

The Unsteady Comanchería:  
A Reexamination of Power in the Indigenous Borderlands  
of the Eighteenth-Century Greater Southwest

*By Joaquín Rivaya-Martínez*

The eighteenth-century Greater Southwest largely consisted of an intricate and fluid system of intersecting Indigenous borderlands. Within this maze of multiethnic composite power, Comanches were fewer, farther apart, less politically integrated, more vulnerable, and more dependent on allies than recent scholarship tends to acknowledge. The Comanchería did not expand indefinitely. Instead, it moved gradually southward, in part due to encroachment from enemy groups, and vast expanses of the southern plains remained beyond Comanche control throughout the century. The way scholars have misunderstood Comanche power raises several methodological and interpretive warnings for the study of early America. Rather than singling out polities or entire ethnic groups as long-term hegemonies, we should consider the differing perspectives and interests within groups to uncover the complex dynamics connecting the multiple hubs of power that dotted the continent. And we should do so without minimizing or overlooking evidence that can be interpreted as vulnerability. Achieving this goal requires prioritizing the use of non-English-language original sources over potentially defective translations, more fully incorporating repositories outside the United States into our research, and listening carefully to past and present Indigenous voices, including evidence recorded by linguists and anthropologists.