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# Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History

Joyce E. Chaplin

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If I were a gambling woman, I would start a betting pool: When the 1989 guide to monographs in my field, *Books about Early America: 2001 Titles*, is brought up to date, how many titles will it have to include? Take a guess. Would 5,001 be too low an estimate? If the hard copy became an electronic guide that was regularly updated, might the number soar to 10,001? While it might be fun to run the pool, the final number of titles would probably give me pause.<sup>1</sup> No other field in American history has grown as fast, mostly because colonial history now overlaps with and borrows from so many other fields. It has long taken from and contributed to many other fields of history, but the scope and rate of expansion have increased dramatically. The border crossings now include those between Europe and the Americas, between the early modern and modern eras, between dependent colonies and the independent United States, between imperial regions (British America vis-à-vis New Spain, New France, and New Amsterdam), and along cultural and political borders with West Africa and indigenous America.

Why should early Americanists want to keep track of so many other fields? Is all this borrowing cost-effective in time and energy? And who, if anyone, borrows from us? I cannot possibly survey all the relevant points of expansion in this essay; doing so would come close to replicating the problem I wish to analyze. Instead, I will look first at older border crossings (between colonial America and other nations or empires dominated by Europeans), then at newer ones (between early America and non-European populations). In the first section, I will consider the connections that early American history has with United States history, British history, and the histories of other New World empires; in the second, I will examine the borders early America now shares with African history and Native American history and look at the muffled impact of cultural studies, particularly postcolonial theories. I will not examine interdisciplinary borrowing in and of itself (which would take at least another essay) but will instead look at some ways early Americanists' interest in or chariness of new methodologies has affected their crossovers into other historical

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Ammerman and Philip D. Morgan, comps., *Books about Early America: 2001 Titles* (Williamsburg, 1989).

fields. This approach leaves out a great deal; I will be able only glancingly to address, for example, the question of why most early Americanists ignore certain obvious neighboring fields, such as Canadian history.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be? Early Americanists are both, though the resulting debt networks form discernible patterns. The traffic from early America to the United States is extensive, though not always exemplary of the range of historical experience, instead privileging problems seen as contemporary or relevant. Exchange across the boundary between British and early American history is mostly restricted to matters relating to the American Revolution. That event, which divided Britain from the United States, now, curiously, brings together scholars of Britain and of America. Early Americanists' attention to non-Anglophone European colonies has of late focused on "borderlands," areas where the British Empire touched other empires; that focus has generally anticipated the creation of the United States, ignoring comparative colonization in favor of a Manifest Destiny view of North America's history, teleologically driven toward the creation of the Republic.

If these forays have moved early American history inexorably toward the history of the United States, new inquiries about non-European populations have likewise flourished only when they easily contribute to discussion of long-standing questions about the American history originally crafted to explain white settlers. The new histories of Native Americans, perhaps the most exciting development in the field, remain the province of a small group of scholars; the demanding nature of that history has made most early Americanists reluctant to do research on Native Americans. Scholars may take on board the conclusions of this subfield when they teach, but not when they do their own work. In contrast, the exchange between African and African American histories provides a rare model of parity in trade relations across a border and of the generation of a new field to which nearly all early Americanists pay attention.

If the new field of Atlantic history has encouraged us to connect nations, peoples, and events, that remains an ideal surprisingly unachieved. Emphasis on the establishment of Creole societies in the British colonies and on the transformation of those societies into an independent republic—the traditional focuses of early American history—has persisted, however much it is now framed in reference to larger, non-Anglophone, and non-United States worlds. As their only tentative and selective attention to the "second" British Empire in South Asia has shown, early Americanists are even more reluctant to look beyond the Atlantic world, showing little curiosity about a comparative dimension within colonial histories. Lack of attention to legal studies of indigenous rights—the province mostly of Canadian and Australasian scholars—likewise precludes a truly transnational and comparative understanding of early America.

In looking at the borrowing and lending that early Americanists do, I wish to call attention to that persistent myth, American exceptionalism. Exceptionalism emphasizes the United States'—and earlier the colonies'—separation from the rest of the world and development of unprecedented forms of society and politics. In its old form, it stressed the positive achievements of white residents of North America and

shunned whatever might have been tragic and ambiguous about their handiwork. Newer forms of exceptionalism look beyond the white population; one new variant examines the multicultural bases of American society (told as a story of positive achievement) and another stresses the uniquely negative character of American culture, as in the paradoxical relationship between slavery and freedom. All versions of exceptionalism ignore how the colonies and United States shared histories (including reprehensible histories) with other societies and peoples. Exceptionalism may be best represented by such parochialism—it is not a consciously constructed school (which can be systematically analyzed), but instead an unconscious tendency that marks the works of many scholars who have nothing else in common. Ignorance of what is going on in parallel fields can easily generate an illusion of uniqueness where none exists; an overwhelming attention to how colonial history provides “background” for U.S. history can only reinforce that tendency, as it always has.

In particular, by not paying attention to theory and cultural studies, early Americanists may miss opportunities to translate key events and trends in their field into terms that can give them impact outside it. Theories can bridge fields—they are trading languages that can operate across frontiers. Exceptionalism might be avoided if early Americanists not only grew more conversant with theory but also contributed to it, for the first time leaving their mark on an important conversation about the global fate of modern empires and colonized peoples. Borrowing and lending from other fields should perpetually question American exceptionalism, but exceptionalism has proven a slippery and durable myth within early American history. In fact, the patterns of borrowing and lending best reveal the myth’s continuance.

The first intersection I wish to examine is that between early America and the United States. That boundary gave the field its original meaning: colonial history was prelude to the creation of the United States. The moment of transition, when early America became the early republic, has always been a matter of debate, and therefore the nature of the connection with the historiography on the United States has tended to alter over time. Recently, studies of the revolutionary period have given way to a focus on the period beyond the Revolution, the early republic. Studies as varied as David Waldstreicher’s *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (1997), Jeffrey L. Pasley’s *“The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (2001), Joanne Freeman’s *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (2001), and Jill Lepore’s *A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (2002) have shown the new interest in the period just after the Revolution. The authors of those books quite self-consciously turned their backs on the British-oriented and Atlantic perspectives that scholars of the officially colonial period now tend to pursue. American national identity and republican politics are the centers of scholarship on the early republic. Some of this is doubtless due to the influence of cultural theorists of nationalism and the politics of the public sphere; Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas are the significant referential figures.

Table 1  
 Monographs Published by the Omohundro Institute of Early American  
 History and Culture, 1992–2002, by Era Covered

	<i>Seventeenth Century</i>	<i>Cross-Era<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Eighteenth Century</i>	<i>Eighteenth/ Nineteenth Centuries</i>	<i>Nineteenth Century</i>
N	2	12	12	8	4
%	5.3	31.6	31.6	21.0	10.5

<sup>a</sup>Includes a substantial portion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Here, the boundary between early America and the United States is doing interesting things, the latter field exerting a gravitational pull on the former, demanding attention to things “American” rather than “Atlantic” or comparative. Certainly, the breakdown in periods covered among books published in the last ten years by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture shows a definite preference for the more modern period. (See table 1.) Only 2 (5.3 percent) of the books focus on the seventeenth century, whereas 12 (31.6 percent) focus on the eighteenth. Monographs on the eighteenth and/or nineteenth centuries number 24 (63.1 percent), whereas those that looked at more than one century of the colonial era numbered 12 (31.6 percent).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, several new introductions to the field present colonial America according to a developmental model that leads toward the American Revolution, the founding of the United States, and the eventual filling in of the nation’s current geographical boundaries. They include Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (2000) and Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (2001). Further, many of the Founding Fathers have enjoyed yet another revival, with spell-binding and important new studies of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and John Quincy Adams garnering attention and prizes. And Joyce Appleby’s *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (2000) gives a collective biography of the first generation that came of age in the Republic.

Those may have been figures and events due for revival anyway. But I think that the commercialization of book publishing is not insignificant in this story. Books that lean toward the modern period sell better than books that lean the other way; the early nineteenth century is much more familiar to general audiences than is the seventeenth century, or even the early eighteenth century. Perceived “relevance” may therefore be pulling authors of monographs past the Revolution and toward the Republic and the turn of the nineteenth century—toward events that are easier to explain to historians outside the field (or general readers or, as we know all too well, students). This slide forward in time is also apparent in the chronologies that three different early Americanist enterprises have staked out. The more recent the group, the more of the nineteenth century it includes. The Omohundro Institute of Early

<sup>2</sup> No other press has had as long a series on early American history, so it is difficult to determine how much the pattern at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture (OIEAHC) appears in book publishing in general. Since this is the main press in the field, the trend is indicative.

American History and Culture (with late-nineteenth-century foundations, reorganized in the mid-twentieth century) covers the period to 1815; the McNeil Center for Early American Studies (founded in 1978) goes to 1850; and *Common-Place*, begun in 2001, while focused on “early American history and culture,” is nevertheless for “anyone interested in American history before 1900,” well past the era when anyone wore tricorns and knee breeches as everyday garb.<sup>3</sup>

My comments on this score are perhaps ungrateful, not least when they appear here in the *Journal of American History*. United States history is, for colonialists, our meal ticket. It is the reason departments see the relevance of the early period and maintain a faculty line in the field; it is also the rationale for libraries to purchase materials for periods long before the American Revolution, acquiring a greater proportion of the monographs and journals devoted to early America than of those on early modern Europe. Of course, there is an important connection—or connections—between colonial America and the United States. But not all topics in colonial American history lend themselves to that manner of examination, and even when they can, the teleology can be a trade-off. Too much emphasis on what will be means we lose sight of what was, a point that early Americanists seem doomed to make perennially. Further, explication of the United States itself would be clearer if done without teleology; for example, studying the Caribbean, as well as the continental, colonies gives us a much better picture of American slavery, despite the eventual separation between the islands and the United States. Above all, placing the English-speaking colonies within a trajectory leading toward the United States is definitely at odds with the growing call to write transnational history. Atlantic history tends to fade the further we go beyond 1789, as the recent and most widely read books on the early republic have shown. Forthcoming first monographs by younger scholars might put the early republic back in the Atlantic world, but it remains to be seen whether the trend lasts.

Moreover, it is probably not accidental that recent turmoil over scholarship by early Americanists has taken place on the boundary between colonial and United States history and involved topics of contemporary relevance, firearms and race relations: thus the controversies over Michael Bellesiles’s *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (2000) and Edward Pearson’s edited *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (1999). Critics have argued that Bellesiles misrepresented probate records in order to make a case for a relatively gun-free colonial period, in contrast to the rising gun culture of the nineteenth century; others have faulted Pearson for failing to question, or properly edit, documents that seemed to prove the existence of a slave conspiracy. Ownership of firearms and African American resistance to institutionalized racism are relevant to our time; though they are early Americanists, Bellesiles and Pearson used their studies to make points about later American history and society. If, for early Americanists,

<sup>3</sup> Denise K. Magner, “Seeking a Radical Change in the Role of Publishing,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 16, 2000, pp. A16–17; Fredrika J. Teute, “To Publish and Perish: Who Are the Dinosaurs in Scholarly Publishing?,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 32 (Jan. 2001), 102–12; *Common-Place* <[www.common-place.org](http://www.common-place.org)> (Dec. 10, 2002).



Table 2  
*William and Mary Quarterly* Articles, Third Series, by Era Covered

	Pre-1600	Seventeenth Century	Cross-Era <sup>a</sup>	Eighteenth Century	Eighteenth/ Nineteenth Centuries	Nineteenth Century	Commentary	Total
1944–1953								
N	2	21	16	115	4	15	17	190
%	1.1	11.1	8.4	60.5	2.1	7.9	8.9	
1973–1982								
N	3	49	21	127	10	15	17	242
%	1.2	20.3	8.7	52.5	4.1	6.2	7.0	
7/1992–4/2002								
N	7	32	36	78	16	19	35	223
%	3.1	14.4	16.1	35.0	7.2	8.5	15.7	

<sup>a</sup>Includes a substantial portion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

the history of the United States is a meal ticket, we should be aware that there are no free lunches and be alert to the hidden costs of gravitating toward the modern era and topics that promise to excite interest outside the immediate field.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the tilt toward the United States and to more recent eras is not as apparent in genres of academic production meant for early Americanists only, rather than broader audiences. Journal articles are more insulated from market demands than monographs or textbooks; sales of journals depend on a smaller but more loyal group of buyers than do academic (or other) books. The pattern among articles published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* during three separate decades—1944–1953 (the first decade of the journal's third series); 1973–1982 (the decade midway between the start of that series and the present); and July 1992–April 2002 (the most recent decade)—presents a more complicated picture, one less demonstrative of a historiographic drift forward in time.<sup>5</sup>

From one decade to another, the proportions of articles that covered different historical eras changed. (See table 2.) In the first decade, most (60.5 percent) were on the eighteenth century, with the second greatest number on the seventeenth century (11.1 percent). This shifted in 1973–1982, when the eighteenth century still had the most articles but the seventeenth century did not lag so far behind: 52.5 percent versus 20.3 percent. In the last ten years, the proportions shifted yet again (35 percent for the eighteenth century and 14.4 percent for the seventeenth). But the category that really surged ahead comprised articles that looked at substantial portions of at least two centuries, typically the seventeenth and eighteenth. This increase, from 8.4 percent in the series' first decade to 16.1 percent in its most recent decade, indicates a

<sup>4</sup> For the most recent statements about these controversies, see the two forums: "The Making of a Slave Conspiracy," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (Jan. 2002), 135–202; and "Historians and Guns," *ibid.*, 203–68.

<sup>5</sup> A study of articles on early American history in all journals would be difficult, hence the spotlight on the OIEAHC's journal, the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

Table 3  
*William and Mary Quarterly* Articles, Third Series, by Era Covered  
 (minus Commentary Pieces)

	<i>Seventeenth Century and Earlier</i>	<i>Cross-Era<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries</i>	<i>Total</i>
1944–1953				
N	23	16	134	173
%	13.3	9.2	77.5	
1973–1982				
N	52	21	152	225
%	23.1	9.3	67.6	
7/1992–4/2002				
N	39	36	113	188
%	20.7	19.2	60.1	

<sup>a</sup>Includes a substantial portion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

growing interest in long-term trends and developments in the colonial era. (But compare table 1, which shows that the incidence of cross-era topics is higher for monographs, probably because a book-length format is more conducive to such study.) The other category that increases significantly is commentary: essays on selected historiographic problems or debates, particular sources or libraries, or luminaries in the field; that category jumped to 15.7 percent, up from 8.9 percent in the first decade of the journal's third series. The trends in articles that cover particular eras is clearer if the commentary articles are put to one side. (See table 3, which takes out the commentary pieces and combines the early period and the seventeenth century, on the one hand, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on the other.)

The shift in periods covered reflects in part the interests of the successive editors of the *William and Mary Quarterly*; journals depend on a mixture of independently submitted pieces and solicited submissions, the latter often indicating what the editor knows someone is working on. Douglass Adair, as first editor of the third series, created the journal's current format, and his interest in the founding period is clearly written into the series' first decade. Michael McGiffert, a scholar of the seventeenth century, guided the journal through the period from 1972 to 1983, and the journal's focus shifted toward his concerns. Finally, in the journal's most recent decade, it has had three editors (Michael McGiffert, Philip D. Morgan, and Christopher Grasso), each with different interests; Morgan advertised his interest in border-crossing essays.

But I don't think that a "great editor" interpretation explains everything. The era after World War II, when the *William and Mary Quarterly* and the Williamsburg-based Institute of Early American History and Culture (later renamed the Omohundro Institute) were reconfigured to become the centers of the scholarly field, was one of interest in the nation's founding, as the United States achieved new global prominence and scores of scholars and public figures sought the roots of the nation's greatness. The current midpoint of the journal's career occurred when early modern



history had scholarly prestige, led by the inquiries of Fernand Braudel, the French *Annalists*, scholars of rural England such as Joan Thirsk, and prestigious Princeton University historians such as Lawrence Stone and Natalie Zemon Davis. Perhaps now, over fifty years after the start of the *William and Mary Quarterly's* third series, the field of early American history is well enough developed that more scholars have the confidence (and the elaborated secondary literatures) to move across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; hence the growth of cross-era essays. The rise in commentary likewise bespeaks a mature field with the leisure to pause for debate and reconsideration.

However, the comment-based essays may be the journals' counterpart to early American monographs' shift toward the eighteenth century: a sign of market demand for a certain kind of writing. Commentary has increased in many areas of academe, generating a magazine-style genre that is qualitatively different from a research essay. This is especially the case in the *William and Mary Quarterly's* forums, where scholars present different perspectives on a historical or historiographic problem. Here historians concede that knowledge exists as a plurality of voices rather than as the single, authoritative voice that used to be common even in the old versions of commentary in the journal. We also accept that our knowledge should be made more accessible, translated into shorter pieces and concentrated on topics of interest to nonspecialists or beginners. The rise in journal commentary is thus parallel to the shift in interest toward the eighteenth century, where traffic between early America and the United States is currently apparent, though flowing for the most part forward in time rather than back and forth in even measures.

If the United States is the nation that beckons early Americanists forward in time, England, later Britain, pulls them back toward the colonies' cultural and political beginnings. Colonial Americanists have long had a close connection to historians of early modern England. That was particularly true in the 1970s and 1980s, when the new social history elicited studies of American towns, parishes, and colonies that resembled parallel scholarship on the mother country. Indeed, scholarship on Europe was the model for much of the social history of early America. For example, Alan Macfarlane's *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman: An Essay in Historical Anthropology* (1970) and his edited *Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616–1683* (1976) were key models for early Americanists' examination of everyday life in the early modern period, still seen in the works of John Demos and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, among others.<sup>6</sup> Further, examination of migration from England to its colonies emphasized conditions back in the metropolis—religious upheaval, civil war, economic dislocations—that fostered emigration. Nicholas Canny's "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America" (1973) and Roger Thompson's *Women in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study* (1974) anticipated Americanists' Atlantic perspectives and imperial contexts by at least twenty years. By the late 1970s, graduate advisers expected students who were preparing for examina-

<sup>6</sup> See Joyce Appleby, "Value and Society," in *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Baltimore, 1984), 290–316.

tions in colonial history to familiarize themselves with the work of Macfarlane, Stone, Peter Laslett, Christopher Hill, and (perhaps less often) E. P. Thompson.<sup>7</sup>

Then, as now, colonialists probably read more about English history than historians of England did about colonial history, but the traffic was by no means unidirectional. The late David Beers Quinn seemed most successful at collapsing, indeed ignoring, any boundaries between metropolitan and colonial—nearly all of his work on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries challenged such compartmentalization and presented an early Atlantic world long before that terminology took root in the field. Quinn's Atlanticism *avant la lettre* was perhaps unusual, but Laslett's work was characteristic of the thoughtful, if less sustained, vision of transatlantic Anglophone worlds that more historians held. Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* (1966) regarded the colonies as indicative parallels to the hierarchical and economic structures of early modern England. Further, Laslett's edited volume, *Household and Family in Past Time: Comparative Studies in the Size and Structure of the Domestic Group over the Last Three Centuries in England, France, Serbia, Japan, and Colonial North America, with Further Materials from Western Europe* (1972), put England and its colonies in a thoroughly comparative perspective. Likewise, Stone referred to works on New England family history and demography, for instance, in his *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977). Stone also served on the editorial board of the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

David Cressy later presented synthetic views of England and its colonies in *Coming Over: Migration and Communication between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (1987) and *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (1989). Cressy's was the last important social history by a historian of England that connected the mother country and its colonies, ending a run that had begun with Laslett in 1966—defining a period of just over twenty years. In that period, social histories of England and her colonies were considered parts of a larger yet unified field of inquiry, whose historiographic borders had replicated those historical borders of the early modern era, when people and ideas did in fact flow back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. This focus continues among scholars of early America, now under the cohesive (if not always coherent) label of Atlantic history.

The term Atlantic has spread throughout studies of early America—into syllabi, articles, monographs, and now textbooks—but it is not clear whether it has yet fulfilled its genuinely exciting promise to change the field. Commentators have remarked that at times the idea of the Atlantic may not raise new questions or introduce new methodologies so much as repackage very old issues such as imperial governance, maritime commerce, long-distance migration, and transplantation of Old World cultures. Certainly, books and articles with “Atlantic” in their titles rarely connect different lands bordering the Atlantic Ocean; more often they showcase one part

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Canny, “The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 30 (Oct. 1973), 575–98. On this historiographic trend, see Nicholas Canny, “Writing Atlantic History; or, Reconfiguring the History of Colonial British America,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1093–1114.

of that oceanic geography. Thus the comparative dimension within studies of the early modern English-speaking world has not necessarily been accelerated by the Atlanticization of early America. Perhaps it is too early to tell, however, just how the idea of the Atlantic may affect the ideas of rising historians in the field and whether it accentuates the old, social-historical trend to examine simultaneously the histories of colonies and mother country.<sup>8</sup>

Since the late 1980s, however, historians of the metropolis (as of the colonies) have gravitated from social history toward political and cultural studies, and those are now the grounds for any important cross-national work. This shift, shared across many fields, reflected dissatisfaction with the often depoliticized nature of social history and a new enthusiasm for cultural history.<sup>9</sup> One pivotal event in this shift took place in 1990, when Lawrence Stone organized a conference called “The Eighteenth-Century British State and Empire” at Princeton’s Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies. That gathering may have seemed a quiet, specialized affair, but it began, or at least accelerated, a striking trend in British history. The conference seems to date the beginning of British historians’ steady invasion of the colonial field, encouraged by the reminder that Britain had an early imperial past that had recently been underexamined. Since then, nearly all the best studies on the significance of the American Revolution have been done by historians of Britain who look at the Revolution’s importance to, well, Britain. Best known are Linda Colley’s germinal *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (1992), J. C. D. Clark’s *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (1994), Stephen Conway’s *The War of American Independence, 1775–1783* (1995) and his *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (2000), Kathleen Wilson’s *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (1998), Eliga H. Gould’s *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (2000), and Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy’s *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (2000). Suddenly, the primordial event of U.S. history is an important locus of scholarship on Britain.

Certainly, the scholars listed above give credit to the deep and important historiography on the American Revolution that leading political historians such as Bernard Bailyn, Jack P. Greene, and Gordon Wood helped create. (Those Americanists were themselves in earlier dialogue with scholars of British political thought, such as Caroline Robbins and J. G. A. Pocock.) That historiography continues to influence Americanists and to be debated by them. But, since the heyday of republican ideology, on which Daniel T. Rodgers declared a moratorium in 1992, studies of the Revolution

<sup>8</sup> Some examples of truly Atlantic history (which connect and compare Britain and British America) include Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic: An Exploration of Communication and Community, 1675–1740* (New York, 1981); D. W. Meinig, *Atlantic America, 1492–1800* (New Haven, 1986); and David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (New York, 1995). On the promises and problems of Atlantic history, see Canny, “Writing Atlantic History,” 1093–1114; and David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York, 2002), 11–27.

<sup>9</sup> See Susan Pedersen, “What Is Political History Now?,” in *What Is History Now?*, ed. David Cannadine (New York, 2002), 36–56; and Miri Rubin, “What Is Cultural History Now?,” *ibid.*, 80–94.

among early Americanists have slowed even as those among scholars of Britain have quickened.<sup>10</sup> That is probably because historians of Britain need not privilege republicanism as a national theme—they also have to explain aristocracy and monarchy. They can therefore send their inquiries into British political events and thought in wider and more fruitful directions even as they gravitate, almost perversely, toward the revolution that shattered the first British Empire.

Is imitation the sincerest form of flattery? Maybe early Americanists should declare victory: we composed aggressively proselytizing literature on the American Revolution, presented a seductive vision of political transformation within the English-speaking world, made new converts overseas, and can now claim that they have since been faithful worshipers within our church. Above all, the British acolytes have not yet blasphemed, generally maintaining tactful silence on the exceptionalist character of the American literature on the American Revolution.

But outside of studies of the Revolution, when are historians of Europe, particularly of Britain, influenced by the work of early Americanists? The instances are remarkably few and scattered, if intriguing. Some intersections occur when scholars have a topic that is not specific to certain nations, as with gender. For example, Amanda Vickery, in *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (1998) cites Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Goodwives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (1982). Prerevolutionary politics is also a point of connection, as in the works of David Armitage and M. J. Braddick, who look at the significance of colonies in their respective works, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000) and *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550–1700* (2000). In crafting analyses of the connected fates of the British state and British Empire, however, Armitage and Braddick take up theories of political development that were not specific to or produced by early Americanists. And some time-honored topics that led to comparisons between the colonies and England, such as witchcraft, are no longer comparative in this way. Recent studies of witchcraft and magic in England have made Europe the center of attention, regarding the English colonies as not worth mentioning or as exhibiting peripheral, provincial echoes of what happened first in the Old World. Conversely, Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002) is only the most recent example of a colonial history that, while it compares New England to Britain, ignores the more powerful continental European examples of witchcraft. Until all the comparisons are made—colonial, British, and Continental—we will lack a good understanding of early modern witchcraft.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992), 11–38.

<sup>11</sup> Most recent scholars of European witchcraft consider the colonies only glancingly, if at all, and many who work on Britain take scholarship on witchcraft in early modern Germany, not in England's colonies, as their point of reference. See Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London, 1996), 310–16, 333; Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c.1650–c.1750* (Oxford, 1997), 76; Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London, 1999); Marion Gibson, ed., *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (London, 2000); and Frederick Valletta, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Superstition in England, 1640–70* (Burlington, 2000), 210–11. On the European influence on Cotton Mather, see William E. Monter, "Scandinavian Witchcraft in Anglo-American Perspective," in *Early Mod-*

A more clearly American topic is race; early Americanists consider the theme central to their work, indeed, distinctive to their subject. It would make sense if scholars of British culture who are interested in race referred to foundational Americanist monographs on the subject, especially the works of David Brion Davis, Winthrop D. Jordan, and Edmund S. Morgan. Certainly, those scholars' research informs the work of Americanists. Alden T. Vaughan's *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (1995) cites his debt to Jordan, and Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (1996) builds on and reads against Morgan.<sup>12</sup> While the foundational works on race focused on attitudes toward Africans, the most recent research on early America looks at both Native Americans and captive Africans; that is true of Vaughan's and Brown's work, for example (and of my own). Knowledge of works by Anthony Pagden and Robert Williams Jr. that look at colonial denigration of Indians, as well as of ethnohistorical work on American Indians, is standard for early Americanists interested in race.

Even when British historians examine race and racism, however, they do not rely much on Americanist scholarship, and when they pay attention to the New World, they overwhelmingly focus on Africans, not Native Americans. A clutch of literary scholars who have examined gender and race, including Laura Brown and Felicity A. Nussbaum, do not by and large engage with Americanist historiography, relying instead on theorists of alterity, orientalism, and postcolonialism. (Moira Ferguson and Kim Hall are unusual in using Winthrop Jordan's work as their jumping-off point.) Colin Kidd's *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (1999) lists Jordan, Davis, and Morgan in a much larger field of secondary sources, some on British India. In similar fashion, Roxann Wheeler, in *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (2000), cites Jordan but is mostly in dialogue with the scholars of gender and race listed above. Linda Colley's work on captivity narratives, racial difference, and cultural frontiers is conversant with literatures on those themes in British America, though in adopting a global context she has issued a challenge to American exceptionalism, dismissing the Americanist literature on captivity as parochial and misguided.<sup>13</sup>

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*ern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford, 1990), 425–34. Unusual in its extensive consideration of colonial witchcraft cases is Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1996). An attempt to trace a larger world of witchcraft is Elaine G. Breslaw, *Witches of the Atlantic World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook* (New York, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> See Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York, 1995), 255n4.

<sup>13</sup> In many such works, the dominant references are to Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Peter Hulme, Tzvetan Todorov, Mary Louise Pratt, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Stephen Greenblatt. See Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca, 1993), 28–31nn; Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London, 1994), 1–14; and Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, 1995), 211n5, 212n13, and 212n16. See also Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 23–27nn; and Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia, 2000), 304–6. To a similar list of references, Moira Ferguson adds an extensive historiography on slavery, including the works of David Brion Davis; see Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (New York, 1992), 309n1, 311n19. See also Linda Colley, "Going Native, Telling Tales: Captivity, Collaborations, and Empire," *Past and Present* (no. 168, 2000), 170–93; and Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain,*



The intersections between British and American historiographies therefore hardly approximate the impact of such scholars as Bailyn and Greene on the British historians now examining Britain in the age of the American Revolution. And it is ironic that as the word “Atlantic” creeps across the academic landscape (soon to be the “republicanism” of our decade, overextended and emptied of meaning?), the American and British historiographies remain not truly Atlantic. Each field is situated firmly within a national historiography and geography and assesses, at most, the influence that overseas events had on its corner of the world. Border crossings between the two historiographies amount to selective exchange over empire and revolution.<sup>14</sup>

If early American historiography is poised between two nations, between the fields of United States and British history, it runs parallel to—and at points intersects—scholarship on the other European nations that established colonies in the Americas. Comparative work on empires seems, however, to have flagged despite widespread agreement that it is desirable. Since the heyday of the big tomes that compared different zones of the colonized Atlantic world, few have ventured in this direction. Certainly, the density and erudition of R. R. Palmer’s *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (1959) and David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975) would intimidate anyone. Most of those who study comparative imperialism are Latin Americanists, not scholars of Anglophone America (or of New France). Such recent studies include Anthony Pagden’s *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France c. 1500–c. 1800* (1995) and Patricia Seed’s *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (1995), which consider Spain, England, France, and Portugal. John Elliott has put forward preliminary comparisons in his *Britain and Spain in America: Colonists and Colonized* (1994) and *Do the Americas Have a Common History? An Address* (1998), but his larger and more comprehensive work along these lines is still unfinished.<sup>15</sup>

That few have even attempted what Pagden and Seed have accomplished is probably due not only to the stupendous amount of work that comparative studies require but also to comparativists’ focus on ideas and elites, bugbears to those early Americanists weaned on social history, with its emphasis on lived experience and ordinary people. To focus on everyday life, in comparative imperial terms, would up the ante considerably—a scholar would have to master a prodigious number of disparate histories before drawing any conclusions. Furthermore, it is not apparent that historians of British America read very widely in the histories of Spanish America and New France, let alone of Dutch and Portuguese colonization. For example, few scholars in my field seemed to read David Brading’s *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492–1867* (1991). Yet its bold (and exception-

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*Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (London, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> But see the essays in Armitage and Braddick, eds., *British Atlantic World*.

<sup>15</sup> Two books that have received less attention among scholars of the north Atlantic than Patricia Seed’s and Anthony Pagden’s works are Peggy K. Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Network of Trade and Revolution, 1713–1826* (Baltimore, 1983); and Peggy K. Liss and Franklin Knight, eds., *Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650–1830* (Knoxville, 1991).



alist) title, not least, should have made us eager to grapple with his assertion that Spanish America's "creole patriots" were the first self-consciously American residents of the western Atlantic; Benedict Anderson conveyed the rudiments of this point to early Americanists who never bothered to read Brading. Only now, with Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's revival (and Atlanticization) of Brading's insights, are historians of the English colonies gaining some comprehension of the later history of Spanish America and seeing ideas (such as the Enlightenment) once thought to be exclusively northern European and north Atlantic as the products of a larger, southern, Atlantic world. Without more books like Cañizares's, much work on the non-Anglophone portions of the Americas will never have an impact on the field.<sup>16</sup>

Probably for these reasons, study of "borderlands" has largely filled the space that comparative colonialism used to occupy. Borderlands was originally the concept of Latin Americanists (principally Herbert E. Bolton) and still plays a part in Latin American history. Only recently, since the late 1980s, have scholars of Anglophone America taken up the topic, often as an adjunct to or a version of frontier history. Practitioners focus especially on areas occupied and often disputed by at least two different European powers, invariably the British and someone else. While the original model was a zone of Anglo-Spanish contact (a tradition that continues in the work of David J. Weber and others), areas of New France have recently been drawn into the picture. A prime example is Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991). The concept of borderlands now informs ideas of all frontiers, whether between European colonies or between colonists and Native Americans; the trend is best seen in the essays edited by Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830* (1998). Finally, ideas about borderlands (or frontiers) have even influenced Europeanists, as seen in Natalie Zemon Davis's *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (1995) and in Linda Colley's *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (2002).<sup>17</sup>

Study of borderlands, accordingly, has somewhat different goals than does comparative analysis of colonization or empires. While the former may be informed by some knowledge of imperial politics (and ideas of governance), that is no longer the main story. Instead, the social historian's focus on ordinary people and lived experience is the point, however much it is framed within larger political questions. To focus on a borderland, complicated though it might be, is to take a manageable chunk of comparative history, a very controlled experiment in comparative colonization, as it were.

Moreover, most studies of borderlands by scholars whose primary interest is the English colonies have stuck to geographies that would become parts of the United States; bordering Indians, French, and Spanish colonists matter because their lands

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Herbert E. Bolton, "The Epic of Greater America," *American Historical Review*, 38 (April 1933), 448–74; David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, 1992).

and descendants end up in the postrevolutionary republic. Such scholarship generally takes a continentalist view of American history. The continentalist view is apparent in Alan Taylor's *American Colonies* as well as Elizabeth Fenn's *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–82* (2001), in which events and populations once divided among different political and cultural groups are brought together in one narrative that is informed by knowledge of the creation of the United States. The approach is a bit misleading; the border populations in question had primary allegiances to Iroquoia, to the Sun King, to bureaucrats in Mexico City, to the pope—to nearly anything but English-speaking and American cultures. Bona fide Latin Americanists and scholars of New France (not to mention Latin Americans and Canadians) have reason to be irritated at this selective appropriation of their histories, which does not directly engage most literature on Latin America and Canada.

Again, exceptionalism creeps onstage, deeming non-Anglophone places and peoples as precursors to those of the United States and granting them a significance they may not have thought they needed. Thus, the borders that early American historiography has with the historiographies of the United States, Britain, and the other European colonizing powers have not (at least recently) significantly challenged the exceptionalist streak within the field; instead, early Americanists have navigated those borders to characterize people and highlight events that move us back to colonial history as staging place for the emergence of the United States.

In part, the tentativeness of connections between early American and British or imperial historiographies is due to early Americanists' slow reception of new methodologies, especially those belonging to cultural studies. Though the lag affects many of the issues I have addressed above, it has perhaps the deepest implications for questions about colonized populations and "hybrid" identities.

Though an increasing number of studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe are histories informed by theory (that is, they pay equal attention to specific events and to suprahistorical patterns), in the field of early America, scholars tend to do one or the other, rarely both. Certainly, many of my colleagues practice what a medievalist friend has affectionately labeled "regular guy history." It is not quite the old "maps and chaps" form of history, which implied a focus on the masculine arenas of military and high political events. The new version—I will call it the standard form of early American history—includes social history (and its focus on women). But the standard form focuses on concrete phenomena, statistically verifiable patterns, long-familiar events, and a mixture of extraordinary leaders and ordinary folk, and it does so with techniques (particularly narrative exposition, microhistory, and examination of political, legal, and economic records) that are by now beyond reproach. Theories from the social sciences remain influential, though they are subordinate to the construction of empirically verifiable narratives; the theory is in the footnotes, not the text. Moreover, younger social historians may no longer consciously register a debt to social science, as their elders did. These methods result in crucially important studies, and when applied to such groups as Native Americans

and African Americans, they give us vital analysis of still underexamined populations.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, an increasing number of younger scholars have gathered inspiration from cultural studies and now generate essays and monographs in which the theory is in the text as well as the footnotes: discourse, the body, the public sphere, ritual, and print culture are the commonest themes. Early Americanists interested in those things are thus proceeding mostly in parallel to non-Americanists, if slightly later, responding to work by French theorists (including Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault), cultural historians of the book (Robert Darnton and Elizabeth Eisenstein), Anglophone scholars of language and the body (Stephen Greenblatt and Thomas Laqueur), and theorists of the state and public sphere (Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas). That list is not exhaustive, but it includes the most frequent references for early Americanists who consciously approach their topics theoretically.

Sometimes their topics intersect with long-established questions in the field, as study of the public sphere contributes to political history, and study of print culture to religious history. Sometimes both the questions and methodologies are entirely new and therefore freestanding. But the lack of intersection with older topics reifies boundaries between scholarly generations and subfields. A graduate student interested in cultural studies would be lucky to have an encouraging (rather than disappointing) adviser but even luckier to have one conversant with the newer methods.

Fortunately, two affiliated scholarly societies can help escort scholars back and forth across boundaries between fields. Both the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) and the newer Society of Early Americanists (SEA) are interdisciplinary, more so than the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture (OIEAHC) and much more than the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic (SHEAR). There are other differences; SEA leans slightly toward literature, for example, and only ASECS is programatically multinational. But neither ASECS nor SEA has much patience with gimcrackery—both are excellent places to watch new questions and methods being tested before intelligent audiences. Nor are all members of the OIEAHC and SHEAR uninterested in new approaches, just skeptical about some of their applications. In fact, a test of a conference paper on early American history might be that it would succeed both at a conference that stresses the standard history and at one that values newer approaches. Is your treatment of ritualized political language in the early republic *really* convincing? How about your statistical analysis of post-1815 pencil sales in the southeastern states? Try presenting your paper at both SEA and SHEAR, and you will find out.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> I do not accept a distinction between “method” (the usual label for the older set of social science concepts) and “theory” (the name for the newer set of literary and cultural concepts); both have theoretical foundations, both recommend methodologies.

<sup>19</sup> Several panels at the first two conferences of the Society of Early Americanists (SEA), in 1999 and 2001, were devoted to literature exclusively, which is rarer at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) and almost unheard of at OIEAHC and Society of Historians of the Early American Republic (SHEAR) conferences, which offer interdisciplinary or exclusively historical panels. (But SEA has a focus on material culture and archaeology that the other organizations lack.) And because ASECS and SHEAR focus on the eighteenth century, that period is much better served with organizations and conferences than are earlier ones. SEA and the OIEAHC include the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but scholars of those periods who are interested in what Europeanists or Latin

In crossing the disciplinary boundary between history and the study of literature, historians have made revealing selections. The three figures most frequently cited by historians of early America are Jay Fliegelman, David S. Shields, and Michael Warner. Those scholars are best known for their work on revolutionary America and the early republic—again, the preference for more recent times is clear. Perhaps early American historians have recently shown interest in scholars of literature because those figures serve as surrogate intellectual historians. Intellectual history (outside the very specific subfields of political thought and of religion) having faded in the field, Fliegelman's, Shields's, and Warner's treatments of texts and ideas fill the vacuum. Nor do those three scholars give extremely theory-laden readings of their topics, at least not in their monographs, making their analyses more immediately usable by historians.<sup>20</sup>

It is in relation to the non-European populations of British America—Native American and African—that methodological questions have been trickiest. Ethnohistory, and now the new Indian history, have been two of the most important developments in early American history. Building on pioneering, if somewhat specialized and isolated, scholarship by Nancy Oestreich Lurie and Francis Jennings, James Axtell defined ethnohistory as the establishment of a true history of Indians, utilizing both the printed sources familiar to historians and ethnographic techniques less known to them. In Axtell's works, beginning with *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (1981) as well as in the journal *Ethnohistory*, early Americanists learned the new mandate that Indian histories were not lost but could be recovered and should be incorporated within the larger field. (In fact, Gary Nash's synthetic survey, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America*, 1974, had already showed how they might be incorporated.) Innovative monographs from James H. Merrell, Daniel J. Usner, and Daniel K. Richter revealed new insights, while Colin G. Calloway continued Francis Jennings's more insistent idiom, calling for radical reassessments of the Indian place in American history and society.<sup>21</sup>

But have such reassessments indeed occurred? Not as much as one might expect. The complexities of Native American societies elude many early Americanists; indeed, most ethnohistorians specialize in certain Indian language groups and regions, preferring this strategy over a broad-brush approach to multiple groups and areas. Still less are nonspecialists in early American history able to take on the range

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Americanists might be up to must look elsewhere. Scholars of the eighteenth century have the greatest choice, and those who wish to avoid talking to scholars of Europe or of cultural studies can still easily do so.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (New York, 1982); Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> See especially James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, 1989); Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill, 1992); and Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York, 1995).

of language groups, cultural patterns, alliances, and geographic shifts that would encompass all the Native Americans in contact with British settlers (let alone those in borderlands or beyond). Furthermore, the critical edge of some of the new Indian history, which categorizes colonization and colonies as insidious and which sees the Revolution and the creation of the United States as tragic developments, has had a limited impact. For those reasons, the earlier sections of Richard White's *Middle Ground* (on Native Americans' creativity and adaptation) may be more reassuring to readers than the later ones about the failure of the middle ground and the rise of the anti-Indian United States.

The methodological foundations of ethnohistory have proved resistant to newer theoretical approaches. Ethnohistory began in the mid-1980s, just as anthropology was beginning its shattering nervous breakdown: symptoms included loss of confidence in anthropology as a form of science, suspicion that the ethnologist's gaze was far from objective, conviction that European imperialism had fostered anthropology and infected it with racist and ethnocentric power relations. This skepticism affected several noteworthy historians' view of the past; Natalie Zemon Davis went so far as to call written records "fiction in the archives." Ethnohistorians, as if they were ethnologists out doing distant fieldwork, seem by and large not to have gotten news of these developments. Challenging anthropologists' skepticism, they continue to interrogate written, Euro-American sources in order to establish reasonable certainties about Indian cultures, actions, and intentions. It is also intriguing that the brief flurry of excitement in the early 1990s over theories of alterity (which presented Indians as "other" to Europeans) has since died, probably due to early Americanists' preference for studying Indians' own ideas rather than those of Europeans about Indians.<sup>22</sup>

Ethnohistorians have in the meantime taken up newer ideas of hybridity, though (contrary to the intentions of their inventors) these definitions have acquired a second and opportunistic life when applied to white colonists. The concept of cultural hybridity, which developed out of theories of creolization and interpretations of the colonized statuses of non-European peoples, has been discussed in early American history since the 1980s. Early Americanists first took up the idea to explain African Americans and Native Americans who had made adaptations to British colonization; in the 1980s *syncretism* was the term usually applied to cultural mixture, until theories of language introduced the term *hybridity* as a comparable concept. Hybrid peoples and cultures are still of interest to historians of Indians, for example, those inhabiting Richard White's middle ground, James Merrell's Shamokin, and James P. Ronda's praying towns. Yet ideas about cultural mixture and about colonial populations as intrinsically syncretic have inexorably pulled historians toward descriptions of white settlers, whose hybridity is presented as comparable to that of Indians. In large part, this is a welcome development—Indians' syncretism no longer seems like

<sup>22</sup> The high-water mark—and implied end—to ideas about "otherness" appeared in Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (New York, 1994). For a skeptical view of written sources, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987).



a powerless accommodation to European culture if we know that Europeans themselves adopted new cultural forms.<sup>23</sup>

But this move also tends to lavish renewed and theoretically energized attention on the population that needs it least: white settlers. In this way, many early Americanists are borrowing from the field of Indian history without taking on board its insistence that Indians, as well as settlers, need to be at the center of the story. Further, examining hybridity as the interesting handiwork of free, white residents of early America reasserts exceptionalism. In contrast to non-Americanist critics' presentation of hybridity as a dilemma and a temporary state, early Americanists present it as a positive accomplishment and a permanent "American" state, entering into the new tendency to reidentify the American past as multicultural and to see multiculturalism as a creative condition.<sup>24</sup>

Connections between the history of West Africa and of captive Africans in British America seem to have resisted this drift toward a positive variety of exceptionalism, doubtless because slavery is the fatal flaw in American history, difficult to reconcile with ideas of the United States (and thirteen colonies) as set apart from the fallen condition of the rest of the world. Indeed, if there is any truly Atlantic or transnational field in early American history, it is taking shape around the study of slavery. Developing the foundational work of Philip Curtin, such Africanists as John K. Thornton and Joseph C. Miller have established a bench-mark for this interpenetration of historiographies. Miller, particularly in *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (1988), has examined Africa in Atlantic perspective. Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (1992) and several of his essays likewise demonstrate the impossibility of studying only one side of the Atlantic. Touchstones of the African American experience in British America—such as the first documented shipment of African captives to Virginia in 1619 and the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739—now look significantly different because Thornton has told us about their African components, especially because his specificity about *which* African individuals and cultures contributed to those developments dispels the illusion of an undifferentiated African past. Most recently, David Eltis's *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (2000)

<sup>23</sup> On Indians' hybridity, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991); James H. Merrell, "Shamokin, 'the Very Seat of the Prince of Darkness': Unsettling the Early American Frontier," in *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830*, ed. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, 1998), 16–59; and James P. Ronda, "Generations of Faith: The Christian Indians of Martha's Vineyard," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 38 (July 1981), 369–94. On the colonist as Anglo-Indian hybrid, see Timothy J. Shannon, "Dressing for Success on the Mohawk Frontier: Hendrick, William Johnson, and the Indian Fashion," *ibid.*, 53 (Jan. 1996), 13–42; and Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 201–42. And on the colonist as a hybrid of European traditions, see Robert Blair St. George, "Massacred Language: Courtroom Performance in Eighteenth-Century Boston," in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, 2000), 327–56.

<sup>24</sup> For non-Americanist and ambivalent views of hybridity, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), 85–92; Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (New York, 1995); and Charles Stewart, "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture," *Diacritics*, 29 (no. 3, 1999), 40–62.



contributes to the transatlantic cross-fertilization by showing how the paradoxical juxtaposition of slavery and freedom can be applied to Africa as well as to America.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars of slavery in British America may lack those scholars' close expertise in West African history and languages, but their work exhibits a familiarity with Africa that was lacking in studies of early American slavery in the last generation. Michael Mullin's *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (1992) and Michael A. Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998) have examined the durability (and flexibility) of West African cultural forms in the western Atlantic. With even greater sophistication, Ira Berlin's and Philip Morgan's beautifully balanced readings of the African experience in the Atlantic world have made adept use of complex historiographies on both sides of the Atlantic. Berlin's attention to Africa's "Atlantic creoles" (Africans who were veterans of African-European encounters) and American "charter generations" (the first groups of slaves in key North American regions) gives us a nuanced view of generational and cultural Atlantic crossings. This scholarship makes it impossible to imagine interpreting captive Africans and African American slaves without knowing a great deal of African history.<sup>26</sup>

Historians in this subfield know and draw upon the research that scholars of literature are doing on Atlantic African texts, particularly those from the late eighteenth century. Much of this new emphasis takes its direction from Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), which makes the explicit case for crossings among cultural zones, including Britain. The narratives of Ottobah Cugano and Olaudah Equiano, the letters of Ignatius Sancho, and the poems of Phillis Wheatley have become essential sources for analysis of the black Atlantic. Historians have generally followed the cues of such literary scholars as Henry Louis Gates Jr. to understand what black authors may have been signifying, especially in defining an autonomous culture and offering a critique of Euro-American societies. Here, the conversation across historical fields is facilitated by attention to theory and literary analysis, in contrast to the much more selective conversation drawing on such methods between historians of early America and of Britain.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See John Thornton, "The African Experience of the '20. and Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 55 (July 1998), 421–34; and John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review*, 96 (Oct. 1991), 1101–13.

<sup>26</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (April 1996), 251–88.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984); Philip D. Morgan, "British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600–1780," in *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill, 1991), 157–219; Adam Portkay and Sandra Burr, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (New York, 1995); W. Jeffrey Bolster, "An Inner Diaspora: Black Sailors Making Selves," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, 1997), esp. 428, 434, 439; James Walvin, *An African's Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1747–1797* (Washington, 1998); Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 456–57, 581, 599, 632–33, 640.

New media (alongside monographs and articles) are also making the case for a black Atlantic history. Perhaps the most important nontextual resource is *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (1999), a decade-long project of Harvard University's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research that is now available from Cambridge University Press. The database is both a high-level tool for researchers and an innovative resource for teachers and students who have nonspecialized interest in the history of slavery. Utilizing the records of all documented Atlantic slaving ventures, the database contains an estimated two-thirds of such slaving voyages (a total of 27,233 ventures, from 1527 to 1866). This is the best statistical overview we have of the slave trade. The Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora at York University in Canada is presenting a project on the "Nigerian" hinterland that examines the diasporic dimension of African history.<sup>28</sup>

In these works—textual, historical, and new media—we can see the triumph of Melville J. Herskovits, who long ago postulated deep and persistent cultural connections between Africa and the Americas, a thesis long dismissed, then reintroduced by Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price in 1976, and now absolutely standard.<sup>29</sup> The Atlantic connects as much as it divides West Africa and post-Columbian America. The crossings between the fields are multiple and meaningful and have proven that transnational history is essential to understanding the past. Further, interpretations of African Americans have extended the Atlantic perspective into the nineteenth century—a rare instance. This achievement of a transborder historiography is striking. It also requires considerable specialization in order to produce meaningful studies in this realm. It is therefore all the more surprising that the boundary between the histories of Britain and of British America is solidier (even though the Anglo-American border presents many fewer linguistic and methodological difficulties than does the African-American one) and that the inclusion of Indians into early American history is much more tentative.

The black Atlantic has also informed several fictional representations of the past, both in print and on film. The imaginative reconstructions have, by and large, emphasized slave resistance and autonomy, giving ahistorical prominence to those factors and revealing that we may be trying to make the scar of slavery less apparent by dwelling on the black Atlantic's more uplifting moments. Two novels—Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* (1992) and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997)—represent the slave trade. The first concerns a slaving voyage that results in a united black-white revolt against the ship's captain and the establishment of a Florida maroon community; the latter is about a survivor of the 1781 *Zong* massacre (in which captain and crew threw sickened slaves overboard in order to realize a profit through insurance, an incident that became a key moment in the British antislavery movement). Both books re-created the contexts of slavery (and antislavery) in the late

<sup>28</sup> York/UNESCO Nigerian Hinterland Project <<http://yorku.ca/nhp/areas/nhp.htm>> (Dec. 10, 2002). See also David Eltis and David Richardson, eds., *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity, and Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (London, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, 1941); Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1976).

eighteenth century while creating events and intentions that could never be documented. At rather different points on the documentable-undocumentable continuum, the Equiano Foundation has made a documentary on Olaudah Equiano, and Steven Spielberg has produced the commercial film *Amistad* (1997) about the uprising on the slave ship of that name. Those films too made the black Atlantic the center of a reimagined past. While historians have been critical of some of the efforts (particularly Spielberg's), they have generally welcomed them, seeing them as generically different from, yet still informed by, what professional historians do.<sup>30</sup>

Scholarly contributions on the black Atlantic that appear to blur the genres of history and fiction (whether deliberately or not) have been far more troubling, however. For the most part, early American historians have ignored or strongly criticized Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), a performance theorist's interpretation of the impact of a death-permeated culture of slavery on the peoples of Africa, England, Louisiana—and beyond. Roach's interpretive leaps, his darker tone, and his insistence that customary performances (such as today's Mardi Gras parades) are, like written texts, viable clues to the past have been too unfamiliar and unsettling for historians to trust his approach or conclusions. For somewhat different reasons, the profession has by and large criticized Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh's *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000). This is a classic instance of a heartfelt but wrongheaded historical study; heartfelt because it rightly identifies the early modern Atlantic as fascinatingly polyglot and viciously exploitative, but wrongheaded because its "revolutionary Atlantic" (where exploitation created solidarity among disparate groups) was so hidden as to be nonexistent. The imaginative dimension of the black Atlantic, tolerated or even welcome in Unsworth, Spielberg, and Roach, has been questioned in Rediker and Linebaugh.

Recent debate over Olaudah Equiano has further shown the limits of shared understanding of the black Atlantic between historians and scholars of literature. The literary scholar Vincent Caretta's discovery of documents in which Equiano seemed to state that his birthplace was South Carolina (rather than the West Africa of his famous narrative) has raised questions about the meaning of "Africa" to his identity. While Caretta has pointed out that Equiano was an author, and that his text-based identities were creative personae presented to varying audiences, historians have been reluctant to accept those arguments. It remains to be seen whether Caretta's work is a conversation stopper, ending a pattern of unanimity among scholars of literature as

<sup>30</sup> Steven Spielberg has, unsurprisingly, received the lion's share of attention, Barry Unsworth less, and Fred D'Aguiar almost none, even though historians and scholars of African American studies put Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* and D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* on their syllabi. I wonder if they would assign works of history that had not been critically reviewed within the field. See Sean Wilentz, "The Mandarin and the Rebel," *New Republic*, Dec. 22, 1997, pp. 32–34; Fredrick Dalzell, "Dreamworking *Amistad*: Representing Slavery, Revolt, and Freedom in America, 1839 and 1997," *New England Quarterly*, 71 (March 1998), 127–33; Eric McKittrick, "JQA: For the Defense," *New York Review of Books*, April 23, 1998, pp. 53–58; John Thornton, "Liberty or Licence?," *History Today*, 48 (April 1998), 58–59; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, review of *Amistad*, *Journal of American History*, 85 (Dec. 1998), 1174–76; and Peter Hulme, "The Atlantic World of *Sacred Hunger*," *New Left Review* (no. 204, 1994), 138–44.

well as historians of Africa and early America, or whether it restarts the conversation in a significant and interesting way.<sup>31</sup>

It is possible that emerging interest in postcolonial studies—analysis of places and peoples formerly colonized by European powers and recovering from that colonization—might help redefine central topics in early American history and bring it into renewed and deeper dialogue with some of the older, national historiographies I discussed above. Certainly, British historians whose research gravitates toward imperial questions have another field—South Asia—that competes very effectively for their attentions. Classic studies of early British activity in India, as with the work of P. J. Marshall and of C. A. Bayly, have encouraged scholars of Britain to turn eastward toward Asia rather than west across the Atlantic. And the newer field of subaltern studies, which interrogates relations among unequals in colonial settings, gives all scholars important new ways to conceive of the encounter between colonizer and colonized. Here is where theory could provide a lingua franca for scholars of imperialism, underpinning new comparative studies about colonial relations (among populations within colonized areas) and imperial relations (between a colonizing European state and colonial peoples). Early Americanists' ideas about such relations have apparently been less influential than those of South Asianists—ethnohistory, particularly, has not yet made the impact outside the Americanist field that postcolonial theory has outside South Asian and African histories.<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, this transimperial conversation would present certain difficulties. Careful translation would be necessary. This is nowhere more the case than in comparisons between South Asia and early America. Subaltern studies and postcolonial theory present exciting opportunities for early Americanists to rethink and refine their conceptions of the politics and culture of colonialism in British America. Yet British India and early America were very different places, and not all of postcolonial theory is applicable to the latter. The biggest difference is between the relevant populations. In India, a minority—a tiny minority—of Britons claimed sovereignty over huge South Asian populations; in British America, Britain (which sent a small number of imperial officials overseas) claimed sovereignty over an ever-growing population of white Creoles, African American slaves, and Native Americans—the latter the only true counterpart to the peoples subject to British authority in India, but whose numbers paled in comparison.

Above all, and as several non-Americanists have already pointed out, the *label* postcolonial makes little sense as a description of the United States, since the Revolution removed British *imperialism* only, not white *colonization* in America. The colonizing population left India by the midpoint of the twentieth century, but outside Nunavut (the semiautonomous First Nations' province recently created in arctic Canada), it still has not left North America. To apply the label postcolonial to the

<sup>31</sup> For the most recent work on black-authored texts, see Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould, eds., *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic* (New York, 2001); and Vincent Carretta, "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa: New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery and Abolition* (Ilford), 20 (no. 3, 1999), 96–105.

<sup>32</sup> P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead: Eastern India, 1740–1828* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987); C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989).

white settlers who made themselves independent of Britain is again to fetishize their experience as the center of North American history. (It may also demonstrate the paucity of Native American voices in the academy.) Independent Americans were postimperial, not postcolonial, and attention to the differing conditions in South Asia and North America would discourage the valorizing of accomplishments linked with one racial group that, if anything, continued the colonial legacy of the imperial era. Indeed, the United States probably never had a nonimperial moment, given that it made the Louisiana Purchase (and opened its “empire of liberty”) in 1803, even before the British finally relinquished aspirations to regain a foothold below Canada in 1815, with the Treaty of Ghent. In failing to take on the complex nature of postcolonial theory *or* by using the term postcolonial broadly, early Americanists will variously assert the myth of American exceptionalism: the triumphal view of American history and the focus on white settlers as heroes who overcame the British Empire.<sup>33</sup>

Is it more remarkable that exceptionalism survives despite early Americanists’ borrowing from other fields, or that they do so much borrowing despite the prevailing exceptionalism in their field? It is the combination of both expansion and exceptionalism in early American history that seems so paradoxical. But I want to encourage my colleagues to continue the borrowing and lending, and to ask historians of the United States to pay attention when such activities make early Americanists veer sharply away from exceptionalist interpretations.

I think that discussions of colonialism and postcolonialism may offer an important way for early Americanists to avoid parochialism and to engage American history in a global debate. The story of the twentieth century, and now of the twenty-first century, is that of decolonization; when W. E. B. Du Bois referred to the problem of the twentieth century being the problem of the color line, he referred to one aspect of the then as-yet-unbegun work of decolonization. But this is a global concern and global discussion, one that the United States shares with the rest of the world. Early Americanists have the opportunity, perhaps even the obligation, to help define the discussion—after all, the eras we study are those when the non-European world began to be divided into European colonies, and the place we study was one stupendously successful example of that colonizing process. If the world is now disassembling these colonial relations, we should be able to help explain how and why they were so assembled.

In short, to winkle out what is or is not distinctive about early America, much more consciously comparative work would be necessary. For a start, it would be interesting to have a four-way conversation among historians of Britain, early Ameri-

<sup>33</sup> For criticism of imprecise use of the term “postcolonial,” see Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” *Social Text* (nos. 31–32, 1992), 84–98; Peter Hulme, “Including America,” *Ariel*, 26 (Jan. 1995), 117–23; and Stuart Hall, “When Was ‘the Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London, 1996), esp. 245. For more inclusive definitions of “postcolonial,” see Robert Blair St. George, “Introduction,” in *Possible Pasts*, ed. St. George; Peter Hulme, “Postcolonial Theory and Early America: An Approach from the Caribbean,” *ibid.*; and Michael Warner, “What’s Colonial about Colonial America?,” *ibid.*

canists, South Asianists, and scholars of the black Atlantic. They study populations that were in contact (via the British Empire) in the past—why not have a conference panel on precisely this? I volunteer Linda Colley, Richard White, Gyan Prakash, and Paul Gilroy for the job.

To avoid privileging theories of colonial power derived from South Asia and Africa, however, early Americanists might want to take an even broader view of the legacy of colonialism. The legal field that examines indigenous rights—comparing the United States against Canada, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand—would give critical content to interpretations of the continuing significance of the American colonial past. A conference panel on indigenous rights, this one with Robert Williams (on the Americas) in dialogue with James Tully (on Canada), Henry Reynolds (Australia), and J. G. A. Pocock (New Zealand), would be a fascinating exercise.

Between the two panels, we would have a pretty full range of comparative angles—an expansion of the field, indeed—and a tough atmosphere for exceptionalist interpretations. I would love to attend those panels, and if you find me in the audience and I am indeed running the pool on the total number of book titles in my field, you can place your bet with me.