Reviews of Books

Contestation, Power, and the Legacy of David Weber

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In the spring of 1689, Juan Sabeata arrived at the northern New Spain outpost of San Francisco de Conchos in what is now southern Chihuahua, Mexico. The Jumano headman attributed his lateness to it being the season for great trade fairs on the upper Rio Grande. The economics and politics of New Mexico nearly a decade after the Pueblo Revolt remained of great interest to Spanish officials seeking a means to recover their lost colony. That the New Mexican trade fairs continued long after the expulsion of Spanish colonists was unsurprising. Of far greater initial interest was Sabeata’s welcome confirmation of the failure of the French colony at Matagorda Bay established by René-Robert, Cavelier de La Salle.1 Once the Spanish focus shifted away from the imperial geopolitics of French encroachment, Sabeata’s objectives became paramount. Jumanos needed the Spanish alliance as much as Spain needed indigenous allies in the region. New peoples, European and indigenous alike, transformed their homeland. Apaches had made Jumano access to Pueblo trading partners increasingly difficult and simultaneously threatened Spain’s ambitions in the region. In short, Sabeata said all of the right things to encourage Spaniards to join his people against a common enemy.

Sabeata’s intimate knowledge of events across a vast territory stretching from New Mexico to the Mississippi River and south to the Gulf Coast also made him an especially valuable ally for Spaniards. The contested space that

ultimately became Texas was, for Spaniards, a bewildering patchwork of peoples and shifting conditions. The ripple effects of Indios simultaneously moving northward from Mexican slave raids and southward within reach of Spanish horses, cattle, cloth, and metal made for a particularly confusing frontier. Beyond Spanish control, multiethnic villages of newcomers coexisted with more deeply rooted peoples. Dynamism seemed the only constant across a region transformed by equestrianism, slave raiding, and the availability of European trade goods.

The perspective from within that indigenous space was of course quite different. The nominally Spanish settlements were but one dimension of a complicated network of relationships. By the 1680s Jumanos had long since procured European goods through trading at eastern Pueblo villages in New Mexico and in the area around the Rio Grande–Conchos River junction Spaniards dubbed La Junta de Los Rios. In that particular borderland at that moment, Sabeata’s power lay in his demonstration of knowledge.

The relationships between villages such as those Sabeata visited, imperial geopolitics, and the peoples of the continent’s vast interior are not new subjects. In the early twentieth century, Herbert E. Bolton led a charge to study the Americas in a comprehensive way while incorporating New Spain into a continental history. However, a revival of interest revolves in part around David J. Weber’s *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, which remains perhaps the finest overview of the greater region traversed by Sabeata and his counterparts. Since 1996, Weber and the William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies (of which he was the founding director) have reintroduced a generation of scholars to the Spanish borderlands. However, it is easy to forget that, even as New Spain regained an academic audience among early Americanists, Weber himself continued to use the frontier lens for much of his career. His Latin Americanist approach, in which the term *frontier* did not necessarily invoke the tarnished legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner, allowed the term to maintain a utility that many historians of the North American West increasingly came to see as inadequate. In conference settings and elsewhere, Weber expressed his ambivalence over the apparent substitution of *borderlands* as merely a more ethnically inclusive version of *frontier*. As

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historians began seeing borderlands between empires, nations, regions, and even bodies, the term threatened to become too vague to be useful. Were borderlands political, religious, economic, linguistic, or perceptual? Were they the meeting place of European and indigenous hegemonies? Or could they exist anywhere different cultures converged? The answer, through the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, appeared to be yes to all of the above.

Rather than serving as the latest volley in the long-running conversation on what exactly constitutes a borderland, *Contested Spaces in North America* addresses indigenous and European interactions from a series of perspectives stretching across North and South America. It also serves as a fine sampling of what a continental orientation can offer in terms of shifting our perspectives and creating more holistic colonial histories. In part an explicit departure from the maritime orientation of the colony-centered Atlantic world, *Contested Spaces* also complicates dualisms of “the Indians” and “the Europeans” as contrary to on-the-ground reality. As Pekka Häimäläinen indicates in his opening essay, for indigenous and European peoples alike “every homeland was also a borderland, a zone of contestation and intermixing” (32).

*Contested Spaces* also reflects the value of the combined influence of the Clements Center at Southern Methodist University and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. The essays in the volume were first offered for discussion and critique at a 2010 McNeil Center meeting, and the authors then returned with revised versions to a Clements Center meeting in 2011. The result is a common focus on the stories of peoples who were not immediately incorporated into European empires. Taken as a whole, this volume demonstrates the advantages of the extended treatment of the ideas presented but also speaks to the increasingly continental perspective of the two research centers. The essays offer a useful set of ideas through which to understand a much larger colonial America. No longer is borderlands shorthand for the U.S.-Mexico relationship, or early America merely a reference to mainland British North American colonies. Nearly two decades after the founding of both centers, it is no longer surprising to see colonial histories delving into what were once historiographically marginal peoples and territories. Though the essays comprising *Contested Spaces* are grounded in a wide sampling of specific places and eras, contestation within and among indigenous and European worlds is a fundamental theme throughout.

Häimäläinen urges a focus on power as the central means of understanding a broader early American history. And indeed, the contest

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for power is a thread running through the dozen essays here. Though Hämäläinen is careful to caution against a return to sweeping grand unification narratives, he expresses concern that the recent proliferation of innovative works on so many facets of colonial history has fragmented the field into a mosaic with no easily discernible pattern. He also recognizes that many (if not most) professional historians are indeed comfortable with this chaotic mélange of particularist histories.

At the same time, the volume’s editors take a broadly Atlantic perspective to justify the use of a singular “America” for the two continents. Utilizing the theme of power to create a more integrated narrative would have value for the classroom and a public that is perhaps not as comfortable with the confusion of regional studies that have so enriched the field in recent years. In addition, we might see more shared, comparative history between the several European colonies and the vast interior spaces that should no longer be terra nullius. As the essays collected in Contested Spaces make apparent, much of the colonial contest for power took place in the continent’s interior, well away from maritime colonies. Examining how indigenous economics and politics engaged with European newcomers extends the colonial process across shifting boundaries and traditional colonial timelines. It also moves Native Americans to the center of early American history.

For example, Iroquois, Lakotas, and Comanches carved out spaces that look and feel imperial. They initially did so, Hämäläinen argues, without intent. Through the simple processes of small victories and band-level decisions to maintain power, these peoples created empires almost by accident. Once in place, their efforts to defend trade arrangements and resource access and maintain population solidified the ad hoc structures of each empire and enabled these polities to project power for generations. Indigenous peoples across the continent reacted to colonization by demonstrating adaptability and, often, surprising resilience.

Hämäläinen also makes a case for examining weakness, especially of fledgling European colonies, as the catalyst for continued cross-cultural relations. In New Mexico, in the British backcountry, and in the Pays d’en Haut, Europeans could not project control upon peoples and found themselves acquiescing to indigenous mores and ceremonies, creating mestizo worlds. Even though Hämäläinen is careful to emphasize that these regions were not all “middle ground[s]” (54), such histories run counter to immediate European dominance. In most of the Americas, he argues, the sixteenth-century process of colonization continued well into the nineteenth century. Comanchería is but one example; after displacing Sabeata’s Jumanos, Comanches maintained their control of west Texas until the 1870s.

Moving away from these obvious examples of Native American resilience, Elizabeth A. Fenn offers an introduction to the scope and scale of
her Pulitzer Prize–winning history of the Mandan people, *Encounters at the Heart of the World*.

Perhaps the most interesting of the many points Fenn makes is how in multiple ways Mandans adapted to the challenges of five centuries of sedentary village life on the upper Missouri River very differently from their Lakota neighbors. From the mid-eighteenth century through the earliest years of the 1800s, the Mandan villages were Europeans’ primary entry point into the indigenous commerce of the northern Great Plains. French, British, Spanish, and American traders all called upon this trading nexus in an attempt to both sway trade and open the door to the Far West.

Mandan history could be read as a long, slow decline or as an epic of adaptive resilience. The Mandans’ power lay in the stability of their agriculture and the reliance of their more mobile neighbors on trade to supplement the hunt. Fenn makes clear how space played a direct role in the persistence of Mandan culture. Their agricultural strength turned to weakness with a series of disasters. Steamboats and the growing fur trade shifted the economics of the region into American hands by the early nineteenth century. Smallpox outbreaks in the 1730s, 1781, and 1837 came far enough apart that few Mandans were immune. Downstream tribes received smallpox vaccinations before the 1830s epidemic, and many neighboring Hidatsas and Arikaras were away on a buffalo hunt at the time the disease struck. But Mandans, confined to their villages by Sioux raids, encountered the outbreak at its onset and suffered the worst. By the end of the epidemic, only about 150 Mandans remained. Forced to abandon the villages Europeans had sought out for centuries, Mandans adapted to change once more by affiliating with their Hidatsa and Arikara neighbors. Such a process of ethogenesis allowed for Mandan recovery even as the borderlands of the northern Plains shifted away from indigenous agrarian villages.

Cynthia Radding demonstrates a similarly fluid interpretation of place and people over time. Delving into territory connected to a larger project, she looks at Ostimuri as an “internal borderland” within New Spain. Radding sees borderlands as contested spaces where different peoples and cultures, different “material uses and symbolic meanings,” meet. By using linguistic, agricultural, and religious boundaries, she demonstrates a near absence of anything resembling static culture. Indeed, it is the heterogeneity of such contested spaces that Radding emphasizes. Various representatives of the Spanish Empire and the *Indios* repeatedly “tested one another,” but the circumstances of such contestation operated in a

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7 For an extended treatment, see Cynthia Radding, *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic* (Durham, N.C., 2005).
nearly constant state of flux. There were simply too many actors to generate cultural stability, and thus Ostimuri long remained a contested space.

Radding’s assertions mesh with those offered by James C. Scott’s recent work, in which he argues that most of humanity has long existed beyond the control of the state; thus we should understand processes such as the assertion of imperial control over indigenous peoples as anomalous.8 Ned Blackhawk’s essay in *Contested Spaces* makes explicit reference to Scott in reminding us that those living under the control of an organized nation-state are both recent and exceptional in human history. In short, Blackhawk argues, examining the colonial process from the perspective of state power has obscured our understanding of how people lived outside that new, artificial system. Indeed, understanding how long indigenous people were able to maintain an existence outside the state, whether in Radding’s Ostimuri or Blackhawk’s Great Plains, should be central to any examination of colonial history.

The thrust of Blackhawk’s essay makes another strong case for the centrality of violence in history.9 In the absence of European colonization, but partly driven by new equestrianism and sometimes-far-off slave markets, vast swaths of North America experienced increased raiding. Using the Segesser hide paintings as a reference point, Blackhawk’s assertion that “the center of the continent witnessed borderland conflicts” (287) raises the specter of European impacts extending deep into the continent. The most familiar of these paintings depicts the French-Pawnee defeat of the 1720 Villasur expedition. The fierce battle marked the effective retreat of New Mexico from the Great Plains and the shifting power wrought by European guns and horses. The intensity of such experiences had little to do with the time Pawnees spent in contact with European missionaries, militaries, or settlements. Instead, the very existence of Europeans and their economics intruded into indigenous worlds much the same as the reverse. Unasked for, the borderland between New France and New Spain was, for a moment, near Pawnee villages in what is now eastern Nebraska. Rebuffed by a rise of indigenous equestrian power, colonial empires failed in their efforts to exert power over the Plains.

The lesser-known (and perhaps more interesting) of the Segesser paintings is a representation of a far more common experience: an Indian attack on an Indian village. Both the attackers and the attacked remain unidentified. However, the implications of captive taking and displacement as the result of such violence are clear. Even without Europeans on the scene,
Blackhawk speculates that the “loyal Pueblo or Apache warriors are defeating ‘heathen’ enemies in a noble pursuit to reunite families” (297). The tantalizing glimpse offered by a careful reading of artifacts such as these hide paintings suggests that the new imperial context for Native Americans was far more widespread than previously acknowledged.

Cross-cultural violence stands at the center of Brian DeLay’s contribution as well. By focusing on the lengthy side-by-side existence of Navajos and Spanish New Mexico, DeLay brings the reader a persistent borderland in which the two cultures were “more or less stuck with each other” (231). In a space where New Mexico could muster far greater manpower, it might seem likely that Spaniards and their Pueblo allies would have consistently held more power, but DeLay’s exposition makes clear that Spaniards were reluctant to resort to war as a first option. Navajos also avoided open warfare, but sometimes turned to that option as a matter of explicit protest. They understood that they were unlikely to win in any sustained military confrontation, and only when enough aggrieved Navajos rose up did acts of personal violence such as murder turn into more widespread violence between peoples.

In these and the other essays of Contested Spaces, by Matthew Babcock, Chantal Cramaussel, Allan Greer, Raúl José Mandrini, Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Alan Taylor, and Samuel Truett, the inspiration of David J. Weber is clear. Prior to his death in 2010, he had a direct influence on the training, thinking, and writing of each of these scholars, whether as colleagues or, in the cases of Barr, DeLay, Hämäläinen, Radding, and Truett, as Clements Center fellows. Even outside of such mentorship, historians exploring borderlands, Spanish colonial, and indigenous history need few reminders of Weber’s personal and intellectual generosity. That his ideas resonate across what were, a generation ago, rather separate historiographies speaks to the maturity of borderlands studies as a field no longer at the periphery of early American history.

Dynamism—of geographies, economies, politics, and demographics—within and across borderlands is a central theme of Weber’s final book. Throughout Bárbaros, and the eighteenth-century Latin American experience it chronicles, indigenous peoples and colonizers worked toward accommodation. It is firmly in the tradition of such scholarship that Natale A. Zappia places Traders and Raiders: The Indigenous World of the Colorado Basin, 1540–1859. Citing the work of Weber, Barr, Blackhawk, DeLay, Hämäläinen, and others, Zappia examines a region tied together by movement. He recasts the lower Colorado River as the center of an “interior world” (25) rather than as a peripheral sector of the Spanish

borderlands.\textsuperscript{11} Stretching roughly from present-day San Diego and the Los Angeles Basin of California across central Arizona, this region stood almost completely outside of European control until the mid-nineteenth century. Zappia makes a compelling case that a handful of indigenous groups came to dominate the political economy of the region while functioning as part of a greater continental network. However, it is his focus on the fluctuations of regional power that allows him to move beyond simple dualisms of indigenous culture facing an inevitable European juggernaut.

Much of North America at one time or another probably felt like the lower Colorado Basin that Zappia describes. It was a place in which indigenous power remained the primary influence over several centuries. This interior world is much more analogous to Kathleen DuVal's Native ground than it is to Richard White's middle ground.\textsuperscript{12} Here, Quechans, Mojaves, and Cocopahs held out against an extension of a Spanish missionary presence, using trading and raiding to maintain economic and demographic power. As in Sabeata's west Texas, European goods, tools, and markets profoundly influenced the peoples of the Colorado Basin without ensnaring them. Zappia asserts that this region was also one of several continental "Indian nodes of political power" (12). Only if we accept a rather variable scale of such political nodes does this statement seem warranted. However, the persistence of Quechans and Mojaves in spite of repeated shifts in regional power is remarkable. Trading and raiding brought equestrians and agriculturalists into frequent contact, and the villages along the Colorado River formed a nexus for an extensive hinterland. Here, too, is a lens that reorients readers away from the maritime approaches of colonizers. From the interior of the continent, an indigenous "patchwork of overlapping, pulsating territories with their outlying borderlands" (16) emerges.

The Colorado Basin offers a limited set of documentary sources, but Zappia's case for the centrality of trading and raiding across what Spanish maps dubbed a tierra despoblado, or uninhabited land, is clear. The movement of goods through this territory, from \textit{pook} (\textit{Olivella biplicata} shell beads) to horses raided from Spanish California, demonstrates that, far from being empty, the lower Colorado was full of action and actors over a long period. Zappia draws effectively on anthropological methods to supplement Spanish and American historical observations in illuminating something of a historical donut hole.

\textsuperscript{11} Zappia relies on the phrase "interior world" throughout, using it in multiple captions and extensively throughout the introduction. This conspicuously contrasts with the "indigenous world" of the title.

The handful of stories presented here also includes more well-known events such as the Quechan leader Olleyquotequiebe’s 1781 Yuma Revolt, an expulsion that was every bit as effective and far-reaching in its consequences as the Pueblo Revolt a century earlier. A few decades later, the Timpanogos leader Wákara appeared at the head of Ute raiding parties into southern California. Finally, the Mojave War of 1858–59 marked the end of indigenous autonomy. Akin to the Mandans described in Fenn’s history, the peoples of this interior world persisted, but the nineteenth century brought a close to one phase of colonialism. All told, the stories emanating from the lower Colorado are as emblematic as those included in *Contested Spaces*.

Zappia makes a persuasive case for the utility of such complex histories. Indeed, the preliminary note he includes on naming, and his acknowledgement of the need for linguistic oversimplification, has become increasingly necessary for complicated, multigroup histories. The array of indigenous and Euroamerican names, the changing conceptions of geographic labels, and the fluid identities of peoples threaten to make for a narrative too complicated to follow for any but the most expert. Zappia, however, does a fine job of introducing a complex story while threading a narrative throughout. Once beyond the definitions of an introduction, a chronological approach broken by a handful of interludes to highlight particular stories serves to guide readers through what will be for many an unfamiliar region.

A few years before founding the Clements Center, Weber wrote in the introduction to *The Spanish Frontier in North America* that “frontiers seem best understood as zones of interaction between two different cultures—as places where the cultures of the invader and of the invaded contend with one another and with their physical environment to produce a dynamic that is unique to time and place.” The authors of these volumes share that interest in interaction, contention, and effects that were often far removed from conventionally understood borderlands. Several of the essays in *Contested Spaces* and the narrative of *Traders and Raiders* are firmly grounded in what Weber called “the unconquered lands beyond the edges of empire.” Taken together, they demonstrate that more than three centuries after Sabeata forced a brief melding of New Spain’s imperial geopolitics and a defense of the Jumano homeland, we still have histories laden with meaning to uncover. There were many Sabeatas—and Olleyquotequiebes and Wákaras—in the vast spaces of the colonial Americas, and it is no longer surprising to find that looking out from Indian country results in complex, rich, and interconnected histories quite different from those told from

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the perspective of the European colonies. That it has become so difficult to explain colonial history without indigenous peoples, continental perspectives, and considerations of power seems a fitting legacy for Weber as well as for the scholars he continues to inspire.