

## [The Old South in the New West: Southern Expansionism and Empire Building in the American Borderlands](#)

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**Chair:** Stacey Smith, Oregon State University

**Panelists:**

- Stacey Smith, Oregon State University
- Andrew Torget, University of North Texas
- William Deverell, University of Southern California
- Maria Angela Diaz, Utah State University
- Kevin Waite, Durham University

Between roughly 1800 and 1860, an expanding United States acquired or seized huge swaths of territory across North America, thrusting numerous borderland communities and residents into the midst of a contest over the future of slavery in the nation. Slavery advocates, for their part, deployed a number of strategies for pushing an agenda that would both ensure the spread of the institution into these new lands and guard against prohibitive national legislation. This panel explores those multifarious methods and tactics, which ranged from lobbying territorial legislatures to outright filibustering. Too often, however, the literature on slavery and southern interest in the Trans-Mississippi West focuses heavily on familiar debates in Congress and their consequences for eastern politics. In contrast, this panel will reorient the conversation to the western battlegrounds themselves to consider local conditions and discussions about the viability of slavery. In doing so, it will demonstrate how established communities in these far-flung lands confronted southern expansionism and shaped or molded it to their advantage. Southern dreams of empire ultimately hinged on the ability of advocates to navigate the whirlwind of competing nation-states, local elites, and various interest groups in the American borderlands. The southern impetus to see slavery proliferate arguably drove U.S. territorial growth during this period, but western interests determined whether those efforts succeeded or, more often than not, fizzled.

In roundtable format, this panel brings together scholars at different stages in their careers to discuss particular cases of pro-slavery expansionism. Each presentation will move the view westward, beginning with Texas, shifting toward the continental interior, and concluding on the Pacific coast. Maria Angela Diaz argues that southerners in the Gulf South embraced Texas as a model and staging ground for expansionist ventures into Latin America, challenging typical geographic conceptualizations of the South, Southwest, and Gulf of Mexico as distinct regions. Similarly, the movement of Anglo-American cotton farmers into Coahuila y Tejas in the 1820s sparked heated debates over slavery in northeastern Mexico that, according to Andrew Torget, culminated in an independent Texas. Matthew Saionz, in turn, explores how the Republic of Texas worked to secure an “empire” of its own during the early 1840s when its leaders aimed to enforce territorial claims in New Mexico and gain control of the Santa Fe trade. Taking us further westward, Kevin Waite contextualizes the pro-slavery, separatist movements of Arizona and California during the 1850s to consider the numerous ways that antebellum partisans attempted to remake the North American map for slaveholding interests. Stacey Smith argues that southern migrants in California, hoping to contest free soil ideology in the gold mines, pursued other benefits from taking slaves to the Pacific

Coast that did not rely on successfully establishing the institution there. To conclude, William Deverell will discuss how Civil War veterans looked upon the West as convalescent space, even as it reverberated with sectional tensions. Collectively, this roundtable offers new perspectives on the interplay of slavery and U.S. expansion and emphasizes the contingency of southern empire-building in the context of borderland politics.

*Recorded in April 2018 at the OAH Annual Meeting held in Sacramento, California as part of the Mellon-funded Amplified Initiative.*

**Full Session**

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