexation to the United States was not a desire shared by all. Anti-slavery Northerners saw the annexation of Texas as a naked move to extend slavery further to the Southwest, and thus

immediate annexation to the United States did not occur in the aftermath of the Texas Revolution. After years of wrangling, however, Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845. Annexation and disagreements on the boundaries between Texas with Mexico put the United States on track to war with Mexico in 1846 – a war that enabled a triumphant United States to gobble up the northern third of the Republic of Mexico and increase the geographic domain of the United States to the California coast. Within this newly acquired, vast region, the Comanches still remained a formidable power. The conquest of Comanche lands – which Anglos now claimed as their own – became the prime motivation for Anglos seeking to expand their nation, as dictated by the precepts of manifest destiny.3

During this momentous decade in the history of Texas, given the huge increase in the Anglo population, encounters between Anglos, be they Anglo-Americans or Anglo-Texans, and Comanches became more and more commonplace. The press, of course, was there to collect the data of these exchanges and create a narrative of Anglo-Comanche relations for both the citizens of Texas and the United States. This era denoted a change in how the English language press covered the ever-increasing encounters between these two groups, however. The now-familiar process of inflating the Comanche to superhuman dimensions, particularly through the usage of the literary construct of Comanches being the superlatively “most” attribute, continued apace – especially in the Texas press. Articles discussing the Comanche domain, their wild population estimates, and some, often dubious articles on Comanche ethnography still appeared. Erroneous, rumor-fueled articles also still appeared and were sometimes amended or retracted after the damage of the rumor had been done. As

3 For dissenting views on annexation, see Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, 5-6; for treaty stipulations of the U.S.-Mexican war, see DeLay, “Epilogue.”
Anglos increasingly vied for Comanche lands in central and West Texas – lands that were seen as valuable, profit-earning ranges within the capitalist polity – newspaper articles began framing Comanches as dangerous squatters who could spoil American desires for Texas and its potential bounty. This combination of all of the aforementioned methods of framing the Comanche proved to be the catalyst that eventually led papers in all the reaches of the Anglo-American realm – in Texas, the American South and the Northeast – to admit that the Comanche had no place on the Anglo frontier. By the 1850s, we find a predominate press rhetoric that claimed, at the very least, Comanches must be removed from the Anglo sphere of settlement; and at the most, if Anglos could not transform Comanches through forceful removal or assimilation, Comanches must be exterminated. In this latter venture, the press did not represent some anomalous voice in the wilderness: it articulated and encouraged Anglos and the government with the prevailing discourse that Comanches must be removed.

By 1836, there were well over twelve hundred newspaper titles in the United States alone that frequently swapped articles via the newspaper exchange system. And though the sheer number of dailies and weeklies increased to an unprecedented number, regional differentiation in American papers that reported on or editorialized Comanche issues remained negligible during the antebellum period. The same cannot be said concerning the Texas press in the years following the Texas Revolution, however. Though the first printing press arrived in Texas in 1813, only a handful of English and Spanish language newspapers were established during the Mexican era. However, between the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1836 and the outbreak of the Civil War, Texas became awash in independent newspapers. By 1860, Texas had approximately four hundred newspaper titles alone that mostly acted as propaganda mouthpieces to support issues specific to the state.
The Texas press – and especially the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, based in the safe haven in Houston, leagues away from Comanchería – represented a special case in how it framed Anglo-Comanche relations in the antebellum period. It went to the greatest extents to paint garish or demeaning images of Comanche nature and society. At certain times, Comanches seemed incapable of defeat – and at other times, the Texas press concluded that they were the worst of all uncivilized creatures and were thus ripe for defeat by Anglos. Considering the Republic of Texas and the United States freely exchanged papers until 1842, the exaggerated and inflammatory Texas newspaper articles on Comanches found a large audience eager for more news of a region that was increasingly on the thoughts of all Americans in the days before Texas annexation in 1845. According to the press, no greater barrier to Anglo hegemony emerged than that of the Comanche menace in Texas.4

During the era of free press exchange between the Republic of Texas and the United States, the primary focus of Texas newspaper articles was to dehumanize Comanches in various ways. Articles that often began with attempting to establish facts or news on Comanches often devolved into polemical pieces that edified its readers why it was necessary to despise them or how they might be defeated. In 1839, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* published an article intending to remind its Texian populace of the dangers that Comanches still represented, now three years after Texas independence. Yet, for all of the potential danger that the Comanches represented, the Comanches were slated for defeat: “The Commanches…number about ten thousand warriors, but they are scattered over so large an extent of territory and, moreover, are so divided by private feuds, that they are seldom able to

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4 For newspaper title statistics and history, see Huntzicker, 169-70; and Sibley, 3-14.
assemble a [single] force of six or seven hundred warriors.” Though several hundred teeming warriors hardly seemed a reassuringly low number of natives for Texians to take on, “most of these [Comanches] were only armed with bows and arrows or paltry spears [. ] Two hundred good riflemen would have easily put the whole [Comanche] army to flight.” Though they committed depredations on settlers, “These Indians are probably the most cowardly of all the tribes of North America.” This bit of inflammatory information arrived at the paper via “Several persons who have long been acquainted with this tribe, [and] have informed us…when at length they [Comanches] have joined in battle, the loss of only four or five warriors has so dispirited them, that they have relinquished the contest.” True to form for many articles on Comanches from this era, the last words were often reserved for rhetorically debasing or defeating the Comanche: “Such are the enemies with which we have now to contend – and it is pleasing to reflect, that the judicious measures which have been adopted by the government, to prevent their incursions upon our frontier settlements, will soon enable us to regard them with as little apprehension and dread.”

The brimming overconfidence of this article masked the actual fears that ended up permeating the text. Comanches, according to the article, were incapable of mounting a credible defense due to internal disagreements; they were uncivilized and clan-like cowards who really represented no threat to the superior Anglos armed with their superior weaponry. However, the article belied the fact that, in the eyes of their observers, the Comanches still controlled vast areas that the republic claimed and could potentially amass ten-thousand warriors, itself most likely an overestimation as discussed earlier. This glaring fact, as stated

5 “Hostile Indians,” Telegraph and Texas Register (Houston, TX), March 3, 1839, America’s Historical Newspapers.
by the paper, appeared towards the beginning of the article and most likely left the biggest impression on its readers. The debasement of Comanches as destined to lose in the face of superior Anglos primarily served to temper Anglo fear that they were, in fact, dealing with a very dangerous foe. Moreover, the title of the article, “Hostile Indians,” merely reminded Texians and American readers that there were potentially many Comanches who were inimical to Anglo objectives and controlled much area of the new republic.

This article appeared during the middle of Mirabeau Lamar’s tenure as President of Texas. Lamar was vehemently anti-Indian – and he held special contempt for Comanches. He was a dyed-in-the-wool racist who was one of the earliest Texian politicians to demand the removal of all natives from Texas. Anglos, he argued, were the sacred inheritors of Texas, much to the detriment of its Native populations. The “good riflemen” and “judicious measures” needed for stopping the Comanches to which the article alluded referenced Lamar’s policy of creating Texas Ranger units that had relative success in the ethnic cleansing of large swaths of natives from the republic. This zealous policy eventually bankrupted the poor republic. The article most likely was a reaction to a successful Ranger massacre of a large Comanche camp that contained women, children and Comanche warriors while they slept on the San Saba River the month before. Being able to slaughter Comanches in their teepees while sleeping thus allowed the article to frame them as “cowards” – they certainly did not put up a fight, in the eyes of the Rangers. Comanches, caught unawares, were thus insignificant as fleas to the Rangers. The article reflected the great euphoria that Anglo readers probably experienced with the success of their militia. But the euphoria, encapsulated in a triumphal debasement of Comanches as the most comical sort of
personality trait on the frontier – a yellow-bellied coward – and forecasting defeat at the hands of the Rangers, was short-lived. Only a year later, the newspaper changed its tune.\textsuperscript{6}

In the aftermath of the slaughter of the sleeping Comanche on the San Saba in 1839, several Comanche elders and their families traveled to San Antonio in 1840 for peace talks with Texians who promised to hold talks under a banner of truce. In an earnest gesture of desiring peace, the Comanches promised to return any Anglo captives whom they had. Unable to convince other Comanche bands who did not want to participate in the peace talks to return their own white captives, the peace-desiring Comanches who visited San Antonio were only able to produce a single Anglo captive, Matilda Lockhart, a young girl who appeared to have been abused by her captors. Appalled by her appearance and dispirited with the return of a single Anglo captive, the Texian negotiators informed the visiting Comanche delegation that there would be no negotiations, and that the Comanches were now captives of the republic. Their release was contingent upon the release of all Anglo captives in Comanche captivity – something that the negotiating band of Comanches had already unsuccessfully tried to effect. Frightened and confused by the sudden negation of peace talks, the Comanches attempted to escape the building where they were now being held at gunpoint. A melee ensued, and yet another massacre of the Comanche commenced at the hands of the Texians. Most of the Comanche elders and warriors were killed, along with several of the women and children who tried desperately to escape the city. Anglos took a few alive and imprisoned them. The episode became known in Texas history by the moniker of the Council House Fight – a phrase that on the surface seems like an appropriate phrase,

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.; for Lamar’s views and actions against Natives, specifically the massacre on the San Saba, see Anderson, \textit{The Conquest of Texas}, “Lamar, His Generals, and Ethnic Cleansing”; and Betty, 172.
but in reality, masks the true nature of the episode. A fight implies a fair pitched battle. The incident was anything but a fair fight.7

Responding to yet another crisis in Anglo-Comanche relations, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* published several articles that reminded its readers that though the Txians had whipped the Comanches, the Natives had, in fact, not been totally defeated, and that they were indeed a special enemy with special powers. In the heightened atmosphere of the recent Council House Fight, the paper published story after story that immersed its readers in the gory details of the “fight” against the Comanches in San Antonio and the “heroic” deeds of the Texas army. The *Telegraph and Texas Register* and other Texas papers framed the massacre as a Comanche-initiated sneak attack against peace-desiring Txians whose logical demands the Comanches had never wanted in the first place. *The Galvestonian* labelled the Comanches as “liars” concerning the number of white captives they promised to bring to the peace talks, not realizing the untenable situation the visiting delegation of Comanches had created in their inability to produce more white captives. As the greatly outnumbered Comanches scrambled to escape San Antonio, after the army’s plan for detaining the Comanches had been sprung, Comanche “warriors…fought with desperation…[and] The Indian women fought like female tigers” against the numerous Txians who did their best to keep the Comanches from slipping from the city. In doing so, the Comanches “have placed themselves, by their treachery and by their unprovoked murder of our fellow citizens, while the treaty of peace was in the possession of the murderers, by their robberies and cruelties, beyond the pale of civilized warfare.” The paper seemed unaware, or wanted to blatantly

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7 For a detailed description of the Council House Fight, see Smith, 170-67; and Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas*, 180-84.
distort the truth, that the Texians had promised the Comanche safe passage to and from the peace talks. The Comanches simply could not have imagined secretly attacking their numerous hosts in San Antonio. Why else would the Comanches have brought their entire families if they planned a hopeless attack against Texians? Regardless, the message remained that it was the Comanches, not the Texians, who were treacherous and uncivilized. As just punishment for uncivilized natives, the Comanches “should be hunted like any other ravenous and savage beasts of prey. They should be shot down wherever met, and thus be taught that treachery and falsehood will not be suffered to revel unpunished on the blood of the white man.” If this represented the public reaction to legitimate Comanche attempts at making peace with their Texian neighbors, it is easy to understand the perpetual disdain Comanches grew to have specifically for Texians.8

Comanche cowardice in print seemed to disappear, now that Anglos were fighting Comanche warriors and ruthless Comanche “women [who] fought like female tigers” – Comanches who had not been ambushed sleeping in their teepees, such as what occurred on the San Saba during the previous year. Comanche “treachery” warranted indiscriminate murder of the Comanche. Though not stated, one could imagine the birth of the phrase “Remember the Council House Fight!” as a rallying call for Texians to exterminate evil Comanches, given the misplaced outrage embedded in the dubious printed word of the newspaper that framed such an event as treacherous. According to the Texas press, Texians

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8 The Galvestonian (Galveston, TX), April 3, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers; “unprovoked murder” from Telegraph and Texas Register (Houston, TX), April 4, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers; “savage beasts of prey” from Telegraph and Texas Register (Houston, TX), April 15, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers; concerning Comanche views on Texians, see Jodye Lynn Dickson Schilz and Thomas F. Schilz, Buffalo Hump and the Penateka Comanches (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1989), 9-10.
should have legitimate fear of Comanches coupled with righteous indignation. However, the events of the Council House Fight belied the truth. Were the Texas press to print the truth, it was the Comanches who had much more to dread with the birth of the Republic of Texas. Texians could console themselves with violence enacted against the Comanche, as stated by the printed word, given that the destiny of their Anglo republic demanded native removal for the establishment of civilization. As the press framed it, Comanches were antithetical to civilized Anglo mores.9

However, weeks later, still reeling from the excitement of the wholesale slaughter of the Comanche in San Antonio – inculcated as a “fight” to newspaper readers – the *Telegraph and Texas Register* printed stories that returned to familiar tropes of Comanche prowess and presented evidence that some Texians, at the very least, thought that they were dealing with an otherworldly entity in the Comanches. Though the American press tended to side with their Texian brethren and deemed the Council House Fight a result of typical Comanche treachery, we find some of the earliest stirrings of sympathy for Comanches in the American press. Though sympathy for Native Americans in the press was particularly a phenomenon that emerged after the Civil War at the peak of the wars to subdue the remaining free Plains nations, we do find some scattering of evidence that not every newspaper, and thus not every Anglo, felt it was necessary to fault the Comanche for the spilled blood. However, overarching themes in both the Texas and American press continued to construct the Comanche as nothing more than a soulless, powerful threat.

9 *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston, TX), April 15, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers.
True to form, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* used the recent experience of the Council House Fight as an excuse to construct the images of the Comanche in a superlatively heightened fashion. In an article-turned-editorial from late April 1840, just weeks after the San Antonio massacre, the paper reminded its readers that “of all the Indians the Comanches is [*sic*] most warlike and dangerous to the trader.” Furthermore, in appearance, they were something to behold and dread, given that “They were covered from head to toe with vermillion and as they dashed along the prairie upon them [*sic*] untamed horses, with their long hair streaming behind them, they seemed like mounted flamed of fire, and the very horses seemed to spurn the ground, as though they were under the control of devils.” It was one thing for the paper to suggest a devilish manner of the Comanche, yet it was another thing to suggest actual supernatural abilities of the Comanche to render something as prosaic as a horse with supernatural qualities. This begged the question: if this were the case, what could the Comanches not do? They became something metaphysical to Texians – and they were cowards no more.  

However, there were apparent scientific ways of understanding the Comanche in the press to make them seem much more mundane, and thus capable of defeat. After the “fight” in San Antonio, a nameless Texian phrenologist came across the corpse of a fallen Comanche warrior and “discovered such extraordinary bumps upon one of the heads of these Indians that he cut it off and boiled it for a scientific examination.” Whereupon he discovered that by “removing the flesh he found the skull bone in almost twenty pieces…[and] he pronounced it the organ of ‘club-of-an axe otherness’[.]” Though the cryptic phrase incorporating the “axe”

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10 “PRAIRIE SKETCHES,” *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston, TX), April 22, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers.
will remain in conjecture – it may refer to the instrument used to strike the warrior down – the process of native cranial investigation was a hallmark of the era. American physician Samuel George Morton’s famous treatise on in the investigation of different racial crania, *Crania Americana*, appeared in 1839, only a year before the Council House Fight. Morton posited that protuberances on the skull determined brain faculties and intelligence – and each race had a sort of “national cranium,” which thus determined a race’s natural proclivity towards being civilized and moral, if at all. Both of these attributes, according to Texians and promoted through the press, were things that Comanches could not naturally come by; given their race, as evinced by their skulls, it would be impossible to teach them the fruits of civilized life. This was proved by a quick field phrenological examination in San Antonio. The smashed skull and its essence of Comanche “otherness” merely reified to this phrenologist, and to anyone reading the article, that the Comanche had been scientifically proved to be something different and incompatible with Anglos.\(^\text{11}\)

Curiously, on the same day that the aforementioned article which proved the essence of “otherness” of the Comanche was published in Texas, an article in the *New-Hampshire Sentinel* appeared that damned the Texians’ ambush of the Comanche with the title “Horrible Massacre of the Cumanche Indians.” Gleaning their information from “The latest Texan papers,” the anonymous author of the *Sentinel*’s article seemed wary of the veracity of Texian reportage. The author assumed that Texians were the ones who enacted a “brutal treachery towards a party of Cumanche Indians” in San Antonio. “The Indians [,] finding

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they were betrayed [by the Texians] made a rush to escape,” whereupon a “fight commenced, which resulted in the death of 55 warriors, principally chiefs, 2 women and 3 children. A small number who escaped across the river were pursued by mounted men, and every one killed.” For this paper, the shoe was now on the other foot, and it was the Texians who were capable of such vile treachery. One might best understand blame placed on the Texians by the contempt that Northerners had for the former and the prospects of annexing such a large slave-holding region into the United States. By 1840, this debate in the United States had become more and more divisive to the slave-holding South and abolitionist North. Anglos who had emigrated to Texas came primarily from the American South, bringing with them their peculiar institution of chattel slavery and a Southern creed that demanded violence as a response to supposed effrontery to one’s honor – both attributes that many Northerners loathed. Thus, the author of the article may have had a politico-regional bone to pick with American Southerners in the guise of Texians – and purported sympathy for the Comanche in their dealings with Texians provided a perfect springboard to publicly chastise the South and argue against annexing Texas as another southern state.¹²

Other articles from the Texas press made their way into the American press, as evinced by an article originally from the Houston Times which the Richmond Enquirer reprinted, we assume, with no modification, given the tenor and content of the article. Leaving no room for misinterpretation, the italicized first line of the article read “The expected Comanche Treaty turned into a fight.” The Comanches’ “cool, calculating villainy”

¹² “Horrible Massacre of the Cumanche,” New-Hampshire Sentinel, April 29, 1840, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers; for a discussion of transplanted Southern codes of virtue in Texas and Southern emigration to Texas, see Anderson, Conquest of Texas, 82-97; and Carroll, 79.
was written all over the abused face of their Anglo captive, “Miss Lockhart,” the narrative stated. And “the abuse visible…could not fail to arouse the indignation of every Texian present.” Thus, Texian violence aimed at the Comanches was justified. The article even took time to debase Comanche women, some of whom were killed in the massacre, because “from their attire and warlike skill [they] were taken for men.” Comanches were such uncivilized villains, the article insinuated, that the issue of distinct gender appearances was immaterial as a way to define male combatants – legitimate targets – from female civilians, whose death during the massacre should have been anathema to chivalrous codes of battle, had they been dressed appropriately. Comanches of both genders were legitimate targets, given their undeveloped level of binary dress codes. The Comanches – all Comanches – were indeed barbarous.13

Concomitant to the destruction of the Comanche encampment on the San Saba and the news of the Council House Fight, several articles appeared in both the American North and South that discussed the potentially valuable lands that the Comanches inhabited. This was a topic that the press had not broached until now, most likely because Anglo settlements had not ventured into Comanche lands until after 1836. And it would be this topic – the Anglo desire for material and profit in Texas – that most likely sealed the Comanches’ fate as occupants of the Southern Plains in Texas.

As early as 1839 – a decade before the great gold rush in California – rumors of Texas gold found their way into the printing houses of the United States. Citing news originally printed in *The Galveston Civilian*, Baltimore’s *The Sun* newspaper reported that

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13 Original taken from the *Houston Times*, “TEXAS,” *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA), April 24, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers.
“[Anglo] Settlers were fast pushing out into the western countries [of Texas]; farms were opening, where but a short time since the Indian roamed unheeded…Many valuable specimens of minerals have been discovered in the Comanche country.” Most importantly for the readers of this article that had spread from Texas to the North, “Among the rest [of the explorations] was one of native gold found in the mountainous region, 150 miles northwest of Bexar [San Antonio].” Though smatterings of gold had been discovered from time to time in Texas by the Spaniards and some lucky prospectors later in the nineteenth century, there was never a great gold strike that happened anywhere near the scale of what occurred in California. This fact notwithstanding, this news – arguably a rumor – acted as a threat for potential violence against the Comanche, given the purported gold located in the heart of Comanche lands. And the veracity of the gold story is really immaterial. Anglo settlers, according to this article, were already fast pushing the line of settlement into the western reaches of Texas, acting as a sort of vanguard for other Anglo ventures to exploit Texas and its material offerings. The area was thus primed to extend into Comancheria. And if there had been extensive gold discoveries in this region, this most likely would have quickly resulted in Comanche dispossession earlier than it occurred in the late 1850s. If large quantities of gold had been verifiably discovered, the Comanches and other Texas Indians of the Southern Plains might have experienced a similar genocide that California’s Native population witnessed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Though the Comanches were essentially safe for now from the effects of gold fever, this article displayed how tenuous their position was in the sights of Anglos seeking profit from Texas lands. Anglo
readers awaited the next go-ahead from more verifiable news that the Comanches resided on territory that could yield real wealth.\textsuperscript{14}

At other times, rumors of bountiful wealth of Texas became established fact, and Comanches bore the brunt of Anglo desires for their domain. In 1840, two articles appeared that discussed how rich and fertile Comanche lands were for agricultural pursuits. And as usual, the press either directly stated or intimated that the Comanche presence on these lands was a barrier. According to \textit{The Daily Picayune}, a joint Texian-Lipan-Tankawa native force assembled whose “object of the expedition [was] to force the Commanches from the section of country near the San Saba [River], and to establish in a line of block houses from the Colorado [River] to the Red River.” The purpose of purging the Comanches from the region and establishing the block houses was to “effectually shut out the prairie Indians from the settled portions of the country, and remove the frontier from one to two hundred miles northward.” As not to leave the reader wondering what drove this expedition to instigate the violent removal of Comanches from the region, the article concluded by stating “The section of country thus wrested from these savage hordes, is exceedingly valuable, from the fact that it is peculiarly adapted to the culture of wheat and other staples of the middle States of the American Union.” Savage hordes clearly had no place on such profit-making plains – and the newspaper was here to remind its readers of the high stakes.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Original taken from \textit{The Galveston Civilian}, italics in the original in “From Texas,” \textit{The Sun} (Baltimore, MA), April 12, 1839, America’s Historical Newspapers; unlike California, Texas has historically not been known for its gold hauls, as stated in Fred Rosen, \textit{Gold! The Story of the 1848 Gold Rush and How It Shaped a Nation} (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005), 18; for information on the connections between gold-seeking and the genocide of Natives in California, see Brendan C. Lindsay, \textit{Murder State: California’s Native America Genocide, 1846-1873} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 128-31.

\textsuperscript{15} “Latest from Texas,” \textit{The Daily Picayune} (New Orleans, LA), January 2, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers.
These were not the isolated feelings of a single article, however. In a related article from the same year, entitled “CAMANCHE INDIANS” printed in the Philadelphia National Enquirer, a trader provided observations of peoples and lands between San Antonio and the Mexican city of Chihuahua. In this relatively short article, the anonymous observer reported that “the Camanche tribe has been variously estimated from four to fourteen thousand,” easily a wild overestimation, as discussed earlier. Moreover, the trader claimed “That part of the Camanche country which our caravan passed over, is the most beautiful which the imagination can conceive.” An even greater enticement was the fact that “Water is abundant and pure; pasturage is most excellent; fruit is in great quantities and very good…Game abounds…The air is pure and light; the cold in winter is never severe, and the heat of summer is never oppressive.” In closing, the article made a clarion call for the possession of Comanchería, because “The Camanches attain extreme longevity [given this land]. Though it was supposedly clear why the Comanches were apparently so long-lived, given the perfect environment, the observer reminded the reader ecstatically that “The Camanche country may indeed be called the proper habitation of man. The Creator would seem to have produced there his favorite work.”\(^\text{16}\)

The author, admittedly, did not make any direct call for the Comanche to be removed this land. However, he did not need to spell it out for the readers. The article’s content suggested this area should not be the purview of the Comanche. This region – inhabited by heathen Comanche – had no right to occupy a land of such peerless bounty. The land’s

attributes and its potential to produce the finest agricultural products were wasted on the nomadic Comanches, mere “Bedouins,” as the author called them. Though the phrase “manifest destiny” would still not be coined for another five years after the publication of this article, the contours of its premise were alive and well within this article: this was a God-given land for Anglos. Texians had wrested control of the country from the Mexicans, but they were not done. They set their sights on removing their native populations between the 1830s and 1850s. Early twentieth century Texan historian Rupert Richardson made a judicious yet ironic statement about the land-lust of the Texians and its attendant violence during in the formative years of Texas as an Anglo polity: “The people of Texas loved peace, but they loved land more.” Richardson echoed growing Texian desires – the creed of manifest destiny. The land had been deemed by God to be the purview of Anglos for peaceful development – once the violent removal of Comanches was attained

As the rhetoric of Texas annexation grew to a fever pitch in the United States and the Republic of Texas, the thorny issue of the Comanche presence remained a topic of discussion in the public forum of the press. If Texas were to become a territory or state within the United States, the latter would inevitably inherit the persistent Comanche problem. While the Tyler administration in 1844 wrangled with an appropriate treaty of what responsibilities the federal government would assume if Texas became a formal part of the United States, an article from the Weekly Ohio Statesman – a Northern paper – summed up the two greatest Northern concerns of Texas as a potential American boondoggle: “the United States…[would

17 Original article printed in The Globe, “CAMANCHE INDIANS,” Philadelphia National Enquirer (Philadelphia, PA), April 30, 1840, America’s Historical Newspapers; for a discussion on the birth of manifest destiny, White, 73-5; Richardson, 82.
pay] off the National debt of Texas, and [would end up] defending the Territory against…irregular predatory incursions of the Camanche Indians from their fastness in the mountains on the Western frontier.” However, an article that appeared only two months later in a Southern paper, *The Macon Georgia Telegraph*, encapsulated the Southern desire for great agricultural tracts and the spread of slavery, and discounted the Comanche threat in Texas in verse. To stir up Southern emotions for Texas, the paper published a poem by J. E. Dow, an apparent booster of Texas annexation, entitled “THE LONE STAR OF THE SOUTH.” The poem proclaimed a rebirth of Anglo Texas, this time within the security of the United States:

Far Southward o’er the Sabine stream,
A young Republic lifts her head;
Whose single star doth proudly gleam
O’er valor’s grave and glory’s bed:
That star of empire took its flight
From Freedom’s corporal of light –
Beamed o’er Jacinto’s deathless plain,
And watch’d a nation’s birth again.

The Comanche presence in Texas, naturally, also found its way into the poem. The author wanted to remind its readers that Anglo will could bury the Comanche, or at the very least, push the Comanches out of Texas proper:

The fierce Camanche seeks his home,
Beyond the Rio Bravo’s wave;
No more in battle paint to roam,
Around his father’s sunken grave:
While the broad stream, whose bosom ne’er
Knew but the swan and fallow deer,
Whirls the swift steam boat’s wheel along,
And echoes to the boatman’s song.

The poem suggested pushing the Comanche, who had now been relegated by the author to a former warrior, beyond the “Rio Bravo” – the Rio Grande – and from his former domain “around his father’s sunken grave [in Texas].” What would replace “The fierce Camanche” in this rich environment? Anglo progress, of course. An American Texas awaited the arrival of “the swift steam boat’s wheel” and Anglos who would man them. This poem – published right before the dawn of Texas statehood – acted as a harbinger of increasingly hostile Anglo relations with the Comanche in the last period before the outbreak of the Civil War.

Regardless of how Americans perceived Comanches in the press – Comanches as fierce, savage, spectral, or pitiful – they were an impediment in affixing Texas and all of her riches to the American firmament. There would be no room for the Comanche in the State of Texas. Though Comanches became manifest in different guises in print, all signposts within articles pointed to the necessity of removing Comanches from Anglo proximity.18

By the 1850s, mere years after formal Texas annexation in 1845, the former domain of Comanchería had shrunk drastically. By the mid-1850s, Comanche numbers dropped to

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18 Concerning Tyler and Texas annexation, see Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, 211; “Washington Correspondence,” Weekly Ohio Statesman (Columbus, OH), April 7, 1844, America’s Historical Newspapers; “THE LONE STAR OF THE SOUTH,” The Macon Georgia Telegraph (Macon, GA), June 11, 1844, America’s Historical Newspapers.
precipitously low numbers – possibly no more than a few thousand – due to increased competition for living space and food sources between newly arrived Anglo-American settlers and other, disposed native groups pushed further west. Disease and famine, also, played a large roll in decreasing Comanche numbers. Within this startling, unprecedented period of Comanche history, many of the surviving Comanches – often desperate and starving – increased their raids on Anglo settlements and weaker native groups whom the Comanches saw as fair game in this new era of increased competition for dwindling resources. Some Comanche bands, realizing that their society was inextricably changing, even sought assistance from the United States for survival.¹⁹

As part of their treaty of annexation, Texas retained control over its public lands. This sort of concession by the United States was unprecedented. In 1854, the Texas legislature agreed to Secretary of War Jefferson Davis’s request to set aside a relatively small parcel of land for Comanche reservation to be governed by the federal government. Hoping that this would encourage Comanche domestication through settlement and farming – hunting being outlawed for reserve Comanches – this act of “charity” which Texas politicians agreed to amounted to the last time that they would deign to have Comanches in Texas. After decades of growing mistrust and countless acts of violence between Texians and Comanches, the establishment of the Comanche reserve on the Clear Fork of the Brazos acted as a sort of fin de siècle for the Comanche presence in Texas. Its existence amounted

¹⁹ Concrete demographic data on Native Americans during this era in Texas is notoriously unreliable and varied. For changes in Comanche demographics and Comanche activities in the 1850s, see Hämmäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 294-312; and Smith, “Defeat: The Indians and the United States, 1846 to 1853,” and “Disappearance: The Indians and the Texas Reserves, 1854 to 1859.”
to a paltry five years. In 1859, armed Texians threatened all Comanches – reserve Comanches or otherwise – with extermination if they did not vacate Texas proper. And this is exactly what came to pass.\textsuperscript{20}

Dwindling Comanche numbers notwithstanding, newspapers framed nearly every act of Texas frontier violence as a Comanche manifestation or involving Comanches in some way. Newspapers across the country played their familiar role in framing the Comanche in the most dehumanizing ways. Though some print sources recognized the suffering of the once-powerful Comanche, newspaper articles still framed Comanches as a great danger to the settling of Texas and an unwanted occupant to the spoils of the state. The Comanche, according to a typical article from \textit{The Daily Picayune}, was still a “lynx-eyed savage” who had not yet been defeated. During the final decade of the Comanche presence in Texas and as a popular figure for public discourse in American newspapers before the Civil War, we find a huge uptick in the number of erroneous or spurious articles that placed blame on Comanche for others’ misdeeds. The frontier was a locus of frenetic energy and timorous, trigger-happy anxiety. We thus still find the press willing to print headlines that screamed “MASSACRE BY COMANCHES” based on dubious rumors or hearsay. By this point in the history of the Comanche within the English language press, Americans had come to expect the Comanche as the consummate “bad Indian” on the frontier. Even violence committed by other natives was often initially blamed on Comanches. The \textit{Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register} admitted to this in an article from 1849 which stated that “a battle was recently fought between the combined tribes of Arapaho and Lipan Indians.” One

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 308.}
of the warring parties had initially been reported as the Comanche – and the original reporting that came from “the Arkansas frontier…[was] incorrect.” And then, stories of Comanche threats materialized simply out of Anglo paranoia. According to an article printed in The San Antonio Ledger in 1854, “Indian rumors have been rife, and we have almost daily heard of Indians being seen, and outrages having been committed by them.” The article drew attention to the report that “One man [bear hunting] on the frio [sic] [River]…[got] his imagination…so excited, that he reported having seen three hundred [Comanche] Indians,” after coming across “a trail made by eight or ten horsemen.” This shocking news “caused many to abandon their farms.” Luckily, the man’s hunting partner, who was “less excitable,” reassured the article’s author that “He only saw the trail” that lacked any signs of Comanches. The article continued: “By showing that many rumors are the result of fanciful imaginations, we do not wish to be misunderstood as intimating that no depredations have been committed, nor Indians seen.” However, as a proviso to this fact, the anonymous author pointed out that “we wish to point out the great injury that is done to the country by giving currency to unfounded reports.” Conjured-up Comanches, even when dispelled by the press after the fact, could do great damage to the security of the frontier and to actual Comanches.21

Thus, the literary “most powerful Indian” was still the most powerful weapon in the press’s arsenal for inflammatory news. Regardless if Comanches were at fault for some act or not – regardless if the purported event even took place or not – they were a convenient and

21 “Letter from Corpus Christi,” The Daily Picayune (New Orleans, LA), August 29, 1854, America’s Historical Newspapers; Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register (Houston, TX), June 7, 1849, America’s Historical Newspapers; “Indian Depredations – Their Effect.,” The San Antonio Ledger (San Antonio, TX), June 1, 1854, America’s Historical Newspapers.
translatable scapegoat for American readership in the 1850s. Their extirpation in Texas or outright extermination was therefore a logical outcome for the Comanche menace – and newspapers from all regions of the country articulated that very sentiment.

No better example of the false specter of the Comanche on the frontier occurred than that of the news of the massacre of Captain Marcy and his command – an event that never took place. At the height of the summer in 1852, the American press was set ablaze by reports that drifted in stating that U.S. Army Captain Randolph Marcy and his entourage had been wiped out by Comanches during Marcy’s exploration of the Red River country, the border between Texas and Indian Territory. One of the first newspapers to report on the event was The Arkansas Whig. Citing “letters from Fort Washita to a gentleman of this city [Little Rock?]…[the letters reported] the massacre of Marcy and his men.” Quoting the letter directly, the article mournfully reflected that “We will never see them more.” Captain Marcy and his men “[had] been attacked by the combined forces of nine bands of Comanches and [that] all had been murdered. Not one escaped.” News, according to the article that was “beyond a doubt.” The news of the attack, “brought in by several of the Caddoes [sic], Kickapoes [sic] and Delawares[,]” placed the blame on the Comanches. “The conflict took place above Cash Creek, between Red river [sic] and Arkansas. There is no doubt of the murder of the command who went along the ‘well fed [Indians] by our government to treat and feed them again.’” The last sentence referenced the ill-will of many Americans who held
contempt for the United States in supplying dispossessed Natives with land, food, and annuities – only to get proverbially stabbed in the back, like Captain Marcy.\(^\text{22}\)

On the same day, *The Sun* newspaper out of Baltimore published an article entitled “The Massacre of Captain Marcy and his Command, by Camanche Indians.” Citing a mighty number of Comanches, the article claimed that “The Indians [Comanches] were about 1,000 strong.” This in itself would have been an amazing number of warriors alone, considering that Comanche population estimates were plummeting by 1852. Totally outnumbered – almost ten-to-one – Marcy and his troops gave a near-superhuman performance by fighting the Comanches for an entire day. Comanche treachery reared its ugly head, of course. “They [the Comanche] entered his camp in a friendly manner, received presents from him, and left at night, running off with a number of mules. The next morning they returned and attack the camp.” And after fighting for “twenty-four hours, Capt. Marcy deemed it advisable to surrender, in hopes they [the Comanches] would be satisfied with the plunder of the camp.” Predictably, according to press standards reporting Comanche actions, the Comanches “made an indiscriminate massacre of all the prisoners.” The result of this massacre was, of course, catastrophic for the country, as “The greatest excitement prevailed on the frontier, and it was thought that Fort Arbuckle and other posts on the branches would be next attacked.” Far from a diminished stature, the Comanche threat was alive and well in

\(^{22}\) For information on Randolph Marcy, see Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas*, 252-3; original taken from the *Arkansas Banner*, “CAPTAIN MARCY’S COMMAND,” *The Arkansas Whig* (Little Rock, AR), July 29, 1857, America’s Historical Newspapers.
newspapers and in the minds of all who read and talked about the hideous, yet predictable, Comanche deeds.\footnote{\textquotedblleft The Massacre of Captain Mary and his Command, by Camanche Indians,	extquotedblright \textit{The Sun}, July 29, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers.}

The Marcy “massacre” in the press began to grow legs and run amok during the summer. Amazing details inexplicably arose of the ashes of Marcy and his massacred men. Marcy’s fight expanded from one day to two, as printed in the \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, originally taken from \textit{The Philadelphia Bulletin}. Moreover, the Comanche warriors doubled in number to two thousand souls! Within the same article, entitled “REPORTED BATTLE WITH THE INDIANS. Massacre of Captain Marcy and Eighty Men,” the editor decided to print an addendum to the massacre details that displayed the outright, undying hostility that Comanches had for Anglos. Citing the harrowing escape of a Mr. Humphries, a trader who had been on a trading expedition to the Comanches, he claimed that “the Camanches had melted all the medals that have, from time to time, been distributed among them by the agents of the Government, that they now declare eternal hostility to whites. We may now look for frequent murders on the frontiers of Texas.” Just in case readers of the bogus Marcy massacre forgot that the Comanches – clearly – despised Americans, the Humphries story, true or not, became a convenient method to remind readers of the state of Anglo-Comanche affairs.\footnote{Original taken from \textit{The Philadelphia Bulletin}, “REPORTED BATTLE WITH THE INDIANS. Massacre of Capatin Marcy and Eighty Men,” \textit{Richmond Enquirer} (Richmond, VA), July 30, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers.}

Doubt began to grow in the veracity of the Marcy massacre. In attempting to get to the bottom of the massacre, which had quickly turned into one of the tallest tales on the
frontier, *The Weekly Herald* out of New York admitted that “Doubt and obscurity still hangs over the announcement that Captain Marcy and eighty of his command had been put to death by a large part of Cammanche Indians.” The original story, apparently “based upon the story of a friendly Indian, who stated that he had got his information from Camanches…[claimed that he] saw dressed in the clothes of Captain Marcy’s men.” Sounding somewhat defeated, *The Weekly Herald* admitted that “With all these conflicting reports, the matter will need pretty strong confirmation from an authentic source to insure credence.” Just how the “friendly Indian” source could have specifically identified Marcy’s men’s clothes is beyond imagination – in fact, that point alone should have been enough for any newspaper to question the authenticity. One would assume Marcy and his men, as U.S. Army regulars, were dressed in standard issued uniforms. However, the story simply made for good and exciting press. Comanches dressed in the attire of men they had just slaughtered could not have seemed more grotesque or bizarre. And it was most likely that point that encouraged other newspapers to print the story in the first place, not realizing how unlikely it was.25

Embarrassingly, the massacre eventually gave way to being a hoax. Papers across the country reported sheepishly that Marcy and his command were fine. However, this did not stop one source from taking a potshot at Comanches anyway, as this had become an established practice in the American press by 1852. New Jersey’s *State Gazette* quickly got to the matter within the first line of their article, “Capt. Marcy’s Expedition,” by stating “The party, instead of being cut off or attacked by Camanches, never saw a Camanche during their

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trip, though fresh trails which they almost daily encountered showed plainly the dangerous proximity of a wily foe.” The reason that Comanches did not attack such a vulnerable target, according to the paper, was simple: “The fact that they never made their appearance to Capt. Marcy is an unmistakable proof of their hostility, and the captain’s party escaped, not from the force of its numbers or artillery, but from the cowardice of their enemy.” To confuse the episode even further, the *Barre Gazette* in Massachusetts reported two days later that Captain Marcy, who had not been slaughtered by Comanches, was “in the enjoyment of excellent health.” In fact, the expedition “did not even lose a horse or mule, and the men suffered very little from sickness. Many Indians of the Comanche…were met at various points in the expedition, but they interposed no obstacles to the execution of the orders of the government.”

Somewhere between a massacre, a retraction, a wily coward, and actual Comanches encountered by Randolph Marcy who posed not the least of a threat, Americans were left to make up their minds on what to make of Comanches. Admittedly, most evidence from the period pointed to overwhelmingly negative press on Comanches – therefore, it does not take a great stretch of the imagination to believe that Americans, judging by their press, probably held the Comanche in great disdain, notwithstanding the fact that a few neutral articles appeared that did not paint the Comanche in such a bad light. The Marcy massacre was, of course, not the only case of bogus news of Comanche atrocities being uncovered as a blatant lie. The Marcy massacre hoax even spawned another hoax, the Comanche massacre of a

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26 Original taken from the *New Orleans True Delta*, “Capt. Marcy’s Expedition,” *State Gazette* (Trenton, NJ), September 8, 1852; “Return of Capt. Marcy,” *Barre Gazette* (Barre, MA), September 10, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers.
“Captain Stevens” and his command in several American newspapers. With each printing of the story, the number of souls killed by the Comanches grew by leaps and bounds: anywhere from fifty-six men to one hundred and fifty-six men were slaughtered. Finally, once again, the Barre Gazette admitted that the massacre of Captain Stevens and the indeterminate number of his subordinates was most likely a “rumor…[and] merely a new version of the late fabrication in regard to the command of Captain Marcy.” And then doubts of Comanche involvement in verifiable massacres began to trickle in from the press. A Mrs. Forrester, who was cited as a witness of her own husband’s murder, ostensibly by Comanches, was quoted in The San Antonio Ledger’s article, “INDIAN OUTRAGES!!” She stated “that two of the men [murderers] were dressed as Indians, except that they wore wool hats. She seems to doubt that they were really Indians. One she says had light hair, and was of fair complexion.” In all likelihood, the perpetrators were not Comanches. However, at this point in the history of the Comanche presence in the press, it was far too little, and far too late to make up for decades of oftentimes slanderous, exaggerated, and dehumanizing traits of America’s favorite native villain, the Comanche.27

Concomitant to the phenomenon of spurious Comanche massacres, the press echoed growing concern that Comanches occupied lands, now in the US state of Texas, that were rife with material wealth. Phantom Hill, Texas, which was found on the fringes of shrinking Comanchería, now near the city of Abilene, became something of a desired location for

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27 “fifty-six men” printed in “U.S. Troops Massacred by Camanche Indians.,” State Gazette (Trenton, NJ), August 27, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers; “one hundred and fifty-six men,” original taken from The Clarksville, “Massacre by the Indians,” The Boston Daily Atlas (Boston, MA), August 27, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers; “Another Reported Massacre,” Barre Gazette (Barre, MA), September 3, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers; “INDIAN OUTRAGES!!,” The San Antonio Ledger, (San Antonio, TX), April 20, 1854, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.
settlers aiming to transform some of the last remnants of the Comanche domain into a region primed to yield a profit. Citing a letter from a visitor the region in 1852, *The Daily Picayune* stated that the region “is on the extreme verge of timber and arable soil.” Near Phantom Hill, “Lower down on the Clear Forks [river] there are some beautiful valleys, well timbered with post oak, cotton wood [sic] and pecan.” However, in the midst of this veritable Eden, one “encountered the Camanche.” Prognosticating how this region would inevitably draw more and more settlers to reap the bounty, the nameless author mentioned that the area “will attract more attention in five years than any other place in Texas. Coal of the finest quality is found there in the greatest abundance, as also gypsum and ‘pipe clay.’” Though the article appeared to mention the Comanche presence rather passively, the readers of this content who were acquainted even with the very basic image of the Comanche in the American press knew that having Comanches in such a fertile area could only stymie its development by driving settlers away. However, not every article mentioned the existence of Comanches in bountiful areas so indifferently.28

An article entitled “More Gold Discoveries.,” printed in *The Weekly Herald* proclaimed boldly that “two very important and highly interesting pieces of intelligence connected with the fresh discoveries of gold mines on this continent.” According to an unknown source, “valuable gold mines” in an unstated region of Texas had been discovered. The news was quite promising, though vague in details. One thing that article was quick to mention, however, was “that the regions most rich in the production of gold [in Texas] are at present in the power of and infested by the Camanche Indians, whom it will be necessary to

28 “A Frontier Post,” *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), March 13, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers.
dislodge by force, before mining operations can be successfully carried on.” In an eerily worded statement on removing such native vermin, the article reassured its gold-hungry, captive audience that the Comanches “will not long be allowed to act as a preventive to active operations, if our correspondent’s assurances are as true as we have every reason to believe they are.” The article spelled out the Comanche problem for Anglo development succinctly; the proposed solution was literal. There would be no negotiation with the Comanche – Comanche removal was the goal.

In the years directly antecedent to the establishment of the Comanche reservation in 1854, articles that proclaimed the bounty and promise of Texas – including the aforementioned article on silver mining in risky Comanche hunting grounds – acted as connective tissue to the larger issues of promoting Comanche dispossession and the ethnic cleansing of the Comanche. This became the rhetoric of Comanche removal in the American press. If one were to search out one of the most glaring motives for removing the Comanche to a small reservation and then from the state itself, the Anglo desire for state development and profit most likely sealed the fate of the Comanches in Texas. The American press had one of the most influential hands in creating an image of both a violent, dehumanized subject and great wealth under an endless Texas sky – and never the twain shall meet, barked many a newspaper.29

We also find ample evidence during the same time that the extermination of the Comanche became a valid option discussed by several newspapers in all regions of the United States. This trope became the final, predominant theme for the Comanche in the

29 “Mining Company,” Weekly Journal (Galveston, TX), November 5, 1852, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.
antebellum press. *The Daily Picayune* published one of the earliest articles that forecasted the eventual extermination of the Comanches due to their continued dispossession by Anglos and the resulting Comanche hunger and violence associated with their search for food and resources on the northwestern frontier in Texas. “The fear of immediate punishment must deter the Camanches from committing depredations, and if means could only be provided to furnish them with food, we should hear of no farther hostilities from that powerful tribe.” In this age of growing Comanche starvation, even the press witnessed that Comanches were dying of hunger, though unqualified sympathy for the Comanche in the antebellum press simply did not exist. Posing a question about government responsibility for settling the unsettled frontier, the article stated that “This is a question which demands the serious attention of Government; for driven from many of their old hunting grounds, ignorant of agriculture, and improvident in their nature, they must inevitably in the end be starved or exterminated.” Comanches, it seemed, were even beyond assimilation to Anglo agricultural practices. They thus had two choices: starve or be saved, both contingent on action by the United States government. Presaging eventual government intervention on behalf of both Comanches and settlers, this article acted as a clarion call for action that occurred only two years later.\textsuperscript{30}

The issue of Comanche captivity, as well, resulted in calls for Comanche extermination. By approximately 1850, estimates of Comanche captives ran into the hundreds. These were primarily Hispanic captives, but this number also included Anglo and

\textsuperscript{30} “THE TEXAN FRONTIER,” *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), December 2, 1852, America’s Historical Newspapers; for the history of the Comanche reservation in Texas, see Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas*, 259-60.
native captives taken during raids. An article entitled “Horrible Cruelties to Mrs. Wilson, while a Captive among the Indians,” appeared in numerous papers in the American North and South. After a lengthy discussion of the horrors Jane Wilson experienced at the hands of her Comanche captors, the article placed blame squarely on the shoulders of the government for the continued practice of captive-taking: “Surely our Government will not permit such outrages to go unpunished, even if it be necessary to exterminate the whole tribe of these brutal savages.” Given that this article was published the year that several Comanche bands voluntarily submitted to the reservation, it may have had some success in forcing the government’s hands in carving out the small parcel intended on confining Comanches to bounded land and attempting to teach them the arts of Anglo agricultural cultivation.\(^\text{31}\)

The voices promoting Comanche extermination seemed to have been somewhat silenced by the establishment of the Comanche reservation in 1854, though the demise of the Comanche as a feature on the Texas landscape persisted as images in the press. For five years, between 1854 and 1859, there was a halfhearted attempt by some well-intentioned authorities to stop an all-out war of extermination against the Comanche by in placing volunteer Comanche bands on an agricultural reservation in northwest Texas. However, it was a failed experiment. Comanches, who had had no experience with agricultural pursuits, suffered from disappointing harvests that yielded poor crops. Starving, many reserve Comanches joined still-free Comanches in raiding their Texian neighbors to survive. Texians, who had always had the greatest animosity for Comanches, refused to delineate

\(^\text{31}\) For statistics on Comanche captivity, see Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 293-94; “Horrible Cruelties to Mrs. Wilson, while a Captive among the Indians,” *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), February 3, 1854, America’s Historical Newspapers; “Horrible Cruelties to Mrs. Wilson, while a Captive among the Indians,” *The Georgia Telegraph* (Macon, GA), February 14, 1854, America’s Historical Newspapers.
between “good reserve Comanches” and “bad raiding Comanches” – all Comanches were bad to many Texians. Like the broad brush used to paint all Comanches as bad in the press – a practice that was decades in the making – many Texians on the northwest frontier simply wanted all Comanches gone by 1859. In the end, Texians actively threatened the Comanche with extermination – and the press was the handmaiden to their demands. Were it not for a few brave Anglo administrators, namely Indian Agent Robert Neighbors, and the Comanches who were willing to flee to the relative safety of other reservations north of the Red River in Indian Territory, the Texians might very well exterminated their hated neighbors.32

Appointed as Indian agent for the Comanche by President Pierce, Robert Neighbors worked tirelessly to ensure peaceful relations between the reserve Comanche and Texians. He had a genuine desire to see Comanches assimilated to settled agricultural pursuits to soothe their relations with Texians, rather than continue their wandering pastoralism on the Southern Plains. For his efforts to assist the Comanches, Neighbors garnered the ire of many Texians who viewed Texas as the domain of Anglos only, regardless of any Comanche progress on the reservation in becoming “civilized.” For this merit, Neighbors would pay the ultimate price by being gunned down by an anti-Comanche Texian in 1859.33

Sensing a failing experiment of the Comanche reservation, the Trinity Advocate, citing an article from The Galveston News, proclaimed that “The Indian tribes of Texas are passing into rapid decay.” Citing falling numbers of all tribes, though there were yet “3000


Comanches” in Texas – probably the most numerous group of Natives in Texas – “it will be seen in the course of a few years, from the very nature of things, the whole Indian tribes of Texas will become extinct,” given the inability of Texians to live in concert with their Native neighbors. Moreover, reserve Comanches were being blamed for horse thefts and other crimes from Texian ranches near the reservation. John Sheen submitted a letter to the editor the Dallas Herald, in which he claimed that “the Indians [Comanches] were in a starving condition, they annoyed me daily by begging, and I was told [they] went to every house in the neighborhood begging for something to eat.” Not one to mince words, it seems, Sheen concluded his letter by stating that he had “every reason to think they killed cattle in the neighborhood for the sake of getting something to eat.”

Starving Comanches or not, by 1859, it became evident to Texians and American administrators of the reservation that the Comanche had to leave Texas, if they were to survive. Texians simply had no sympathy for thieving Comanches. At the head of the anti-Comanche pack was one John Baylor. Baylor had actually been in the employ of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and an underling of Neighbors. The latter eventually accused Baylor of misappropriating funds, resulting in Baylor’s dismissal from service. During his brief tenure as subagent for the Comanche, Baylor had relatively decent relations with the Comanche. In fact, under his watch, he allowed some reserve Comanche to live off of the reserve – something that was clearly against the rules of concentrating natives on specified parcels of land. After his dismissal, Baylor tapped into Texian anti-Comanche hysteria to lead the call

34 Original taken from The Galveston News, “The Indian Tribes of Texas,” Trinity Advocate (Palestine, TX), August 26, 1857, America’s Historical Newspapers; untitled, Dallas Herald (Dallas, TX), September 8, 1858, America’s Historical Newspapers.
for their removal from Texas and the removal of Neighbors as Indian agent. Considering how he, as subagent, had previously been apathetic towards demanding Comanches stay within the confines of the reservation, his sudden appetite for Comanche removal after his dismissal smacked of disingenuousness. His aim was to get back at Neighbors by the only means possible: by discrediting Neighbors’s attempt to have peaceful coexistence between Comanches and Texians. After gathering in a town near the reservation under a banner that read “Necessity knows no law,” Baylor and his posse of two-hundred and fifty armed Texians approached the Comanche reserve ready for wholesale slaughter of the Comanche or any Anglo who got in their way. After a brief skirmish, in which Baylor and his men tortured and killed two unarmed Comanches in their eighties, Neighbors and his superiors agreed that the Comanche were in an untenable position: they had to leave or be exterminated.35

“The Texas Indians To Be Removed” blared a headline from The Daily True Delta in April, 1859. Citing an “official document…of the Department of the Interior,” the article stated, Indian agent Robert Neighbors received instructions on relocating the reserve Comanches to a site outside of Texas. The article claimed that “the Comanches…[were] in a state of hostility,” and this necessitated the establishment of a new military post at the new reservation. Never ones to get fair treatment in the public discourse of the American press, the article failed to mention that anti-Comanche John Baylor and his posse threatened to exterminate all reserve Comanches and open up a general war of extermination against all Texas Comanches, were they not relocated immediately. Thus, “Comanche hostility,” as

35 For Baylor’s time as a subagent and his actions against the reserve Comanches, see Neighbours, 166, 192-95, 209-44.
pronounced by the press, was most likely Comanche defense for self-preservation while they were exiting the state under great duress. The article concluded with a quote by Neighbors who pleaded for the state authorities to “use your best exertions to induce them [the Texians] to refrain from molesting” the Comanches as they hightailed it to their new reservation.36

Thus was the end of the Comanches in Texas, as pronounced by the press. After several decades of growing animosity and hostility between Comanches and Anglo settlers – primarily in the guise of Texians – by 1859, the vast majority of Comanches left Texas for a reprieve on a reservation north of the Red River in Indian Territory. Constructed by the press as a monstrous people who occupied prized areas in the Garden of Eden that was Texas – a land granted by God for Anglo settlement and development – the press and Texians eventually chased the Comanches out of Texas and consigned them to the dustbin of Texas history. In the end, the rhetoric that promoted Comanche removal to reservations or actual extermination would be the lasting legacy of the American newspaper in the antebellum years. In 1860, a year after Comanche removal from Texas, a letter to the editor by a source named JUSTICE appeared in The White Man, a paper whose short life was dedicated to being one of the loudest anti-Comanche voices in print, and sadly whose extent copies number only two issues, published an apologist article on John Baylor. Baylor had been one of the paper’s original editors. It is unclear what prompted such a hagiographic retelling of Baylor’s career as an Indian agent in The White Man. Maybe it was for posterity, and JUSTICE – possibly Baylor writing under a pen name – wanted to ensure that his actions

36 “The Texas Indians To Be Removed,” The Daily True Delta (New Orleans, LA), April 22, 1859, America’s Historical Newspapers; for the removal of the Comanches, see Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, “The Final Exodus.”
demanding Comanche removal the year before were not tinged with naked hate. During his tenure as an Indian agent for the Comanches, according to the article, “[Baylor] gained confidence of those wild savages, by impartial, firm, yet friendly rule; and after his sudden dismissal, and when trouble with the tribes began to agitate the frontier, some of these Comanches visited him at his home...and entreated him to return.” Baylor became one of the leading voices for Comanche removal, arguably for dubious reasons. It seems that someone – most likely himself – used the press to make a corrective to his apparent zealousness, once the Comanches had been removed from the state.37

This was the power of the press. It could create completely false narratives and distort history. Within Texas history, there have been many voices, known and unknown, who advocated for the violent removal – the ethnic cleansing – of its Native populations. In essence, Texians got what they desired by the barrel of a gun – Comanche lands free of Comanche. The press was integral in this process by creating so many false idols and false monsters in the Anglo conquest of Texas.

37 For the Comanche exodus to Indian Territory, see Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire, 312; for the history of The White Man, see Sibley, 278-79; and Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, 219; The White Man (Weatherford, TX), September 13, 1860.
CHAPTER 4
COMANCHE CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES, 1836-1859

In 1838, two separate New York book publishers printed, within weeks of each other, two personal accounts of Anglo-American women who survived years of Comanche captivity in the early days of the Republic of Texas. These women, Caroline Harris and Clarissa Plummer, were companions in the same group of Anglo migrants drawn by the promise of fertile farming lands in the newly established Republic. Their short, individual narratives depicted their violent capture, torture, and hellish lives under Comanche captivity. Their horrific descriptions of Comanche behavior and activities must have made an indelible impression on American readers. Later recalling the Comanche ambush after her escape, Harris commented that “the strength of my poor suffering [newborn] babe began to fail: and when attempting to hush its pitiful moans, and to revive it by pressing it close to my bosom, it was torn from my arms by a savage brute, and thrown into a bunch of prickly pears!” Her Comanche captors then pitched her child “on a prairie,” and the child was “left to be devoured by the vultures.” A Comanche warrior turned and attacked her husband “by a blow [to his arm] from a tomahawk” before seizing him and holding him “in a standing position over a blazing fire until [his] life became extinct!”¹

¹ Both authors mention in their respective works that their narratives will be published within a short time of one another; Caroline Harris, History of the Captivity and Providential Release Therefrom of Mrs. Caroline Harris (New York: G. Cunningham Publisher, 1838), 7-10.
Clarissa Plummer, Harris’s fellow émigré and later companion in Comanche captivity, corroborated Harris’s gruesome scene in her own narrative, published just two weeks after the latter’s narrative. After a period of five weeks in Comanche captivity, and her subsequent escape with Harris, Plummer later testified that her own premature newborn met a similarly dire fate at Comanche hands, as the baby “was most inhumanely dashed against a tree the moment after [birth], and its mangled body cast to the dogs!!” This story of Comanche violence displayed that Comanches represented a special category of grotesqueness by the slaughter of such innocents. They would literally rip mother from child.²

Upon reaching the Comanche camp, Harris met a former captive, an unnamed Mexican, who had decided to remain with the Comanches years after his release from bondage. He informed newly captive Harris that she was now a possession of the Comanches, who “lived a wandering life, and had maintained their independence against the powers of Spain and the Mexican state for more than one hundred years; that they were very numerous, and more warlike and independent than any other tribe in America, and a terror to the inhabitants of the frontier provinces of Mexico.”³

Contemporary nineteenth century Comanche images in English language print sources reflected something more than a formidable foe, however. Sensational captivity narratives – which, like their newspaper article brethren, sometimes contained spurious claims and even dubious authorship – had the ability to inculcate in the American imaginary

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³ Disappointingly, Harris provides no more information about her Mexican contact in her narrative; Harris, 8.
a demonic Comanche presence that could potentially challenge the spread of Anglo-American culture. The Harris and Plummer narratives themselves were filled with tales of erratic Comanche violence, infanticide, forced marriage, rape, and a generalized sensation of Comanche “savagery” – sensational subjects that both inculcated Americans in apparent Comanche norms and cultivated an appetite in English language readership for grotesque stories from the frontier. In particular, the narratives detailing the “helplessness” of Anglo women captives and children, whom Comanche preyed upon, elicited great interest and sympathy in the reading public. Shockingly, as the narratives suggested, Comanches seemed willing to carry out the goriest acts of violence to stop Anglo propagation in Texas and the spread of Christian civilization. Comanche motivations in the narratives, however, were often times unclear or not articulated by the author. This point notwithstanding, the process of Anglo-articulated typification of Comanches, and the subsequent dissemination of this information to the far reaches of the expanding nation, could not have been achieved without an explosion in the American popular press by the 1830s.⁴

Regardless of publication date, captivity narratives reflected the experiences of Anglo survivors and presented varying depths of ethnographic information of the Comanche through a racialized lens. Beneath the surface observations, however, the multifarious Comanche identity constructs in captivity narratives also reflected uncertainty and changes in American normative values during the expansion and maturation of the nation: Were the Comanches too powerful, or could Anglos defeat them? Could Anglo civilization

⁴ Victoria Smith discusses how the presence of women and children at the frontier amounted to a process of Anglo territorialization in her Captive Arizona, 1851-1900 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), xxvii-xxviii; the birth of the popular press is discussed in Huntzicker, 93-4.
successfully absorb them, or should the Comanches be exterminated? What role, if any, did Anglo women have at the frontier? In these narratives, Anglo-American identity and nationhood were both reified and challenged through juxtaposition with the Comanche threat just beyond the horizon of the frontier.

The tradition of penning Comanche captivity narratives was not something novel to the Anglo-American experience in Texas. The roots of the literary genre are located in the practice of captive-taking itself. This practice dates back to the earliest years of interaction between English settlers and indigenous Native Americans in the sixteenth century. Both colonists and natives practiced captive-taking, but they practiced it for different reasons. June Namias, in her study on the history of white captivity, claims that colonial New Englanders enslaved natives to include them in a growing slave-based economy that emerged with the birth of English colonies of the New World. Enslaved Natives would oftentimes find themselves shipped to English colonial outposts in the West Indies. Conversely, English literature scholars Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and James Levernier argue that natives took captives for a multitude of reasons, though a primary reason was to satisfy revenge for the growing loss of native lands by Europeans. Natives often put their captives, particularly adult males, through ritualistic torture to exact revenge and to offer sacrifices for fallen warriors. Natives also took European captives to replenish tribal numbers that had been decimated by the spread of European diseases or to replace valuable members who had been killed through violent encounters with the increasing number of European colonists. According to Namias, the narrative of the redeemed Anglo captive became a “centerpiece in [American] history and literature from the earliest days of European and Native American
contact.” The formats of the narratives varied, ranging from personal narratives, to folk histories, and eventually, to dime novels.\(^5\)

This genre represents an important vector in understanding the dynamics of intercultural interaction on the frontier, though the narratives often blended the real with highly dubious accounts. Namias argues that the veracity of the narrative is not the prime concern in understanding the genre’s usefulness in conveying the past, however. Akin to the phenomenon of the Comanche within the press, how the captivity narratives have been produced, reproduced, and what ends the works served all shed light on the culturally and politically dynamic milieu in which they were published. The earliest versions stemming from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries were overtly religious in constitution and tone. Anglo captives, particularly women, could be redeemed by successful reintegration into white Christian society after a trial of living amongst heathen natives. Pioneers who lived to tell their own tales of survival proved a hearty stock for promoting national development – though the rescue of female captives almost always demanded the role of a heroic male. This evinced that the male presence on the frontier was essential for defense and stability. Violence and retribution aimed at the natives were not only excused in the narratives, but also encouraged to promote Anglo-Christian civilization. Any kindness or tenderness exhibited by Native Americans toward captives was dismissed as an aberration or as savage mimicry of civilized Anglo attributes.\(^6\)


\(^{6}\) Ibid., 23.
Thus, the Comanche captivity narratives did not appear in a vacuum. We find similar
tropes connecting earlier captivity narratives to the later Comanche captivity genre, though
overt religiosity found in earlier examples of captivity narratives, for the most part,
disappeared with their Comanche captivity counterparts. The earliest English language
voices that emerged from Comanche captivity were overwhelmingly female. The
aforementioned Caroline Harris and Clarissa Plummer narratives of 1838 were joined by the
narratives of Rachel Plummer in 1839, Sarah Horn in 1839, Dolly Webster in 1843, Jane
Wilson in 1853, and Nelson Lee, a Texas Ranger, in 1859. The span of these publication
dates coincided with the formative years in the establishment of Texas as an Anglo-
dominated political entity on the edges of the American Southwest. The four different
female captives joined their husbands in emigrating to Texas with hopes of establishing
productive agricultural tracts in areas west of San Antonio and Austin. In all four cases, the
Comanches attacked their parties, killed their husbands and some of their children, while
forcing the womenfolk into Comanche bondage. Their families slaughtered, their dignity
shattered, and their trappings of civilization discarded, their relatively short narratives
seemed to coalesce into cautionary tales against emigrating so far west, given the predation
of Comanche hordes in Texas.7

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7 E. House, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Horn, and her two Children, with that of Mrs. Harris, by the Camanche Indians, and Who was Ransomed by the American Traders, and brought by them from Santa Fe to New Franklin, Mo., in the fall of 1838* (St. Louis: C. Keemle, Printer: 1839); Benjamin Dolbeare, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Suffering of Dolly Webster among the Camanche Indians in Texas with an Account of the Massacre of John Webster and His Party, as related by Mrs. Webster* (Clarksburg: McGranaghan and McCarty Printer, 1843; reprint, New Haven: Yale University Library, 1986); “Of the Sufferings of Mrs. Jane Adeline Wilson, during her Captivity among the Camanche Indians,” published in the supplement to the *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, CT), February 11, 1854, America’s Historical Newspapers; Nelson Lee, *Three Years among the Comanches: The Narrative of Nelson Lee, the Texas Ranger* (Albany: B. Taylor, 1859; repr., Santa Barbara: The Narrative Press, 2001).
Within these narratives, Comanche cruelty, inhumanity, and violence emerged as the primary Comanche attributes. Though some of the Anglo survivors admitted that Comanches had an essence of humanhood and belonged to the human race, most of the testimonies stated that Comanche behavior sank beneath the status of animals or beasts, as Comanche cruelty was constant and pervasive. Both Comanche men and women employed violence in rendering their captives as pliable as possible.

Returning to the Harris narrative, she declared that Comanches were “savage beasts [that] glowed not with a single spark of humanity” and who seemed “delighted more in the affliction of torment than the alleviation of distress.” Harris stated this after witnessing Comanches ransack her party’s supplies and torch their wagons. Afterwards, Harris witnessed her child’s murder and her husband’s execution. Comanches tortured and killed her husband, Richard, after he attempted to rescue his wife from two chiefs who were fighting over her as war booty. A Comanche chief eventually forced Caroline Harris into a sort of marriage – becoming a “squaw [wife]” – with a “young Sachem [chief]…doomed to spend eleven months in a state of bondage and misery that beggars description!” In this union, the sachem forced not only Caroline to be his squaw, but also to acquiesce sexually and “yield to the beastly will of a Savage brute!” Her sachem then demanded that she fulfill her dual role as “squaw,” which involved performing all labor-intensive tasks at camp and assuming the meek role of an abused captive. The setting of the Comanche camp appeared as a nightmarish landscape for Harris, and she could see that on “almost every wigwam or hut were displayed more or less human scalps, of those who had at some former period fallen victims to their [Comanches’] barbarity; some apparently were those of very young children! All of which were carefully preserved, and displayed on public occasions as proofs of their
valor.” Thus, bondage, violence, rape, and murder appeared as attributes of Comanche society within her narrative.8

Clarissa Plummer, Harris’s companion in emigration and captivity, painted an equally gruesome landscape of Comanche captive and Comanche society. As with Harris, Comanches forced Plummer into a role as a squaw of a Comanche sachem – the same person who was responsible for the death of Plummer’s husband, James. Though Plummer admitted that her master did not molest her in his abode during her recovery after capture, she stated that the “the old savage (whose companion I was now by compulsion to become) was, in person as well as disposition, the most ugly and disgusting of the human race; a wretch whose heart was callous to every human feeling; nay, one who could coolly and deliberately dash out the brains of the harmless new-born babe.” Plummer, who was pregnant at the time of her capture, went into premature labor five weeks after her capture. But her new Comanche master would not deign to let her Anglo newborn live amongst the tribe. He promptly murdered the infant. Her surviving young son, whom the Comanche had also made into their captive, became her sachem’s object of torture when Plummer “declined gratifying a savage brute in his unreasonable and wicked request.” Plummer’s sachem used her son as a target for bow-and-arrow practice at the top of a high tree. Though this was apparently used to scare Plummer into submission, because the arrows narrowly missed his body. Her sachem also used her son to perform undefined tasks in swamps and other dangerous environments. She admitted that “however painful such a scene to me, it was always gratifying to one who proved himself less humane than the most ferocious beast of the

8 Harris, 7-18.
Regardless of Harris’s subject position as Comanche captive, she took heart that Comanches – as epitomized by her sachem – remained a debased and wicked people. They were, in fact, worse than all other animals.  

Plummer’s narrative was the first to speak of Comanche women as perpetrators of cruelty and violence. She detailed an incident that also involved Harris, their respective sachems, and their fellow Comanche squaws. “As soon as they [the other squaws] learned that Mrs. Harris and myself had by adoption become the favorite companions of their husbands, [they] manifested toward us all the rage and malice that jealousy could be productive of.” Furthermore, Plummer stated that the Comanche women “seemed resolved to our destruction…[they forced their husbands to lodge] us in log huts erected for the temporary shelters for their horses, swine, &c. in stormy weather.” Later on, and against Plummer’s most vociferous protestations, one of Plummer’s fellow squaws prodded their shared sachem to exchange Plummer’s son, who “cost too much to keep,” for a good horse. This passage was unique not only in the fact that Comanche cruelty was not merely the purview of men, but it also inadvertently allowed the reader to peer into Comanche marriage norms of plural marriage – which would have abhorred readers – and to witness the dynamics between women and men in Comanche society. Comanche women, according to this narrative, had a measure of agency in gender relations and as captors themselves. Yet, the fact that Comanches practiced plural marriage informed the reader that their society was nonetheless barbaric.  

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9 Plummer, 13-14.
10 Ibid., 19-20; for mores of Anglo-Texas gender relations and their views on plural marriage, see Carroll, 123.
Was any of this true, however? Some scholars have questioned the veracity of the Plummer and Harris accounts, arguing that these women did not appear in any other historical record, aside from their published captivity narratives. In fact, there is speculation that the Clarissa Plummer and Caroline Harris narratives were an amalgam of the narratives by verifiable Comanche captives Rachel Plummer, Sarah Horn, and the latter’s companion in travel and captivity, one Caroline Harris – not to be confused with the (initial) Caroline Harris under discussion here. However, these latter Comanche captives and their narratives – by Rachel Plummer and Sarah Horn/Caroline Harris – did not appear until 1839 – a year after Clarissa Plummer’s and (the initial) Caroline Harris’s published narratives. The truth becomes muddier when one considers the following. According to Caroline Harris’s narrative, the Harris and Plummer families emigrated to Texas in 1835 from Franklin County, New York. Neither Richard Harris nor James Plummer, the unfortunate husbands whom the Comanches had murdered in front of their wives, appeared in either the United States census from 1820 or 1830. To complicate the matter, however, this present research has uncovered a heretofore unknown newspaper article from December, 1837, originally published in the Far West Newspaper from Liberty, Missouri, that briefly mentioned Mrs. Harris’s and Mrs. Plummer’s harrowing captivity by the Comanche Indians and their release to Santa Fe Trail merchants for the sum of four hundred dollars. As if to encourage greater American concern with captive-taking by the Comanches, the article concluded by stating that “there are now in possession of these [Comanche] savages several women and children.” Several other newspapers subsequently reprinted this article in late 1837 and early 1838.11

11 For the claim of the dubious narratives, see Gregory Michno and Susan Michno, A Fate Worse than Death: Indian Captivity Narratives, 1830-1885 (Caldwell: Caxton Press, 2009), 1; and Newberry Library, Edward E.
It is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion about the veracity of these narratives. Though we have a paucity of historical sources on these two women and their families, the *Far West Newspaper* reported the redemption of two Comanche captives by the name of Mrs. Harris and her companion, Mrs. Plummer. The article specifically stated that these women were originally emigrants from New York to Texas, and that the Comanches had captured them soon after crossing into Texas. Thus, these women should not be confused with the verifiable Comanche captives Rachel Plummer, whose family had already been established at Fort Parker, Texas, and Caroline Harris, an English emigrant whose family had been in Texas for several weeks before her own capture. If the original Comanche captivity narratives of Caroline Harris and Clarissa Plummer were not true, then what are we to make of the article in the *Far West Newspaper*?\(^{12}\)

It should come as no surprise that unscrupulous editors might have purveyed a story of dubious authenticity in order to lend credence to equally dubious Comanche captivity narratives being printed in New York printing houses in order to boost sales. The fact that the possibly fallacious 1838 Harris and Plummer narratives appeared in print mere weeks after the initial report of the Harris-Plummer redemption in the *Far West Newspaper* buttresses this argument. As mentioned earlier, by the 1830s, the “savage Comanche” presence in the

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\(^{12}\) Rachel Plummer, *Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer* ([Louisville]: [Printed at the Morning Courier Office], 1839), 92.; House, 15; Plummer’s story of capture is found in Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas*, 128.
American press had skyrocketed with the birth of the penny press and reports of growing Anglo emigrant encounters with Comanches on the Texas frontier. The demands of the print market had the habit of shaping narratives of Comanches for a growing audience. This was certainly aided by a postage-free newspaper exchange system that the Republic of Texas and the United States agreed upon and which lasted until 1842. Texas newspaper editors had a major hand in this phenomenon by embellishing stories of Comanche terror and savagery against Anglo victims, as discussed earlier. Thus, the Comanche as a fixture in print culture spread to the United States, where increasing numbers of newspapers reprinted stories about them with greater frequency. This whetted American appetites for Comanche sensation and savagery; captivity narratives responded to a reading public that had grown accustomed to seeing terrible Comanches in print.¹³

The truth behind the 1838 Harris and Plummer narratives is not the main concern here. Regardless if these testimonies represented actual experiences or fictionalized accounts, the narratives still painted images of natives whose sole occupation seemed to be the torture and murder of peaceful Anglo migrants in Texas. Furthermore, insatiable Comanche sexual appetites and plural marriage must have had an exciting and titillating effect on American readership – a readership whose own moral values were completely incongruous to that of the savage. For this readership, the Comanche became an object of fear, repulsion, and latent excitement in the Southwest borderlands.

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¹³ For the demands of the market, see Andrés Reséndez, Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 214; for Texas press history, see Sibley, 8-9; Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, 15.
In the years following the publication of the Plummer and Harris narratives, five more testimonies of Comanche captivity appeared for English language readership: the narratives of Rachel Plummer and Sarah Horn appeared in 1839; Dolly Webster’s narrative was published in 1843; the narrative of Jane Wilson appeared in 1854; and the final captivity narrative, of Nelson Lee, was printed in 1859. All of the redeemed provided testimonies detailing their experiences as Comanche captives. The content and tone of these five appeared as literary offspring of the antecedent Harris and Plummer narratives. All of the female captives were part of larger emigration parties to Texas. And with the exception of Rachel Plummer’s husband, Comanches had killed all of their menfolk after traversing Comanchería in search for fertile agricultural lands. Some of the narratives offered basic ethnographic information on Comanche society – but these renderings were often tinged with gross characterizations and racial prejudice. Regardless, the next wave of narratives began to etch out growing detail of Comanche life in the frontier zones of the American empire. First and foremost, however, the authors’ motives were to frame Comanches as the most dangerous natives on the continent. If Anglo civilization were to spread, the narratives evinced that the Comanche were barrier to this process. And whether stated or not, Comanche removal from these lands became the obvious solution.\footnote{Sarah Horn’s narrative also includes tales of a companion, Mrs. Harris, who is not the same as the aforementioned Caroline Harris. The narrative appears to be firsthand testimony by Sarah Horn, and a third-person retelling of Caroline Harris’ ordeal as a captive of the Comanches. The latter’s third-person history is omitted in this research in order to strive for an authentic first-person primary source; Rachel Plummer’s husband escaped their Comanche attackers.}

In 1839, former captive Rachel Plummer, apparently no relation to the possibly fictitious Clarissa Plummer, published her narrative detailing her nearly two-year bondage
under the Comanche Indians. Her testimony, like the aforementioned Harris and Clarissa Plummer narratives, painted a bleak vision of Comanche society. Rachel stated at the beginning of her narrative that one of the main purposes of publishing her narrative was “to make the reader acquainted with the manners and customs of the largest nation of Indians upon the American continent.” However, she somewhat contradicted herself by later stating, rather dismissively, that “the manners and customs of the Indians…[and] their habits are so ridiculous that this would be of but little interest to any,” and thereafter provided little ethnographic detail on the Comanches, aside from descriptions of eating habits and the physical environment of western Texas. Rachel’s testimony acted as a cautionary tale by warning “all who are, or may be placed in a situation where they may be liable to fall prey to savage barbarity” of the Comanches on the fringes of white civilization.15

Rachel seemed most preoccupied in essentializing Comanches as cruel and merciless. The torture of fellow captives and enemy Indians, according to Rachel, propitiated the Comanche religion and was thus a common feature of their society. Echoing the same Comanche practice embedded within Caroline Harris’s 1838 narrative, Rachel’s captor killed her newborn son by repeatedly dragging him through prickly pears, rendering her child “literally torn to pieces.”16

In addition to focusing on the trope of violence that permeated Comanche society, Rachel also discussed how Comanches saw acts of bravery and defiance as hallmarks of a

15 To avoid confusion between Clarissa and Rachel Plummer, I shall hereafter refer to Rachel Plummer simply as Rachel; Plummer, 91-114.

16 Ibid., 98-111; Harris, 7.
strong character. Unable to take further physical abuse by her Comanche mistress, Rachel eventually defended herself by assaulting this woman with a buffalo bone. Rachel’s attack seemed to incite great excitement in the Comanches who witnessed this, and they called out with “such yells as the Indians made around us – being nearly all collected – a Christian mind cannot conceive.” But they did not punish Rachel for her attack. A chief commended Rachel for her tenacity and claimed the Comanche Great Spirit had clearly directed her in bravery for standing up for herself.¹⁷

This somewhat positive attribute of the savage, unchristian Comanche appeared to be fleeting, however, as Rachel summed up Comanche society being a collective of “inhuman cannibals [who] will eat the flesh of a human being and talk of their bravery or abuse their cowardice with as much unconcern as if they were mere beasts.” Though it is impossible to know if her captors actually practiced cannibalism, this last statement appears to be grounded more in the folklore of Texan colonists than what Rachel supposedly witnessed. Comanche cannibalistic practices simply do not exist elsewhere in the historical record. Constructing natives as “cannibals” allowed Anglos to frame them as savage and thus worthy of destruction. Thus, Rachel’s narrative framed Comanches as a dangerous and devilish presence in the midst of colonial settlers by peddling possibly spurious Comanche practices – practices which had no place in white civilization. Moreover, a ghostwriter must have helped write this narrative, because the author, James Parker, Rachel’s father and the person to whom Rachel supposedly dictated her testimony, was nearly illiterate himself. This unknown writer obviously added more ghastly language to the narrative – the addition of

“cannibal Comanches” within the narrative indicates this beyond a doubt. One can only speculate that this might have served the dual purpose of both debasing the Comanches in Texas and pushing sales of Rachel’s sensational narrative at the market.\footnote{Ibid., 114; for the spurious use of cannibalism, see Kelly Himmel, \textit{The Conquest of the Karankawas and the Tonkawas, 1821-1859} (College Station: Texas A&M, 1999), 130-31; concerning James Parker, see Anderson, \textit{The Conquest of Texas}, 129-30.}

Turning now to the Horn narrative, English emigrant Sarah Ann Horn and her family were part of a large group of colonists who established a series of farms on the Rio Grande in the mid-1830s. Comanches descended upon their farms shortly after their founding, killed all adult men, and scattered the survivors into bondage within various Comanche bands in the region. Horn published her narrative after being sold to Mexican merchants by her captor. Though her narrative described the pervasive violence of Comanche society, her testimony mentioned an integral component of Comanche society: that of a near-constant state of migration.

In the aftermath of the European introduction of the horse to North America, Comanches, who had quite successfully adapted to nomadic equestrianism, began to follow seasonal migratory patterns of their staple food, the bison. This process sometimes demanded that Comanche bands journey anywhere between two hundred to four hundred miles to be in close proximity to their most important food source. Horn remarked on this, but she framed it in terms more germane to her English language readership of the 1830s by stating that “these savages remained but a short time in one place…[they] kept roving about, killing and stealing property of those whom they murdered.” This statement suggested that the primary vectors in Comanche migration were murder and plunder – and not bison.
migration patterns. Horn touched on an ethnographic note by commenting on how Comanches prepared their meat in such a mobile society. “They put sticks in the ground [around a fire pit]…[and] bring the tops of them together, and fasten them; the meat is placed on the sticks above, and the fire from the hole beneath cooks it.” Though this was ostensibly a comment on rather mundane practices of Comanche cooking methods, this description allowed Horn to frame Comanches as a rather primitive people with uncivilized, migratory practices – practices ultimately driven by the insatiable Comanche quest for plunder and murder, rather than hunger.19

What is lacking within Horn’s narrative was the fact that this era witnessed a great increase of competing emigrant natives pushed west by federal Indian policy and a marked decline in the bison. Comanches were driven to any means of survival necessary for the health of their people. Stealing, plundering, and murder, as witnessed and construed by Horn, was most likely commonplace in this taxing environment. The western concept of private property, according to Horn, was disregarded with reckless abandon by the Comanches. What Horn did not realize, or did simply not state in her narrative, is that the Comanche had different concepts of ownership than the strict notion of western private ownership. Of course, Comanches owned private property – no better example exists of this than an individual Comanche’s often-numerous private horses. But the Comanche concept of private ownership was inextricably tethered to the greater need for communal ownership and gift-giving for survival. Comanches commonly took – “stole,” according to Horn – what was necessary to survive in order to distribute amongst their band. This both ensured basic

19 Comanche nomadism and eating practices are covered within Wallace and Hoebel, 54-55; House, 24, 36.
survival, and it also allowed for Comanche social mobility by attaining elevated ranks
through generosity within their own bands.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1837, emigrant Dolly Webster and her family arrived to start new lives in central
Texas, where Comanches attacked her party west of Austin. After several years in captivity,
Dolly published her narrative upon her escape to San Antonio in 1843. Comanche societal
practices came into somewhat closer view in Webster’s narrative. Scalping was a hallmark
of Comanche war and spiritual practices, and it was “a source of merriment” at war dances,
as scalps were spoils of victory for successful Comanche warriors. Sadly, Webster failed to
mention an important ethnographic component: the scalp dance was generally the purview of
Comanche women dressed as men, thus signifying that gender roles and appearances were
fluid among the Comanche – something that would have been anathema to Anglo colonial
society in Texas. According to Wallace and Hoebel, having one’s scalp in the afterworld
guaranteed one’s entrance into the immortal realm – and denying this through scalping
totally vanquished the enemy, hence the primacy placed on obtaining as many enemy scalps
as possible. Webster’s own husband, whom the Comanches had killed, had white hair.
Comanches disdained the taking of such apparent old war booty, though all others who fell
during the attack were subsequently scalped. Comanches threatened Webster herself after
her capture “with spears, having the scalps of our unfortunate slain on their points, and after

\textsuperscript{20} For Comanche concepts of ownership, see Betty 91.
rubing [sic] one in my face threatening to scalp me. This treatment would have made the heart of a stoick [sic] recoil.”21

Webster also provided some of the earliest known evidence of Comanche funerary practices and self-mutilation during mourning. After the death of the mother of one of the chiefs, Comanche “squaws cut their hair off. They also killed a little girl, a prisoner, daughter of Mr. Putnam, and buried it with her.” Comanches commonly killed and tortured captives as part of Comanche grieving practices in the event of violent death of their tribal members. Aside from the sacrifice of a fellow captive, Webster failed to mention the great extent Comanche women went to after the loss of loved ones—particularly of warriors in battle. Self-inflicted gashing and cutting was the norm for proper Comanche mourning, and it was common to find groups of Comanche women who sat in pools of their own blood to show proper mourning and reverence for those lost. Thus, all suffered with the loss of life in Comanche society. Given its prevalence, this is a ritual that Webster surely must have witnessed, if she saw the sacrifice of the young Anglo girl as a part of mourning rituals. Webster was understandably shaken by the sacrifice of her fellow captive, because it mirrored her own potential fate. However, failing to mention how entire groups of Comanches self-inflicted pain to mourn, while only emphasizing the sacrifice of the Anglo girl, painted Comanches as particularly cruel and arbitrary in the eyes of American readers.22

21 Indispensable primary sources of Comanche scalp-taking practices are found in Francis Joseph Attocknie, The Life of Ten Bears: Comanche Historical Narratives, ed. Thomas W. Kavanagh (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 191-2; and Wallace and Hoebel, 189; Dolbeare, 7, 10.

22 Ibid., 20-1; for Comanche mourning practices, see Wallace and Hoebel, 268.
Webster’s narrative provided an interesting postscript concerning the motives behind the publishing of her narrative. Upon her release in San Antonio, Webster became acquainted with Mirabeau Lamar, the former President of the Republic of Texas. Lamar encouraged Webster to retell her story of Comanche captivity to “a large number of ladies and gentlemen” in order to propagate her narrative of “cruelties amongst the savages, for nearly six months.” Lamar was no friend of the Comanche during his tenure as president – in fact, he promoted the ethnic cleansing of the Comanche from Texas by any means necessary, citing it as an “official desire of the government.” This usually amounted to concerted efforts by Texas Rangers in harassing and attacking Comanches within the republic. Lamar obviously saw Webster’s experiences – now enshrined as printed word and disseminated to the public – as proof that Comanches must be removed from Texas.23

Comanche degradation of captives also emerged as a trope within the narratives. Jane Wilson, after her brief captivity in 1854, claimed that Comanches enjoyed taunting and torturing their captives in myriad ways. In particular, Comanches taunted Wilson by rubbing scalps in her face and laughing. Though the presence of enemy scalps in Comanche society linked the narratives of Wilson and Dolly Webster, Webster intimated that the rubbing of scalps in a captive’s face possibly had a ritualistic use – a use that seems to be lacking from Wilson’s testimony. According to Wilson, the Comanche use of scalps for taunting amounted to a sort of gruesome, degraded humor at her expense. Thus, the sole use of scalps seemed barbaric and without a shred of meaning to Comanche culture beyond the most base, humorous use. Comanches, she claimed, relished taunting her to their great satisfaction, and

23 Dolbeare, 34; for Lamar and the Texas Rangers, see Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, 194.
they laughed heartily at her woes. They also purposefully spooked the horse that she rode in order to buck her off and cause pain. Again, this elicited the greatest joy from the Comanches. It should be no surprise that upon her escape from her captors, she expressed without a shred of sarcasm: “I was alone in an Indian country, some hundreds of miles from the nearest white settlements…Wild beasts were around me, and savages, more wild than beasts, roamed on every hand.”24

Though Wilson eventually emerged from her toils in Indian country, her Comanche problems continued to vex her even after her redemption. Cohabiting with Comanches, even against one’s will, could have disastrous effects for one’s social standing in Anglo society, as Wilson discovered. She apparently became subject of a rumor that was addressed in the press. As related by an article in The Barre Patriot, “Some heartless scamp wrote that Mrs. Wilson, recently rescued from captivity among the Camanche Indians, had a short time [sic] after given birth ‘to a fine little Indian boy.’” In her own defense, however, “Mrs. Wilson has published a card, indignantly denying the statement, saying that the child is white, and that her husband is the father of it.” Whether or not Wilson actually birthed a child who was half-Comanche can never be proved. And in the end, it may not have mattered, because the damage that this rumor caused could have left her as an outcast in Anglo society. Clearly, as evinced by both newspaper articles and captivity narratives, Comanches were beyond the pale of civilization; and ensuring survival of the Comanche race through reproduction with them would have been abhorrent to Anglo-Americans. Sadly, the

24 “A Narrative of the Sufferings of Mrs. Jane Adeline Wilson, during her captivity among the Camanche,”; Dolbeare, 7.
historical record seems to have no more mention of Jane Wilson beyond this titillating addendum to her travails in Comanche lands.  

What also emerged from this subset of narratives was a small, yet glaring, fact that certain survivors of Comanche captivity mentioned moments of mercy from their captors and moments of shared hardships between captor and captive. The family to which Horn had been assigned to serve had five sons and no daughters. Horn thus spent a considerable amount of time fulfilling duties for her adopted family with an “old woman,” apparently her clan’s matriarch, cooking and dressing buffalo skins into “garments and moccasins; to cut up and dry the buffalo meat, and then pound it for use.” Horn reported that the old woman was “an exception to the general character of these merciless beings, and greatly did she contribute, by her acts of kindness and sooth [sic] manners, to reconcile me to my fate.” This brief statement on a singular instance of Comanche charity was bookended by Horn, however, who went on to say that the old woman’s daughter “was the reverse of everything that is amiable…indeed, she never appeared at ease unless actively employed in inventing some means to indulge her ill humor on me.” Regardless of the fleeting moments of kindness by her Comanche mistress, Horn was, of course, a captive who was subject to the whims of Comanche cultural practices that governed her subject position in Comanche society. And this included abusing her as a form of humor in Comanche society. The kind, old Comanche woman was the great exception to the cruel norm, according to Horn.  

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25 *The Barre Patriot* (Barre, MA), May 5, 1854.  
26 House, 57.
By the 1830s, the harsh environment of Comanchería became exceedingly difficult for survival, given that Comanches experienced increased competition for dwindling resources with other native groups and a burgeoning number of land-hungry Anglo settlers pushing further west. Dolly Webster’s testimony reflected this fact during her captivity, commenting that “their mode of living was disgusting – they eat all kinds of flesh except turkey and fish. They eat the dog, the horse, and even reptiles, such as snakes, &c. They frequently go without food for several days, and undergoing [sic] great fatigue and hardships.” Though this statement touched on the hardships of their migratory existence and increased competition for resources, Webster used this opportunity to depict Comanche society as depraved and uncivilized. Their reaction to hardships simply proved these characteristics. Though seemingly empathetic, particularly since Webster experienced the same privations, her statement actually reiterated the standard trope of the uncivilized Comanche.27

The aforementioned testimonies – from Caroline Harris, Clarissa Plummer, Rachel Plummer, Sarah Horn, Dolly Webster, and Jane Wilson – shared overarching similarities within their methods of constructing Comanche society for American readers. Though there was a certain evolution that occurred over time between these narratives, and we do begin to get glimpses of ethnographic detail of Comanche life, their narratives shared the same motives: warn settlers of the Comanche threat by framing both Comanche men and women as erratic, uncivilized, beastly, and murderous. Obviously, the female voice is the dominant testimony within the earliest Comanche captivity narratives. One of the main reasons we

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27 On dwindling resources, see Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 294; Dolbeare, 23.
have testimony only through women, at this juncture, is primarily due to the nature of Comanche captivity practices. Simply put, Comanches either killed adult Anglo men outright during the initial raid or killed them as part of Comanche ritual practices after capture. Taken as a whole, these testimonies acted as a cautionary tale about the ferociousness of the frontier: Texas clearly was not settled by the 1850s, and no one on the expanding frontier was safe. The progress of American empire seemed checked. The captives’ experiences with Comanches conveyed to the nation that the worst could happen at this threshold between Anglo civilization and Comanchería. Their testimonies evinced that the female body, as the personification of the family and nation, was threatened on the frontier, and the region required a greater militant, male presence to “tame” its savage nature. In fact, all female survivors, barring Jane Wilson, required male agents to secure their redemption from Comanche captivity. Regardless of their survival during captivity, only masculine prowess could achieve their freedom. The frontier, after all, was the purview of men, according to American normative values of the mid-nineteenth century. The captivity narratives were also thrilling pieces of entertainment to an entire segment of the population that could not – or would not – travel to the dangerous frontier. This literature, widely printed and disseminated, could safely transport the reader to one of the most dangerous and contested areas in the United States, all the while inculcating certain stereotypes of dangerous savages who devoured Anglo emigrants in a hostile land.  

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28 For Comanche captivity practices, see Brooks, 68-71; men were required to settle the frontier, according to settler mores in Namias, 82.
The remaining captivity narrative, provided by Nelson Lee, represents an anomaly. Lee was a former Texas Ranger who saw military action during the Mexican-American War before his subsequent captivity. His narrative – compared to all Comanche captivity narratives under investigation during this era – remains the only published source of an adult male’s experience as a Comanche captive. Anderson discredits this narrative as a case of “magical realism,” however. An historical Nelson Lee existed, but the ethnographic information on Comanche society within Lee’s narrative smacked of sensationalism – a well-established practice for print materials on Comanches by 1859. Lee’s report on Comanche life seemed to be a literary pastiche of various practices of other Native American groups. There is no better evidence of this fraud than Lee’s commentary on Comanches holding a “Green Corn Dance” – a ritual celebrating the fertility of corn and other crops, usually performed by more sedentary natives, such as Cherokees from the southeastern United States. Comanches have traditionally been pastoralists, and farming crops has never been a Comanche practice – thus, this sort of ritual would have been an oddity for the Comanches to perform. Published in New York in 1859, this narrative was most likely a way for Lee, or the author who pretended to be Lee, to turn a quick profit through selling and printing a sensational tale. Regardless, this captivity narrative conjured up visions of a violent and powerful Comanche world that haunted the growing number of white settlers at the Southwest borderlands. Lee’s narrative also acted as a propaganda piece that constructed the Comanches as a potential foil to the spread of American civilization and empire.²⁹

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Lee accredited his survival to the fact that he had a watch with a mechanical alarm that intrigued the Comanches. Having some preexisting knowledge of how Comanches treated their war captives, and rightly fearing his own ritualistic death, typical of adult male captives, he quickly took advantage of Comanches’ “credulity and superstition to establish among them that it [the mechanical alarm] was a thing of life – a spiritual medium, having powers of speech – through which their chiefs and prophets, and great warriors who had gone to the land of spirits, could converse in a language perfectly intelligible.” Lee beguiled the Comanches by stating that he was the sole interlocutor who could communicate between Comanches and the spiritual realm. In doing so, Lee guaranteed his own survival – a seeming impossible task for an adult Anglo male in Comanche captivity. This portion of Lee’s narrative was more than simply anecdotal, however. This story crafted an image of Comanches as pitifully backward. In a sense, he could hold them hostage by technology, something that was solely the domain of Anglo civilization.\(^{30}\)

Lee’s narrative shared many of the evolving traits and observations of the earlier female narratives, yet his was much longer in length. In addition to descriptions of both Comanche arbitrary and ritualistic violence, his source reported more of the mundane exercises of Comanche life and intricacies of Comanche society and politics. Lee became a prized captive of a Chief Big Wolf and later of Chief Spotted Leopard. Upon learning the Comanche language, Lee became privy to many important gatherings and discussions that

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\(^{30}\) Lee, 88, 100-101.
concerned the future movements of the Comanche people, their relations with other Native
groups, and their concern with the growing American presence in Texas. He became a
trusted captive who was allowed to accompany his master alone to a Comanche gathering.
Yet, along the way to the gathering, Lee took the opportunity of their solitude on the trail to
bash in Chief Spotted Leopard’s head with a blow from a tomahawk while the Chief was
taking a sip of water from a small stream.31

One of the most crucial episodes in his narrative involved the discovery of the
mutilated corpse of an American soldier found near Lee’s camp that bore all the hallmarks of
Comanche mutilation techniques. Upon this discovery, Lee reflected that Comanche
“cherish[ed] an inveterate and undying hatred of the white race, whom they [the Comanches]
regard as usurpers – and are sanguine in the belief that the time will eventually arrive then
they will be enabled, with the assistance of the Great Spirit, to sweep them from existence
and reclaim their rightful inheritance.” Whereas some of the antecedent testimonies spoke in
brief, vague terms about Comanche dislike of the growing numbers of Americans in
Comanchería, Lee’s narrative foreshadowed that growing encounters between Anglo settlers,
imbued with their self-righteous trappings of a benevolent and just empire, and Comanches
would have dire consequences for all. Furthermore, his testimony is the first to call for
punishment of the Comanches for impugning the rights of American citizens on American
soil. The amorphous concept of Comanchería seemed to dissipate as a geographic body by
the time of Lee’s narrative. His testimony shamed official government policy by stating
“hundreds of our people, in pursuit of their lawful business, are captured yearly, enslaved,

31 Ibid., 119-220, 134.
and barbarously put to death, without attracting the attention of government, whereas if the hundredth part of the same outrages were committed by an enlightened nation, it would call upon the people to fly to arms.” Lee’s narrative represented continuity in tone and observation from preexisting narratives. Yet his testimony emitted a shrill clarion call that the barbarous Comanches presented the greatest threat to American expansion. He cited Comanche atrocities against Americans as warranting swift punishment by the United States. Lee found the enslavement of white women as especially egregious. By drawing attention to the threat against Anglo women – the locus of regeneration for the nation – Lee’s narrative took the shape of incendiary, anti-Indian, nationalist propaganda. Lee essentialized all Comanches as having an unquenchable hatred of Anglo-America. The readers of Lee’s narrative thus learned that the Comanches represented the greatest threat to American nationhood and empire.  

Akin to newspapers, Comanche captivity narratives by the end of the antebellum period displayed that, in no uncertain terms, Anglo-Americans and Comanches could not coexist. Given the prevailing themes of Comanche violence and degradation of Anglo women, captivity narratives framed a native who simply must be removed from the frontier for national development. Though printed captivity narratives were longer, and we have a sense of greater familiarity with the speaker or author – something that is almost totally absent from the relatively brief newspaper articles about Comanches in the press – the endgame for captivity narratives was essentially the same as the newspaper articles. Both genres created fantastical, often spurious images of a degraded Native who aimed to check  

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32 Ibid., 1, 146; for earlier Comanche commentary on growing Anglo populations in Comancheria within the captivity narratives, see Harris, 14; and Webster 22.
the expansion of the American empire and who would do anything to accomplish this. If Anglo men needed greater impetus in print of the perceived Comanche threat, then Comanche captivity narratives of Anglo women provided no better call for a chivalric rescue. If Anglo women needed convincing that the “Indian problem” was not strictly the purview of men, then these captivity narratives convinced them that Anglo settler sisterhood was equally threatened by Comanches. Comanches became an American problem. The rhetoric of the captivity narratives, like that embedded in the press, clearly argued for Comanche removal.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

On April 12, 1861, Confederate canons opened fire for several hours on the United States island fortress holdout of Fort Sumter, South Carolina, thus heralding the outbreak of hostilities between the North and South. The American Civil War was born. Ironically, on that day, The New York Herald published an article that discussed the landing of United States forces in Indianola Bay, Texas, to evacuate remaining federal troops from the ostensibly foreign soil of the Confederate States of America. Many of these troops belonged to the Second Regiment of the United States Cavalry, a unit that the former United States Secretary of War Jefferson Davis – now the President of the Confederate States of America – had created in Missouri in 1855 and sent to Texas to combat persistent Comanche problems during their waning days of freedom in Texas. And until Comanche removal in 1859, the regiment had been “constantly engaged upon the frontiers in a warfare against the Comanche.” The article applauded many in this band of men – many of them Southerners – for remaining steadfastly loyal to the Union, even though now-President Davis had promised promotions to any deserters of the regiment to the Confederate States Army. In addition to applauding the loyalty of the vast majority of the unit, the article paid homage to the many men of the Second Regiment who gave their lives fighting the perpetual problem of the frontier, the Comanche: “Many Indians were killed,” the Northern paper reassured its readers. However, this was a Herculean task with dire consequences, considering that “From the Red River to the Rio Grande many a gallant solider of this regiment has found his resting place in the land of the Redman.”
place beneath the green sods of the prairies.” This geographic span—from what is now the border between Texas and Oklahoma to the Mexican border—was former domain of the Comanches. This was Comanchería.¹

Unwittingly, this article also ushered in great changes for the Comanche presence in American print culture. For the next four years, nearly the entire national focus—from both the North and South—reoriented itself to the bloody engagement that was just beginning to unfold on April 12, 1861. The American press followed suit. The previous obsession with defining in print who the Comanche were, what they were capable of, and what sort of obstacle they presented in westward expansion over the past six decades, came to a halt. This era, from 1861 to 1865, marked a severe disjuncture in the history of the printed word and the Comanche in the United States. In addition to the subject of the Civil War, which became almost the sole focus of printing houses in the North and South, the Comanches were now greatly reduced in number and removed to a reservation in far-flung Indian Territory, a region itself that existed in the liminal space between the United States and the Confederate States. However, this did not stop either the North or South from attempts at peace negotiations with the removed Comanches in order to keep them at bay while the Americans slogged it out. Yet, total subjugation of the natives would have to wait until Anglos got their own house in order. In a sense, Comanches fell off the proverbial radar of American reportage.²

¹ “ARRIVAL OF TROOPS,” The New York Herald (New York, NY), April 12, 1861.

² For the history of Anglo-Comanche relations during the Civil War, see Anderson, The Conquest of Texas, “Indians and the Civil War.”
With the conclusion of the Civil War, and with the nation in total disarray after four years of bloody conflict, some opportunistic Comanches began raiding again on the Southern Plains in Kansas, Indian Territory, and Texas – yet, the raids were relatively small scale and never garnered the same attention of the press, unlike during the antebellum period. A few more captivity narratives were published in the late nineteenth century, but these were generally neutral or cheery reminiscences of former child captive experiences with Comanches. Thus, with the outbreak of hostilities between North and South, the voluminous print presence of the fabled “most powerful” and “most dreaded” Comanche was also one of the Civil War’s victims. Yet, Comanche stereotypes from the antebellum era have proved alluring and tenacious – in many ways, they have informed how we perceive Comanches today.³

The six decades of initial print exposure that created the monstrosity of the Comanche in antebellum print culture left an indelible impression on American audiences. Even today, though scholarship and popular culture are both rife with honest attempts at sympathetic revisionism to paint Native Americans as humans who resisted and survived the deadly onslaught of the American empire, we find jaundiced images persist of the Comanche as the consummate “bad Indian” on the frontier who has the ability to disrupt American westward progress. In telling and retelling the story of national triumph in the American West – and thus the story of ultimate victory of the United States as a nation – the Anglo-articulated narrative requires the presence of a superlatively greatest foe. The Comanche has always fit

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³ For Comanche history after the Civil War, see Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire, “Collapse.”
this bill. Why this has occurred, and why it still occurs, to a great extent, is answered by the lingering power of the printing press in constructing Comanche.
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VITA

Born on March 31, 1977, in Kansas City, Missouri, Joshua Christopher Mika grew up in Shawnee, Kansas, where he attended the Shawnee Mission public schools his entire life. Upon graduating from Shawnee Mission Northwest in 1995, Mr. Mika attended the University of Kansas. Though he desired to go into the field of music theory and conducting, he decided to focus solely on the study of Germanic Languages at the university, where he obtained Bachelor of Arts in Germanic Languages and Literatures in 2000, followed by a Bachelor of Arts in History in 2006. At this university, Mr. Mika received departmental honor for his command of the Dutch Language in 1996. He was a Phi Alpha Theta history honor society inductee in 2005.

After years of working as a paraprofessional researcher at the Johnson County Library in Overland Park, Kansas, Mr. Mika decided to pursue his Master of Library and Information Science at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa in 2011. His master’s thesis was entitled “Discriminating Tastes: Editing Siam’s Patrimony and the Birth of the ‘National Library,’ 1905-1925.” Since obtaining his M.L.I.S.c., Mr. Mika has been employed as an adjunct faculty librarian at the Metropolitan Community College – Longview in Lee’s Summit, Missouri.

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