
AHR Exchange
The Core and Peripheries of Our National Narratives:
A Response from IH-35

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FROM MY HOME IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, I CAN PEER down IH-35, a congested highway that sharply divides the city in two. To the west and north stretch dozens of upper-middle-class “white” suburbs. To the east and south, visitors are greeted by taquerias, “wash-aterias,” and trocas (trucks) with Mexican flags. Given the many physical and linguistic barriers that keep them apart, one would be tempted to assume that these two Austins have little in common. But the economy has a way of stubbornly bringing them together: Thousands of “Mexican” gardeners, waiters, cooks, janitors, and construction workers cross IH-35 every day to work in the booming western section of the city.¹ I hear and speak Spanish all over town. The construction workers and janitors with whom I often chat seem out of place on campus. Many are most likely illegal, have thicker accents than my own, and wear tattoos of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Outside a handful of classrooms, their language is the currency of laborers, not learning, and their history belongs at the margins. The historical narratives that students learn on campus acknowledge these workers as dwellers of the “borderlands.” At cocktail parties in west Austin, where I am often addressed as José and Jesús, and where it is automatically assumed that I am in the “Spanish” department, it is difficult to convince anyone that there is nothing “borderly” about these southeastern dwellers and that we should be taking a closer, second look at their tattoos to understand, say, the history of colonial Boston. These are charged political times in Texas as well as in the rest of the country. Talk-radio hosts insist that the foreign ways of these millions of illegal “aliens” are gnawing at the foundational Anglo-Protestant values of this country and that the debate should ultimately be about culture and history. My conversation with Professor Gould is part of this larger debate. I share most of his views and have little with which to disagree. Yet I do come to the topic from a peculiar personal experience, as an Ecuadorian whose children have been born and raised in this country, and it is here where our interpretive differences ultimately lie.

Many thanks to Fernando Montenegro-Torres and Jeff Speicher for helping me find the right tone among the countless drafts.

¹ For a wonderfully evocative description of Austin as a place that renders deliciously absurd such homogenizing, ironclad categories as “Latin America” and “America,” see Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *El Urbanista* (Mexico City, 2004), 280–289.

PROFESSOR GOULD'S CRITICISM OF MY ESSAY is insightful and valuable. He is correct to assume as flawed the thesis that neither New England nor the Puritans stand as representative of the colonial history of this country. As a former student of Jack Greene, Professor Gould is very familiar with the influential thesis of his teacher: If there ever was a colony representative of the British American experience, it was the Chesapeake, not New England.² A historiography that claims for the Puritans a core representative status is passé. My essay therefore appears twenty years too late to be of any consequence, a sadly misinformed effort to engage Perry Miller. Yet my book *Puritan Conquistadors*, which Professor Gould correctly identifies as the source of my essay, does not seek to claim for the Puritans any central, normative status:

Why specifically compare the Puritans of New England, rather than some other group in British America, to the Spanish Catholics? Given that Jack Greene has demonstrated that New England's politics, culture, and economy were not representative of the British American experience, it would appear to make more sense to study the ideologies of colonization in the middle and southern British American colonies. In fact, as the work of Edward L. Bond suggests, the crusading discourse of colonization as an epic battle against the devil seems to have run as deep in seventeenth-century Virginia as it did in Puritan New England. But the warnings of scholars like Greene have not yet dislodged the Puritans from the public imagination as the quintessentially "American" colonists. This reason alone justifies my choice: I want to reach and challenge a wide audience.³

In both my essay and my *Puritan Conquistadors*, I seek to engage "quintessentially American" stories, to show that "core" national narratives cannot be understood solely within the narrow constraints of national historiographies. Although I agree with Professor Gould's brief yet brilliant characterization of core and peripheries in the early modern British Atlantic, he, in turn, would have to agree that, although Central America and the West Indies might have been more valuable to the British Empire than New England, most "Americans" today do not even know where Honduras and Jamaica are on a map. When I first read C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* some twenty-five years ago, I was shocked to discover that Haitians had made it possible for the United States of America to acquire Louisiana by thoroughly defeating Napoleon in the tropics.⁴ The battle over one-third of the current territory of the U.S. had ultimately been fought in a place that was at the core of the Atlantic system then but is at the symbolic and economic periphery of the continent today. No matter how central it might have been in the past, Haiti today remains marginal in U.S. narratives of western expansion. Professor Gould's problem with my essay (and my problem with his) may stem from our different uses of the words "core" and "peripheries": he uses them to explain past regional interactions within and without bygone empires; I deploy them to identify the margins and centers of national nar-

² Jack Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988).

³ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550–1700* (Stanford, Calif., 2006), 14–15. The reference to Edward L. Bond is to his "Source of Knowledge, Source of Power: The Supernatural World of English Virginia, 1607–1624," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108, no. 2 (2000): 105–138.

⁴ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1938).

ratives today. Thus it is possible to have both, “peripheral” regions of the early modern Atlantic world that have stood firmly at the “core” of the national imagination, as is the case with New England.

As I maintain in the opening paragraph (and in the last chapter of *Puritan Conquistadors*), my interest in “entangled histories” lies in the political implications of our academic debate. Thus I consider narratives on Shakespeare, Milton, and the Puritans to be of greater consequence in the *current* U.S. political debate over race and history than, say, those elucidating the role of British Honduras in the Atlantic economy. Take Shakespeare, for example. In the United States, Shakespeare’s Latin-inspired, convoluted syntax oddly stands for the culturally sophisticated roots of the nation. My twelve-year-old son has already read *The Tempest* in middle school—never mind that he did not quite get it. There is one event in Austin in which “Anglos” and “Mexicans” seldom mix, and that is “Shakespeare in the Park,” a summer festival for the public to honor the bard, a fixture in most U.S. cities. It is understandable that such a summer-long celebration of the elevated English literacy of the urban upper-middle classes should fail to attract an audience of Spanish-speaking janitors and construction workers. But this should not necessarily be the case, for as I suggest in my essay (and amply demonstrate in *Puritan Conquistadors*), the Hispanic world that engendered the miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe informed Shakespeare and Elizabethan England just as well. So to make sense of plays such as *The Tempest*, our “white” urban audiences should be advised to attend the occasional performance of a Mexican “auto-sacramental.”

The presence of “Latin America” in this country is not a new or even recent phenomenon triggered by the massive arrival of illegal immigrants, as most pundits would have us believe. In fact, it is constitutive of this nation from its very colonial beginnings. But this has remained invisible. A panel of highly distinguished historians was recently invited by the *Atlantic Monthly* to compile a list of the 100 most influential figures in “American” history. Not a single “Hispanic” name made it into the roll.⁵ Not only would my choices have included Cesar Chavez as a token, but to remind readers of the violent colonial roots of this nation, I would have listed one or two “conquistadors,” formidable protean figures in the British Atlantic imagination.

THE FRONTISPIECE TO JUAN DE CASTELLANOS’S EPIC *Primera parte de las elegías de varones illustres de Indias* (Elegies for Illustrious Great Men of the Indies, Part One) (1589) makes explicit the biblical inspiration for the holy violence unleashed by the Spaniards against the natives. Colonization becomes a fulfillment of biblical, apocalyptic prophecies, an act of liberation and wrathful divine punishment. (See Figure 1). The image typifies the use of typology in the Spanish colonization of the New World. In it the conquest appears as the fulfillment of various biblical passages, an act of charity setting the natives free from the clutches of Satan. The faithful maiden Spain (“Hispania Virgo fidelis”), bearing the Cross and the Bible, slays the dragon

⁵ Ross Douthat “They Made America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 280, no. 5 (December 2006): 61–78. Native Americans and Asian Americans are also notoriously overlooked. The list includes six African Americans and nine women.



FIGURE 1: Frontispiece, Juan de Castellanos, *Primera parte de las elegías de varones illustres de Indias* (Madrid, 1589). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

Leviathan (“dan io diruptus est draco” [Vulg., Dan. 14:26]), which has prevented Europeans from crossing the Atlantic. The dragon bites its own long tail, which encircles both the ocean and the two continents, and its Amerindian allies shoot arrows at Hispania, who stands on a shell in the middle of the ocean. Angels and the Holy Spirit descend on the New World. The Spanish king’s coat of arms unites the two halves of the composition, in which the fauna and flora of the Old and the New World stand at opposite sides. A crucified Christ stands on top of the coat of arms and is flanked by references to Revelation 19:15–16: “Rex regum et Dominus dominantium,” King of kings and Lord of lords: a vengeful lord with a “sharp sword” for a mouth who is about to “smite the nations” of the New World. On the ground to the right, below the escutcheon and next to the European rabbit, lies a dismembered Amerindian corpse, a symbol of the terrors that Hispania must overcome. Hispania arrives with a message of liberation, for written on the leaves and trunks of the American palm there are passages from Psalms 40:1–3 (Vulg. 39:2–4): “I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. / He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. / And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord.” Castellanos thus set the stage for his massive epic recounting of the deeds of Spanish heroes in the conquest of what today is Colombia, Venezuela, and Guiana.

In a treatise recounting a trip to the coast of Guiana in 1596 to recover samples of gold (a voyage undertaken immediately on the heels of Walter Raleigh’s first trip in 1595), Lawrence Kemys, Raleigh’s learned lieutenant, turned to Castellanos’s epic to identify the numerous Spanish expeditions to Guiana, and thus to convince Elizabeth that there was something worth conquering in the New World.⁶ Inspired by Castellanos’s typological readings of colonization, Kemys insisted that the Orinoco should be named the “Raleana” just as the Amazon had been named the “Orellana” after its Spanish discoverer Francisco de Orellana.⁷

There is perhaps no more entrenched narrative in our historiography than the one that pigeonholes the “conquistador” in Spanish America. Although John Elliott, in his superb *Empires of the Atlantic World*, ultimately shows that the serendipitous finding of silver in the midst of large, settled indigenous civilizations in Peru and Mexico ultimately led to important differences between the Spanish and British American Creole societies, he also demonstrates that there were multiple similarities. Contrary to common opinion, the British made use of every single one of the ceremonies and discourses of legal territorial possession first deployed by Spanish conquistadors, including the planting of crosses and the use of “papal” bulls. The British, to be sure, did not rely on the religious power of the pope to justify the taking of pagan territories; they simply relied on the authority of the monarch as the head of the Anglican Church, but “papal” bulls there were.⁸ Yet these parallels do not

⁶ “Heere follow the names of those worthie Spaniardes that have sought to discover and conquere Guiana, extracted out of the writings of Juan de Castellanos clerigo,” in Lawrence Kemys, *A Relation of the Second Voyage to Guiana* (London, 1596), Appendix.

⁷ Kemys, *A Relation*, B2v; E3r and “Heere follow” (paragraphs 2 and 20).

⁸ J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, Conn., 2006), 1–28, esp. 9–11.

quite capture the appeal that the “conquistador” model once held at the core of the British polity.

One example of the tendency in historiography to cleanse the “conquistador” out of the early modern British expansion is the claim that the epic genre was typical only of Portuguese and Spanish colonization. David Armitage has argued that epic poetry lionizing the conquistador characterized the Iberian expansion, not the English, thus pointing to different conceptions of colonization and territorial possession.⁹ It is true that epics narrating the heroic deeds of Captain Smith and Christopher Newport are yet to be found; but the English did endlessly versify on the exploits of their colonialist heroes, the privateers.¹⁰ The pirate shared with the conquistador similar patterns of brutality and social mobility. In fact, the epic of the English privateer was modeled after that of the Spanish conquistador and in response to it.¹¹ Pirates followed the “business model” first introduced in the New World by the marauding multinational parties of soldiers of fortune we like to call “Spanish” conquistadors, namely, the search for treasure through plunder. Like the conquistadors, these pirates-turned-privateers shared with the Crown any windfall profits in exchange for coats of arms and knighthoods. Typical of these pirate-conquistadors was Francis Drake, at the center of a community of grandees, merchants, and cosmographers who were strategizing about how to turn Elizabethan England into a maritime empire at Spain’s expense. Along with John Dee, the two Richard Hakluyts, and Walter Raleigh, to name only a few, Drake designed ambitious plans to strangle the commerce of the Spanish Empire. This strategic vision took Drake around the globe assaulting and plundering Spanish ports and fleets in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.¹²

Drake was as good a businessman as Cortés, and like Cortés, he understood his chivalric exploits to be part of a larger providential plan to slay the devil in the New World. Unlike Cortés, however, Drake did not associate the devil with the Aztecs; rather, he saw Satan as a Spaniard. He inaugurated a long Protestant *crusading* tradition of outrage over the “massacres and slaughters” committed by Spain in the New World. He and Raleigh were the first in a long line of knights moved to “Anger against the Bloody and Popish nation of the Spaniards, whose Superstitions have exceeded those of Canaan and whose Abominations have excell’d those of Ahab, who spilt the Blood of innocent Naboth, to obtain the Vineyard.” These knights sought “Deuteronomic” revenge (“an eye for an eye”), chivalrously coming to the aid of the innocent natives to protect the garden that was America from Spanish greed.¹³ Drake and his crew considered the Spaniards to be like Satan, exerting a tyrannical rule over innocent natives by the ritual dismembering of bodies and indiscriminate flogging as a sport.¹⁴ English poets understood Drake’s campaigns to

⁹ David Armitage, “Literature and Empire,” in Nicholas Canny, ed., *The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 99–123, esp. 117.

¹⁰ The epitaph on Captain John Smith’s tomb at the south side of the Choir of the Church of St. Sepulcher in London, however, is a short epic poem. See John Stow, *The Survey of London: Contayning the Originall, Increase, Moderne Estate, and Government of That City, Methodically Set Downe* (London, 1633), 779–780.

¹¹ Barbara Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (Cambridge, 2001), chap. 5.

¹² John Cummins, *Francis Drake: The Lives of a Hero* (New York, 1995).

¹³ J. Philips, “Dedicatory,” in Bartolomé de las Casas, *Tears of the Indians* (London, 1656).

¹⁴ Francis Fletcher, *The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake* (1628; repr., London, 1652), 53.



FIGURE 2: *Left*: Frontispiece, Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, *Milicia y descripción de las Indias* (Madrid 1599). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University. *Right*: Frontispiece, Francis Fletcher, *Francis Drake Revived* (London 1653). Courtesy of the Huntington Library. In Machuca's eyes, the conquistador is a knight-cosmographer, wielding both "the sword and the compass [to achieve] more and more and more." The English conquistador follows the same model. Like Machuca's conquistador, Drake stands next to a globe, a cross-staff, an armillary sphere, a compass, and an astrolabe. Guided by the providential hand of God (*auxilio divino*), Drake's vessel, the *Hind*, circumnavigates the world. As a result, Drake becomes a grandee. As his coat of arms announces, Drake has become a knight despite his humble beginnings: "Sic parvis magna" (Greatness from small beginnings). The frontispiece contains a partial reproduction of the poem Elizabeth had posted on the mast of the *Hind* in 1580 when she knighted Drake. The terms of the epic strikingly resemble those first used in Spain and Portugal to lionize the Iberian conquistador: *Plus ultra, Hercules, Drace, columnis, / Et "Magno," dicas, "Hercule maior ero." / Drace, pererrati quem novit terminus orbis, / Quemque simul mundi vidit uterque polus. / Si taceant homines, facient te sydera notum. / Sol nescit comitis non memor esse sui. / Digna ratis quae stet radiantibus inclya stellis; / Supremo coeli vertice digna ratis* (Drake, on the Herculean columns / these words write, / Thou farther wentst then any / mortall wight. / Though Hercules for travel / did excell, / From him and others thou didst / beare the bell. / Brave Drake, that round about / the world didst saile, / And viewdst all the Poles, / when men shall faile / Thee to commend, the starres will do't / the Sunne / Will not forget how with him / thou didst run / That ship whose good successe / did make thy name / To be resounded by the / trump of Fame: / Merits to be beset with / Stars divine, / Instead of waves, and the / Skie to shine). For the Latin original and the translation, see William Camden, *Annales the True and Royall History of the Famous Emperesse Elizabeth, Queene of England, France and Ireland &c* (London, 1621), 427–428.

weaken Phillip II's empire to be an epic battle against the devil. In a poem wishing success to the 1589 failed expedition that Drake launched against the Spanish fleet that had retreated to winter in Portugal and Galicia, the Oxford poet George Peele saw Drake as a knight "under the sanguine Crosse, brave England's badge," setting sail "to propagate religious piety." Peele envisioned Drake going beyond Portugal, all the way to Rome, "there to deface the pryde of Antechrist . . . And pull his Paper Walles and popery downe."¹⁵ Of all the epic poems written to honor Drake's epic struggle against the Spanish Antichrist, Charles FitzGeffrey's *Sir Francis Drake: His*

¹⁵ George Peele, *A Farewell Entitled to the Famous and Fortunate Generalls of Our English Forces* (London, 1589), 5, 6.

Honorable Life's Commendation, and His Tragickall Death's Lamentations (Oxford, 1596) is the most telling.¹⁶ Stanza after stanza, in a repetitive drumbeat, FitzGeffrey portrays Drake's exploits as the battle of the archangel Michael against the beast of the Apocalypse. In the poem, Drake is depicted as superior to all medieval and classical heroes, including Sir Guion (Gawain), Achilles, Aeneas, and Ulysses (B5v–B6r). Had the ancients known Drake, they would have ceased sacrificing to Venus and revered him as a saint: "Erect his statue whereas hers hath beene; Make Drake your Saint, and make the shrine hers his" (B7v). The ancients would also have preferred Drake to Neptune, given the former's greater preternatural hold over the seas; this alone would have placed Drake "in thy catalogue of saints" (C3r). Not surprisingly, before a hero of such caliber, Spain cowers in fear: "Spaine trembled at the thunder of his name, / And when those Giants prouddie did rebel, / No thunderbolt had needed but his fame, / Their hawtie-minded forces to quell, / And send them by whole Myriads unto hell" (C5r). It is Philip II, the "Tartessian Caligula," who most fears Drake "and hides his doating head for very horrour." The mere sound of Drake's name causes this modern Caligula to "lie astonish'd with uncouth terrour, / Exhaling forth his gasping breath with dolour, / While Drake (our new *Alcides*) vanquished this Spanish Hydra's ever-growing head" (C5r).

The case of Drake as a "conquistador" brings us back to the issue of "entangled histories." Far from being a hapless and hopeless endeavor, as Professor Gould suggests, the study of the entangled histories of the British and Spanish Atlantics at their physical and symbolic cores is full of promise and has yet to be done. There are entire areas at the core of British narratives of early modernity that require close scrutiny before we deal with the "peripheries." The very story of the British as the precocious harbingers of scientific modernity associated with the core narrative of the "Scientific Revolution" is still awaiting deconstruction. The millenarian empiricism of Francis Bacon, for example, is often studied solely within English, French, Dutch, and Italian historiographical traditions on early modern knowledge and religion.¹⁷ But clearly Bacon cannot be understood outside the ideas and institutions first created by the

¹⁶ There were numerous other poems written to honor Drake, most of which circulated as manuscripts, including T. N. Cistrensis, "In laudem Francisci Drake militis" (British Library, Egerton MS 2642); William Gager, "In laudem fortissimo viri D. Francisci Draconis" (British Library, Additional MS 22583); N. Eleutherius, "Fortunate Draco," in Eleutherius, *Triumphalia de victoriis Elisabethae Anglorum, Francorum, Hybernorumque reginae augustissimae, fidei defensoris acerrimae, contra classem instructissimam Philippi Hispaniarum regis potentissimi, Deo opt. max. fortunante felicissime partis, anno Christi nati 1588 Julio et Augusto Mensibus* (Germany, 1588); Joannes Hercusanus Danus, *Magnifico ac strenuo viro D. Francisco Draco Anglo Equiti Aurato* (London, 1587); Henry Robarts, *A Most Friendly Farewell Giuen by a Welwiller to the Right Worshipful Sir Frauncis Drake Knight, Generall of Her Maiesties Nauy, Which He Appointed for This His Honorable Voiage, and the Rest of the Fleete Bound to the Southward, and to All the Gentlemen His Followers, and Captaines in This Exploite, Who Set Sale from Wolwich the xv. Day of Iuly, 1585. Wherin is Briefely Touched His Perils Passed in His Last Daungerous Voiage, with an Incouragement to All His Saylers and Souldiers, to Be Forward in this Honourable Exploite* (London, 1585); Thomas Greepe, *The True and Perfecte Newes of the Woorthy and Valiaunt Exploytes, Performed and Doone by That Valiant Knight Syr Frauncis Drake* (London, 1589); and Henry Robarts, *The Trumpet of Fame; or, Sir Francis Drakes and Sir John Hawkins Farewell* (London, 1595).

¹⁷ The literature on Bacon is enormous. For a sampling of the most recent contributions, see Perez Zagorin, *Francis Bacon* (Princeton, N.J., 1998); Lisa Jardine and Alan Stewart, *Hostage to Fortune: The Troubled Life of Francis Bacon* (London, 1998); Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2001); and John Henry, *Knowledge Is Power: How Magic, the Government and an Apocalyptic Vision Inspired Francis Bacon to Create Modern Science* (Cambridge, 2002).

Portuguese and Spanish empires.¹⁸ Cosmographers such as Andrés García de Céspedes (d. 1611) and millenarian utopians such as Pedro Fernández de Quirós (1562–1615), who anticipated many of Bacon’s ideas, ought to be included in any analysis of Bacon’s work.¹⁹ Yet they have remained invisible. Before we move to the peripheries, let us deal first with the core of our most entrenched and self-satisfying narratives of the origins of the nation and of our modernity.

¹⁸ Antonio Barrera-Osorio, *Experiencing Nature: The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution* (Austin, Tex., 2006).

¹⁹ On García de Céspedes, see Maria Portuondo, “Secret Science: Spanish Cosmography and the New World” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2005). On the remarkable similarities between Bacon’s and Fernández de Quirós’s ideas, see Juan Pimentel, *Testigos del mundo: Ciencia, literatura y viajes en la Ilustración* (Madrid, 2003), 73–94. On Bacon as derivative of Iberian traditions of knowledge, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World* (Stanford, Calif., 2006), esp. chap. 2.

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