



Figure 6.6.1 George Catlin, *Múk-a-tab-mish-o-kah-kaik, Black Hawk, Prominent Sac Chief* (1832)

## 7. William Apess's Condemnation of White America

*In the early Republican era, most attention is generally given to the Indians on the frontiers of the ever expanding United States. However, Indians continued to live on the east coast, albeit in drastically reduced numbers and diminished circumstances. One of these, William Apess, became the first North American Indian to write a book. Apess, born in 1798, was of Pequot descent and grew up in Connecticut. His impoverished grandmother, in her desperation and unhappiness, nearly beat him to death at one point. He was then "bound out" to a white family as an indentured servant. (This was the equivalent of the foster care system in early America.) Later, he ran away and joined the army. He fought in the War of 1812, and after he was released in Canada, walked all the way home, passing right through Iroquoian (or Haudenosaunee) territory and seeing Indian communities intact for the first time. Back in Connecticut, he had a religious revival experience and spent the remaining years of his life working as a minister, a scholar of Native American history, and an activist on behalf of Indian people. One of his books, The Experiences of Five Christian*

*Indians (1833) concludes with an essay entitled "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man," which is an unqualified condemnation of the white world as he knew it. In 1837, when the book was reprinted, he removed that section, for reasons we will never know, and replaced it with a much briefer comment. Here is an excerpt from the original statement.*

Reader, I acknowledge that this is a confused world, and I am not seeking for office, but merely placing before you the black inconsistency that you place before me – which is ten times blacker than any skin that you will find in the universe. And now let me exhort you to do away that principle, as it appears ten times worse in the sight of God and candid men than skins of color – more disgraceful than all the skins that Jehovah ever made. If black or red skins or any other skin of color is disgraceful to God, it appears that he has disgraced himself a great deal – for he has made fifteen colored people to one white and placed them here upon this earth.

Now let me ask you, white man, if it is a disgrace to eat, drink, and sleep with the image of God, or sit, or walk, and talk with them. Or have you the folly to think that the white man, being one in fifteen or sixteen, are the only beloved images of God? Assemble all nations together in your imagination, and then let the whites be seated among them, and then let us look for the whites, and I doubt not it would be hard finding them; for to the rest of the nations, they are still but a handful. Now suppose these skins were put together, and each skin had its national crimes written upon it – which skin do you think would have the greatest? I will ask one question more. Can you charge the Indians with robbing a nation almost of their whole continent, and murdering their women and children, and then depriving the remainder of their lawful rights, that nature and God require them to have? And to cap the climax, rob another nation to till their grounds and welter out their days under the lash with hunger and fatigue under the scorching rays of a burning sun? I should look at all the skins, and I know that when I cast my eye upon the white skins, and if I saw those crimes written upon it, I should enter my protest against it immediately and cleave to that which is more honorable. And I can tell you that I am satisfied with the manner of my creation, fully – whether others are or not.

... Let me ask why the men of a different skin are so despised? Why are not they educated and placed in your pulpits? I ask if a marriage or a funeral ceremony or the ordinance of the Lord's house [for a man of color] would not be as acceptable in the sight of God as though he was white. And if so, why is it not to you? I ask again: Why is it not acceptable to have men to exercise their office in one place as well as in another? Perhaps you will say that if we admit you to all of these privileges you will want more. I expect that I can guess what that is – Why, say you, there would be intermarriages. How that would be I am not able to say – and if it should be, it would be

nothing strange or new to me; for I can assure you that I know a great many that have intermarried, both of the whites and the Indians – and many are their sons and daughters and people, too, of the first respectability. And I could point to some in the famous city of Boston and elsewhere. You may look now at the disgraceful act in the statutes law passed by the legislature of Massachusetts, and behold the fifty-pound fine levied upon any clergyman or justice of the peace that dare to encourage the laws of God and nature by a legitimate union in holy wedlock between the Indians and whites. I would ask how this looks to your lawmakers. I would ask if this corresponds to your sayings – that you think as much of the Indians as you do of the whites. I do not wonder that you blush, many of you, while you read; for many have broken the ill-fated laws made by man to hedge up the laws of God and nature. I would ask if they who have made the law have not broken it – but there is no other state in New England that has this law but Massachusetts; and I think, as many of you do not, that you have done yourselves no credit.

But as I am not looking for a wife, having one of the finest cast . . . you will see that it is not my object. And if I had none, I should not want anyone to take my right from me and choose a wife for me; for I think that I or any of my brethren have a right to choose a wife for themselves as well as the whites – and as the whites have taken the liberty to choose my brethren,<sup>12</sup> the Indians, hundreds and thousands of them, as partners in life, I believe the Indians have as much right to choose their partners among the whites if they wish. I would ask you if you can see anything inconsistent in your conduct and talk about the Indians. And if you do, I hope you will try to become more consistent. Now, if the Lord Jesus Christ, who is counted by all to be a Jew – and it is well known that the Jews are a colored people, especially those living in the East, where Christ was born – and if he should appear among us, would he not be shut out of doors by many, very quickly? And by those too who profess religion?

Source and study: Barry O'Connell, ed., *A Son of the Forest and Other Writings by William Apess, a Pequot* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp. 97–100.

Further exploration: All of Apess's writings are worth reading. He himself read everything he could find about King Philip's War and then gave a remarkable speech entitled "A Eulogy on King Philip" (reprinted in O'Connell, cited above). Students can look for the ways in which he understood the third and fourth documents of Chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Apess means Indian women. "Brethren" did not have a gender implication for him.