Territorial Crossings: Histories and Historiographies of the Early Americas

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In his 1932 presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, titled “The Epic of Greater America,” Herbert E. Bolton issued a ringing challenge to American historians to conceive of their subject on a larger scale than they had heretofore been willing to do. Fittingly, his remarks were delivered in Toronto—the first time the AHA’s annual meeting had been held outside the United States. The history of the western hemisphere, he contended, was a single grand epic of human enterprise. Its neglect led to isolated national histories that “obscured many of the larger factors in their development, and helped to raise up a nation of chauvinists” in the United States. Across three centuries, Bolton argued, “European peoples occupied the country, transplanted their cultures, and adapted themselves to the American scene. Rival nations devised systems for exploiting...
natives and natural resources, and competed for profit and possession.”¹ He traced the outlines of these processes by generalizing in broad strokes about European activities in the Americas, and he urged historians to devise scholarly agendas and school curricula that would illuminate the epic and lay a foundation for durable cooperation in pan-American scholarship.²

Bolton enjoyed a profoundly influential career—his pioneering work on the American borderlands fundamentally reshaped the history of the American West—but his call for a hemispheric history was still-born. Some scholars offered withering criticism; prominent Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman, for example, replied that the Americas were united only in the most general ways, whereas essential cultural and spiritual characteristics fundamentally divided them. The more common response, however, was indifference. Beyond a small circle of scholars with hemispheric interests, Bolton’s manifesto fell on deaf ears. Bolton himself failed to complete a planned monograph that would have followed the outline of his presidential address, and his own students largely abandoned the idea of a grand synthesis. The epic lived on primarily as a vestigial idea in course syllabi inspired by Bolton’s own efforts at the University of California, Berkeley.³

Yet in some sense the time for an epic of greater America was right. Bolton’s call for a hemispheric history coincided with a rising tide of pan-Americanism in political and cultural institutions. One such institution was the Pan American Institute of Geography and History, headquartered in Mexico City. In 1947, responding to both Bolton’s call for a hemispheric history and the post–World War II enthusiasm for inter-American cooperation, the Institute created the History of America pro-

² Ibid. The annual meeting of the American Historical Association has been held outside the United States only twice, in 1932 and 1967, both times in Toronto.
gram. Directed by Silvio Zavala, a distinguished historian of Mexico, the program encouraged scholarly efforts to create a unified view of the Americas. In the end Zavala himself authored its most enduring works. Recognizing that Bolton’s essentialized categories of European identity—Saxon America and Hispanic America in particular—were inadequate to explain the cultural complexity of the Americas, Zavala suggested a new approach. In “A General View of the Colonial History of the New World,” published in the American Historical Review in 1961, Zavala argued that colonial experience was shaped not by essential European differences but by interactions among European, Indian, and African peoples in diverse colonial settings. He suggested a tripartite typology of American societies that cut across lines of European national origins: “the Americas of European, African, and Indian identity.”

Zavala’s emphasis on the local scene and the three core groups that together created new colonial societies anticipated an avalanche of scholarship that has reshaped the history of the early Americas in the past two decades. Yet Zavala, the Pan American Institute, and the History of America program are all but forgotten in the United States and had only the most limited impact on colonial historiographies.

Bolton and Zavala notwithstanding, the colonization of the Americas is rarely seen or conceptualized whole. Nationalist preoccupations have fragmented the histories and historiographies of the early Americas, so that colonial history—whether of Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Peru, or the United States—has most often been understood as the precursor to a national story. Integrative impulses have emerged periodically among historians aspiring to transcend such boundaries, but

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daunting barriers often limit their success. Not only nationalist impulses but also language differences, fragmented audiences, and limiting or conflicting institutional imperatives all work against attempts to understand the history of the Americas as a single story. Nevertheless we inhabit an era in which integrative efforts are once again coming to the fore. Continental, Atlantic, and hemispheric approaches offer conceptual schemes intended to make sense of the Americas (or large regions of them) as a whole, and particular topics—borderlands history and the history of slavery and the slave trade, for example—often cross political boundaries and encourage comparison and integration.

This newest round of integrative efforts inspired a workshop held at the Henry E. Huntington Library in May 2009, “Territorial Crossings: Histories and Historiographies of the Early Americas.” The call for proposals asked participants to “offer comparisons or identify continuities among different imperial settings,” to consider “what theoretical and conceptual tools best frame” accounts of an “enlarged sphere of imperial competition and colonial development,” and to identify questions and topics that “best suit comparative or more broadly contextualized scholarship.” In general the participants’ essays either offered overarching conceptual schemes intended to identify large-scale patterns in the colonization of the Americas or explored particular sites and situations that cast boundary crossing in especially sharp relief. Our purpose here is to consider the workshop essays in light of the larger contexts for such efforts and to offer additional thoughts on how scholars interested in territorial and conceptual crossings might best move forward.

We approach this essay with the conviction that the disparate regions and societies of the Americas brought under Danish, Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish dominion from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, varied though they were, share a common history. The notion of a common history of the Americas has a long, complex, and contested genealogy. In the broadest sense, it runs counter to the nation-centered approach characteristic of the modern practice of history. The historical profession came of age alongside the

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7 This essay surveys primarily English-language scholarship, though much of that work is informed by sources and scholarly work in French, Portuguese, and Spanish. It also pays disproportionate attention to scholarly practices and literature in the United States, in keeping with the principal focus of this journal. We acknowledge at the outset that these are limiting concessions, but they seem necessary to keep the essay to a manageable scope.
modern nation-state. The nation, as Thomas Bender has written, became “the ‘natural’ unit for historical study and the ‘natural audience’ for historical work.”\(^8\) The primary purpose of history in the modern era has been to shape national identities; historians have accepted the need to define a common past that points toward common values and a common future. Nowhere is this function of history clearer than in the classroom, where the teaching of history has long been assumed to fulfill a civic mission: not simply to inform students of events in the past but to infuse them with faith in national identity and purpose. The institutional practices that produce history all reflect the centrality of the nation; the structures of historical fields, graduate training, university employment, and scholarly publication are all mapped onto national identities and imperatives. Even when scholars turn to other units of analysis—local or regional histories, for example—their contexts, whether explicit or implied, are usually national. They produce metonymic histories in which one section of the nation or the population stands for the whole.\(^9\)

In the Americas the United States exerts the most powerfully distorting influence on the historiography of the colonial era. Allan Greer’s workshop essay, “Perspectives on New France,” persuasively develops this point in relation to the modern historiography of New France. He acknowledges that historians are now “frequently told [that] a global age is upon us and colonial history is being reconsidered from a variety of expansive perspectives” but notes that these “new approaches may not be as fully liberated from national preoccupations as they seem.” Even


those U.S.-based historians of early America who profess a nonnationalistic approach to their field often slip into a form of hypernationalism: the use of a continental canvas to illuminate or aggrandize the national story of the United States. U.S.-published works that have been praised for their extranationalist perspective often end by narrowing their focus to explain the early development of the nation. Scholars from outside the United States cannot help but notice that

in the historiography of the Americas . . . the intellectual force of the Great Nation, backed by a superpower’s prestige and cultural influence and represented in the specific area of colonial history by an elaborate institutional infrastructure and battalions of well-trained professionals, can seem overwhelming. Of course, considerations of power may not be on the minds of Great Nation historians as they struggle to escape the confines of anachronistic boundaries and cast their eyes to the farthest horizon—that is how hegemony feels to those who enjoy it—but these very considerations may explain a certain ambivalence on the part of scholars based in or oriented towards small and aspirational nations. When the call goes up for transnational approaches to colonial history . . . how can they help wondering whose agenda will drive this enterprise? . . . Where will scholarship be published and what language will predominate at conferences?10

Greer’s cautionary remarks frame a thoughtful consideration of the ways in which scholars have approached the history of New France. He argues that the tradition of incorporating New France into a hypernationalist narrative of the United States began with Francis Parkman, who thought his account of France and England in North America illuminated a grand conflict, “Hegelian in its import, of rival civilizations.” In the years after Parkman wrote, historians working in the United States narrowed their focus to concentrate almost exclusively on the thirteen colonies, whereas Canadian historians drew New France into their own bifurcated nationalist narratives, one Francophone and the other Anglophone. For French-Canadian historians, the period before 1759 “was the time when French Canada was most fully itself: French in language, Catholic in religion, rural, obedient and brave.” The English colonies were of little interest, except as “a constant threat” to Canadian

interests. Just as the American Revolution was “the main hinge of United States historical narratives,” Greer contends, “the Conquest of 1759–60 was, if anything, a more momentous turning point for French-Canadian historiography. It was a turn for the worse.” Though French-speaking historians of New France now write in a more secularized vein, “the colony continues to be viewed as fully and unambiguously ancestral,” and “New France history in French remains [predominantly] settler national history.” English-Canadian historians tended to take a different tack in their attempt “to integrate the history of New France into a Canadian national narrative.” Through the mid-twentieth century, they generally regarded New France as “a deficient colonial entity . . . standing in need of British tutelage in order to flourish.” More recently, with a growing “sense of Canada as bi-national rather than British,” Anglophone historians have “developed a more positive view of New France.” Both the Anglophone and the Francophone traditions, however, have “neglected the dimensions of New France that extended beyond the borders of modern Canada/Quebec.”

Though the “new continentalism” promises to break the grip of these nationalist tendencies in the historiography of the early Americas, Greer cautions that American historians often fail to deal adequately with New France. Sometimes scholars treat New France only as “a periphery or an anomaly.” At other times they neglect Canadian scholarship, define the geographic boundaries of their studies in ways that truncate territories that now lie in Canada, or frame their arguments in nation-centered terms. And often, despite the best intentions, they cannot decide whether their “subject is a country or a continent.”

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12 Greer, “Perspectives on New France,” 5 (“new continentalism”), 25 ("periphery"), 6 ("subject").
Daniel H. Usner Jr.’s workshop contribution similarly argues that “the construction of nation-states in the Americas [has] tenaciously implicated and distorted colonial histories, as well as indigenous histories, of many peoples and places predating those nation-states.” In an essay titled “Rescuing Early America from National Narratives,” he calls particular attention to the way that national histories have unnaturally separated the historiographies of New France and Louisiana, two colonies that were under French jurisdiction and shared much in common through the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century. Historians of New France and Louisiana have each taken great strides in recent years against the earlier presumptions of nationalist historiography, but they have yet to explore the connections between Canada and Louisiana in any depth or detail. This neglect is surprising, Usner suggests, since French Canada and French Louisiana were linked in many ways. They shared political leaders, many of Louisiana’s early settlers came from New France, and both colonies “depended heavily on trade and alliance with populous and pluralistic Indian nations.” The two colonies differed in important ways as well, and Usner believes that those differences can also make close comparison illuminating. Comparative analysis of New France and Louisiana “will take us deeper inside Indian country,” will highlight “important fractures and fissures in French imperial policy,” and will lead to a fuller understanding of the “interwoven roles of ethnicity, gender, and class in shaping colonial society.” According to Usner, this comparison is just one among many that might be made among colonial regions in the early Americas, and modern national boundaries should not determine the limits of our willingness to pursue them.

The essential insight of these essays—that nationalist impulses have been the predominant force in shaping colonial histories—can be extended to Latin America as well. For the first century and more after independence, historians from Latin America focused on the construction of national histories, just as those in the United States tended to do, as part of the larger project of nation building. Given that context for historiographical development, scholars who examined the colonial period did so with modern outcomes uppermost in their minds. They took up their examinations of the early period, as Stanley J. Stein has written, “because they wished to extol or depreciate the colonial heritage.”

14 Ibid.
It is not only nationalism, but more particularly the tradition of national exceptionalism, that has shaped much of what has been written about colonial societies in the Americas. Though exceptionalism is most strongly associated with the United States, “it is actually implicit,” as J. H. Elliott has noted, “in all national histories.” Exceptionalist traditions run deep in Latin America, where leaders of independence movements and early historians often emphasized their new nations’ unique identities. Bartolomé Mitre, president of Argentina from 1862 to 1868 and “the creator of Argentine historiography,” believed his nation differed from the rest of Spanish America because of its unique colonial past. Unlike Mexico and Peru, Argentina was not a feudal society “in which the heirs of the conquerors continued to oppress and exploit those of the conquered” but rather an egalitarian one characterized by racial and economic equality. Even when scholars have sought to transcend narrowly framed national histories, they have sometimes invoked a larger exceptionalist vision. Thus, when José Vasconcelos argued that a “cosmic race” was arising in the Americas to reshape the destiny of the world, he saw Iberian America as its homeland; Anglo-America, with its commitment to racial purity and exclusion, was antithetical to his vision of the new Americas.

As the only Portuguese-speaking country in the Americas, Brazil’s historiography has traditionally been separate from the rest of Latin America. It has its own exceptionalist tendencies; Gilberto Freyre, for example, has popularized the idea that its pattern of race mixing “was the unique contribution of Brazil to the world.” Though European scholars have a long-standing interest in colonial Brazilian history, it did not emerge as a distinct field of study in the United States until the 1960s; this relative lack of attention underlies reviews of the historical literature that at times resemble calls to arms, lamenting the lack of scholarship on this large and important nation and suggesting measures...
of redress. Traditionally, scholars have stressed Brazil’s “strong peculiarities” as a colonial region, a view that has further encouraged historiographical separation.20

In one way, however, the literatures on the colonies of French, Portuguese, and Spanish America are similar to one another but essentially different from that on British North America. Whereas the study of non-English-speaking colonial American regions, and especially Latin America, has been steadily internationalized since the mid-twentieth century, U.S. scholars continue to dominate the writing of early Anglo-American history. Thus, while Latin American historians, for example, “gradually discarded the framework created by the founders of their national historiographies” and coordinated their efforts with those of historians working in Europe and the United States, no comparable development has occurred in the historiography of Anglo-America.21


a history already strongly inflected by nationalist and exceptionalist traditions, the relative lack of international influence has made those emphases especially durable.\textsuperscript{22} This fact makes Greer's skepticism about boundary-crossing projects that originate in the United States and appear in English especially apposite. He sounds a cautionary note that readers of this journal, in particular, should take to heart.

\textbf{One way to approach} an epic of greater America is to expand the geographic frame of analysis within which early American historians typically work. In this spirit Paul Mapp's workshop essay argues that we should adopt a continental perspective on early America. In “Interpretive Implications of a Continental Approach,” Mapp contends that a continental frame for colonial U.S. history, though it might sacrifice some of the analytic depth to which historians who focus only on mainland British North America are accustomed, has the compensating virtue of more fully revealing large-scale patterns and transformations of North America. Mapp's essay draws our attention to two features of a continental

and Reginald D. Butler, “The Contact of Cultures: Perspectives on the Quincentenary,” \textit{American Historical Review} 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 478–503; James Lockhart, “The Social History of Early Latin America: Evolution and Potential,” in \textit{Of Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New in Early Latin American History} (Stanford, Calif., 1999), 27–80. As a body, this historiographical literature tends to emphasize English-language scholarship. In a review of an essay collection on social history as practiced in different regions of the world, Lockhart comments: “One thing that emerges from the present volume is the peculiar disadvantage under which North American history has labored, that of being practiced almost exclusively by natives, who, in one way or another, are all wrapped up in the American dream; European history has more perspective, being done by many nationals concerning many nations, yet after all mainly by Europeans. Latin American history has the advantage of being written by a truly balanced set of inhabitants of three continents.” See Lockhart, review of Zunz, \textit{Reliving the Past}, \textit{Hispanic American Historical Review} 67, no. 3 (August 1987): 499–501 (quotation, 501).

approach that he considers especially valuable. Using sources from more than one European nation to explore a continent with a complex array of Native American polities at its center can bring an Indian core into clearer focus. Sources drawn from the archives of several nations highlight the geographic scope of Native America and the astonishing range of cultural diversity that characterized North America in the era of European colonization. They also present us, at times, with multiple perspectives on the same Indian polities, which can deepen our understanding of those polities and help compensate for the partial and instrumental ways particular observers described them as we seek to arrive at our own balanced and expansive understanding. A second important feature of the continental approach, in Mapp's formulation, is its power to capture one of the era's most important developments: "the decimation of the continent's indigenous peoples." If our vision of the colonial era of North American history begins with its Native population and we develop an appreciation for the antiquity, range, diversity, and dynamism of the Indian societies inhabiting the continent, then we are also better positioned to appreciate the magnitude and significance of population decline in the postcontact era.

In calling for a continental approach, Mapp directs our attention to a growth industry in early American historiography as it is currently practiced in the United States. Scholars such as Juliana Barr, Ned Blackhawk, James F. Brooks, Steven W. Hackel, Susan Sleeper-Smith, and Richard White, among many others, have pushed the boundaries of early American history westward, and synthetic accounts—most notably Alan Taylor’s *American Colonies*—have increasingly attempted to make the North American continent their subject. U.S. history textbooks, which included nothing about the colonial-era trans-Mississippi West a generation ago, now routinely place the Pueblo Revolt alongside Bacon’s Rebellion and King Philip’s War in their discussions of late-seventeenth-century resistance to European rule. The growth of continental history has had a laudable effect on the field of early American history in the United States. It has brought greater attention to Spanish and French colonization of North America; places such as the *pays d’en haut* and the southwestern borderlands now appear even in U.S. history survey courses. Scholars of early Anglo-America appreciate more clearly than ever before the importance of Native American polities and imperial competition in the history of early America.

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24 Ibid.
Yet, for all its virtues, the new continental history remains focused primarily on the territory that would eventually be incorporated into the United States, as Allan Greer’s essay emphasizes. U.S.-based historians of Anglo-America may teach about the Pueblo Revolt or the middle ground of the Great Lakes region in survey classes, but relatively few deal with the histories of Mexico or New France in a more comprehensive way. Curiosity about these rival empires all too often stops at the borders that separate the continent’s modern nation-states. At the same time that historians define the boundaries of the continent selectively, a continental focus can lead them to neglect important colonized territories that lie beyond them. Where in a continental history do we place the islands of the West Indies, which were so important to Anglo-American coloniza-
tion? Though the expanded geography of a continental approach is laud-
able, these problems of definition remind us how artificial and arbitrary continents are: they are intellectual abstractions, mapped onto human societies whose complexities belie the apparent clarity and simplicity of these geographic units.

The challenge of identifying an appropriate unit of geographic analysis highlights the most insurmountable aspect of an epic of greater America. Whether a scholar is mapping a research strategy, planning a course, or outlining a synthetic survey text, taking on developments that span a continent—or, as Herbert E. Bolton would have it, the entire western hemisphere—is a daunting prospect. Its scope defeated Bolton’s effort to craft a monograph on the subject half a century ago, and the explosion of scholarship in the meantime has only complicated things further. Our knowledge of particular colonial settings is now so vast that a comprehensive, synthetic account of the Americas in the early modern era is, quite simply, impossible. Only by carefully controlling its terms is a boundary-crossing project of the kind envisioned by the 2009 WMQ-EMSI workshop’s call for proposals really manageable. The question then becomes, how are the terms of such a project best defined?

One possibility is to focus on a smaller geographic unit in which multiple polities contended for resources and dominion. In areas where more than one European empire competed for dominance, a scholar, as in Mapp’s continental formulation, may still be able to draw on the archival resources of more than one colonizing power. Such regions also present complex patterns of contestation and change over time. This is the appeal of borderlands history, which has long been one of the most sustained and successful areas of boundary-crossing research in the early Americas. Juliana Barr’s workshop essay, titled “The Problem of ‘Borderlands’ and the Reality of Indian Territoriality in Early America,” explores the dynamics of cross-cultural power and authority in the region that is now Texas and, in so doing, interrogates the assumptions underlying most versions of borderlands history.

The problem with borderlands history, according to Barr, is that its conceptions of borders and, therefore, of power are inherently Eurocentric. Like the older frontier model that it often intends to supplant, borderlands history focuses on regions just beyond the effective control of European empires. Recent accounts of the borderlands conceive of them as “spaces within which no one has a monopoly on power or violence . . . Borderlands are not regions of dominion and subordination, but cultural encounter and adaptation.” This understanding of the borderlands has been grounded in scholars’ desire to decenter European empires and colonists and make Indians equal actors. Paradoxically, however, the borders involved—like the frontiers of an earlier generation—are European in origin. Borderlands emerge when Europeans arrive, bringing with them imperial claims to authority. But what about Indian borders, Indian territoriality, Indian claims to power? In most recent accounts, according to Barr, these remain ill defined and poorly understood. Indian boundaries and territorial claims constitute a vague, unarticulated prehistory that all too quickly falls by the wayside once European powers assert themselves in the borderlands. Barr’s essay runs strongly against this tradition. “The challenge,” she notes, “is to conceptualize ‘borders’ as defined by Indian peoples and nations.” Barr writes, “Indian nations could and did exercise power that had unambiguous spatial dimensions.”


On the concept of borderlands, see the influential and much-contested article by Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” American Historical Review 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 814–41; and “Forum” responses to it by Evan Haefeli, Christopher Ebert Schmidt-Nowara, John R. Wunder and Pekka
Barr’s essay demonstrates that borderlands could be regions where power relations were shaped less by the contest of European empires than by Indian strategies. Coahuiltecan-speaking hunter-gatherers incorporated Spanish missions into their seasonal territorial ranges through ceremonial rituals that proclaimed their control over them. Hasinais and other Caddo groups carefully policed their boundaries. They kept Spaniards out of their territory altogether for many years; later, Spaniards were admitted only by permission, accompanied by official escorts and bearing objects that were understood as “mneumonic icons of political and economic alliance”—passports into the Caddo world. Apache and Comanche raiders, Barr writes, “extended and rearranged their territorial claims throughout the [eighteenth] century, often in combative concert with the other.” For centuries this complex pattern of Indian territoriality defeated Spanish and French efforts to control or rearrange its elements. “When David Weber explains that, two and [a] half centuries following the alleged Spanish ‘conquest,’ independent Indian nations controlled more than half of Spanish America,” Barr notes, “he does not merely assert that native peoples still stood in positions to resist and/or to maintain independent identities and cultures. He is telling us that they continued to control sovereign domains, that extensive areas of Latin America were in fact Indian America, and that those independent Indian nations were the ones with enough power to coerce Europeans into paying tribute and recognizing native dominion.”

The same point could be extended to French and British America through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: European maps to the contrary notwithstanding, vast swaths of the Americas remained Indian country throughout the colonial period. Or, as Barr puts it, “Native geopolitical realities cut across European cartographic fictions.” This point is consonant with the central emphasis of Mapp’s essay, though Barr reaches it through the intensive study of a single region rather than an expansive assessment of the entire continent. Taken together, the two essays highlight a central contention that often arises in boundary-crossing histories: Indians were not just important but secondary players in the colonization process. They were central to everything that happened in the Americas. Despite the demographic catastrophe that altered the course of events so dramatically, throughout the colonial period much of the Americas remained Indian country, and Europeans were newcomers in an alien landscape.


30 Ibid., 48.
One central challenge in constructing an epic of greater America, then, is to delve more deeply into Indian worlds. Historians interested in boundary crossing find themselves taking Indian polities, societies, and cultures more seriously and seeking to understand them on their own terms. In borderlands settings Indian territoriality was often obscured by the succession of regimes that supplanted it and by the layers of stories that accompanied displacement and conquest. Carla Gerona’s workshop contribution reminds us that the occupation of borderlands spaces, though effected by conquest and secured in law, is legitimated through narrative. Her essay, “To Upstream, To Downstream, and Cah-e-cha’-da-ya (To Float),” is part of a book project that she describes as an ethnohistory of Nacogdoches, Texas, “from pre-colonial times to U.S. annexation.” Her essay seeks to contextualize various extant accounts of Caddo origin stories from the Nacogdoches region by “floating around” among six different informants who recorded those stories. Each of these informants, according to Gerona, had a distinct understanding of Caddo history. She contends that their stories cannot be combined into a single, synthetic narrative. Instead they “point to the contestation of stories and varieties of contradictions that emerged from borderlands Texas or Bah'-hat-te-no borderlands. One key point of contention has revolved around stories: which story is true and who has the right to tell the story.”31 The fragmentary and contested accounts of Caddo origin stories that come down to us today only highlight the many stories that have been lost—and with them, entire worlds of human experience and understanding.32

One of the peculiarities of borderlands history is the fact that the term is most often applied to only a single region of the colonial Americas—not coincidentally, the borderlands region that has been most important to U.S. history—though colonization created borderlands throughout the hemisphere. Even if we understand borderlands to exist only where European empires competed for dominance, the term should apply at least to northeastern and southeastern North America and the regions of the Great Lakes and the La Plata river basin. If we accept a more expansive definition of borderlands and include regions where Indian territorial claims collided with those of European empires, the number of borderlands multiplies rapidly. In either case excellent work now sheds light on borderlands located throughout the hemisphere—the Great Lakes region; Central America; the Orinoco, Amazon, and La

32 Ibid.
Plata river basins; the Brazilian interior; and Gran Chaco, among others.  

As this rich literature suggests, the field of borderlands history has enormous potential for comparative approaches, a potential that to date has not been fully realized. Comparative borderlands studies have progressed furthest for Latin America, which had an early start with Alistair Hennessy’s *The Frontier in Latin American History*. With the notable exceptions of David J. Weber’s *Bárbaros* and Cynthia Radding’s *Landskape of Power and Identity*, however, more recent comparisons appear largely in the form of anthologies. The notion of Native territoriality, which Barr explored in the specific context of Texas, is relevant to borderlands everywhere in the Americas; close attention to gender and sexuality can fundamentally alter how we conceive of borderlands; and in settings where Indians and Africans shared borderlands spaces, the dynamics of their cross-cultural encounters further complicate the story. Yet differences in the vocabularies and valences of meaning in distinct national
historiographies can also obscure or complicate comparative opportunities, especially when it comes to borderlands and frontiers. A vast gulf of understanding separates the meaning of “frontier” in the United States from that of the apparently similar terms “frontera” in Mexico or “sertão” in Brazil. Scholars who want to compare experiences in these regions must also contend with unstated assumptions that are often deeply rooted in their historiographies.35

Comparative opportunities are not limited to borderlands in the Americas. Indeed comparative history has long served as another way to manage the sprawling scope of an epic of greater America. Since the 1980s interest in comparative histories of the Americas, and in the com-


35 The frontier as a central element in the construction of national identity is especially pronounced in Argentina, Brazil, and the United States, though the precise meanings ascribed to the frontier vary. David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch argue that, other than in Argentina and Brazil, “Latin American intellectuals have seldom considered their own frontiers central to the formation of national identities or of national institutions.” See Weber and Rausch, “Introduction,” in Weber and Rausch, Where Cultures Meet, xiii–xli (quotation, xiii). Also see Richard W. Slatta, “Historical Frontier Imagery in the Americas,” in Latin American Frontiers, Borders, and Hinterlands: Research Needs and Resources, ed. Paula Covington (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1990), 5–25; A. J. R. Russell-Wood, “Frontiers in Colonial Brazil: Reality, Myth, and Metaphor,” ibid., 26–61; Fredrick B. Pike, The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature (Austin, Tex., 1992). On Canada, see the classic work by W. J. Eccles, The Canadian Frontier, 1534–1760 (New York, 1969), which argues in essence that all of French Canada was a frontier for much of its history, a view affirmed by LeslieChoquette: “What historians have sometimes forgotten is that New France, for much of its history, was also a frontier, ‘a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined.’ It was, at the same time, a borderland, ‘a site of imperial rivalry and ‘contested boundaries between colonial domains.’” See Choquette, “Center and Periphery in French North America,” in Daniels and Kennedy, Negotiated Empires, 193–206 (quotation, 193–94).
Comparative approach more generally, has been renewed as globalization has spurred efforts to break down the barriers of national histories and place them in broader contexts. Most recently, J. H. Elliott’s *Empires of the Atlantic World* constitutes an ambitious and wide-ranging meditation on the similarities and differences between Spanish and British America. Yet workshop participants agreed that even this most sophisticated and sustained example of comparative history to appear in the field in recent years suffers from some characteristic limitations of the comparative approach.  

The first problem with comparative history is the choice of things to be compared. Comparative histories nearly always tend toward synecdoche: parts of empires stand in for their wholes. However insightful such studies may be, this tendency often distorts their analyses. Generally, comparative histories of American empires have focused on regions that seem most characteristic of each empire rather than highlighting comparisons between places that are essentially similar to each other. Yet they nevertheless tend to generalize primarily about the differences between European colonial powers rather than the differences between places being colonized. If a historian wishes to compare the ways that English, French, and Spanish kingdoms approached colonization, it would presumably be best to focus on a place—the staple-producing islands of the West Indies, for example—where the three empires faced essentially similar conditions.


37 Despite this opportunity, the historiography of the Caribbean generally follows national lines. On this point, see, for example, Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1990); Juanita de Barros, Audra Diptee, and David V. Trotman, eds., *Beyond Fragmentation:...
Instead scholars have most often focused such comparisons on New England, New France, and New Spain, where the preexisting conditions of the places involved—their climates, geographies, natural resources, and human populations—have much more power to explain differences than do the predilections of the colonizing powers. Yet scholars nevertheless tend to attribute the differences they find primarily to the national characters of European kingdoms rather than to the exploitable resources of American places. This tendency to characterize empires according to European national styles or imperial personalities reifies national models for colonization instead of acknowledging that early modern empires tended to be highly differentiated systems that varied widely from one site to the next. Some workshop participants noted this problem and expressed skepticism about the viability of comparative projects; others suggested that comparative histories remained useful, as long as their terms were carefully controlled. Daniel H. Usner Jr. affirmed the value of comparisons within empires as well as among them—his essay, as we have noted, advocated more systematic comparison between New France and Louisiana—and Allan Greer and Juliana Barr both suggested that there were fruitful, and largely unexploited, opportunities for comparisons between the French and Spanish empires. However they are framed, comparisons demand a thoughtful consideration of the things being compared; they also require that available source materials permit comparable treatment.38

Perspectives on Caribbean History (Princeton, N.J., 2006). The potential for a more comparative approach to Caribbean colonization is suggested by Karen Ordahl Kupperman’s history of Providence Island, the short-lived Puritan Caribbean colony that differed so greatly from the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay. Kupperman positions her study within the historiographical debate on the motivations of Puritan emigration and settlement that is central to the early Anglo-American field. Yet it also constitutes a powerful demonstration that local conditions shaped colonial enterprise. In this case a tropical environment and proximity to Spanish colonies led Puritans to grant large landholdings to individual planters and adopt African slavery. See Kupperman, “Errand to the Indies: Puritan Colonization from Providence Island through the Western Design,” WMQ 45, no. 1 (January 1988): 70–99; Kupperman, Providence Island, 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony (Cambridge, 1993). For a recent work that suggests the value of comparing Saint Domingue, Jamaica, and Brazil, see John D. Garrigus, Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue (New York, 2006), 3–4.

Colonial Brazil offers an interesting illustration of both the possibilities and the limits of comparative histories of the early Americas. Because of its formative role in the development of plantation slavery, Brazil has long been at the center of a rich scholarly tradition in comparative studies of slavery and the slave trade. Yet when comparative histories treat the politics and governance of empires, Portuguese America is almost always neglected. Brazil encompassed such a vast territory, with so many variations in zones of development, that it makes more sense to compare it to all of British or Spanish America than to compare it to a single colony or viceroyalty. Yet the Portuguese model of colonial governance and development remains poorly understood by scholars working in other fields. Despite their considerable promise in helping to shape an epic of greater America, most comparative histories of the Americas remain problematic in important ways.

The most prominent alternative to comparative history to emerge in the last two decades is the field of Atlantic history. This approach concerns the Atlantic Ocean as more than a geographic entity: it was an interconnected arena of migration, trade, intellectual and cultural exchange, and warfare that linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas into a broader transatlantic world. Atlantic history thus concerns phenomena that transcend the political boundaries of European empires; the history of any single colony is seen neither as prelude to the modern nation nor simply for its own sake but as part of an interrelated system that shaped colonization. As Ian Tyrrell argues, “The Atlantic world must encompass Africa as well as Europe and the Americas and . . . focus on the cultural and social interchange of Native Americans, Africans, African-American slaves, and a variety of European peoples.”

For an introduction to this literature, see Laird W. Bergad, The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States (New York, 2007).

Like continental history, Atlantic history presents historians with a problem of scale. Whereas some works of Atlantic history pursue their themes on a daunting scale, others seek to make their sprawling geographies manageable by pursuing their subjects in particularistic ways. Scholars might focus on a single individual, place, or theme and illuminate its Atlantic dimensions, or they might construct “entangled histories” that highlight the complexities of Atlantic interactions. Atlantic histories aim to make larger analytic sense of events that occurred at a geographic or chronological distance from each other and that involved the activities of multiple European, African, and Native American polities. Whereas the comparative history approach is especially compatible with political or social history methods, Atlantic history—with its characteristic tendency to contextualize the particular—is well suited to the rise of cultural history.

The shift from patterned generalization to nuanced particularization is apparent in the evolving history of African slavery and the slave trade, which is arguably the most fully developed and sophisticated field in Atlantic history. For forty years the most important focus in this field has been the ongoing attempt to quantify and map the slave trade. That effort began with Philip D. Curtin’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, the first attempt to present slave trade figures for various European nations. Subsequent research has carried Curtin’s initial efforts to a level of detail and comprehensiveness that would have seemed unimaginable four decades ago. In 1999 Cambridge University Press published a landmark CD-ROM that contained electronic records on 25,000 transatlantic slave trade voyages, and scholars rushed to offer their assessments of the new data. Yet it soon became apparent that this data set, too, was provisional rather than definitive. Today Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database is an open-access Web site that documents 34,941 slave trade voyages and identifies more than 67,000 victims of the trade by their African names.


Yet even as this decades-long effort nears completion, scholarship on slavery and the slave trade has shifted to place a greater emphasis on culture and identity. The most influential recent works on the slave trade itself are more interested in capturing its human dimension than in quantifying its scope. Similarly, Atlantic histories of slavery have brought a new sophistication to old questions about the relative importance of African cultural traditions and creolization, or New World adaptations, in plantation settings. It was once commonplace to assume that the transatlantic slave trade was profoundly destructive to African cultural traditions—that what Africans “initially possessed either was destroyed during the Atlantic passage or survived in remnants that did not last long in the Americas.”43 The violence of captivity, the high death rates among forced migrants, the destruction of community and mixing of peoples in the transatlantic marketplace, and the dehumanizing brutality of plantation regimes were believed to have destroyed much of the cultural fabric of African life. This view has been eclipsed by the work of many historians who have shown that broad cultural patterns survived the Middle Passage, that ethnic ties structured relations among first-generation slaves, and that important elements of African cultural traditions were transplanted to American settings, where they were adapted to the disorienting circumstances of American slavery. The scholarly debate over African cultural survivals and creolization has been transformed both by closer readings of the available evidence and by the recourse to comparison that is so much a part of the African Atlantic field.44

The tension between the transmission of ethnic cultures to the Americas and the creation of new American identities also characterizes the historiography on Europeans. Traditionally, scholars have argued that European inheritances were overwhelmingly, if not uniquely, influential in shaping colonial societies, an interpretive approach that reaches back to the great epic histories of the nineteenth century and continues


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Since the 1980s, American historians have emphasized the importance of European cultural influences on American society. David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* presented a sweeping interpretation of British North America, arguing that all its important cultural features derived from four hearth cultures in the British Isles. Rejecting the idea that culture is dynamic and unstable, Fischer argued instead for a seed theory of culture. Every important cultural element in U.S. society, even to the present day, he suggested, could be explained by reference to founding traits that were traceable to the colonies’ earliest English settlers. In *Ceremonies of Possession*, Patricia Seed likewise contended that the original European cultural impulses to colonization were astonishingly durable and that the differences in the types of colonies created in the Americas by the Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish were grounded in differences in their countries of origin. Claudio Véliz offered a sustained comparison between Spanish and English America that similarly discovered essential cultural traits in the character of those two countries that explained the divergences in their American colonies.

Other scholars have contested this emphasis on the durability of European cultural inheritances. For Spanish America, historians traditionally located the emergence of creole identities among American-born Spaniards in the eighteenth century; more recently, however, some have argued that American experiences transformed notions of Spanishness even in the early years of conquest and settlement. Scholars of French Canada contend that migration to Canada turned Frenchmen—a modern, urbanized, and diverse population—into peasants. Yet Canadians also came into sustained contact with neighboring Indians from an early date, an experience that transformed the colony’s society and culture. In an influential essay on British North America, T. H. Breen has argued that European colonies in the Americas should be understood not as extensions of European social and cultural forms into new, unformed environments but rather as places where European, Native American, and African cultural forms met and interacted in dynamic and potentially volatile ways. Each region and locale, Breen suggests, must be understood on its own terms, but scholars can use the idea of “creative adaptations” as an analytic key that can help them understand underlying patterns of symmetry in the highly differentiated societies of the colonial Americas.

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embrace the idea that culture was dynamic and mutable and scholars of Africans in America discover a greater degree of cultural durability, the two historiographies, while remaining largely separate, approach a common understanding of the process of cultural transmission and adaptation.

Nevertheless, the essential problem of how to understand culture itself remains contested terrain. A workshop essay coauthored by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and James Sidbury ventures onto this ground to propose an analytic framework for understanding patterns of cultural change throughout the colonial Americas. Their essay—“Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic”—attempts to unite disparate literatures and help scholars think more deeply and clearly about the powerful forces of cultural change unleashed by colonization.47

Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury ask us to look beyond the “subdisciplinary divisions within the academy” that create distinct typologies of cultural transformation for Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans in the early modern Atlantic, in part through the vocabularies they employ: “What, in short, happens when one moves beyond the labels that separate interpretations of the ‘creole’ cultures of African Americans, the ‘hybrid’ cultures of Europeans, and the ‘tribal’ cultures of Native Americans by placing all of these processes of ethnogenesis within the pan-hemispheric and pan-Atlantic processes that linked them to one another?”48 Embracing the term ethnogenesis (which is commonly used in the historical and anthropological literature on Native Americans), Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury proceed to map out the enormous variation in this pan-Atlantic phenomenon, arguing for a dynamic notion of culture formation that challenges in fundamental ways the seed theory of culture, whether applied to European, African, or Native American contexts.49

In their analysis of African cultural patterns in the Americas, Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury sidestep the old debate over the creolization model,
proposed by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price in the 1970s to conceptualize African American culture. Though recent scholarship has successfully demonstrated that Mintz and Price underestimated the extent to which African cultural patterns were transferred to the Americas, it has not invalidated the concept of creolization. Indeed, Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury argue, the creolization “model sheds valuable light on” cultural change in precolonial Africa itself. African states acquiring slaves “were constantly seeking to integrate ethnic outsiders before, during and after the era of the Atlantic slave trade. The experience of captives adapting to a new culture and a new society was, therefore, an endemic condition that created ongoing processes of ethnogenesis in pre-colonial African polities.”

Ethnogenesis varied according to local conditions, but in one way or another it accounts for the emergence of new ethnic groups in southeastern, Central, and West Africa. “In fact, it is increasingly clear,” Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury argue, “that many ethnic identities that scholars have long read back onto the coastal regions of West Africa were products of slavery and diaspora.” This “fluid state of cultural change” among Africans, moreover, represents a pan-Atlantic phenomenon. Africans and their descendants “established a wealth of racial, ethnic and national identities in the Americas,” whether in the context of “‘liberated Africans’ who wound up in Trinidad and the Bahamas,” “African” churches in North America, pardo republicanism in Spanish America, or grand marronage from New Spain to the Caribbean and Brazil; all “shared in the fluidity that characterized the identities and cultures of West and Central Africa in the age of the slave trade.”

Likewise, Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury argue, Native Americans and Europeans throughout the Atlantic world experienced cultural change that resembled creolization. In the borderlands new “colonial tribes” emerged in the context of demographic collapse and interethnic conflict, a process that “has for too long been artificially separated from” similar developments experienced by Native Americans in the urban centers of highland Mexico and Peru. There, too, indigenous agrarian communities underwent profound cultural change, in time becoming “Indian pueblos.” These new, locally focused forms of cultural identification did not preclude the development of other “pan-Amerindian” identities in either the North American borderlands or the Spanish American highlands, involving “the creation of the ethnic category of the Indian.”

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50 Ibid., 5–6 (“model,” 5, “were constantly seeking,” 6).
51 Ibid., 7–8 (“In fact,” “‘liberated Africans,’” 7, “established a wealth,” 8), 12 (“shared in the fluidity”).
Similarly, Europeans underwent processes of ethnogenesis throughout the early modern Atlantic. In British North America, European settlers and their descendants forged common identities at the village, county, and colony levels at the same time that they developed a shared sense of themselves as “American” and “White” during the revolutionary era, “a racially exclusionary conception of nationalism in the United States” that explicitly excluded Native Americans and Africans even as it rejected the religious and national divisions so marked in the history of Europe. In Spanish America diverse European “ethnic groups developed common identities as ‘vecinos,’ members of a shared urban patria.” Similar processes were at work in Europe itself: “many ‘national’ identities were crafted in the crucible of the Atlantic expansion,” though “European ‘ethnogenesis’ in relationship to the Atlantic has yet to be fully explored.”

The essential insight of the Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury essay— the need to use the same terminology to refer to the process of cultural formation for each of the three main groups in the early modern Atlantic—forcefully reminds us of vocabulary’s critical role in boundary-crossing histories. By now we recognize, at least in theory, the ideological work of a term such as “settlement,” which is commonly applied to colonists in British North America, in comparison with “conquest,” which is usually reserved, at least in the United States, to describe the colonization of Latin America. Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury demonstrate how the terms creolization, ethnogenesis, and hybridity create an unnecessary conceptual distance among diverse residents of the early modern Atlantic. The move to label common processes with a single term is simple yet powerful; it reorients our understanding of a pan-Atlantic phenomenon, bridging separate historiographies and bringing them into conversation with one another.

Perhaps the greatest pitfall of this kind of wide-angle approach is the tendency to make cultural change so abstract that lived human experience all but disappears from view, a point that Ann Little makes in her comment on Cañizares-Esguerra and Sidbury’s essay. Abstract models of cultural development can all too easily disregard the fact that the principal engine of cultural change in the early Americas was violence, and its principal victims were women. She asks,

How does something as scientific and clinical-sounding as ethnogenesis actually work in the colonial Americas? . . . Based on my readings of this essay, it seems that ethnogenesis happened principally because of the theft of human bodies and the

exploitation of their labor and their sexuality, women’s bodies and sexuality in particular. Creolization and ethnogenesis in most parts of the Americas were contingent on sexual exploitation and abuse, and in particular the sexual exploitation of mostly Indian and African women. The exploitation of women was after all one of the most important cross-cultural constants in Europe, Africa, and the colonial Americas.\textsuperscript{54}

Ethnogenesis, whatever else it implies, was a wrenching process that occurred in the context of profoundly unequal power relations and catastrophic dislocations; only in close readings of particular places or individual lives do those qualities emerge in all their vivid complexity.

Little’s workshop essay, drawn from a larger biography in progress of Esther Wheelwright, offers a good case in point. Captured as a child from her home in Wells, Maine, by Wabanaki Indians in 1703, Wheelwright’s experience illustrates patterns of violence and wrenching cultural change, but in unexpected ways. The larger context for Wheelwright’s story is one of empires contending for territorial and cultural dominion, with Indian communities caught in the crossfire. Yet her experience overturns many of our expectations and precepts. Held captive by the Wabanakis for five years, she later became a nun in Montreal’s Ursuline convent and eventually rose to the office of Mother Superior. Wheelwright’s story raises a host of important questions about the power of borderlands experiences in individual lives. It allows us to ask, as Karin Wulf did in our workshop conversation, whether women crossed boundaries in early American settings in ways that were distinct from the experiences of men? Certainly, motives and incentives for men and women in borderlands spaces could be quite different; in her book \textit{Abraham in Arms}, for example, Little has argued that women who were captured in New England and carried to New France might find more attractive opportunities there than they had at home, whereas male captives were more likely to be drawn back across the border by the promise of an inheritance.\textsuperscript{55}

Close attention to the life of someone such as Wheelwright thus has the potential to engage with familiar themes but shift our angle of vision to illuminate them in new ways. The borderlands have been “traditionally portrayed as masculine spaces of diplomacy, warfare, and violence,” a partial view that obscures important dimensions of borderlands expe-


perience. Borderlands war violently disrupted Wheelwright’s childhood, but that was only the beginning of a process through which she was incorporated into a Wabanaki community, adapted herself to its rhythms, and learned its distinctive brand of Catholicism. Her story connects with important dimensions of colonialism in the Americas—borderlands violence, the gendered dimension of cross-cultural encounter, the adaptation of Christianity to distinctive American settings—but, in its particularities, it is unique.

Analyses of race, gender, and sexuality have become prominent features of colonial histories, and they are especially important to the historiography

56 Little, History Compass 7: 1606.
of border crossing. Wherever Europeans encountered indigenous and African peoples in the colonial Americas, essential assumptions about the social order faced new challenges. Europeans who sought to make a place for themselves in indigenous societies often had to adapt to constructs of gender and sexuality that differed fundamentally from those of their own cultures. Those differences sometimes caused colonists considerable anxiety; in other cases, they encouraged new forms of social and sexual experimentation. Over time, the colonization process also had the power to transform indigenous norms of sexuality and gender. Many scholars have highlighted the fact that race and gender were interrelated categories of understanding. As colonists sought to incorporate racial difference into their ideas of social hierarchy, for example, they often drew on the example of gender difference to comprehend the meanings of race. In all these ways, borderlands encounters had the power to challenge and reshape long-settled notions about the social order. Out of the crucible of such experiences, new or newly energized conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality gained strength and meaning.59

Military history shares with the history of gender and sexuality the potential to generate entangled histories that bring abstract processes vividly to life. It is traditionally pursued in the context of a single nation’s history and framed by questions of strategy, tactics, logistics, and leadership, but a broader approach to military history, embedded in cultural analyses of the warring parties and sensitive to the ways that

cultural preconceptions shape outcomes, can shed a bright light on
events that all too often remain in the shadows in comparative and
Atlantic histories. Warfare, after all, did much to determine the relative
fates of peoples and empires in the Americas, yet most historians inter-
ested in territorial crossings pay little attention to the details of military
conflict, whereas military historians most often derive narrowly framed
conclusions from their analyses. Peter Silver’s workshop essay, “A Rotten
Colossus: The Americas in the War of Jenkins’s Ear,” seeks to redress
this failing with close attention to a much-neglected war. He argues that
the decade from 1735 to 1745 can be conceived as a distinct period—“the
era of the War of Jenkins’s Ear”—and that events of those years have a
great deal to tell us about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the
Spanish and British empires in the Americas. “As early modern empires
went,” Silver contends, “eighteenth-century British America was un-
expectedly brittle and Spanish America surprisingly resilient.”

His essay is a sustained exploration of that judgment.

“A Rotten Colossus” makes clear that popular British misconcep-
tions of the Spanish empire—thought to be a corrupt, crumbling edifice
whose millions of enslaved Indians and Africans would flock to the
British standard if given the chance—led to fatal misjudgments about
its strength and resiliency, which afflicted commanding officers of the
army and navy every bit as much as they did the ordinary Britons who
got their information from the penny pamphlets hawked in London
bookstalls. Silver argues that essential qualities of the British Empire,
commonly regarded then and since as sources of strength, turned out to
heighten its vulnerability. Not only its vibrant print culture, which did
so much to transmit misinformation in this era, but also its “highly
developed Atlantic markets in human beings,” its “flood of new con-
sumer imports,” its “endlessly fissiparous Protestantism,” and its “trust
in blue-water solutions”—all of these, he contends, contributed to the
empire’s brittle vulnerabilities in wartime.

Like most histories of warfare, Silver’s essay revolves around the
fateful choices of individual actors as they responded to contingencies

60 Silver, “A Rotten Colossus,” 1 (quotations).
61 Ibid. For examples of military history that stress the cultural contexts of war-
fare, see especially Ross Hassig, Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political
Control (Norman, Okla., 1988); Ian K. Steele, Warpaths: Invasions of North America
(New York, 1994); Pérez, War of 1898; John K. Thornton, Warfare in Atlantic Africa,
1500–1800 (London, 1999); Fred Anderson, Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and
the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766 (New York, 2000); Ben
Vinson III, Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico
(Stanford, Calif., 2001); George Reid Andrews, Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000 (New
York, 2004), 53–115; John Grenier, The First Way of War: American War Making on
the Frontier, 1667–1814 (New York, 2005).
62 Ibid., 27 (“highly developed”), 6 (“trust”).
and shaped events. At the same time, “A Rotten Colossus” inspires broader reflections on the Spanish and British empires in the Americas and on the prospects for writing “connective” histories. He rejects Atlantic history as a frame for the War of Jenkins’s Ear because it makes little sense for a story that encompasses vast inland territories and a Pacific theater. Similarly, he contends that borderlands history, despite its strengths, is limited by definition to contiguous regions; the War of Jenkins’s Ear, by contrast, involved territories that did not always share borders. And comparative histories of the British and Spanish empires tend to focus “not on how . . . two empires interfered in one another’s histories, but on how they resembled or diverged from each other, pulling scholars’ vision toward their familiar historiographical heartlands—New England, the Valley of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay—instead of their messy collisions and quarrelsome peripheries.” As an alternative, Silver suggests, “A connective and hemispheric history—as opposed to an Atlantic or comparative one—has to take the Americas whole, or at least in large chunks, and focus systematically on things that bound together their different parts.”

This approach—hemispheric in scope and focusing on connections and entanglements rather than comprehensive comparisons—has much to recommend it, and not only as a way to conceptualize histories of warfare in the early modern Americas. Silver’s critique of Atlantic history echoes concerns that many other scholars have raised and that limit the value of Atlantic history as a conceptual frame for an epic of greater America. On the one hand, bending the history of the Atlantic world to focus disproportionately on the Americas distorts global patterns of activity. Atlantic maritime enterprise should not be separated from developments in the Indian and Pacific oceans, nor should linkages among western Europe, Africa, and the Americas overshadow the larger patterns of interaction and trade that increasingly bound together far-flung regions of the early modern globe. On the other hand, Atlantic history should be neither mistaken nor substituted for a history of the Americas. The great continents of the western hemisphere were deeply imprinted by the arrival of Europeans and Africans and by maritime

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contacts on their Atlantic and Pacific coasts. But they were not a blank slate to be written on by colonial powers. Beneath the growing superstructure of colonial enterprise and exploitation lay a durable foundation. Climate, geography, and natural resources set the limits and established the possibilities for human societies in the Americas. Native American populations, too, both constrained and enabled various forms of colonial enterprise. Though linked to the Atlantic world, the Americas have a common history that predates European colonization and cannot be fully explained by the rise of transatlantic exploration, trade, migration, and communication.

The “Territorial Crossings” workshop did not aim to construct an epic of greater America, but the essays, comments, and conversation brought certain essential elements of such an epic to the fore. When Herbert E. Bolton addressed the AHA in 1932, the time was right to imagine the possibility of such an epic, but the scholarly spadework that would make it possible had barely begun. We inhabit a very different era, in which the impulse to integrate the disparate fields of the early Americas is matched by a tremendous depth of scholarly investigation within those fields and increasingly sophisticated efforts to bridge the boundaries that have traditionally separated them.65

European colonization triggered common processes and experiences in the Americas that set those continents apart from Europe and from other world regions that were subjected to European imperialism. Throughout the Americas, colonization brought together Native American, European, and African populations in dramatically new demographic, social, economic, political, and cultural configurations. These were dominated by European structures of authority but departed fundamentally from earlier social orders. Colonization of the Americas

differed from that of Asia and Africa, where Europeans took centuries to establish anything like political or economic hegemony (if they succeeded in doing so at all), always constituted a relatively small portion of the overall population, and never achieved the level of cultural dominance experienced in the Americas.  

The distinctive experience of the Americas reflects their unique position in world history at the time of European expansion. The societies of the western hemisphere had been isolated from the rest of the world for millennia and thus did not share in the overlapping technological and biological worlds of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Native American societies had experienced their own version of the Neolithic Revolution that brought cities, agriculture, metalworking, and other fundamental innovations to Old World societies; the Americas, too, saw the rise of great urban centers, agriculture, and new technologies. Yet they lacked the wide range of domesticated animals common in Eurasia, and Native American populations were astonishingly susceptible to epidemics of smallpox, measles, influenza, and other devastating microbes. From an estimated population of about fifty-four million in 1492, Native populations plummeted by as much as 90 percent as they came into sustained contact with Europeans.

Native American population decline unfolded alongside mass movements of Europeans and Africans to the Americas. Just more than two million Europeans likely migrated to the Americas between 1492 and the end of the colonial period, including some 1.2 million from the Iberian peninsula and perhaps 750,000 from the British Isles. Around 200,000 people emigrated to the Americas from France, and about 25,000 left the Netherlands. Together with these European relocations occurred the largest forced migration in human history: the African slave trade to the Americas. The number of Africans who survived the Atlantic crossing exceeded the number of Europeans fivefold. From 1526 to 1870, at least eleven million Africans crossed the Atlantic for American destinations, with nearly ten million surviving the passage. This massive rearrangement of global populations—
these waves of catastrophe and diaspora—swept across the western hemisphere and set the Americas apart from every other region of the world, including the colonized portions of Asia and Africa.

Wherever we analyze colonial enterprise in the Americas, we must begin with the realization that Native American societies gave those efforts their essential shape. When patterns of colonization throughout the hemisphere are considered, the point is so obvious that it should hardly need to be stated, and yet it is often overlooked. Creating a colonial society in a densely populated, fully sedentary region with a preexisting imperial state, as was the case in central Mexico and the Andes, was very different than colonizing a coastal region populated by semisedentary peoples living in small villages organized into clan-based chiefdoms or confederacies, as with much of coastal North America or Brazil. In 1983 James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz published Early Latin America, a survey text of unusual depth and sophistication, which argued that the colonial societies of Latin America conformed themselves in important ways to the Native American societies that preceded them. Regions with dense indigenous populations became core regions of the colonial world, and in those places indigenous patterns of social organization profoundly influenced the colonial social order. In low-lying tropical regions where Indian populations were less densely settled to begin with and proved especially susceptible to Eurasian diseases, Spanish and Portuguese colonists were likely to turn to African slave labor to support the plantation economies they transplanted to those areas. Inland territories occupied by smaller groupings of semisedentary or nonsedentary Indians were especially difficult to colonize and often persisted as “fringe” areas of limited use to Europeans for very long periods. Though this text considered only Spanish and Portuguese America, its argument might be elaborated and extended to the whole western hemisphere.


It might also be argued that the colonization of the Americas was given a common shape—paradoxically—by the extreme variations in climate and resources encountered by colonizers. The original core regions of European enterprise in the Americas included tropical islands and vast tropical and subtropical landscapes along the continental seaboards; explorers bent on the discovery of a northwest passage found themselves icebound in the Arctic, confined on shipboard for six months at a time; and merchants who sought to trade on South America’s Pacific coast had to fight through the treacherous waters around Cape Horn. Dealing with environmental extremes was part of the search for American resources that could be tapped for European profit. The pursuit of profitable commodities was not unique to the colonization of the Americas, but they presented would-be colonizers with a wider range of challenges and opportunities than any other region of imperial enterprise in global history.70

The Americas also share a common history in having been colonized during the early modern era, roughly the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. As the phrase early modern implies, it was an era of transition between fundamentally different social orders in European history. The discovery and exploitation of the Americas, with the attendant challenges and opportunities, constituted one important engine driving the change from medieval to modern forms of political and social organization. In particular American colonization established vast new labor markets; triggered a series of population diasporas unprecedented in scale; helped to stimulate the transition from composite, dynastic monarchies to modern nation-states; promoted the creation of new racial hierarchies and ideologies; challenged and reshaped prevailing notions of gender; and established new forms of global enterprise and dominion that linked American sites to European centers of capital, commerce, governance, and culture.71

As colonies gained definition and purpose, the scale of American enterprise and transatlantic labor mobilization demanded new forms of administrative competence and expertise on the part of state bureaucracies and private partnerships. The creation of overseas empires was closely con-

70 In workshop discussions Peter C. Mancall highlighted the importance of environmental extremes and challenged workshop participants to think about neglected regions, periods, and players as we considered ways to construct a hemispheric history.

nected to the formation of nation-states—a defining characteristic of modernity. Throughout Europe on the eve of colonization, dynastic power overshadowed and subsumed national identity. The Habsburgs, the Capets and Bourbons, and the Tudors and Stuarts all contended for European thrones and built unlikely alliances that reflected family interests much more than national ones. In the early modern era, the dynastic rivalries that structured the wars of the Middle Ages gave way to national rivalries in which calculations of power based on lineage gradually lost their force. Colonial enterprise in the Americas was one important engine of this change. Overseas colonization drove early national monarchies to create more efficient administrative bureaucracies, generated dramatic new sources of revenue, and extended old rivalries into new settings. By the eighteenth century, wars fought for the aggrandizement of ruling families were giving way to wars that involved entire political nations, mobilized through popular ideology and seeking to extend their influence across the globe. As European rivalries were projected into American settings, they intensified national identities even as they helped to create, for the first time, the notion of Europe itself, as both a place and a source of collective identity that was linked to, but distinct from, the earlier idea of Christendom.72

Though administrative reform became necessary to imperial powers, it also triggered waves of resistance by colonists who had enjoyed many years of de facto control over their own affairs and by Native Americans and Africans who felt these pressures in new ways. Beginning with uprisings in the Andes in the early eighteenth century, violent protest reverberated through the colonial Americas in the following century. In some places these protests resulted in wars of independence from European control; sometimes they even produced revolutions against hierarchical patterns of privilege and authority. Like the process of colonization itself, these wars of independence and revolution reflected preexisting labor systems, structures of authority, and the social and cultural orders they implied. They succeeded most easily where the definition of the political nation was least problematic and colonial elites could make untroubled common cause in their resistance to metropolitan authority. Where elite solidarity fractured


In this brief sketch, a few of the ligaments of a hemispheric history begin to come into focus. Though they are presented here at a high level of abstraction and generalization, the real power of hemispheric history lies in close analyses of local settings, where the complex interplay of these patterns can be carefully observed. In the unstable worlds of colonial enterprise, Native American, European, and African inheritances came together in a variety of ways to underpin the creation of new societies. If the emergence of hemispheric history marks a new stage in the development of an epic of greater America, it bears reemphasizing that only collaborative labor can produce such an epic. Indeed the term epic itself, with its implication of a single, unified grand narrative, may have outlived its usefulness. By necessity a hemispheric perspective crosses boundaries of language, nation, and region; draws on the work of many scholars in many fields; tells many stories; and demands that we couple our close investigations of particular places with a wide vision of hemispheric development. When Silvio Zavala’s The Colonial Period in the History of the New World was published in English in 1962, it included a map of the colonial Americas that stretched from the Arctic to the Antarctic and included both the Pacific coast and the Atlantic basin. It is striking to consider how rarely scholars of the colonial period have invoked that breadth of scale since then. Such maps were relatively common in the sixteenth century, when Europeans first began to imagine the contours of the Americas, but became much less so in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as European interests and mapmakers’ imaginations came to focus on particular regions of the Americas. Scholarly attention has tended to follow the same trajectory, but renewed interest in territorial crossings make Zavala’s image relevant once again. More than ever before, historians of the early modern Americas working in various countries and languages recognize the necessity of a hemispheric perspective. It remains for us to absorb and elaborate its meanings.