On Borderlands

Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett

At some point in the recent past, borderlands history entered the mainstream. All across North America—from the seventeenth-century Great Lakes and eighteenth-century Great Basin to the nineteenth-century Rio Bravo and the twentieth-century Columbia River—historians have gravitated to tales of economic exchange, cultural mixing, and political contestation at the edges of empires, nations, and world systems. Anchored in spatial mobility, situational identity, local contingency, and the ambiguities of power, this is the brave new world of borderlands history.

These are not traditional frontier histories, where empires and settler colonists prepare the stage for nations, national expansion, and a transcontinental future. The open-ended horizons of borderlands history cut against that grain. If frontiers were the places where we once told our master American narratives, then borderlands are the places where those narratives come unraveled. They are ambiguous and often-unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road. If frontiers are spaces of narrative closure, then borderlands are places where stories take unpredictable turns and rarely end as expected.

Such distinctions—and their significance for American history—are far from obvious to most historians because in their fervor to map out new American histories, borderlands historians have typically moved forward in an ad hoc fashion, offering only the skeleton of a broader vision. From a traditional centrist perspective—say, a colonial history of New France, a national history of the United States, or a regional history of Latin America—the weak gravity of borderlands history may seem apropos. One might argue that borderlands history is simply a form of provincial history that pulls in hundreds of localized directions. Borderlands historians might retort that borderlands history offers hundreds of ways to transcend centrist blind spots. But this critique only gets us so far. It remains difficult to see the field's intellectual core, analytical work, and lessons as more

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than a sum of its local parts. Despite all of its critical insights, borderlands history seems to offer us little in place of imperial, national, and regional history.[1]

For years borderlands historians have told mostly small-scale tales, privileging local description over large-scale conceptualization. If Americanists rarely worried about the broader significance of borderlands history, it was because most considered the field marginal. As the field has moved into the mainstream, however, this sentiment has changed, and as it has expanded across the continent and beyond, historians are asking harder questions about portability. How far can scholars stretch the idea of borderlands? Are borderlands early-American meeting places of empires and Indians or modern spaces bound to nations and their denizens or both? Are they imperial and national phenomena or might they also exist separately from empires and nations? What are the borders of borderlands history? Who are its subjects, what are its limits, and can it demarcate America differently? Will borderlands history simply reinforce mainstream histories or might it help us see and narrate the past in new ways?[2]

This essay takes those questions as points of departure as it probes the past, present, and possible futures of borderlands history. The field has opened productive terrain by unsettling centrist paradigms and shining light on fresh subjects and stories. Yet it has also preserved older distinctions: between early and modern America, imperial and national histories, immigrant and indigenous subjects, state and nonstate realms, and peoples and places that eventually pertain to one nation or another. These divides make it difficult to speak across borderlands history. We now find borderlands everywhere, but our ability to interweave their stories—and use them to contest older narratives and transcend older boundaries—is as limited as ever.

Borderlands history, we insist, can do better. A new generation of borderlands historians has reoriented American history by delving more deeply into indigenous history, traveling across the borders of empire, and extending these border crossings forward in time—as empires yield to nations and nations seek to dominate in new ways the often-autonomous realms of indigenous and immigrant America. Despite those broader, continental perspectives—and despite research in the languages, archives, and historiographies of multiple nations and empires—older empire- and nation-centered narratives continue to dominate. How might historians do more to challenge such perspectives? If the purpose of borderlands history is to perforate and expose historical currents between historical

[1] On borderlands history as provincial, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Entangled Histories: Borderland Historiographies in New Clothes?," *American Historical Review,* 112 (June 2007), 789, 799. For a positive equation of borderlands and provincialism, see Mark Von Hagen, "Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era," *ibid.*, 109 (April 2004), 447.

[2] We have framed these as American history questions, but they are also falling increasingly to the center elsewhere. For examples of comparative borderlands history, see Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History,* 8 (Fall 1997), 211–42; Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, 2005); Willem Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London, 2005); Charles Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Brian J. Boeck, *Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 2009); Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, 2009); Noboru Ishikawa, *Between Frontiers: Nation and Identity in a Southeast Asian Borderland* (Athens, Ohio, 2010); and I. William Zartman, ed., *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion* (Athens, Ga., 2010).

spaces, then how might one encapsulate that history without simply pouring it back into its former containers?

How, too, can our border-crossing itineraries lead us to tell new American stories? Some historians have recognized that a view of America from the interior, looking out toward what might be called the colonial fringe, can provide a different set of beginning, middle, and end points for American history. Even so, many of the efforts to set alternative narrative coordinates for borderlands history have simply reinforced a state-centered teleology by emphasizing the eventual shift from empires to nations and the rise of a new era of central authority over once-autonomous spaces of interior America. The challenge is to respect the very real power of empires and nations without missing the field's central insight: that history pivoted not only on a succession of state-centered polities but also on other turning points anchored in vast stretches of America where the visions of empires and nations often foundered and the future was far from certain.[3]

Beginnings

Borderlands history has a complex root system that reaches deep into the twentieth century. The field has grown, in part out of the new social history, with its attention to peoples and spaces at the margins. It has drawn inspiration from the cultural turn, which attuned historians to the microworkings of power, the ways people create meaning, and the open-endedness of social relationships. It shares with other new histories a postmodern, poststructuralist disenchantment with master narratives, and alertness to the contingencies and negotiability of social categories. It has also taken cues from turn-of-the-century critiques of capitalist relations—often focusing on transnationalism and globalization—in which scholars have contemplated the essence and relevance of nation-states, the power of nonstate actors, and the long-term viability of the political and social borders they had once taken for granted.[4]

As the field has grown and captured the attention of more and more historians, it has also become more cosmopolitan. What historians once saw as a distinct space beyond Anglo America—south of Georgia in the swamps of Spanish Florida, or beyond the Mississippi River in the deserts of northern Mexico—has burst at the seams, spilling out across the continent and beyond. Borderlands are now as likely to be British or African or Shoshone as Spanish; they are as likely to be found in Montreal or Missouri as in Chihuahua. Those browsing the subject in libraries are likely to find themselves in imperial Russia, Ming China, modern Iran, or indigenous Patagonia. What earlier generations saw as a peculiarly American space has become a larger, globe-trotting phenomenon that drifts

[3] On U.S. history and narration, see William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History,* 78 (March 1992), 1347–76. On teleology, see Samuel Truett, "Epics of Greater America: Herbert Eugene Bolton's Quest for a Transnational American History," in *Interpreting Spanish Colonialism: Empires, Nations, and Legends,* ed. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara and John M. Nieto-Phillips (Albuquerque, 2005), 213–47. For a view of American history seen from the interior, see Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

[4] On historiographies, see Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill, "Borders and Their Historians in North America," in *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories,* ed. Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill (Durham, N.C., 2010), 1–29; and Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, "Making Transnational History: Nations, Regions, and Borderlands," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History,* ed. Samuel Truett and Elliott Young (Durham, N.C., 2004), 1–32.

across borders, speaks new languages, and adopts new customs. What was once the marker of a particular place has become a way of seeing the world.[5]

Scholars typically trace the origins of borderlands history to the 1920s, starting with the U.S. historian Herbert Eugene Bolton. Herbert Eugene Bolton had begun in 1901 to pursue a Spanish-American counterpoint to Frederick Jackson Turner's influential 1893 frontier narrative by thinking in new ways about America's frontiers. He paid more attention to Indians and other empires and saw a large swath of North America as the "meeting place and fusing place of two streams of European civilization, one coming from the south, and the other from the north." By 1921 he repackaged this as borderlands history—a perspective that not only privileged multiple native and imperial voices but also played out on a more open-ended, hemispheric stage.[6]

We often remember Bolton as an enlightened counterpart to Turner, with his concept of borderlands compensating for the shortcomings of its sister term, "frontier." For Bolton, however, the terms meant relatively the same thing: both were imperial fringes, and if Spanish borderlands were different, the difference was with the Spanish. It is worth considering that Bolton did not in fact coin the term; his editor proposed it in 1917, quite possibly with different resonances in mind. Most Americans of the time would have associated borderlands either with the embattled edges of revolutionary Mexico or with the equally contested European border zones of World War I, spaces marked not only by violence but also by cultural transience, mobility, and intermingling. If the idea of borderlands evoked the uncertainties of the modern era—the ragged edges of modern nations under siege—it also, in this sense, resonated with Bolton's stories, where imperial rivalry and cultural intermingling took a similar toll on visions of social and territorial control.[7]

These resonances undermined the idea of closure associated with Turner's frontier. If the frontier of 1893 ended with national consolidation, the borderlands of 1917 pointed to a future in which the coherence of the nation was anything but assured. Bolton's

[5] For exemplary works on the specific borderlands alluded to here, see Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley, 2005); David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2005); Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington, 2006); Sabri Ates, "Empires at the Margin: Toward a History of the Ottoman-Iranian Borderland and the Borderland Peoples, 1843–1881" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2006); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Leo K. Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (New York, 2006); Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderlands of the American Revolution* (New York, 2006); Nicholas B. Breyfogle, Abby Schrader, and Willard Sunderland, eds., *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History* (New York, 2007); and Eliga H. Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery," *American Historical Review,* 112 (June 2007), 764–86.

[6] Herbert Eugene Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven, 1921); Herbert Eugene Bolton, "Defensive Spanish Expansion and the Significance of the Borderlands," in *Wider Horizons of American History,* ed. Herbert Eugene Bolton (Notre Dame, 1939), 55–106, esp. 98. On Herbert Eugene Bolton, see John Francis Bannon, *Herbert Eugene Bolton: The Historian and the Man, 1870–1953* (Tucson, 1978); and Albert L. Hurtado, "Parkmanizing the Spanish Borderlands: Bolton, Turner, and the Historians' World," *Western Historical Quarterly,* 26 (Summer 1995), 149–67.

[7] On Bolton as an enlightened counterpart to Frederick Jackson Turner, see David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review,* 91 (Feb. 1986), 67–69, 72–73; 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 (June 1999), 814–15; and Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Elliott Young, "Transnationalizing Borderlands History," *Western Historical Quarterly,* 41 (Spring 2010), 29–30. On the 1917 coinage of the term borderlands, see Bannon, *Herbert Eugene Bolton,* 120–21, 129. See also Hurtado, "Parkmanizing the Spanish Borderlands," 162.

histories echoed this open-endedness. As narratives, they were romances: tales of movement and adventure with indefinite end points, such as the stories of Odysseus's travels in *The Odyssey*. They lacked the directionality of epic tales such as Turner's frontier narrative. "To the victors belongs epic, with its linear teleology," remarks the literary scholar David Quint. "To the losers belongs romance, with its random or circular wandering." Bolton's stories achieved resolution only by harnessing romance to epic, by telling borderland tales as prologues to frontier tales in which the United States completed the unfinished work of conquest. If the borderlands persisted, as they did in 1917, the assumption was that a modernizing America would eventually absorb them, turning them into romantic interludes in an otherwise linear American narrative.[8]

Epic can incorporate romance, but romance can also destabilize epic by challenging visions of closure. For a time, borderlands history was poised to do just that. For Bolton, what started as a search for Spanish frontiers became a voyage into the hemisphere—what he called the greater America—in which history pointed in many directions. "Much of what has been written of each national history," he asserted, "is but a thread out of a larger strand." Under Bolton, the field seemed ready to move beyond earlier centrist coordinates, but in the end it took a different path leading back to familiar teleologies. Bolton's students took up the reins of western U.S. or Latin American history, two fields their adviser helped place on the map, and wrote histories that led either north or south. Despite his attention to open-ended frameworks, Bolton reinforced this trend in biographies of Spanish pioneers in California, Arizona, and New Mexico—wanderers of borderlands romance who became pathfinders for a U.S. epic of the American West.[9]

To the south, as Latin American history developed as a field, its practitioners traded in the border-crossing vision of Bolton's greater America for traditional imperial and national foci. In Mexico, scholars reinforced this metropolitan focus in a context of postrevolutionary nation building. They either wrote the states of Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon, Baja California, or Sonora into larger-scale, centrist plots or they worked as regional and local historians, often in isolation from one another. To the north, others entered the border region in search of different tales. Carlos Castañeda, George I. Sánchez, and Américo Parédes began to recover the legacies of Mexican-origin populations, while anthropologists and historians crossed other borders into Indian country—for instance, in the context of the 1946 Indian Claims Commission—to gather information for tribal histories. The social movements of the 1960s created a new base for these inquiries, while programs in American Indian studies and Chicana/o and Latina/o studies nurtured a wider range

[8] Homer, *The Odyssey,* trans. Andrew Lang and S. H. Butcher (Cambridge, Mass., 1909); David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, 1993), 3–10, esp. 9. We draw our distinction between romance as a wandering narrative and epic as an end-driven narrative from David Quint. Although *The Odyssey* is technically an epic poem (and achieves resolution in Odysseus's return home), it hews closely to the form of romance (meant as tales of adventure, not romantic love). A classic example of the end-driven epic that Quint has in mind is Virgil's *Aeneid*, which chronicles the westward movement of empire from Troy to Rome (a teleology reiterated in subsequent narratives of empire). Virgil, *The Aeneid,* trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1983).

[9] On epic incorporations and the destabilization of epic, see Quint, *Epic and Empire,* 31–34. On Bolton's vision, see Herbert E. Bolton, "The Epic of Greater America," *American Historical Review,* 38 (April 1933), 448–74, esp. 449. For Bolton's Spanish pioneers, see Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Anza's California Expeditions* (5 vols., Berkeley, 1930); Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Rim of Christendom: A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino, Pacific Coast Pioneer* (New York, 1936); and Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Coronado on the Turquoise Trail: Knight of Pueblos and Plains* (Albuquerque, 1949).

of subject positions. Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Native American historians began not only to organize their own fields but also to introduce larger conceptual insights that would resonate *across* American history.[10]

Meanwhile, historians of the U.S. West were trading older Turnerian tales of expansion for either more open-ended histories of cross-cultural relations or less progressive tales of social and economic domination, often drawing on work in Chicana/o and Native American history. In this context, borderlands history again moved into the spotlight. At the helm was David J. Weber, a Latin Americanist who wrote with an eye to both Chicana/o and western history. Weber's research linked those two fields to Bolton's concept of borderlands, and he expanded the field temporally while shifting its focus from institutions and pioneers to cross-cultural relationships. Weber and others of his cohort embraced native and mestizo histories, asked how power and difference shaped colonial relationships, and interrogated earlier visions of frontier exceptionalism from a broader, comparative perspective.[11]

If it was once easy to distinguish among the fields of western history, borderlands history, Native American history, Chicana/o history, and mainstream U.S. and Latin American histories, all bets were off by the 1990s. Chicana/o and Native American historians traveled into western history, western historians moved east to earlier contact zones, colonial historians migrated west across Indian country, and ethnohistorians went to Mexico. All of this shuffling transformed the borderlands, and some scholars began to view the concept as a metaphor for cultural encounters, which they applied to countless places and eras. Others, disenchanted with Turner's use of the term "frontier," used the term "borderlands" (as Bolton had) to describe spaces at the edges of nations and empires. If frontier invoked colonial binaries—imperial vs. indigenous, conqueror vs. conquered, insider vs. outsider—then borderlands, as a plural noun, suggested a more multidirectional, multivocal vision of America. It captured the cultural, political, and spatial reconfigurations associated with *fin-de-siècle* revisionism.[12]

By the end of the twentieth century, borderlands history had begun to settle along two distinct lines of inquiry. The first looked at early America, drawing on insights from the new Indian history, a native-centered approach that matured in the 1990s. Borderlands joined the concepts of frontier, middle ground, new world, and contact point as metaphors for areas of cross-cultural interaction at the edges of empires and world systems. A second line of inquiry centered on border zones between modern nations, with an emphasis on transnational and cross-cultural relations. At the U.S.-Mexico border it drew on Chicana/o and Latina/o history, while at both North American borders (if more noticeably at the U.S.-Canadian border) it incorporated insights from indigenous history.

[10] Truett and Young, "Making Transnational History," 2–12; James Axtell, "Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint," *Ethnohistory,* 26 (Winter 1979), 1–13; Margaret Connell-Szasz, "Introduction," in *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker,* ed. Margaret Connell-Szasz (Norman, 1994), 3–20; Philip J. Deloria, "Historiography," in *A Companion to American Indian History,* ed. Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury (Oxford, N.Y., 2002), 14–18.

[11] David J. Weber, ed., *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans* (Albuquerque, 1973); David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821–1846: The American Southwest under Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1982); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987); Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, 1991); Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman, 1991); William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, 1992).

[12] On borderlands vs. frontiers, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in *The Frontier in American Culture,* ed. James R. Grossman (Chicago, 1994), 67–102. On borderlands as metaphor, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, 1987).

This later borderlands history also found kinship with the new transnational history, promoted by scholars such as Ian Tyrrell and Thomas Bender, in which border-crossing stories and methodologies served as correctives for the nation-centered, exceptionalist cant of U.S. history.[13]

The field was ripe for reassessment, and Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron led the way in 1999. Borderlands history, they wrote in a landmark essay on the state of the field, had drifted into every nook and cranny of the continent. In some places it overturned older narratives, while in others it served as a cloak for older frontier stories, becoming the frontier du jour. It had once been easy to tell (Anglo) frontiers from (Hispanic) borderlands, but by the 1990s these older binaries had lost currency. If everything had become a borderland, Adelman and Aron wondered, then how could historians possibly expect to pin down the field? If the field pulled in all directions—if it lacked coherence—then how might it ever secure a place at the main table?[14]

With an eye to distinctions, definitions, and membership, Adelman and Aron proposed a new frontier-borderlands grammar to connect current work and give it a shared lineage. Borderlands history, they wrote, might start with Bolton's view of the world beyond the frontier. If frontiers were cultural meeting places where "geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined," then borderlands were zones of interaction and rivalry among empires, places marked by "power politics of territorial hegemony." One was a borderless space at the edges of colonial America inhabited by Europeans and Indians. The other was also a fluid space, but one anchored in place by a more bounded, territorialized, interimperial milieu.[15]

If Adelman and Aron preserved Bolton's awareness of spaces beyond the colonial sphere, they also nodded to Turner. For all his faults, they wrote, Turner had gotten one thing right. He had respected turning points and had "insisted on temporal boundaries." Just as Turner's frontier had closed, so too had borderlands: as empires yielded to nations, "borderlands" became "bordered lands." With the territorialization of the nation-state and the ascent of national hegemony, Indians could no longer live autonomously in the interstitial spaces. As "colonial borderlands gave way to national borders," they wrote, "fluid and 'inclusive' intercultural frontiers yielded to hardened and more 'exclusive' hierarchies." Borderlands and frontiers functioned in tandem for years, and then together they yielded to the modern enclosure of national space.[16]

Adelman and Aron's narrative of "borderlands" to "bordered lands" was a compelling one, and it went on to shape conversations not only about early America but also about other global imperial borderlands. Like most pioneering scholarship, however, it

[13] For early American metaphors, see James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, 1989); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991); Colin Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore, 1997); and Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830* (Chapel Hill, 1998). On new Indian history, see Ned Blackhawk, "Look How Far We've Come: How American Indian History Changed the Study of American History in the 1990s," *OAH Magazine of History,* 19 (Nov. 2005), 8–14. On the new transnational history, see Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review,* 96 (Oct. 1991), 1031–55; Thomas Bender, "No Borders: Beyond the Nation-State," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* April 7, 2006, pp. B6–B8; and Thomas Bender, "The Boundaries and Constituencies of History," *American Literary History,* 18 (Summer 2006), 267–82.

[14] Adelman and Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders."

[15] *Ibid.*, 815–16.

[16] *Ibid.*

only partially anticipated the work that followed. Borderlands history has since begun to chart new paths—and the time seems ripe to pick up where Adelman and Aron left off. They raised important questions about the place of borderlands history and its organizing stories, even if today historians might answer them differently. If they mapped the borderlands as a Turnerian epic, subsequent scholarship has favored the open-ended horizons of the Boltonian romance. Thus almost a century after Bolton's initial forays into the greater America we find the field perched over an equally extensive terrain.

Centers

The new borderlands history finds its most significant bearings in attempts to broaden the geographical and cultural scope of American history. For years, historians viewed America as a product of empires and nations. They wrote national and imperial histories to shine light on our national and imperial selves. In these histories, others either did not matter, mattered only in terms of how empires and nations had transformed them—either by sweeping them aside or containing them—or mattered to the extent that they had transformed subjects and citizens. History reinforced state-building projects by describing how empires had marked out and prepared the space for nations, which then anchored territory and identity in place. In this way, history gave the modern nation-state spatial as well as temporal bearings.

Yet these imperial and national histories were also inherently unstable because empires and nations never controlled American space in the ways they intended. In 1893, when Frederick Jackson Turner anchored his new master narrative in the frontier, he did so because he felt that older histories rooted in Europe no longer fit. America, he felt, had taken on a life of its own and thus needed new stories. Older visions of a clearly demarcated succession of empires, nations, and identities were fraying at the edges. People were crossing multiple borders into the United States and the United States was crossing borders into the continent and the world. With America in motion, it was hard not to see centers and edges as mutually constituted spaces. It was hard not to see American history, to paraphrase Colin Calloway, as a "new world for all."[17]

We might find resemblances between the 1890s and our own border-crossing age, but we should also consider the differences. The point of Turner's history was to bring the frontier back to the center. His border crossings were sojourns: settlers went to the nation's edge long enough to harness its transformative power and its sense of difference, before facing east again, toward the metropole. Newcomers to the frontier, Turner wrote, "were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race." If these sojourns made America different, they also preserved the centrism and teleological movement of earlier histories. Yet soon even those bearings shifted. Already by the time of Bolton and increasingly by the end of the twentieth century, border-crossing histories yielded less certain outcomes. Like Odysseus, the subjects of these narratives were just as likely to find themselves adrift, with a range of potential ports in mind. With stories rooted in other nations, other cultures, and other places, borderlands history is today poised

[17] Calloway, *New Worlds for All*. On Turner's rhetorical structure, see William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Western Historical Quarterly,* 18 (April 1987), 157–76.

to pull American history from its centrist bearings and make it something different altogether.[18]

Such a transformation is already underway. Borderlands historians of early America have pushed beyond older comfort zones to consider neglected players, including Muskogees, Russians, Africans, Utes, and Swedes. From new vantage points—the lower Mississippi River, the Great Basin, the Pacific Ocean—they have broadened the canvas, putting new peoples and places at the center, on their own terms. These were distinctive realms: remote from empire, self-reliant, culturally and politically fluid, and rooted in face-to-face relations that often took precedence over the market forces of the Atlantic world. Instead of simply setting the stage for a subsequent Anglo-American ascendancy, early America now appears as a patchwork of cultures and polities, grounded in local relationships that point to future nations in only the most tenuous ways.[19]

In the study of modern America, borderlands histories are likewise creating fresh vantage points. The increased interpenetration of Mexican, U.S., Canadian, First Nations, Native American, Latina/o, African American, and Asian American histories has carried the field more systematically across ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. Here, too, historians have recovered neglected subjects: transnational subjects who move in and out of national histories; multicultural subjects who migrate between ethnic histories; Africans, Asians, and others who vanish from north-south borderland binaries; and migrants lost in stories that privilege rootedness. These borderlands are characterized by informality autonomy, fluidity, and isolation from states and markets. If early borderlands histories cover more continental space than their later counterparts (which tend to gravitate to national borders), attention to transnational relationships broadens modern borderlands horizons in equally powerful ways.[20]

By opening the continental aperture, borderlands history has also offered new center points for American history. It has challenged tales of settler colonization and expansion—the making of a new people in a new world—with narratives of cultural convergence. Taking a cue from the new Indian history's view of early America as a place where

[18] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History,* ed. Frederick Jackson Turner (New York, 1920), 23.

[19] For work on the specific players and vantage points alluded to here, see Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill, 1992); David Igler, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770–1850," *American Historical Review,* 109 (June 2004), 693–719; Joshua Piker, *Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley, 2005); Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land;* Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, N.C., 2006); and Gunlög Fur, *A Nation of Women: Gender and Colonial Encounters among the Delaware Indians* (Philadelphia, 2009).

[20] For examples of new directions in modern borderlands history, see Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven, 2003); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Elliott Young, *Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Durham, N.C., 2004); Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800–1850* (New York, 2005); Sheila McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln, 2005); Sterling Evans, ed., *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel* (Lincoln, 2006); David G. McGrady, *Living with Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands* (Lincoln, 2006); Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven, 2006); Raúl Ramos, *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio* (Chapel Hill, 2008); Karl S. Hele, ed., *Lines Drawn upon the Water: First Nations and the Great Lakes Borders and Borderlands* (Waterloo, 2008); Alexis McCrossen, ed., *Land of Necessity: Consumer Culture in the United States–Mexico Borderlands* (Durham, N.C., 2009); and Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, 2011).

power was chronically up for grabs, borderlands historians have begun to rewrite North American history as a history of entanglements—of shifting accommodations—rather than one of expansion. Early America, the thinking now goes, was less colonial and more native than formerly assumed. Engaging Europe from within networks of indigenous power, Indians played a decisive and frequently unexpected role in the movements of empires and the rise of modern nations.[21]

In later borderlands histories, attention to transnational relationships has opened up other center points. Scholars of Chicana/o and Latina/o history set an example similar to that of the new Indian history by fleshing out an ethnic history center that contested and transcended national history, especially when tied to migration-based paradigms. Their histories revealed entanglements and accommodations—if not also powerful contests—that incorporation-minded stories such as Turner's ignored. Building on these foundations, historians of modern American borderlands have folded in other cultural and spatial centers, including African, Asian, and European migration networks, economic enclaves, indigenous homelands, world systems, and border zones. In the process, they have staked out a range of alternative perspectives from which the history of America seems less national and more transnational—if not also more transcultural and transregional.[22]

Borderlands historians have also probed more intimate layers of human relations in North America. Scholars of early America have shown, for instance, how native women assumed roles as cultural brokers, wives, commodities, and objects of sexual desire, dynamically inflecting how Indian and Euro-American relations unfolded. In local contact zones, people often interacted in ways that defy expectations of how race, colonialism, and nationalism shape social relations. Distinctions hardened as people marked out new identities, but impromptu links also cut across racial and ethnic lines. Behavior that was tied to gendered notions of kinship and honor rather than blood lineages shaped inclusion and exclusion. What historians usually remember as the unambiguous native landscape of early America often consisted of polyglot communities of defeated enemies, war refugees, European captives, and African runaways—all of whom brought contingent

[21] White, *Middle Ground;* Weber, *Mexican Frontier;* Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change* (Vancouver, 1997); Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673–1800* (New York, 1997); Jean O'Brien, *Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650–1790* (New York, 1997); Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country;* Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln, 2003); Jane Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–1763* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land;* Aron, *American Confluence;* Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia, 2006); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, 2008); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, 2008); Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, and Indian Allies* (New York, 2010). These scholars may self-identify as early American or Native American historians, but all write about places and processes that easily fall under the borderlands rubric.

[22] Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (New York, 2000); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004); Donna R. Gabaccia and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds., *American Dreaming, Global Realities: Rethinking U.S. Immigration History* (Urbana, 2006); Eric V. Meeks, *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona* (Austin, 2007); Sarah E. Cornell, "Americans in the U.S. South and Mexico: A Transnational History of Race, Slavery, and Freedom, 1810–1910" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2008); Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: A Borderlands Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York, 2008); Alicia R. Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York, 2008); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); and Monica Perales, *Smeltertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

legacies of migration, rootedness, hybridity, and difference to the heart of the continent's history.[23]

Empires and nations strove to simplify those relationships, delineating insiders from outsiders and assimilable from unassimilable others. One of the lessons of borderlands history is that such heterogeneous spaces persisted despite these efforts, and nowhere did they endure more visibly than at the territorialized edges of nations—spaces that simultaneously embodied and undermined state power. In modern borderlands, face-to-face relationships could also trump centrist power and orthodoxies: in these peripheral zones, family ties, patron-client relations, and local alliances often determined membership and power. As in earlier America, these contact zones were also zones of mobility, spaces where individuals might elude domination, cross between cultures, or shift between categories. If borderlands subverted centrist power, they often did so by fostering relationships that slipped under the radar. They functioned at scales that were often too small for centralizing institutions to control, contain, or comprehend.[24]

Borderlands scholars have spent the past two decades pursuing those fugitive terrains, trying to find new centers for American history. At their best, the new borderlands histories expose relationships at a range of scales, moving from realms as broad as continents, oceans, and world systems to the smaller-scale border crossings of regions, cultures, and ethnic groups to the most intimate peregrinations of men, women, and families. The breadth of the field is its virtue, and also its chief vulnerability. As the historian Alan Taylor argues, Americanists run the risk of loving borderlands to death. "Historians are currently in a race to see which will be overused the most: borderlands, or its close cousins, middle ground and Atlantic history," he writes. "It is becoming a problem that

[23] For examples of prominent studies that have illuminated the intimate strata of cross-cultural spaces through the lenses of gender, race, ethnicity, identity, mobility, and hybridity, see Ramon A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, 1991); White, *Middle Ground;* Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Ana María Alonso, *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* (Tucson, 1995); Gary Clayton Anderson, *The Indian Southwest, 1580–1830: Ethnogenesis and Reinvention* (Norman, 1999); James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2002); Nancy Shoemaker, *Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York, 2004); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst, 2004); Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2007); Kathleen DuVal, "Indian Intermarriage and *Métissage* in Colonial Louisiana," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 65 (April 2008), 267–304; and David L. Preston, *Texture of Contact: European and Indian Settler Communities on the Frontiers of Iroquoia* (Lincoln, 2009).

[24] On local, face-to-face, intimate, and patron-client relationships in borderlands history, see, for example, Josiah McC. Heyman, *Life and Labor on the Border: Working People of Northeastern Sonora, Mexico, 1886–1986* (Tucson, 1991); Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia, 1992); Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii, 1900–1936* (Chicago, 2001); Maria Montoya, *Translating Property: The Maxwell Land Grant and the Conflict over Land in the American West* (Berkeley, 2002); Eithne Liubhéid and Lionel Cantú, eds., *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minneapolis, 2005); Haiming Liu, *The Transnational History of a Chinese Family: Immigrant Letters, Family Business, and Reverse Migration* (New Brunswick, 2005); María Raquél Casas, *Married to a Daughter of the Land: Spanish-Mexican Women and Interethnic Marriage in California, 1820–1880* (Reno, 2007); Louise Pubols, *The Father of All: The de la Guerra Family, Power, and Patriarchy in Mexican California* (Berkeley, 2009); David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Ithaca, 2009); and Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill, 2010). On states and the simplification of space, see James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998); and Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review,* 105 (June 2000), 807–31. Charles S. Maier argues that states sought to territorialize, demarcate, and assimilate space in new ways in the late nineteenth century, but this shift was tied to a process of change that began in the early modern era and linked as much as it divided imperial and national visions.

scholars find borderlands everywhere—leaving us with no space, at least in North America, that's not a borderland."[25]

Taylor's concern is not without merit. Borderlands today signify everything from contact zones, imperial and national peripheries, and spaces of contest and hybridity to generic slippages of categories and identities. If borderlands history has yet to cave under its own weight, however, it is because its practitioners have focused on a limited range of themes and stories. If, in theory, the field operates on many scales, in practice its scale of choice is relatively small, typically between the local and regional. By missing dynamics at larger and smaller scales, it frequently obscures a wider set of coordinates around which contact zones revolve. It also tends to focus on particular plots. In earlier borderlands histories, for instance, empires and nations expand, indigenous and other nonstate actors find microniches in which to exercise power, and outcomes remain undecided until centralized power eventually prevails. These studies may celebrate particularity and locality, but they often do so from a common conceptual template.[26]

This is partly a problem of dependence on older paradigms. Trying to move beyond centrist legacies, borderlands scholars have turned American history into a Manichean interplay of states and borderlands. Borderlands history is everything that state-centered histories are not. If imperial and national histories operate on larger scales, then borderlands histories are, by contrast, small-scale, heterogeneous, and open-ended undertakings. The problem is not that we see all borderlands the same way but rather that in simply reacting to centrist stories, we create systematic blind spots. Unless we declare independence from these narratives, we will continue to juxtapose state and nonstate actors, larger-scale forces to smaller-scale counterforces. Unless we view these realms as interdependent, and unless we resist a tendency to pit one against the other, we will keep telling the same tale, one counternarrative at a time.

The blind spots of borderlands history are also indirectly connected to Richard White's field-shaping book, *The Middle Ground*. Its organizing metaphor shaped how a generation envisioned early America. Used by White to evoke a particular cross-cultural realm marked by mediation, creative misunderstandings, and contingencies of power, the metaphor was soon stretched beyond recognition. It became a synonym for accommodation and was applied to places that only vaguely resembled the particular contact zone of White's history. By the late 1990s, many scholars turned to the concept of borderlands to carry out the same work, grounding tales of cross-cultural accommodation in a variety of American contact zones. If this allowed the notion of the middle ground to regain analytical precision, it also transferred to borderlands history a narrow vision of the European-American encounter, one that elided the antagonism, cultural demarcations, and power imbalances that marked much of the continent's history.[27]

[25] Alan Taylor, "State of the Field: Borderlands History in Early America," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Seattle, March 2009; Alan Taylor to Samuel Truett, e-mail, Aug. 17, 2010 (in Samuel Truett's possession).

[26] For a treatment of the concept of scale, see Richard White, "The Nationalization of Nature," *Journal of American History,* 86 (Dec. 1999), 976–86.

[27] For critical assessments of middle ground studies, see Susan Sleeper-Smith, "The Middle Ground Revisited: Introduction," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 63 (Jan. 2006), 3–8; Philip J. Deloria, "What's the Middle Ground, Anyway?," *ibid.*, 15–22; and Claudio Saunt, "The Native South: An Account of Recent Historiography," *Native South,* 1 (Jan. 2008), 52–55. On the balance between aggression and accommodation in borderlands historiography, see Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, "On the Connection of Frontiers," in *Contact Points,* ed. Cayton and Teute, 6–9; Claudio Saunt, "'Our Indians': European Empires and the History of the Native American South," in *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000,* ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman (Upper Saddle River, 2007), 61–75; and Brian Sandberg, "Beyond Encounters: Religion, Ethnicity, and Violence in the Early Modern Atlantic World, 1492–1700," *Journal of World History,* 17 (March 2006), 1–25.

Different blind spots attended borderlands history into the modern period. Here too the field has gravitated to smaller-scale narratives: histories constrained less by a desire to highlight local exceptions to state-dominated histories and more by the markers of state-imposed territorial dominance. Modern borderlands history has been limited by its borders—most prominently that dividing the United States from Mexico. Although this line runs two thousand miles across the continent, scholars have tended to focus on local nodes: Texas and Coahuila, Arizona and Sonora, Baja California and Alta California. Like the settlers who migrated north into these places, these historians tend to understand the borderlands in a piecemeal way. If Chicana/o and Mexican American histories have taken an increasingly broader view, following their subjects across the continent, they also consider the imposition of borders as an essential point of departure. Whether people cross borders or borders cross a people, the boundary line activates these larger histories in powerful ways.[28]

The same is true of U.S.-Canada borderlands history. Here too historians have tended to focus on the border itself, often working regionally distinct segments of the line: Pacific, prairie, Great Lakes, and so on. Like their colleagues working on the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, scholars of this border region have also engaged transnational histories, echoed earlier American tales of incomplete conquests and uncertain outcomes, and written against the grain of state-centered epics. Yet the framing of these narratives—especially in a context where historians are increasingly looking north and south—threatens to reinforce those bounded containers that the field hopes to transcend. By limning North America with Canada above, Mexico below, and the United States in the middle, historians run the risk of creating binaries (North versus South, the United States versus its American neighbors) that reinforce as much as they challenge national paradigms. We might disrupt these binaries by following other paths eastward across the Atlantic Ocean, westward across the Pacific Ocean, or deeper into indigenous or Latin America. But we have yet to make these alternative pathways central to borderlands history.[29]

Thus the field finds itself at an impasse. Its champions have marched forth wielding what some consider an all-purpose metaphor—signifying almost anything in almost any context. At the same time, the field has been surprisingly modest in its conquests. Armed to take a continent (if not the world), it has mostly yielded to the organizational power

[28] For exemplary studies tied to the local border nodes mentioned here, see Roberto R. Calderón, *Mexican Coal Mining Labor in Texas and Coahuila, 1880–1930* (College Station, 2000); Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); and Bárbara O. Reyes, *Private Women, Public Lives: Gender and the Missions of the Californias* (Austin, 2009). An exemplary work covering a larger territory is St. John, *Line in the Sand*. A classic counter-example is Oscar J. Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson, 1994). Works in Mexican-American history that move more widely across the continent are Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Gabriela Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916–39* (Urbana, 2008); and Marc Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism and Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill, 2011). For a discussion of the state of the field of Latina/o history, which in its broader view crosses oceanic and continental contact faces, see "Latino History: An Interchange on Present Realities and Future Prospects," *Journal of American History,* 97 (Sept. 2010), 424–63.

[29] Exemplary local studies include Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York, 2001); Matthew D. Evenden, *Fish versus Power: An Environmental History of the Fraser River* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004); and Mary Lethert Wingerd, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 2010). For transnational approaches to the northern borderlands, see Johnson and Graybill, eds., *Bridging National Borders*. On U.S.-Canadian borderlands, see Elizabeth Jameson and Jeremy Mouat, "Telling Differences: The Forty-Ninth Parallel and Historiographies of the West and Nation," *Pacific Historical Review,* 75 (May 2006), 183–230. For a comparative approach to northern and southern borderlands, see Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875–1910* (Lincoln, 2007).

of traditional historical paradigms, moving in an often-reactive fashion on a limited range of scales. If imperial and national histories are about larger-scale conquests, borderlands histories are about smaller-scale accommodations or pockets of resistance. If imperial and national histories fill the continent, borderlands history seeps into the cracks in between those studies. It lives in the shadows, offering a chiaroscuro rendering of America that heightens the impact of the historical portrait but leaves the basic composition intact.

We might chalk this up to the field finding its feet were it not for the fact that the field has been around for awhile. It may be more useful to view those limits as structural weaknesses in a mature field that has emerged in impromptu and reactive ways. These vulnerabilities have yet to become chronic, but our generation must carefully consider how and where to proceed. To preserve the field's vision, energy, and significance, borderlands historians need to move in a more deliberate fashion—identifying the field's strengths, assessing where it might do its best work, and asking how habits formed in past generations may hinder it. The field may mature best by building on its capacity for open-ended frameworks, while shedding its dependence on prevailing imperial and national orthodoxies.

We already have promising coordinates for moving ahead. Recent work on violence, for instance, has the potential to reconfigure the foundations of borderlands history. During the past two decades, early Americanists have tended to equate borderlands with accommodation, asking how they revolved around conciliatory networks. New work on borderlands violence highlights different networks; by showing how violence can simultaneously divide, connect, break, and revitalize societies, it demonstrates how borderlands communities could be locked into long-standing relationships that endured despite—and at times because of—the bloodshed. It shows us how cross-cultural coexistence was not only an alternative but also often a counterpart to violence and thus opens new analytical possibilities for the field. It compels us to reconsider the challenges and limitations of cross-cultural coexistence and indicates that the tone of our stories may have been too upbeat, too engrossed with the integrationist underpinnings of American history, and shrouding a darker story of violence, ethnic hatred, and cultural entrenchment.[30]

We might also free borderlands history from older orthodoxies by approaching space and territoriality from new angles. Most scholars of early America still see borderlands as spaces at the edges of empire, and later borderlands historians simply trade out empires for nations, with a clear preference for histories set in motion by Europe. Even though borderlands historians have done much to deepen our understanding of native worlds, the field remains locked into a Eurocentric perspective in which borderlands histories are shadows of imperial narratives. From one recent perspective, borderlands are what ensue when European expansion pauses, stalls, or ends. Viewing this same history from a different angle, borderlands are contested zones between colonial/national realms where native

[30] Major studies on borderlands violence include Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land;* James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999); Brooks, *Captives and Cousins;* Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York, 2007); DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts;* and Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn*. For a critique of American historians' tendency to view hybridity as a positive condition and to overlook its predicaments, see Joyce E. Chaplin, "Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History," *Journal of American History,* 89 (March 2003), 1447–49.

peoples, or others living between states, preserve power and autonomy by playing European or European American rivals against one another.[31]

Embedded in those definitions is a set of assumptions that are troubling to specialists of indigenous America: Europeans have realms, Indians have habitats; Europeans mark borders, Native Americans resist them; Europeans strive to dominate, Indians try to survive or coexist; borderlands are born of European failure rather than indigenous initiative, and they must always have at least one protagonist that is not indigenous. By linking borderlands history to peripheries of European occupation or to spaces between bounded colonial domains, historians privilege European, state-centered paradigms in ways that slice against the current interest in indigenous epistemologies, agency, and power. Instead of merely asking what Indians did when Europeans grappled for power, we must take a larger view. We must ask how Indians created the conditions for borderlands history rather than simply looking at how they acted within it.[32]

The challenge is to find ways to reconcile old empire-centered and nation-centered narratives with indigenous and nonstate space and territoriality. We must go beyond simply tracing the balance between imperial and national power and local resistance and resilience—the *idée fixe* of recent borderlands history. We must link borderlands to European and indigenous power, envision new cores, and embrace more nuanced definitions of power. We need to adopt an approach that shows how imperial and national powers interpenetrated smaller (regional, local) scales without necessarily dominating them. Such an approach would destabilize distinctions between core and periphery and would challenge the convention of using the territorialized spaces of empires and nations as points of departure. If previous historians envisioned borderlands as peripheries to European realms, new scholarship is as likely to find them taking shape around indigenous cores.[33]

In mapping new conceptual centers, however, we must be careful about reinforcing older binaries. As much as individual studies have challenged two-sided views—of Indians and Europeans in early America or of Anglo-Americans and ethnic Mexicans in later America, for example—the field's larger frameworks still minimize the importance of third peoples. Native peoples drop increasingly out of borderlands history (as such) by the twentieth century, African American and Asian American actors are relegated to cameo roles across the field, and the relationships among Asians, Africans, and Native Americans are typically glossed over. If these alternative realms of cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic difference are tangential to the field, so too are the multiethnic points of confluence among these and other groups. Borderlands history has not ignored these other centers so

[31] For a critique of the borderlands concept from the perspective of indigenous history, see Juliana Barr, "Geographies of Power: Mapping Indian Borders in the 'Borderlands' of the Early Southwest," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 67 (Jan. 2011), 3–44. For a forceful formulation of indigenous balance-of-power politics on imperial borderlands, see Adelman and Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders."

[32] On the complex epistemological and analytical linkages among Native American territoriality, indigenous agency, and borderlands history, see Patricia Albers and Jeanne Kay, "Sharing the Land: A Study in American Indian Territoriality," in *A Cultural Geography of North American Indians,* ed. Thomas E. Ross and Tyrel G. Moore (Boulder, 1987); Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, 1996); and Cynthia Radding, *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700–1850* (Durham, N.C., 1997).

[33] For studies that illuminate indigenous territoriality and power in the making and unmaking of North American borderlands, see DuVal, *Native Ground;* Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman;* DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts;* Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire;* and Michael J. Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native World Shaped Modern North America* (Philadelphia, forthcoming).

much as it has subordinated them in a conventional staging that privileges the same, small cast of leading actors.[34]

If borderlands history can work harder to circulate a broader range of actors into leading roles, it might also think more deeply about the larger stage on which it operates. Among other things, the field tends to be limited by its borders and lands. It is relatively easy to see the meeting grounds of Iroquois villagers and French Jesuits—or contested zones of Mexican, African American, and Seminole influence—as centers of borderlands history. Moving beyond spatially adjacent, land-based relations is more difficult. Oceanic travels of Yorùbá, Greek, or Hawaiian slaves, wage workers, and entrepreneurs—or trading centers, port cities, or immigration stations on the Gulf of Mexico, Puget Sound, or the mouth of the Hudson River—may seem less germane. Yet those passing through these latter spaces to barrios in Brownsville, rural border crossings in British Columbia, or native trade centers at colonial Albany soon enter the more recognizable realm of borderlands history. To the extent that the larger journeys and border crossings are interwoven, where are we to draw our distinctions—and with what implications for the field?[35]

While indigenous history has led us to think about the centers and peripheries of interior America in new ways, a growing body of work in transnational history has pushed us in the other direction, toward thinking about the places where borderlands history enters the history of the world. This work builds on the field of immigration history as well as new work on diasporas, which tracks movements of people across borders and between spaces. Transnational approaches to these histories have tended to be more open-ended. If emigrant, immigrant, or diaspora histories often pivot on spaces where migration began or ended, transnational histories complicate notions of directionality—either by showing how migrant nodes mutually shaped one another over time, or highlighting unanticipated forks in the road.[36]

Borderlands and transnational histories have also intersected fruitfully with environmental history, which has paid growing attention to the ways human relationships to nature have engaged, transformed, and transcended American spaces. Such inquiries first took root in early American history as scholars began to track plants, animals, and diseases

[34] For critiques of binaries in borderlands history, see Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1818* (New York, 1999); James F. Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln, 2002); and Miles, *Ties That Bind*. In modern U.S.-Mexico borderlands history, there are important studies of the "triad" of Anglo, Hispanic, and Indian. Examples are Meeks, *Border Citizens;* Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn;* and Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans*. Historians are only slowly pulling Asian American and African American voices into the mix. See, for example, Foley, *White Scourge;* Lee, *At America's Gates;* Karl Jacoby, "The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895," in *Continental Crossroads,* ed. Truett and Young, 183–207; and Grace Peña Delgado, "At Exclusion's Southern Gate: Changing Categories of Race and Class among Chinese *Fronterizos,* 1882–1904," *ibid.*, 209–39.

[35] Books that illuminate the rewards and challenges of envisioning nontraditional borderland spaces are Kamari Maxine Clarke, *Mapping Yorùbá Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities* (Durham, N.C., 2004); Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor;* and Jean Barman and Bruce McIntyre Watson, *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest, 1787–1898* (Honolulu, 2006).

[36] Transnational and migrant histories include Donna Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History," *Journal of American History,* 86 (Dec. 1999), 1115–34; Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor;* McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change;* Robert Courtney Smith, *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants* (Berkeley, 2006); and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton, 2008). On transnational history and borderlands history, see Gutiérrez and Young, "Transnationalizing Borderlands History." On the larger conceptual range of transnational histories, see "*AHR* Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review,* 111 (Dec. 2006), 1441–64.

along colonial vectors. Recent work has revisited these sweeping global processes from the ground up, showing how borderlands served as cultural filters through which local relationships could transform, deflect, and rechannel seemingly monolithic ecological processes in unexpected ways. Environmental historians of modern North America ask how ecological border crossings would continue to complicate efforts to organize and control social space. At the heart of these inquiries is the question of how nature moves and how humans have tried to direct that movement toward cultural or national ends—while at the same time fueling increasingly global circuits of organisms, commodities, and environmental ideas that unsettle the territorialized foundations of modern nations and cultures.[37]

Transnational approaches have added depth to our borderlands histories: they have expanded the range of national or cultural perspectives by disrupting older teleologies, but by focusing primarily on borders *within* the North American continent, they have opened the lens only so far. They have interrogated, but not really broken, our dependence on the centrist visions that traditionally anchor the continent's history. If borderlands historians truly expect to develop the interiors of borderlands history—to admit a wider range of Asian, African, and other migrant voices—then they must also extend their transnational field of vision in new directions. Only by immersing ourselves in the wider range of historiographies and archives that connect America to the world—by taking in global as well as continental horizons—can we fully liberate our view of America's historical centers from older paradigms.

All of this means leaving more of our traditional comfort zones behind. To take the next step and embrace a more complete and more open-ended view of borderlands history, we must allow the continent and the world to breathe in new ways. We must allow ourselves to travel—by land and by sea—to engage more fully new ways of seeing America from within and without. A view of the continent from its indigenous heartland forces us to rethink (and in some ways abandon) a notion of borderlands linked to European empires and their national progeny. At the same time, an expanded transnational framework—one that includes more actors and transcends a continent-centered view of relationships among adjacent units—can more fully combat our dependence on traditional stories. These narratives matter, but borderlands history should engage them in ways that make their centrality a historical question rather than a spatial assumption.

[37] Studies that focus on intersections of environmental history and borderlands history in early America include Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York, 2004); Louis S. Warren, "The Nature of Conquest: Indians, Americans, and Environmental History," in *A Companion to American Indian History,* ed. Deloria and Salisbury; Paul Kelton, *Epidemics and Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe in the Native Southeast, 1492–1715* (Lincoln, 2007); and Pekka Hämäläinen, "The Politics of Grass: European Expansion, Ecological Change, and Indigenous Power in the Southwest Borderlands," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 67 (April 2010), 173–208. Environmental histories of later America that use transnational research include Donald Worster, "World without Borders: The Internationalizing of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review,* 7 (Fall 1982), 8–13; Samuel Truett, "Neighbors by Nature: Rethinking Region, Nation, and Environmental History in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands," *Environmental History,* 2 (April 1997), 160–78; Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880–1950* (College Station, 2007); Joseph E. Taylor III, "Boundary Terminology," *Environmental History,* 13 (July 2008), 454–81; Emily Wakild, "Border Chasm: International Boundary Parks and Mexican Conservation, 1935–1945," *ibid.*, 14 (July 2009), 453–75; Jennifer Seltz, "Epidemics, Indians, and Border-Making in the Nineteenth-Century Pacific Northwest," in *Bridging National Borders in North America,* ed. Johnson and Graybill, 91–115; Rachel St. John, "Divided Ranges: Trans-border Ranches and the Creation of National Space along the Western Mexico-U.S. Border," *ibid.*, 116–40; and Lissa Wadewitz, "The Scales of Salmon: Diplomacy and Conservation in the Western Canada-U.S. Borderlands," *ibid.*, 141–64.

Narratives

If greater attention to indigenous and transnational perspectives can help us map out more compelling centers for borderlands history, the field is still left with the problem of interweaving these perspectives into larger borderlands narratives. Despite their interest in crossing borders between empires, nations, and cultures, borderlands historians have almost always faltered in the face of their field's most enduring divide: the watershed between colonial and national American history. Its practitioners continue to inhabit separate worlds: one grounded in an earlier America of empires and Indians, and the other in a modern America of nations and transnational denizens. Our efforts to open up the field's indigenous and transnational horizons will simply reinforce the segregation of these two borderlands until we begin to rethink the stories we tell. In the end, our narrative horizons matter as much as our spatial horizons.

The field initially borrowed a metaphor from a modern world of nations and their uncertain ends, using it to tell equally open-ended tales of earlier America. Over time, historians told more pointed tales that connected borderland romance to national epic. If revisionist strands in the later twentieth century unsettled these stories, they also reinforced their teleologies. Western historians painted on a continental early-American canvas that became subnational by the 1850s, Chicana/o historians told border-crossing tales that ended in the United States, and histories of the U.S. Southwest or northern Mexico looked north or south, but rarely in both directions. Borderlands history thereby reinforced the mainstream narratives of American history and their organization of the continent into nation-centered beginnings, middles, and ends.[38]

It was not until the turn of the twentieth century that historians began to move beyond those older master plots to ask how borderlands history might mark out its own narrative coordinates. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron initiated this conversation in 1999, offering a story line that pivoted on the national incorporation, of American space in the nineteenth century. That incorporation, they argued, brought an end to prior continental borderlands. With the national enclosure of people and land, borderlands became "bordered lands," in a process that echoed Turner's closing frontier. For Turner, the end came after the process of Americanization—in which Europeans fell into savagery and emerged as Americans—ran its course. Adelman and Aron rejected Turner's story but embraced its form. They tracked a more diverse history across a larger continental backdrop but agreed with Turner that America's political and cultural makeup had changed profoundly by the end of the nineteenth century.[39]

Adelman and Aron were interested less in reviving Turner's frontier thesis than in critiquing a field that had, in its rejection of Turner, embraced a "timeless legacy of cultural continuity." There were consequences, however, to their decision to embrace Turner's narrative form. It was not just that Turner had written a nation-centered epic but that he had also envisioned its turning points in ways that would discourage meaningful conversations about relationships between earlier and later America. What Adelman and Aron (and those who embraced their argument) correctly identified as a powerful mode for

[38] The subnational teleology of western history can be seen in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin's *Under an Open Sky,* in which essays on earlier continental history prepare the space for a later subnational history. See Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky*.

[39] Adelman and Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders"; Turner, "Significance of the Frontier in American History."

tracking change over time also imposed barriers to scholarly engagement across the *longue durée* of North American borderlands history.

The trouble began with a critical tension in Turner's frontier thesis: his historical turning points actually reinforced a vision of American timelessness and continuity. In his narrative, a larger pattern of cultural decline and renewal played out repeatedly from the moment Europeans reached America. His story ultimately pivots on the 1890s, a point of rupture at which America becomes something else. This hardly seems surprising if we consider that his story was tied to a *fin-de-siècle* crisis of identity. As William Cronon writes of frontier narratives, "the end of these human stories creates their unity, the telos against which we judge the efficacy, wisdom, and morality of human actions." If Turner's story privileged one turning point—a radical break that flattened all that came before—it was because he was not primarily interested in early America. He was more interested in the modern nation that came at its end.[40]

In revising the Turnerian story, Adelman and Aron faced a similar problem. Like Turner, they privileged a single turning point—in their case, a shift from early to modern America. Prior turning points paled by comparison. Even though borderlands assumed regional differences, their fundamental shape remained the same until empires yielded to nations: borderlands bent toward the telos of the nation and its territorialized incorporation of space. If their narrative focused on multiple empires and nations, its spatial coordinates—its focus on places bordering on or within what became the United States—had the same effect as Turner's frontier epic. It highlighted relationships culminating in a single nation and downplayed borderland relationships pointing elsewhere and shaped by other turning points, such as global shifts in imperial power, continental shifts in indigenous power, epidemics, migrations, wars, religious movements, and social transformations. By insisting on particular turning points, Adelman and Aron's narrative banished almost everything else to the same void of timelessness and continuity it sought to eliminate.

Turner's story line also raised a problem for later American history: where to turn after the frontier epic ran its course. That dilemma bedeviled Turner, and he spent the rest of his career trying to find an equally compelling way to narrate American history after 1893, with only limited success. The sense of rupture that made the end of his narrative so powerful also made it hard to imagine a sequel. It threatened to make the twentieth century as timeless and unchanging as early America, leaving historians with two choices: tell different versions of the same frontier tale (which many did) or reject the frontier paradigm altogether (which many also did). Thus western history formed separate planets, one circling a sun of European American expansion and the other orbiting, by default, a master narrative of the twentieth-century United States. Even today, scholars struggle to bridge this gulf—a narrative-driven divide that we might identify as Turner's most enduring contribution to the field.[41]

The borderlands to bordered lands narrative preserves those problems. Scholars interested in dynamics of imperial and national incorporation embrace the narrative's power, retelling it in different parts of the world. If they disagree on the details—when things

[40] Cronon, "Place for Stories," 1375. On Turner's narrative, see Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier."

[41] On Turner's search for a sequel, see Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier," 167–68. Cronon makes a plea for open-ended frontier narratives in William Cronon, "Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity," in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York, 1994), 603–37.

changed and how completely—they nevertheless view this shift as an essential break, a schism between worlds. These scholars are usually early Americanists or historians of empire elsewhere. Like Turner, they are interested in how one world finished; they care less about what it will later become. Meanwhile, historians of later borderlands, like scholars of the post-1893 West, are left on their own—often to tie their work by default to traditional centrist plots such as the story of Mexico, U.S. immigration history, or the history of Canadian race relations. The effort to create a stand-alone narrative for borderlands history thus has done little to hold the field together.[42]

This is not just a problem of narrative form; it is also a spatial problem. The field's most visible turning points are also the most centrist of turning points. Operating from an empire-to-nation scaffolding, borderlands historians systematically miss countervailing currents. Yet as both Jack Greene and François Furstenberg observe, borderlands history should, if anything, destabilize centrist turning points. In the borderlands, "continuities emerge over more familiar ruptures," writes Furstenberg. These are not the timeless continuities that Adelman and Aron critique; these are instead locally-rooted and contingent continuities. Often viewed by empires or nations as provincial resistance, tardiness, or imperviousness (for example, to the shift from Hapsburg to Bourbon rule or the transition from British to U.S. regimes), these continuities look different from the borderlands. Here, we find Carolina newcomers or *Nuevomexicano* old-timers—or, in later centuries, Taishanese migrants or Yaqui exiles—living life as usual or facing radical changes (on small or larger scales) that have little to do with empires, nations, and their self-authorizing narratives.[43]

By juxtaposing the "familiar ruptures" of the center to the locally rooted "continuities" of the borderlands, we must take care not to fall back into the trap of seeing borderlands as what imperial and national centers are not. Indeed, turning points in centrist narratives are not always what people experienced in central places either. Our inability to track some turning points in the borderlands may say less about actual differences between borderlands and centers and more about the distortions of centrist narratives. Conversely, if it is difficult to reconcile centrist stories with centrist realities, then we should be especially careful about reasserting their narrative logic elsewhere. What we need, in fact, is a different way of conceptualizing turning points—one that resists classic binaries of rupture and continuity by mapping out change at different scales and in different places, in a broader, relational way. Finding new centers for borderlands history means also plotting *change* differently.[44]

[42] Works that embrace the narrative of borderlands to bordered lands include Alan Taylor, "The Divided Ground: Upper Canada, New York, and the Iroquois Six Nations, 1783–1815," *Journal of the Early Republic,* 22 (Spring 2002), 55–75; Igler, "Diseased Goods"; Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds"; and William H. Bergmann, "A 'Commercial View of This Unfortunate War': Economic Roots of an American National State in the Ohio Valley, 1775–1795," *Early American Studies,* 6 (Spring 2008), 137–64.

[43] Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 64 (April 2007), 240–49; François Furstenberg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History," *Journal of American History,* 89 (March 2003), 647–77, esp. 650. For an example of how borderlands history can reveal contingent, locally rooted continuities, see Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion* (New Haven, 2010). On autonomous spaces alluded to here, see Evelyn Hu-DeHart, *Yaqui Resistance and Survival: The Struggle for Land and Autonomy, 1821–1910* (Madison, 1984); Merrell, *Indians' New World;* Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882–1943* (Stanford, 2000); and John M. Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish-American Identity in New Mexico, 1880s–1930s* (Albuquerque, 2004).

[44] Our call for mapping change at different scales builds on Richard White's call for a multiscale spatial approach to history. See White, "The Nationalization of Nature."

If the antidote to centrism is nomadism—putting the field in motion, moving it across the continent and into the world to bring alternative foci into play—the antidote to teleology is open-endedness. Open-ended narratives, as a rule, pivot less on single points of rupture and more on a wide array of turning points with conditional outcomes and meanings. Such narratives highlight contingencies at all scales: they can have unexpected and multiple—even contradictory—points of closure. To promote a more open-ended vision of borderlands history, we also need an open-ended understanding of borderlands. Instead of asking when borderlands cease to be, we might instead ask what happens when borderlands change. That is, instead of envisioning borderlands as steady-state phenomena—ahistorical entities waiting to be destabilized—we might ask how instability is built into the borderlands. In other words, to write open-ended histories, we should become more catholic about our categories.

The question is how to open up definitions and promote more flexible narratives without overburdening the field. How might we embrace borderlands history more openly without loving it to death? This need not be a problem of scope—of leaving no space that is not a borderland. After all, imperial and national histories have grown into every corner of America and continue to thrive. The challenge is preparing the field to carry its weight. As a study of entanglements, borderlands history is well situated to work on a variety of scales to circumvent the traditional blind spots of imperial and national histories. In practice, however, it has split this potential on dozens of local fronts. Instead of simply punching holes into master narratives with smaller-scale counternarratives, the field might also think about mounting large-scale historical frameworks—not just reactively, but on its own conceptual terms.

If borderlands historians have yet to grasp the greater implications of this conceptual task, it is because their questions tend to be smaller than the histories they have uncovered. They have devoted themselves to the recovery of forgotten historical realms and have shown less interest in connections between places, periods, and powers. They have typically chosen microhistory over macrohistory rather than seeking to bridge the two. They have studied local dynamics but have rarely turned the telescope around to see how borderlands shaped larger entities such as empires, nations, or global networks. The result is a field that is only partially aware of its explanatory power. Borderlands historians resist master narratives, with reason. But are their contributions only isolated interventions or might they have a collective impact? Is there a point at which the combined weight of the small worlds of borderlands history may not only crack the foundations of imperial and national narratives but also offer something in their place?

We can already see where the cracks are likely to appear. In previous narratives, empires become nations in a context of settler expansion and growing state hegemony. Scholars are now challenging the place of empire in this story. British colonies might have buttressed a sprawling empire of goods, but as recent studies show, their efforts to consolidate power over the American interior remained elusive throughout the colonial era. Scholars now see Spain's North American realm, for its part, as a collection of often-incompatible parts, separated by distance and powerful indigenous societies that reduced its power to poorly incorporated and often-exploited outposts. They now see New France as a disjointed space that scarcely made an empire—with the *pays d'en haut* (the Great Lakes area), where imperial desires dissolved into the cross-cultural matrices of the middle ground; and Louisiana, an unstable local world in which French colonists, African

slaves, and their native neighbors forged face-to-face relationships beyond the expanding transatlantic economy.[45]

If older frontier histories emphasized Europe's inexorable march across America, the new borderlands history has often focused on its unintended consequences and failures. And if earlier narratives celebrated or lamented the inexorable decline of Native America, newer histories have taken a fresh look at indigenous power and the roles that Native Americans played in producing European America. Some have argued, for instance, that we might trace the origins of white identity in the British colonies—indeed, the very notions of popular sovereignty and racial difference that came to distinguish the United States—to the fears and uncertainties that the borderlands provoked among seemingly irreconcilable colonists. Others have argued that conditions in the borderlands forced various colonial powers to adopt similar policies toward independent Indians—and, over time, to become structurally alike: flexible, centrifugal, and fragmented.[46]

If we see empires and nations from their borderlands with powerful, independent, nonstate actors, their distinctiveness and coherence become less evident. Doing so methodically might lead us to new large-scale narratives. In the traditional telling, American nations emerged naturally from the fertile ashes of empire. With all roads leading to 1776, colonial America was the United States in embryonic form, but with the diminished stature of European-American empire, the history looks different. The rise of American nations becomes an abrupt, violent, and incomplete deflection of a continental history that for centuries pulled in many directions. Envisioning early American history from its borderlands, we learn how little there was in this intercultural, interimperial milieu to anticipate the emergence of nation-states.

Borderlands history can also reconfigure the colonial-national interface from the other side of the divide by revealing continuities and persisting legacies. Approaching events and processes from the borderlands, we see how imperfectly the fledgling heirs to empire imposed their modern logic of incorporation and control on those they claimed as citizens and subjects. We also see how much of the old molded the new. The new nation-states did not simply erase the many preexisting American worlds, but often built on their precedents, plunging repeatedly into pockets of deep history as they gradually extended their reach across the continent. From the Great Lakes middle ground to the politically and racially charged Indian South to the U.S. Southwest, where colonialism had crumbled in the face of indigenous power, long-standing borderlands dynamics profoundly influenced the contours and meaning of the emerging nation-states. Those dynamics shaped where their settlers and agents could go and when, how they had to relate to

[45] Daniel K. Richter, "Native Peoples of North America and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire," in *Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century,* ed. P. J. Marshall (Oxford, 1998), 347–71; Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires;* Weber, *Mexican Frontier;* Weber, *Bárbaros;* Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman;* DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts;* Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire;* White, *Middle Ground;* Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy;* Kathleen DuVal, "American Indians in Colonial New Orleans," in *Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast,* ed. Gregory A. Waselkov, Peter H. Wood, and Tom Hatley (Lincoln, 2006).

[46] Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998); Gregory T. Knouff, *The Soldier's Revolution: Pennsylvanians in Arms and the Forging of Early American Identity* (University Park, 2004); Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors;* Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York, 2007); Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*.

others, where they could draw international borders, and, eventually, what kind of rulers they would have to become.[47]

Collectively, then, new borderlands histories have not so much overturned frontier stories as they have destabilized their trajectories. Few borderlands historians would argue with the idea that empires prepared the soil, at least selectively, for later nation-states. Moreover, few would dispute the fact that imperial projects of conquest, dispossession, and removal weakened native power all across the continent, laying foundations for colonial processes that became increasingly modern, but no less profound, as empires yielded to nations. Borderlands relationships were as likely, in any given part of America, to subvert as to reinforce linear progressions of power and identity. Seen collectively, borderlands histories begin much less neatly, and move through early America much less coherently, than older master narratives.

That same instability—a lack of linear progression, unanticipated twists, a profound sense of uncertainty about how stories will play out—characterizes later borderlands narratives. If older ways of seeing closure in early America were linked to the nation that came at the end of empire, historians of later America have tended to point their stories toward that ambiguous notion of modernity and its reorganization of global space often in the service of the modern nation-state. Presented at the modern showcase of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Turner's frontier epic was one such tale, and it pointed to the incorporative work of the modern United States. While scholars would contest the significance of 1893 (as a point of rupture, it was not as obvious as 1776), the notion that nations nevertheless came to map and police boundaries in a profoundly new way—and that this should inform how historians organize their American narratives—has persisted.

It is this way of ending the American story—or of at least containing it—that later borderlands histories have most deeply unsettled. If older national histories emphasized the rising power of states and capital to control America, newer borderlands histories have dwelt on the limits of this control. Corporations and bureaucracies might have gained unparalleled power to organize how peoples, things, and ideas moved across America, but recent studies have shown how the best-laid plans of modernizing elites frequently ran aground in the borderlands. Visions of control failed due to the uneven reach of markets in the periphery, differences in political and legal cultures across borders, and the fact that local peoples found a multitude of ways to resist or circumvent corporate power and state authority in the borderlands. As in earlier borderlands, the power of local relationships—often mediated by border elites seeking to preserve their provincial power against centralizing regimes—destabilized the logic of national incorporation.[48]

If efforts to incorporate the borderlands yielded nothing like the closure of the Turnerian frontier, national dreams of demarcating territory and controlling border crossings also remained elusive. For every outsider that the state turned into an ethnic insider, or

[47] Examples from a growing body of studies that examine the rise of American nation-states from borderlands outward include White, *Middle Ground;* Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier;* DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts;* Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire;* Gitlin, *Bourgeois Frontier;* Taylor, *Civil War of 1812;* Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); and Witgen, *Infinity of Nations*.

[48] Alonso, *Thread of Blood;* Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier;* Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes;* Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn;* St. John, *Line in the Sand*. For a comparative discussion of these dynamics, see Baud and Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands."

every insider that the state made an enemy alien or sent into exile, another drew on the ambiguities of power in the borderlands to elude the authority of the state, forge political or cultural power, or turn the capital of nations into transnational opportunity. If borderlands were spaces where nations frayed at the edges, they were also places where the flows of peoples, things, and ideas—and dreams and fears of worlds beyond—creatively remade America. If there was little in the interimperial and intercultural milieu of early America to anticipate modern nation-states, there was little in the modern borderlands to anchor their coherence or anticipate where America might go next. If borderlands history has unsettled our historical vision of early America by beginning less neatly and moving forward less coherently, then it has destabilized views of modern American history by leading nowhere in particular.

Borderlands narratives resist master American narratives by combating directionality and closure, but they also offer lessons that we might appreciate best at the scale of master narratives in seeing America broadly. Borderlands history is far more than the sum of its local parts. In the end, it gives us a new way to navigate the past. If, like Odysseus's ship, it takes us through a variety of ports, it is also in a unique position to take its crew back to America. Epic narratives miss much of American history because American history is less about the story's end than it is about the journey itself: the conditional trajectories, the unforeseen turning points, the uncharted course ahead. From the crow's nest of borderlands history, one sees how much epic left behind, tangled up in the contingencies of the world.

This is not to suggest that borderlands historians trade the pointed tales of epic for the wanderings of romance. That would mean simply replacing the itineraries and blind spots of one history for another. It would also mean ignoring the links between past, present, and future—the moral compass settings—that give most historical narratives their human meaning. Rather than focusing on the power of borderlands history to unravel our epic tales, we might instead focus on the entanglements of epic and romance in borderlands history. If America is an open-ended historical stage, it is also a tangled web of imperial, national, and cultural journeys—each tracing a unique trajectory, its own beginning, middle, and end. In this conditional terrain—between the well-worn path and the world beyond—the borderlands begin.