

[Fortney on Strang, 'Frontiers of Science: Imperialism and Natural Knowledge in the Gulf South Borderlands, 1500-1850'](#)

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Cameron B. Strang. *Frontiers of Science: Imperialism and Natural Knowledge in the Gulf South Borderlands, 1500-1850.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 376 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-4047-1.

Reviewed by Jeff Fortney (Florida Gulf Coast University) **Published on** H-AmIndian (June, 2020)
Commissioned by F. Evan Nooe (University of North Carolina, Charlotte)

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Contested Knowledge and Empire in the Gulf South

Cameron Strang's captivating study *Frontiers of Science* challenges long-standing historical consensus on the relationship between knowledge creation and empire in early America. After discovering a series of "seemingly bizarre" stories from diverse characters—African herbalists who recounted "mutilation, magic, and monsters, European men of science, spies, pirates, and indigenous shamans"—Strang realized that such accounts only appeared odd because of flaws in existing historical frameworks (p. 6). By exploring these stories across imperial, cultural, and linguistic lines, Strang's work uncovers a lost intellectual world centered in the Gulf South from Spanish contact through the American early republic. These borderlands contained a rich, vibrant, and enduring intellectual life, systematically connected to the Atlantic empires but typically absent from intellectual histories of colonial America.

While most existing narratives hinge on East Coast Anglo elites reacting to British colonialism, and later exporting the concepts of liberty and democracy, Strang drags the focus into the Gulf South to demonstrate that American intellectual history involved "a more diverse set of actors than Anglos, a more diverse set of practices than those we would comfortably call scientific, and more emphasis on continuities between the colonial and national era" (pp. 6-7). Here, encounters between disparate peoples of shifting loyalties shaped the production, circulation, and application of natural knowledge within contested regions "and, more broadly, spread them throughout the empires and nations competing for them" (p. 12). Moreover, as the United States pushed out competing empires, they continued the same methods of imperialism, inequality, and violence—with added doses of hardened racial hierarchies—in order to gain useful knowledge and additional control of the continent.

Strang organizes his study in a loose chronology, mostly through the lens of his unique cast of characters and case studies. The book is filled with largely forgotten figures not normally associated with science, like Barthélémy Lafon, a French-born Louisiana slave-trader and cartographer who served with Andrew Jackson at New Orleans and turned to pirates for patronage when US and Spanish officials eventually cut ties, or plantation owner William Dunbar, who manipulated transnational webs of patronage and exploited slave labor "to study nature, gain political influence ...

and build connections with eastern officials and institutions” (p. 192). Stranger still is the case of Thomas Power, a naturalist born of Irish parents on the Canary Islands who spied for Spain and fomented resistance to American expansion in exchange for Spain patronizing Power’s scientific ventures. Power eventually found himself testifying at Aaron Burr’s treason trial, lost access to needed patronage, and had his findings co-opted by others. Strang uses these little-known figures to showcase the many “white, black, and native inhabitants who applied natural knowledge toward challenging the United States,” and therefore were “just as much a part of the republic’s intellectual world as patriots whose scientific work promoted its aggrandizement” (p. 177).

The first two chapters introduce the ways that early Spanish, French, and British imperialism impacted observation and experimentation from the early 1500s to the late 1700s. Natives and Euro-Americans alike sought natural knowledge and valued the ability to obtain or create information in similar ways. In their mutual new world, Natives and Europeans understood that knowledge was power and sought it through exchange, competition, and violence. Native leaders in the Gulf South regularly patronized Euro-American priests who had access to unobtainable knowledge, in many cases preferring them over Native shamans. Imperial competition among Euro-Americans in turn created a need for maps containing Native knowledge of geographic features and competing peoples. Yet overall weakness caused Euro-American empires to depend on marginal, self-interested figures like Francois Le Maire and Lamhatty to provide information, often resulting in failed attempts to grasp culturally centered, natural knowledge. This pattern served as precedent once the aspiring American empire entered the scene.

Challenging previously accepted notions of Spanish irrelevance and ineffectiveness by 1800 in the Gulf South, the second section of the book explores intellectual contestation in astronomy and other disciplines between American and Spanish empires. The messiness of the Gulf South’s “international and interethnic relationships” constantly complicated simple narratives of firm borderlines or American hegemony (p. 131). Examples abound. Take, for instance, the 1798 joint effort by the United States and Spain to make astronomical observations to chart the line between nations. Both nations flaunted their astronomical abilities and used them to promote national pride. Both also hired British-born men to lead their expeditions and relied heavily upon enslaved labor to make the journey. The expedition ultimately failed, though, when Creeks and Seminoles stepped in to disburse invaders on their territory. The persistence of geopolitical competition therefore shaped what knowledge could be found and highlighted the weakness of asserted US rule in Native North America.

From these lesser-known stories, Strang turns to better plowed ground of debates over ethnography, polygenesis, race, slavery, and Removal in the 1820s and 1830s. American expansion with the Louisiana Purchase and potential for a cotton kingdom motivated a scientific shift toward notions of innate Native and African inferiority. American scientific communities purged themselves of nonwhites and largely embraced phrenology and polygenesis as a means of justifying their dominance over other groups. Men like Dr. Rush Nutt embraced uniformitarianism within the field of geology to argue for expanding plantation slavery, protecting the Enlightenment, and against “spreading the disease of Christianity from its epicenter in New England into the South” (p. 275). Likewise, Americans who had once believed that they could learn from natural knowledge possessed by Natives flipped and argued instead for insurmountable Native deficiencies. These arguments shaped debates over Indian Removal and the Seminole Wars, both of which provided Gulf South scientists with access

to numerous bodies to continue their studies.

Nonetheless, Strang adeptly reveals considerable resistance from free black and Native people, creole scientists, and even some American skull collectors and planters who disputed notions of innate Anglo superiority. Lingering American rhetoric about uplifting peoples and memories of Spanish colonial society all shaped Gulf South inhabitants' efforts to resist the changes wrought by US imperialism. For instance, Native men of science flaunted their advances in education while selectively embracing notions of their own racial superiority over African peoples in efforts to keep power over their territories. The Choctaws also opened the famed Choctaw Academy, a secular boarding school that taught an advanced science curriculum to the upcoming generation of Native leadership.

Strang constantly returns to a central argument about the role of violence in both American expansion and knowledge formation. Some of these connections are expected, such the relationship between emergent racial ideology and the pillaging of protected burial grounds following Indian Removal and the Seminole Wars. Others, like connecting chattel slavery to the well-known geohistorical discoveries in Mobile, Alabama, are quite novel. It was not state-sponsored patronage that allowed renowned geologist Timothy Abbott Conrad to become an expert on paleontology but rather the largesse of plantation scientist Charles Tait and the forced labors of the enslaved people he owned. These connections complicate comfortable narratives about the history of science in the early republic, often dragging the reader to less comfortable but more comprehensive conclusions. What emerges is a "messy history" as opposed to a typical "clean narrative" (p. 13).

Strang is both consistent and direct in making interventions into various historiographies, including those concerning intellectual history, borderlands, race, slavery, and Removal. The broad reach as well as the innovative nature of the argument will certainly make this requisite reading for experts in these fields. Strang's approach of placing unique mini biographies at the center of his narrative will also make this an attractive option for graduate and advanced undergraduate students. Strang's numerous stories, as well as the footnotes and bibliography, reflect the exhaustive and downright impressive scope of his research in primary and secondary sources alike.

Yet, for a study that repeatedly returns to the role of diversity in knowledge formation, women are rarely, if ever, included. Also, Gulf South Native individuals receive less attention than one would hope. For instance, Strang focuses exclusively on Choctaws when addressing Removal. Yet, curiously, he opts against exploring Choctaws James McDonald, a board-certified attorney who certainly fits Strang's broadened definition of a man of science, and Dr. John Riddle, a man who shaped medicine and led a revolt at Choctaw Academy. Both men would have added to Strang's argument. These exclusions notwithstanding, Strang largely succeeds in recovering important voices, many of them non-Anglos, in shaping and contesting knowledge from early contact through the early republic.

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