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“Empire and the Early Republic.”

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Part of the globalization of U.S. history has meant rethinking exceptionalist narratives of the American past, including those of the Revolution and the Early Republic that focused on the rejection of empire and those that have set 1898 as the start date for the ‘imperial era’ of American history. Increasingly, historians of the Early Republic have questioned this characterization of their period of study and that chronology of American empire and imperialism. In fact, it almost seems that empire has become something of a trend in early nineteenth-century American history. Prize committees, dissertations, conference panels, books, and articles all reveal historians of the nineteenth century to be in an empire state of mind.

Empire is more than just a buzzword, though. The historians working on the theme of empire in the early nineteenth century have helped to shift our understanding of early American history while contributing to important discussions of the shape, chronology, and form of American imperialism and empire. These are important questions, not least because the questions of whether the United States is or was an empire and, if so, of what sort continue to haunt not only our history but our present politics. For this reason, historians outside of the Early Republic ought to be paying attention to these developments. The Early Republic is a particularly significant moment for this discussion not only because of the traditional use of 1898 as a turning point in the story of American imperialism. More importantly, the Early Republic was an era in which the American people sought to determine the implications of their revolution for their political and cultural lives. They cast aside their colonial status within the British Empire and found themselves attempting to make something new. In so doing, they both rejected and emulated imperial and colonial forms with results that are instructive to historians who try to understand the American relationship to empire.

These Early-Republic scholars are trying to make sense of how the United States was both imperialist and anti-imperialist in the decades after the American Revolution, and how a nation forged in the overthrow of the British Empire emerged to express its own

version of imperialism quite quickly after independence. These studies have the potential to change our understanding of American empire, not only by extending the chronology to the decades before 1898, but also by demanding attention to language. By tracing the history of American ideas about and practices of empire, colonialism, and imperialism to the Early Republic, these authors are rewriting some of the traditional narratives of the early American Republic and antebellum America. Urging American historians to think about empire and colonialism more seriously in their work, Ann Stoler has asked if “these terms seem forced because they have been made to not fit, because historical actors refused the term *empire* while practicing its tactics.”¹ This observation sets the framework for much of the recent scholarship of the imperial Early Republic. The task is to unpack the meaning of a post-colonial republic’s colonialism.

Defining Our Terms

These developments come in multiple chronological directions. On the one hand, the discussion of empire in the first half of the nineteenth century seems to be the shifting of chronology of empire backwards from 1898 into the early nineteenth century. What happened at that important turning point, historians of the early nineteenth century want to say, did not come out of nowhere. The imperial impulse of the turn of the century was present much earlier, even in activities that have previously been treated as having been primarily continental. Expansion, that continental mobility that seemed to make America’s fate distinct from other Western powers, these historians remind us, was itself a colonial and imperial process.² 1898 seems less of a complete divergence from the earlier period of American history when we think this way. 1846 becomes a more important date, as does 1830, 1820, 1816, 1812, and even 1787.

Just as we are moving one timeline backwards, the early nineteenth-century also seems to be responding to the move within early American history to expand the chronology (and geography) of the colonial era further into the nineteenth century. For example, Alan Taylor’s rightfully celebrated survey of the colonial period, *American Colonies*, extends its chronology to 1820. Colonial America is no longer just the pre-history of the United States; no longer does it make sense to think about colonial America primarily as (only) the thirteen British colonies on mainland North America that would declare their independence in 1776. Spain, France, the Netherlands, and even Russia are important players for Taylor, as of course are the many Native American groups living throughout North America. This is the result of an interest in telling the story of colonial America as something other than the pre-history of the American Revolution. Even accepting a ‘colonial America’ defined by the future United States requires an extended chronology

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Intimidations of Empire,” in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

² Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, for example, use the United States and Russia as joint examples of “empires across continents” in their comparative study of empires. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), chapter 8

and geography to include the stories of the colonization of all of the land that would eventually be incorporated into the United States. If Taylor does not end his narrative here in the story of the United States as an empire, he does situate its history in much more complex and long-ranging imperial conflicts than general surveys of the colonial era have previously done. The result, for historians of the Early Republic, is a new set of questions that de-center the national in their narratives and ask about the ways that colonialism and empires remained an important part of the history of North America even after the Revolution.³

These two different chronological impulses introduce two different types of terminology. The pre-history of 1898 encourages us to talk about American *empire*, while the long colonial era encourages the language of *colonialism*. The former inspires visions of a strong central state, seemingly demanding an exploration of the formation and nature of the United States' central government.⁴ The later term suggests processes of extractive settlement and incorporation. *Imperialism* is used as well, in both its political and cultural meanings. The result can seem like a lack of precision in historians' use of terms that demands attention, particularly in light of traditional historiography's emphasis on the anti-imperialism of this century. The weakness of the state during the Early Republic can lead to assumptions about the impossibility of American empire in this period that can distract from examinations of imperial culture and colonial practices. Part of the challenge facing historians of the Early Republic, and one that they are rising to, is addressing these questions of terminology and categorization of empire in American politics and culture.

The shadow of the British Empire stands over the use of all of these terms for early Americanists and has the potential to limit our understanding of empire for the United States. Real differences between the British and American experiences can lead to the question of whether these imperial terms are appropriate here. The contiguous nature of the early American empire stands in clear contrast, of course, to the overseas reach of the British Empire. The incorporation of that land (if not always the people who lived on it) into the United States created distinct issues in the American case that do not easily match the experiences of the British East India Company in Bengal, for example. The 'new imperial historians' working on British culture have shown the British Empire to have had significant impacts on metropolitan culture in ways that are not as immediately clear early in the American case.⁵ And so some might ask if this is a case of

³ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001). Jack Greene, too, has emphasized this point to early Americanists. Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 64, No. 2 (April 2007): 235-250

⁴ On the creation of the American state, see Brian Bahlog, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Max M. Edling, *A Revolution in Favor of Government: Origins of the U.S. Constitution and the Making of the American State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵ There are several excellent collections that examine these metropolitan cultural effects of British imperialism. See for example: Catharine Hall, *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the*

historians introducing language and concepts that are more attuned to our own time than to the past. But looking at this research, we might instead ask if historians are in fact naming political, cultural, and economic dynamics that have been overlooked and that need careful analysis. As historians note, for all the differences between the British and American experiences, there are also real similarities that demand attention.⁶ Recognizing that something does not need to look exactly like the British Empire to count as imperial, we can notice the different types of imperialism (and, indeed, anti-imperialism) that did exist in nineteenth century America.

One thing is clear: the language of empire is in fact evident in Early Republican writings about the new United States. The eagle, the designers of the Great Seal of the United States explained, “is a symbol of empire.”⁷ Timothy Dwight, Congregationalist minister and president of Yale University, described the United States as “the greatest empire the hand of time ever raised up to view.”⁸ Early Republicans, then, used the word ‘empire’ to describe their country. What is less clear, however, is what they meant when they used the word. Did empire mean the same thing to them as it does to us in the twenty-first century? Was it merely a convenient synonym for nation-state? Was it the opposite of a republic? An engine of oppression? Just a way of describing a large polity? When Early Republicans used the language of empire, in other words, did they mean the same things that we do today when we use those words? Are we even entirely sure what we mean ourselves? In recent years, as scholars of the Early Republic have been answering the questions of the global turn, they have begun to find some new answers to these questions.

Thomas Jefferson has given us the beautiful, if vexing, turn of phrase ‘empire of liberty’ to describe his early vision for the future of the new American republic. For Early Republic scholars interested in these questions, this is a term to contend with, its power perhaps most evident in the handful of surveys of the period in recent years that have used it, or variations of it, in their titles to describe the American experience more

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Taylor and Francis: 2000); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). It is partly this historiographical intervention that Ann Stoler suggests bringing to the United States in *Haunted by Empire*. For an American monograph that follows this development, though for a later period, see Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁶ For a comparison of the British and American empires that questions the extent of the distinctions between the two, see Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

⁷ Quoted in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p.5 note 7

⁸ Quoted in Smith-Rosenberg, 207

generally.⁹ What did Jefferson mean? Was America to be an empire? What would an empire of *liberty* look like?

Peter Onuf seeks to answer these questions in both *Jefferson's Empire* and his entry in Jay Sexton and Ian Tyrrell's new volume on anti-imperialism. In these pieces, Onuf explains the ways that Jefferson combined an "imperial vision" for the United States with a commitment to republicanism and the nation.¹⁰ For the patriots-turned-citizens, the meaning of 'empire' itself was not forever altered by the tyranny of George III and his Parliament, evidenced by the power of 'empire of liberty' as a framework for thinking about the role of the United States. For Onuf, nation and empire were not incompatible, binary terms, but rather deeply linked. The problem that the colonists identified with the British Empire was that they could not fully experience their rights and liberties as Britons. Nationhood was the way to claim and enact these rights. As he explains, "nation and empire thus were hardly incompatible terms for Revolutionary Americans; indeed, nationhood was meaningless outside of the context of empire, as colonial Americans understood it, or of the federal union, its successor."¹¹

Much of the difficulty in describing America in the early nineteenth century as an empire or its international political orientation as imperial is the legacy of exceptionalism. As Onuf points out, as exceptionalist arguments wane within the academy, historians have become better able to notice "the legacies of imperial practices as well as ideas about empire in the early American republic."¹² Empire is not a label that we now apply inappropriately. Instead, without the blinders of exceptionalism we are better able to identify the imperialism that did exist in the Early Republic. We can identify the settler colonialism of westward expansion, point to the imperialism and colonialism of Americans in Hawaii and Liberia, and examine the ways that Americans both rejected *and emulated* the British Empire in their own state and cultural formations.

Exceptionalism, however, is not only a blinder that historians wear. Americans of the past also claimed an exceptional status for their nation, and this exceptionalism frequently meant an opposition to European empires. Thus Americans of the nineteenth century (and later generations) could invoke anti-imperialist arguments,

⁹ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Reynolds, *America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

¹⁰ Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), quotation on 1; Peter Onuf, "Imperialism and Nationalism in the Early American Republic," in Jay Sexton and Ian Tyrrell, eds., *Empire's Twin: U.S. Anti-Imperialism from the Founding Era to the Age of Terrorism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Onuf, "Imperialism and Nationalism," 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

even while advocating policies and actions that resemble imperialism and colonialism. This resulted in what William Appleman Williams referred to as “imperial anticolonialism,” a useful framework for unpacking the meaning of the ‘empire of liberty’ and other Early Republican modes of talking about empires.¹³ The early nineteenth-century essays in Ian Tyrrell and Jay Sexton’s *Empire’s Twin* by Peter Onuf, Jay Sexton, and Jeffrey Ostler all examine this dynamic.¹⁴ Tyrrell and Sexton argue that anti-imperialism, like empire, is a subject deserving of closer attention by American historians. The essays concerning the period under study do indeed provide new insights into the meaning of anti-imperialism in the Early Republic. Rather than being a taken-for-granted aspect of American foreign relations, it is examined as a stance that demands explanation and that could mean different things when expressed by different people.

American anti-imperialism in the Early Republic was incredibly useful in buttressing arguments for territorial expansion. Claiming new lands for white settlers from Native Americans was an important goal of the early United States. Indeed, for some Americans it was frustration with the Proclamation Line of 1763 and the image of Britain’s clamp against colonial expansion that led to support of independence in the first place. With the era of the Early Republic, though, this expansion was framed as anti-colonial. Because it was a rejection of the British Empire, though, does not mean that it was a rejection of empire as such. Accepting the anti-colonial terminology as representing the historical reality focuses only on white Americans as the subjects of (British) empire and ignores the Native Americans who would become the subject of American empire. As Jay Sexton and other historians rightly emphasize, the only way to understand territorial expansion as anything other than colonialism requires us to ignore the presence of Native American groups who occupied the space of America’s shifting frontier.¹⁵ Such a process of ignoring is greatly aided by Jefferson’s concept of the ‘empire of liberty’ and attention to the Northwest Ordinance as a tool of expansionist statecraft. In this model, expansion could look anti-colonial because new territory would not be treated as a colony. In drastic contrast to European colonial forms, new colonies would be incorporated into the United States itself, where after a period of territorial status all new lands would become states, equal to all other states in the American Union. If the federal union was the “republicanized version of imperialism,” as Onuf has described it, then its members had an equality that was

¹³ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, new edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972), chapter 1.

¹⁴ Jay Sexton and Ian Tyrrell, eds., *Empire’s Twin: U.S. Anti-Imperialism from the Founding Era to the Age of Terrorism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Jay Sexton, “‘The Imperialism of the Declaration of Independence’ in the Civil War Era,” in Sexton and Tyrrell, *Empire’s Twin*. On the need to include Native Americans in U.S. history, see Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O’Brien, Nancy Shoemaker, and Scott Manning Stevens, eds., *Why You Can’t Teach United States History without American Indians* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

unique among other imperial forms around the world.¹⁶ This was how the empire of liberty would work, and it is how Americans of the Early Republic could act as imperialists while claiming anti-imperialist motives. Part of the answer to the question of whether the United States was an empire in the Early Republic, then, depends upon whether you are looking west or east, or if you can tell both stories at once. For it is by bringing together the American experience in North America with the Americans' experience of European empires that we begin to see the nature of American imperialism.

Anglo-American Empire/European Models

The continued relationship between the United States and Great Britain after the Revolution has been an important field of study for some Early Republican scholars interested in thinking about American empire. In many ways, the British Empire provided (and, it could be argued, continues to provide) the model by which Americans understood all empires, including their own. The British Empire, though, provided many examples of different imperial modes, some of which Americans were eager to embrace.

In the decades after the American Revolution, Americans often invoked the history of that empire as they worked to describe their nation and its role on the global stage. The Revolution, with its overthrow of British colonial rule, marked the emergence of the American nation. As Onuf describes, this emergence of America out of the ashes of empire has given us the “fundamentally mistaken and misleading” understanding of the Early Republic as an essentially anti-imperial nation.¹⁷ In fact, the word ‘empire’ at the time had a very flexible definition, allowing Americans of the Early Republic to be deeply critical of the British Empire without necessarily rejecting the potential of empire to be a positive governmental form. As revolutionary historians have suggested, the Revolution was not inherently anti-imperial. The imperial crisis that led to American independence was an argument about what empires ought to be and how they ought to be governed. The Revolution marked a transformation in the meaning of empire, for Britons as well as Americans. In the eighteenth century, both American colonists and Britons subscribed to a broad definition of imperial membership, embracing colonists and metropolitans alike as benefitting from the imperial connection. As the century progressed, however, the British increasingly challenged this idea, adopting instead an understanding of empire as a tool for “national grandeur.”¹⁸ The British Empire, in this understanding, was British because it benefited Britain, not because its subjects were British. Britons accordingly emphasized the distance and differences between colony and metropole, even as Americans focused on similarities

¹⁶ Onuf, “Imperialism and Nationalism,” 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

and connections. The anti-imperialism of the Revolution, Onuf argues, is an opposition to this understanding of empire, rather than an opposition to empire itself.¹⁹

Within British imperial historiography, the American Revolution has provided a transitional moment dividing the 'First' British Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the 'Second' of the nineteenth and twentieth. As Maya Jasanoff has argued, the Revolution and the Loyalists themselves were instrumental to reshaping colonial forms in the decades after the creation of the United States. The "spirit of 1783," as she calls it, transformed the empire as the questions about imperial governance that brought American revolutionaries to challenge British authority continued to frustrate colonial subjects elsewhere in the empire.²⁰

With this understanding of the Revolution as a war about empire, rather than a war against empire, we can make more sense of those Americans who spent the final decades of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth attempting to claim their nation's role as the proper inheritor of Britain's global role. It has been easy to ignore this group, largely because they were so unsuccessful in taking on that global role, and because their continental successes have been reframed as domestic, rather than international, history. The global weakness of the Republic, though, should not prevent us from noticing the ways that some Americans had ambitions of recreating the British example and enacting their own visions of what a proper, liberty-spreading empire would look like.

One of the most exciting examinations of this dynamic of weakness and ambition is Kariann Yokota's *Unbecoming British*.²¹ Yokota uses post-colonialism to describe the early United States and reorient our discussion of this period to focus on the ways that American global and national ambitions were shaped in the shadows of the British Empire. For all of its history of independence gained through the rejection of colonial status, there has been little interest in describing the early United States as post-colonial. Post-colonial theory has seemed potentially inappropriate to describe the early years of a country that eventually emerged as a global super-power and even in its infancy showed evidence of imperial ambitions. Yet Yokota's work has suggested some

¹⁹ On the British Empire and the American Revolution, see P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage, 2012); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

²⁰ Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

²¹ Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

of the potential of this framework for understanding the political and economic dynamics of the first half of the nineteenth century.

One example of this potential can be found in Yokota's argument concerning maps. While Americans took great pride in the vastness of their empire, they were yet a weak republic without an international reputation. Americans abroad—particularly merchants wanting to be taken seriously in the Canton trade now that they did not fly under the British flag—needed maps to demonstrate the importance of their nation to foreigners. Yet the United States, Yokota points out, did not have the tools to make these maps. These important documents of Early Republican independence were in fact produced in England. Even as Americans articulated their new strength as an independent nation with a vast territory, they revealed their dependence as a former colony. The Early Republic here becomes an era of attempts like this to claim equality with Britain in terms of culture, economics, and global influence in the face of many real limitations. There were many things that the United States could not do in the Early Republic period. American experiences with the Barbary States are telling. Independence meant the loss of British protection there, the imposition of expensive bounties that made up a heavy proportion of the federal budget, and a new threshold for panic about American enslavement and captivity.²² When American merchants began to trade in Canton, they had a difficult time explaining to Chinese merchants that they were not just smaller, weaker, versions of the British. The ways in which they reported in great detail the times when they were treated as the equals of the British (particularly when it was the British themselves who did it), however, reveals the ways that for Americans, too, they were judging themselves against a British standard. Securing independence and building the new Republic, after all, meant not only declaring themselves to be an independent country, but securing the recognition of other nations, as Eliga Gould argues in *Among the Powers of the Earth*.²³

In this history of the revolutionary era, Gould tells a story that focuses on the international and the diplomatic meanings of building the new United States. Like so many of the other works under discussion here, the book focuses on the ways that independence granted Americans the ability not (just) to be independent from England, but to become more like England. In particular, Gould looks to the American attempts to obtain equality with European states and to be “treaty-worthy” in the law of nations.²⁴ Part of this, for Americans, involved securing the right to maintain “dominion over others,” including Native and African Americans. As he explains it, the Revolution

²² For a discussion of the meaning of this captivity for Americans, see Lawrence A. Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

²³ Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

“to a greater degree than we often realize” had the effect of “reproduc[ing] key features of the European empires that they otherwise hoped to replace.”²⁵

If Gould tells the story of Americans coming to resemble the empire that they had replaced, other historians have looked to see the ways that Americans of the Early Republic responded to the rejected British Empire after the Revolution. Rosemarie Zagarri led the charge for thinking about Americans in India with her presidential address to the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic in 2010.²⁶ Print culture, commerce, and missionary activity all brought Americans to India and India to Americans. Here, Americans looked at the British Empire and compared it with their own empire-building (both real and imagined). As Zagarri argues, Americans understood their own activities to be “a fundamentally different process from that of British India” in the years before the Mexican War, but important similarities could be seen in the treatment of non-whites by both countries.²⁷ Racial classifications in British India and North America hardened in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with significant effects for colonial governance in both places. Even in a state of weakness, the early American state resembled other empires. Even while critiquing British imperialism, Americans hoped to perfect its methods.

Overseas Colonization

Even if we rely upon strict political definitions of empire and colonialism modeled on the British example, though, there are early-nineteenth century imperial stories to tell about the United States. Liberia, Hawaii, and indeed the western portion of the continental United States can all be understood as examples of American colonization. Historians focusing on these regions are providing us with new ways of thinking about traditional Early Republican and antebellum topics like ‘expansion.’

The American colonization movement has a long and important historiography. Yet until recently, few American historians have focused on the meaning of the ‘colonization’ of the movement’s title. The movement was an at-times uncomfortable coalition of proslavery figures who wanted a way to remove free blacks from the United States and antislavery advocates who envisioned colonization as a way to gradually end slavery with minimal risk to the Republic. Many free blacks agreed with David Walker, author of the *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, that the movement was

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Rosemarie Zagarri, “The Significance of the ‘Global Turn’ for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 31 (Spring 2011): 1-37. Additional work on this theme includes Emily Conroy-Krutz, “‘Engaged in the Same Glorious Cause’: Anglo-American Connections in the American Missionary Entrance into India, 1790-1815,” Vol. 34, No. 1 *Journal of the Early Republic* (Spring 2014), 21-44; Michael A. Verney, “An Eye for Prices, an Eye for Souls: Americans in the Indian Subcontinent, 1784-1838,” *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 33, No. 3 (Fall 2013), 397-432.

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

inherently racist, premised as it was on the necessity of the removal of African Americans from the polity. American historians focusing on colonization have accordingly spent a lot of time trying to make sense of this coalition in the context of the unfolding history of slavery and anti-slavery in the United States. Until recently, less attention was paid to what happened once the colonists reached Liberia or to the governance of that colony and what it has to tell us about American understandings of their relationship to the rest of the world.

In “The Outskirts of Our Happiness,” Nicholas Guyatt offers a different perspective on the colonization movement and its connections to American ideas about empire. Guyatt’s focus is on what he terms benevolent colonization. Colonies, according to this idea, had been “one of the major ways civilization had advanced from classical times to the present,” as Guyatt explains. Supporters claimed further that “nonwhites could plant colonies as profitably as whites.”²⁸ These two premises laid the framework for the benevolence of this type of colonization: here, colonization was a way to improvement and to the attainment of civilization. The idea that removing a racially or ethnically different population from the physical space of a white United States would allow for that population to improve their situation was a key part of the ways that many supporters of the American colonization society understood that movement. It was also, as Guyatt reminds us, behind the thinking of some supporters of Indian removal. The parallels between these two contemporaneous movements should seem obvious. After all, both involved the physical removal of nonwhite populations. And yet they have rarely been studied in the same framework. They did not have the same groups of advocates: supporters of colonization were not necessarily (or even often) supporters of Indian removal, especially after the election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency.

If we have been interested in colonization for what it can tell us of the history of antislavery, then the closest we get to thinking about the two movements’ connections is the understanding that for some opponents of Indian removal, the final success of Jackson’s forceful policy led to a re-consideration of the arguments of the American Colonization Society and a new interest in the antiracist politics of the abolitionist movements.²⁹ Guyatt, by contrast, in asking about these movements in relation to American ideas about colonization is able to open up a different way of thinking about the connections across the movements and, ultimately, what they reveal about

²⁸ Nicholas Guyatt, “The Outskirts of Our Happiness’: Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 95, No. 4 (March, 2009): 987.

²⁹ This argument is put forward in Mary Hershberger’s “Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 15-40. David Kazanjian addresses some of the connections but his focus on Brown’s discussions of racial depictions of Native Americans focused on assimilation in the early part of the century, rather than removal, and emphasized the different racial classifications for blacks and Native Americans. David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

American culture in the early nineteenth century. In these benevolent colonization movements, Guyatt finds the roots of a “separate but equal” ideology that would go on to have incredible importance to the history of race in America.³⁰ That ideology, he argues, was first developed in the context of American ideas about race and settler colonialism. In racially segregated spaces, here separated by different polities, even continents, rather than different schools or water fountains, ‘inferior’ races could improve themselves to become the equals of white Americans. In Liberia, free blacks could recreate the American story of Plymouth and Jamestown—an argument that supporters of colonization made when encouraging African Americans to emigrate and colonize West Africa. The racial ideas that motivated benevolent colonization, Guyatt argues, were Americans’ ways of working through the tensions between republican values and fears about racial coexistence.

This is a central question for the Early Republic. In the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War, Americans again and again had to face the seeming difficulties of creating a republican system that could withstand the diversity of the American populace. It is very important that in this case, these tensions were worked out through a colonial process. Colonialism made republicanism possible. American republicanism and colonization, then, were not at odds with each other: for some in the Early Republic, they required each other. It is the republican civilization at the end of benevolent colonization that makes this experiment with imperial actions permissible for the United States, just as it is this colonial experiment that makes the United States safe for republicanism by removing racial others.

Brandon Mills’ work on Liberia is particularly useful in this conversation, covering as it does not only the initial burst of colonizationist interest in the 1810s and 1820s, but following it through the 1847 creation of the republic of Liberia.³¹ By focusing our attention on Liberian independence, Mills forces us to ask ourselves: independence from what? Answering that question and looking at American responses to the African Republic helps us to think more about colonization not only as a solution to a domestic political crisis, but also as an international relations event. In his discussion of the Liberian Declaration of Independence, Mills notes the ways in which the Liberians’ grievances focused on the United States, not the Colonization Society: it was the impossibility of blacks claiming full citizenship in the United States that led to not only emigration but to the necessity of claiming independence for their new Republic.

In “The United States of Africa,” Mills examines the connections between expansionist ideology and the colonization of Liberia. In this telling, the now-former colony of Liberia became, in the late 1840s, “the embodiment of U.S. republican ideals and a seed

³⁰ Guyatt, 988.

³¹ Brandon Mills, “‘The United States of Africa’: Liberian Independence and the Contested Meaning of a Black Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 2014), 79-108.

of settler expansion in Africa.”³² In other words, this was an anti-imperial colony, the ‘empire of liberty’ taken abroad, with unclear implications for the American nation. As one supporter of the colonization movement described it in the 1820s, the Liberian colony was “a nation in the bud—a miniature of this Republic.”³³ America would have colonies, yes, but they would be different from European colonies. The nature of that difference is perhaps the question that we need to answer now more fully as we work our way to a new terminology and theory to describe the American approach to empire in the first half of the nineteenth century. Mills, urges us to recognize that the supporters of colonization and expansion created a rhetorical distance between themselves and Europe, even while the methods of expansion looked a great deal like settler colonialism, complete with the displacement of indigenous peoples.

Mills defines Liberia before its independence as “a settler colony that was supported to varying degrees by the U.S. government but remained territorially separate from the United States.”³⁴ And herein lies the puzzle of Liberia for thinking about America and empire. What do we make of a settler colony that was governed by a reform society and not by a state government? Some scholars have focused on drawing out the particular connections between the United States government and Liberia. Eugene S. Van Sickle, for example, has highlighted the role of the Africa Squadron, the American answer to the British Royal Navy’s patrol of West Africa that was intended to protect Liberia. In Liberia, he identifies an “embryonic American imperialism” not yet fully embraced by the government but evident in the activities of the Colonization Society and its supporters.³⁵ Forthcoming work by Eric Burin examines the process of purchase for the colony’s territory in Liberia and looks at the governance of the colony and its relation to the indigenous Grebo more closely than previous work has.³⁶ In my own research, I have been influenced by a comparison made by the Maryland Colonization Society during an argument with American missionaries about governance in Liberia. When pushed to explain the basis of their claims of sovereignty in Liberia, the director of the Society compared it to the British East India Company. Just as the East India Company had political sovereignty in India, he claimed, so too did the Colonization Society in Liberia. If we can think of the East India Company, also a private commercial company with some government oversight in the early nineteenth century, as part of a British Empire, why are we so reluctant to discuss the American Colonization Society in similar terms? What about Sierra Leone, the British anti-slavery colony on which

³² Ibid., 80.

³³ Ibid., 86.

³⁴ Ibid., 86.

³⁵ Eugene S. Van Sickle, "Reluctant Imperialists: The U.S. Navy and Liberia, 1819-1845," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 31 (Spring 2011): 107-134.

³⁶ Eric Burin, “Americans and Liberia: Rethinking Race, Religion and Colonization” OAH Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA April 10, 2014

Liberia was modeled? Surely there are differences, and important ones, between the American and British colonies, but it is telling that this was the way that colonizationists understood their role. In order to understand the meaning of American involvement in Liberia and the nature of American thinking about empire in the early nineteenth century, we must listen to these sources that push us to think differently about this era.³⁷

Hawaii presents a different situation. If Liberia makes us think about American empire because it was settled by a colonization society whose explicit goal was to resettle Americans in a distant space to create a new polity, Hawaii is relevant to this discussion because of the relationship between its government and the United States. While Liberia became an independent republic, Hawaii eventually became a state in the Union. Before that, though, it was the subject of American missionary, commercial, and even colonial ambitions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This longer history creates an important context for thinking about the American presence in Hawaii in the first half of the nineteenth century, and like Liberia, this is a field that is currently receiving a good deal of scholarly attention.

Some of the most exciting work on Hawaii in this period, such as that by Jennifer Thigpen and Joy Schulz, examines the missionary encounters in Hawaii beginning in the 1820s.³⁸ Indeed, missionaries are key figures in many of these places around the world, bringing American culture into new spaces and confronting the realities of empire, both American and European, as they attempted to convert new people and places. These types of studies examine the personal and cultural dynamics that are the product of imperial encounters and provide the important perspective of the ways that empires create relationships not just between government bodies or economies, but between people. Joy Schulz's work on missionary children provides a deeply useful perspective on the ways that missionaries' concerns about their own children shaped their work in Hawaii, and ultimately helped to shape American colonialism there. Thigpen's book examines the connections between gender and colonialism in nineteenth-century Hawaii, focusing in particular on the ways in which Hawaiian royal women engaged American missionary women in cycles of gift exchange that became central to the creation and maintenance of diplomatic and political alliances.

This close perspective on a particular place allows us to see the ways that colonialism is actually enacted. We see here, as Thigpen articulates it, the ways that "Hawaiians were

³⁷ Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 170-171.

³⁸ Joy Schulz, "Birthing Empire: Economies of Childrearing and the Formation of American Colonialism in Hawai'i, 1820-1848," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2014): 895-925; Jennifer Thigpen, *Island Queens and Mission Wives: How Gender and Empire Remade Hawai'i's Pacific World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

neither 'passive' nor 'helpless' victims of Western colonialism."³⁹ They were, instead, participants in relationships that they had the power to help shape. We know the end of the story of Americans in Hawaii, but in 1820 the missionaries did not. Thigpen's careful attention to the interactions between Hawaiian and missionary women helps to reorient our chronology of the American presence in Hawaii by making the missionary entrance less of a turning point. Other Americans and Europeans were active in Hawaii already when the missionaries arrived in 1820, and would continue to be so throughout the nineteenth century. Missionaries were competing with other groups, then, to make their mark on Hawaiian culture and political life. Without losing sight of the fact that these dynamics were imperial, the intimate focus of local studies has the potential to reveal the complex ways that American empire was enacted on the ground. For the larger field of scholarship on empire in nineteenth-century America, this type of study is invaluable for its attention to the mechanics of colonial dynamics. From these studies of missionaries in Hawaii, we can begin to get a sense of both the ambitions of the United States and the checks to that ambition. In this essential early period of American history, these stories attune us to the fragility and diversity of American power.

These studies, significantly, challenge the central tenets of American exceptionalism's insistence that one of the most important ways that the United States differed from other Western powers was through its lack of an imperial and colonial history. Common across these works on both Liberia and Hawaii is a reconsideration of the term 'expansion' and a suggestion of the ways that a global framework for expansion suggests some of the ways that this terminology has served to elide some important questions about empire for nineteenth century American history.

Continental Colonialism

Of course, we do not have to go to Liberia or Hawaii to think about American imperialism in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. We can, indeed, think about westward expansion across the North American continent as a kind of empire building. Here, in the most supposedly isolationist of American eras, we see not only American engagement abroad, but an engagement that looks a lot like settler colonialism. The continental expansion of the United States is colonial if we include only Native American peoples in our discussions of these dynamics. It is only when we ignore the significant population of Indian peoples that Manifest Destiny can look like anything but settler colonialism. Calling American expansion a process of empire building is hardly a new innovation. Decades of work on this theme allowed William Earl Weeks to state baldly in his *Building the Continental Empire* that he was writing about "the creation of an American empire, of the fundamental importance of that empire to the existence of the American nation, and of how a dispute over the future of that empire led the nation

³⁹ Thigpen, 3.

to civil war.”⁴⁰ Other historians have followed in that vein, writing the history of Manifest Destiny as a history of American imperialism.⁴¹

One sound way to get there is to think more about settler colonialism. This is one of the central premises of Walter Hixson’s *American Settler Colonialism*, a very useful work that builds on the historiographical impulse to rethink the history of expansion and Manifest Destiny using the language and theory of empire and imperialism.⁴² The Doctrine of Discovery had enabled European colonists to lay claim to Indian lands on the premise that they were unoccupied by any ‘civilized’ people; the United States employed a similar logic. Settler colonialism refers to a mode of imperialism in which settlers come to lands occupied by indigenous populations, drive them out from the land, and construct new communities in their place modeled on their own home cultures. This is quite clearly what happened when Americans settled Indian lands, even after the end of the colonial era. Through a range of means including treaties, support of squatters, civilization programs, voluntary removal programs, and finally involuntary removal, the United States’ relations with Native Americans can be understood as settler colonialism. And yet this is not a terminology that has been used frequently in the historical literature to describe these dynamics. Instead, we speak of ‘expansion’ and ‘Manifest Destiny,’ both of which have the potential to divert our attention away from Native American people as individuals who were affected by and helped to influence the actions of the United States.⁴³

Bethel Saler’s *The Settlers’ Empire* sets out to examine this dynamic, describing the “peculiar situation endemic to the young American nation as both a postcolonial republic and a contiguous domestic empire.”⁴⁴ American political identity, she explains, is in this era centrally based in their position as a settler nation with a history as “both

⁴⁰ William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), ix.

⁴¹ Thomas Hietala discusses empire in his history of Manifest Destiny. Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*, revised edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), especially chapter 8. Ann Stoler refers to this as “internal colonialism.” Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties,” 36.

⁴² Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On settler colonialism more generally, see Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴³ On Native Americans and Manifest Destiny, see Robert J. Miller, “The Doctrine of Discovery, Manifest Destiny, and American Indians” in Sleeper-Smith, et al., *Why You Can’t Teach United States History without American Indians*, 87-100.

⁴⁴ Bethel Saler, *The Settlers’ Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America’s Old Northwest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015),

colonized and colonizers.”⁴⁵ Focusing on Wisconsin, her study examines the on-the-ground processes of state formation. In part, her argument is that the national state emerged out of the governance of these territories of multi-racial constituencies that Saler calls the “domestic empire.”⁴⁶ As the United States attempted to govern white citizens, Native Americans, and French Creole settlers, they turned to culture as well as politics to establish their authority, insisting on changes in marital and economic practices. Missionaries contributed to the work of state formation as well, supporting the government agents’ work of cultural change. As she tells the story of the settlement of the West with a focus on state formation and colonialism, Saler helps us to understand the many meanings of empire for the Early Republic and the ways that a postcolonial state could become an empire itself.

Saler’s work includes a very useful close reading of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 as the document that embodied this tension between the United States as a postcolonial republic and an empire. Earlier ordinances (of 1784 and 1785) had allowed for self-government in the territories prior to statehood, based on assumptions about who the ideal settlers would be—white, republican, married men interested in reproducing Anglo-American civic and cultural life in this ‘new’ land. The reality, as Saler reminds us, was quite different—and it was the realization of the diverse nature of the population of these territories that contributed to the move in 1787 to remove the provision for self-government and replace it with the authority of the national government over the territories prior to their ability to become states. This was intended, as Saler argues, to be a “temporary colonialism,” but colonialism it certainly was.⁴⁷

At the same time that the national government imposed a temporary colonialism over white settlers from eastern states and French *habitants* in the Northwest territory, it imposed another type of temporary colonialism over the Native American groups in the region through the project of the government’s civilizing mission. This aspect of the early domestic empire of the United States had “inverse meanings” of what was promised to whites.⁴⁸ The temporary colonialism of the Northwest Ordinance granted white settlers the promise of eventual self-determination. As “quasi-foreign political bodies,” Indians on the other hand were subject to American claims of “paternalistic colonial rule” until they had become civilized and thus “ready for membership in the republic.” The temporary nature of this part of the colonial project, then, had an indeterminate end point and a remarkable amount of oversight into “nearly all levels of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17-26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.

Indian life," as Saler argues.⁴⁹ Much of the rest of the book examines this oversight, looking at the colonial management of local economics, marriage, and religion in Wisconsin during its territorial era. Saler's book is important for its confident assertion of American colonialism during the years of the Early Republic and its careful examination of the political and cultural ways that this colonialism was enacted. In her hands, the settlement of the Northwest territory, and of expansion more generally, is quite clearly a history of American empire from the very beginning of the United States.

Similar to Saler's discussion of Wisconsin, the story of Indian removal presents another central moment of American empire in the Early Republic. The civilizing mission not only applied to the Northwest Territory; it was also the government policy in dealing with other Native American groups, including the Cherokee and the Choctaw, prior to the election of Andrew Jackson. Jackson's ultimate rejection of civilization in favor of a policy of forced removal of Native peoples from the lands east of the Mississippi to make way for white American settlement can be seen as the replacement of one version of American imperialism for another as the civilizing project of missionaries and others made way for the assertion of complete American sovereignty over Indian lands and people.⁵⁰ American expansion required an unprecedented display of power on the part of the United States through the Indian Removal Act and the articulation of a new form of American empire.

From 1830 forward, this imperialism-as-expansion developed rapidly into Manifest Destiny. The recent histories of the Mexican-American War give us a new way of thinking about this relationship between expansion and imperialism. Here, we see warfare as a means of territorial expansion. As with the Spanish-American War later in the century, Americans of the mid-nineteenth century claimed that they were saving foreign women through these interventions. As Shelly Streeby and Amy Greenberg's work on the sensationalist fiction and travel literature surrounding this war highlights, sexuality and race were tied up in the celebration of this war as a way of spreading American civilization across the continent.⁵¹ Projecting themselves as the force of civilization and democracy, American supporters of this war attempted to expand their own territory while asserting the inevitability of their success due to their cultural and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27-38.

⁵⁰ Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 102-150. For the story of this period from the Cherokee perspective, see William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁵¹ Shelly Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the Mexican War see also: David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), chapter 1; Paul Foss, *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002);

political superiority. This was a war about borders and about the American desire to expand its territory—its empire of liberty—across the entire continent. This focus on expansion through conquest helps to reveal Manifest Destiny as a U.S. imperial project and emphasizes again the important ways that this imperialism was a cultural as well as a political project.

Not all Americans supported this vision, however. The U.S.-Mexican War gave rise to “America’s first national antiwar movement,” as Amy Greenberg points out in her recent study of the war.⁵² It was this opposition that contributed to the shifting expectations of what the American map would look like after peace: the all-Mexico movement could not survive the wartime opposition. Greenberg’s emphasis on the extent of opposition among the American populace helps us to understand the extent to which this war marked a new development in U.S. history. Here was a war for American territory and empire fought against the will of many American citizens. The national conversation about the war opened up a discussion about American identity and the role of the United States in the world. As Greenberg previously argued in *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, ideas about these topics were deeply contested at the time.⁵³ While the 1840s saw the rise of a new type of anti-war sentiment, it also saw the rise of a new type of American imperialism: the filibuster.

One of the primary ways of challenging the traditional narrative of Manifest Destiny and expansion as a domestic non-imperial history has been to look at those most radical of the expansionists, the filibusters. Filibusters present an important and tricky group for thinking about American empire in the mid-nineteenth century. They were breaking U.S. and international law when they attempted to seize foreign lands, and they were not acting as agents of the American state or any of its large organizations (as were the colonizationists and missionaries in Liberia and Hawaii). And yet they were often motivated by the logic of Manifest Destiny, including ideas about the supposed political superiority of American republicanism and the supposed racial and cultural superiority of white Protestant Americans. The American reception of filibusters, as Amy Greenberg has ably demonstrated, speaks to the variety of ways that American citizens thought about empire, their own nation, and its role in the world.⁵⁴ Importantly, even those who were opposed to the violence and claims of sovereignty that were inherent in filibustering often agreed that American commercial, social, political, and religious forms ought to be spread abroad. *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* does the important work of examining the diversity of American thinking about empire and imperialism in the nineteenth century.

⁵² Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Vintage, 2013), xvii.

⁵³ Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

⁵⁴ Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*; Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

As Walter Johnson reminds us, one of the major motivations behind this movement was the spread of slavery and of the cotton kingdom. His *River of Dark Dreams* finds an imperial framework for understanding the history of slavery and expansion.⁵⁵ Thinking about expansion in this way forces us to examine how expansion meant the management of multiple nonwhite populations and the connection of American expansion to the place of the United States in the global economy. For Johnson, this type of slavery provides the logic for the support of an American empire. As he discusses the importance of Cuba, for example, Johnson focuses on proslavery imperialism and challenges his readers to imagine the map of the United States as his historical figures did. This map, and the importance of Cuba to it, challenges the continental vision of the Early Republic.

As all of these works show us, even continental history can be imperial history. Focusing on that imperial framework has been illuminating for this period. Thinking about empire gives us a better history of nineteenth century America, one that takes seriously actors who were not white U.S. citizens and one that is not guided by exceptionalist assumptions about what the United States was about.

New Directions

There are several directions that seem particularly fruitful for historians interested in exploring empire in the nineteenth century. I am most excited by the possibilities of comparative work. The path seems open for new studies that will more carefully examine American empire alongside other empires. Such attention should help us to reach clearer answers about the meaning of empire and colonialism for the history of the United States and the world. In addition, as the work on Liberia, Hawaii, and the American continent suggests, there is ample room for more work that pays close attention to particular local situations. More work might be done, too, on the domestic impact of international engagement. And as is true for so much of American historiography, foreign language sources are begging to be incorporated into our work to help provide closer attention to on-the-ground dynamics and non-American perspectives on American imperial behavior.

If the traditional questions of the Early Republic have been focused on the creation of the nation-state, these recent and forthcoming works reveal some of the ways in which the study of this period has been transformed in recent years. Once we no longer feel the need to debate whether the United States is, was, or has had an empire, but can recognize that there were aspects of imperialism throughout the American past, we will be able to get to the much more important work of explaining how the United States experienced imperialism throughout its history, how this affected the nation and the world, and how the American experience actually differed from other empires. Such

⁵⁵ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), chapter 11.

work requires careful attention to our terms and a willingness to be led by our sources to examine their engagement with foreign space and people without assumptions about what sorts of imperial or anti-imperial stories we might find. With the impressive work that has been recently completed by these scholars, as well as those that are currently in manuscript form as books, articles, and dissertations, we are well on our way.

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