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(Re)Envisioning Borderlands: Towards a More Productive Paradigm

This is a theoretical essay inspired by the crisis of the central concept of American identity – the idea of the frontier – and by the belief that in a crisis lies a chance for a new beginning. Thus, the goal is to propose an image/narrative model of alternative universal borderlands. To do this I first briefly explain the notion of the frontier in American imagination. I then evoke archaic imagination and outline how the frontier and its epistemology first came into being and crossed the ocean ushering in a type of modern subjectivity. I then contrast this with local cartographies that had existed in the Americas before European contact. Together the two cartographies engender the *transfrontera* space. This both actual and mytho-poetic space engenders “contact subjects” and is explained by examples from works by Creole and Chicano theater artists. A third spatial imagining is then proposed after Native American storytelling and theater methodology. Circles upon circles upon circles is an epistemic/procedural model of how the world is (re)made through stories in the Native worldview. The essay is subtly experimental: as it charts multiple spatio-subjective models it hopes to work on the imagination of the reader, to build imaginary cognitive maps and, perhaps, effect a slight shift in consciousness, taking the reader to the borderlands.

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Introduction – frontier and borderlands

One’s new hands are not those that clutch iron arms, and one’s new eyes are not those looking out from the caravels of the European intruders, who cry Land! with Columbus.

Enrique Dussel (1995: 74)

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In his Pulitzer-Prize winning book *The End of the Myth* (2019) Greg Grandin says: “No myth in American history has been more powerful (...) than that of pioneers advancing across an endless meridian” (2019: 7). One of the most influential intellectual paradigms supporting this myth was expressed by American historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* thesis delivered in 1893 at the American Historical Association’s conference in Chicago. Turner argues that the forces which gave rise to American democracy stem from energetic Anglo-Saxon settlers’ encounters with the vast territory on the ever-moving Western frontier. According to him, it is the frontier-experience, violent, crude, unpredictable which shaped the American intellect and character. He envisions the frontier as a dividing line or rather what he calls the “outer edge of the wave” between savagery and civilization triumphantly advanced by restless, acute, inquisitive, adaptable, and self-reliant individuals. Grandin summarizes: “Expansion across the continent, Turner said, made Europeans into something new, into a people both coarse and curious, self-disciplined and spontaneous, practical and inventive, filled with a ‘restless, nervous energy’ and lifted by ‘that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom’ (2019: 7). The direction of the edge of the wave’s movement envisioned here is noteworthy for it privileges the East-West axis. Although he hails Columbus who “sailed into the waters of the New World” as the originator of America’s “other name”, that of “opportunity”, for Turner the people who have been the most fit and adaptable in frontier conditions and seized on that opportunity are those of English-stock.

The directional preference and the silent elision of the influence of Spanish, French, Asian or Russian colonists, not to mention the civilizational achievements of the Indigenous nations, are illustrative of Turner’s bias. This privileged optic and historical interpretation, however, were appealing to the United States’ imagination of itself, as the nation was emerging out of the Western expansion phase (Wounded Knee happened just three years before the thesis), was at the peak of the Jim Crow segregation, and readied itself for imperial aggrandizement beyond its borders (the Spanish-American war would come five years later). Despite the concept’s shortcomings the idea of the frontier provided not only a favorable interpretation of the past but allowed an optimistic outlook to the future. After all, as Jackson Turner asserted, the frontier “was a magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and was rejuvenated” (Grandin 2019: 106). In the frontier lay the promise of perennial rebirth. Turner’s thesis became immensely influential, obligatory material for 60% of university history courses by the time of its author’s death in 1932.

The challenge to the thesis came a year later. In 1933 Herbert Eugene Bolton, Turner’s one-time student, delivered his seminal essay *The Epic of Greater America* also at the American Historical Association’s conference. Bolton is the founder of

what came to be known as the Borderlands school of American history and the essay is a clear declaration of his position.

Bolton argues for a hemispheric, and multidirectional perspective on American history. Pointing to the example of John Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931) he says that previously the more appropriate name of the American Historical Association would have been "The United States Historical Association" (Bolton 1933: 448). Hence, he advocates for a change in the paradigm hitherto narrowly focused on the United States and proposes to envision U.S. history not through the lens of the usual Eastern seaboard and English influence but as part of the greater American story in order to, as he puts it, "supplement the purely nationalistic presentation" (Bolton 1933: 448). As Bolton observes: "In my own country the study of thirteen English colonies and the United States in isolation has obscured many of the larger factors in their development, and helped to raise up a nation of chauvinists" (1933: 448).

Looking at American history hemispherically, Bolton argues, will enable us to see the developments in each country or region not as isolated events but in relation to one another, subject to forces which have always transcended man-imposed boundaries of colonial claims, ethnicities, or languages. In other words, Bolton advocates more of a bird's eye view, a view from the "moon" as he says (1933: 474) of the Americas' history where the events in, say, South Carolina, are seen on a par with those in Peru or Barbados, where the story of California will be linked to that of Araucana in Chile, or Quebec, etc. He says: "each local story will have clearer meaning when studied in the light of the others; and (...) much of what has been written of each national history is but a thread out of a larger strand" (1933: 449).

Bolton draws attention to parallels between various colonial powers rather than their differences. All held "mercantilistic views of colonies (...) for the benefit of their own people", nearly all "revived in America some vestige of feudalism", all practiced and benefited from the system of African slavery (Bolton 1933: 452), and all dispossessed Native populations although the manner of this dispossession differed: Catholics wanted to convert and civilize them turning them into wards of the church, Protestants saw in them Biblical Canaanites to be mercilessly removed from what they considered their Promised Land. All colonial powers engaged in rivalry over lands and resources, the hemisphere became the arena of continuous turf conflicts, territories changed hands, often multiple times depending on local and global factors, European interests, market demands, innovations. One example can be that of the Manhattan-Surinam swap between the Dutch and the English due to demand for sugar and pelts. The independence movements were also not unique to the English colonies. Soon after Britain, Spain lost most of its imperial possessions in the hemisphere, while Brazil emerged as an independent nation due to events set in motion by Napoleon.

Bolton narrates this epic to argue for the need to recognize the “essential unity of the Western Hemisphere”, its nations developing “side by side” (1933: 472), interrelated not only economically and historically but also culturally, as well as intellectually. Thus, he says, “the nationalistic pattern” does not afford an adequate framework for it obscures what from a larger purview becomes “outstanding and primary” (1933: 473). This angle of analysis is especially needed in borderlands research which may reveal that the histories of separate entities might “be treated as one” (1933: 473). Bolton writes: “Borderland zones are vital not only in the determination of international relations, but also in the development of culture. In this direction one of the important modifications of the Turner thesis is to be sought. By borderland areas not solely geographical regions are meant; **borderline studies of many kinds are similarly fruitful**” (1933: 473; my emphasis)².

Bolton’s ideas – which urged scholars, in the words of Russell Magnaghi, “(1) to go beyond limiting national histories; (2) to get a better understanding of the history and culture of the entire region (...); (3) to gain more meaning for national histories when they are understood in light of the other histories” (1998: xi) – are an important legacy which helped envision the Americas as the borderlands. However, we also know that Bolton’s views were not without inherent biases. For example, in his famous 1917 essay *The Spanish Mission as a Frontier Institution*, he hailed the Spanish colonial missions as pioneering “industrial training school[s]” (Bolton 1917: 57) for the Indigenous neophytes. He also extolled the mission padres as “political and civilizing agents of a very positive sort” (Bolton 1917: 47). For him, therefore, the mission enterprise, including the missions established by Junípero Serra in California, was a prominent success testifying to “Spain’s frontier ‘genius’” (Sandos 2004: 174). James A. Sandos calls Bolton’s attitude a “Christophilic Triumphalism” (2004: 174) and reminds us that in the 1940s Bolton was appointed to serve on the Vatican’s historical commission for Serra’s sainthood. Indeed, Bolton’s 1948 testimony in favor of canonization not only reveals his religious sentiments but also sheds light on his disregard for Indian agency and subjectivity. James Sandos (1988) argues that the already existing research (Cook 1976; Harrington 1934; McWilliams 1946) which had revealed the missions’ devastating impact on the people they were supposed to serve was ignored by Bolton (1253–1269). Similarly, although Bolton’s interest in the hemispheric history encompassed the Americas “from pole to pole” it was also limited in scope, to use his own words, “from

² The lecture is the most succinct expression of Bolton’s views on American historiography that he had been developing since the 1890s and which were in response to his mentor’s nationalism. Bolton was an internationalist by nature and when early in his career (1901) he landed a teaching position at the University of Texas he began to study Spanish, travelled to Mexico and was soon fully invested in the study of Southwestern history. It is from this research that he began to build his Spanish Borderlands interests which would eventually lead him to the Americas concept (Magnaghi 1998: 48).

Columbus to the present” (Magnaghi 1998: xii) – a statement which reveals his narrow, Colombian time frame and a Eurocentric interest in history told from the point of view of Western individuals.

Mindful of Jackson’s frontier thesis’ limitations and its legacy, inspired by Bolton’s Borderlands concept, wary of its shortcomings, yet taking to heart his advocacy for “borderline studies of many kinds” as well as heeding the recent “border aesthetics” scholars Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman’s call for a “heightened focus on images and narratives as means of approaching the border” and for contributions “to a political aesthetics of borders” (Schimanski, Nyman 2021: 3), I want to propose a (re)envisioning of the notion of the borderlands in the Americas. If the frontier myth has come to an end, it is the right time to consider an alternative.

Several movements are performed in what follows. I first excavate the origins of the borderlands concept reaching to the past anterior to Columbus both in Europe and in the Americas. I remember the originary European – as well as American – American borderlands and schematically outline the diachronic development of the paradigm since the European invasion. Later, I point to examples of artists whose works draw from the past in order to reimagine the maps of American agency and memory and bring fore in the present the idea of expansive, multidirectional borderlands, a *transfrontera* space. Finally, I evoke the Native feminist Spiderwoman Theater’s cognitive model of circles upon circles upon circles to provoke an imaginative reorganization of our coordinates, of how we map the world. If America is, as Grandin holds, at the end of the myth of the endless frontier the last thing it needs is more of the same. If the way out of crisis is developing a new paradigm which is to be, as cultural theorist Fred Moten advocates, “a turn away from centrality’s technics and metaphysics” (Moten online: 2) Spiderwoman’s model may offer just the right reimagination, rearticulation or a (re)envisioning of the universal frontier or borderlands. This would be one positive answer to the ethical conundrum America faces between democracy and “barbarism” (Grandin 2019: 251).

From the island of the earth to a terraqueous globe

Edmundo O’Gorman, in his *The Invention of America* (1961) reminds us that before Columbus’ voyage Europeans believed themselves to be inhabitants of an island, “the Island of the Earth” (O’Gorman 1961: 128). According to ancient beliefs the *Orbis Terrarum* was an island consisting of Europe, Asia and Africa and bounded by the Ocean. The Ocean was the original border of the world and everything which lay beyond it was not the Earth. With Columbus’ voyage and with the publication in 1507 of *Cosmographiae Introductio*, the first map upon

which America as an island and the fourth part of the *Orbis Terrarum* appears. The Ocean ceased to be “regarded as [Earth’s] boundary”: “now for the first time [the *Orbis* was] conceived as including not only the Island of the Earth, but the Ocean itself, and therefore not only the newly-found lands but any other land that may appear in the future” (O’Gorman 1961: 128).

The implications of this new understanding of the world as not limited to the Island of the Earth but including “the entire terraqueous globe” (O’Gorman 1961: 130) were profound. For if the archaic notion held that the Earth was “a limited space in the universe assigned to man by God” now, once the bounds were transcended, the wall of the Ocean was broken, a New Man was born who could claim “sovereignty over the whole universe” (O’Gorman 1961: 129). “[N]o longer circumscribed only to the Island of the Earth” (O’Gorman 1961: 128), freed from the confines of the border of the sea, the European man comprehended that the world was, to cite O’Gorman, “something of his own making, and therefore something for which he is responsible as owner and master” (1961: 128). Thus, O’Gorman continues, the European “opened for himself the road to the conquest” of the globe (1961: 129). The universe was revealed as “a vast inexhaustible quarry” (O’Gorman 1961: 129) out of which one would now “carve out his world, depending (...) solely on his own initiative, daring, and technical ability” (O’Gorman 1961: 129). The Modern idea of individual freedom was contingent on that moment. It was then, we could add after Enrique Dussel, that Hernan Cortes’ actions “gave expression to an ideal of subjectivity that could be defined as the *ego conquiro*, which predates Rene’ Descartes’s articulation of the *ego cogito*” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 244–245).

It was this new conviction of unlimited space and potentials, this new epistemology, born out of “modern man’s contempt for and his rebellion against the fetters (...) of archaic religious fears” (O’Gorman 1961: 129–130), against the limits hitherto imposed by cosmology that brought Europeans first to the islands of the Caribbean where they met the Taino, the Arawak and the Caribs and then to the rest of the globe. When this epistemology was combined with a conviction supported by the new cartography that as part of the new *Orbis Terrarum* the Western hemisphere could not be in any essential way different from other continents, America and then the world were invented as “the land of opportunities, of the future, and of freedom” (O’Gorman 1961: 129–130) to be shaped in Europe’s image that is, as Tzvetan Todorov puts it, denied the right to difference not reduced to inferiority (Todorov 1999: 160). In other words, when what had hitherto been the border of the world was breached what lay beyond it became the vast global borderlands for *Ego conquiro/cogito*’s agency. The borderlands initiated the procedures of the coloniality of being and knowing (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2011) and thus is the originary, central locus of Modernity/Coloniality.

There would be no Modernity/Coloniality with its complimentary ideas of freedom/slavery and progress/backwardness, etc. without the emergence of the imagination of the borderless frontier or the borderlands (spatial, of ethics, of being, of knowing, of sexuality, etc.).

Columbus stands as the originator of this locus and its corollary practices of invention and evasion. It was Columbus who imposed on the Americas his expectations – he had anticipated to arrive in India and hence the people living there could be no other but Indians. The misnomer was the first in a series of misperceptions which have haunted the Americas ever since, becoming the continent's inseparable double. It is this shadow of the hyperreal – what Jean Baudrillard explains as “models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 2002: 166) – which I believe feeds what Junot Díaz calls the “*Fukú americanus*, (...) the Curse and the Doom of the New World” also known as “the fukú of the Admiral”. This curse has kept us “in the shit ever since” says Díaz (2007: 1). It is in this sense that I want to understand Todorov's statement that “we are all the direct descendants of” (Todorov 1999: 5) the Admiral. We are all subject to the interpellation of the hyperreal.

I propose that one way of exorcising the spell of the *fukú* may be by going back to what Díaz calls the “ground zero of the New World” (2007: 1), that is by revisiting the Caribbean basin at the moment of the birth of Modernity/Coloniality's borderlands and the invention of the West. We may approach this by reviewing the development of the cartographic toponymy of the region before the “Caribbean-sea” was popularized by Thomas Jefferys' *West Indies Atlas* (1773).

Note that Columbus' original mandate issued by the Spanish Crown on April 30, 1492, spoke not of the Indies but of “Islands and Tierra Firme in the Ocean Sea” (Sauer 1966: 1) and that it was the Spanish title to “certain islands and mainlands” that pope Alexander VI's Bull later affirmed. Columbus reached such islands and, in his third and fourth voyages, caught glimpses of the mainland/*tierra firme* but failed like many others who followed him to understand the uniqueness of the region, its difference. The territory was first understood only as part of the global Ocean Sea; then, when in 1513 Vasco Nuñez de Balboa announced the discovery of the Pacific or the South Sea, the Caribbean became the first part of the North Sea or what later came to be called the Western Atlantic. In 1574 López de Velasco first tried to find a proper name for the region by proposing to call it the Gulf of the Cannibals: “*de los Canibales llaman el golfo grande del mar Oceano desde la Deseada y Dominica por toda la costa de Tierra Firme, Yucatan, Golfo de Tierra Firme, y de las Islas del Mar del Norte*” (Sauer 1966: 2)³. Within this Gulf of the Cannibals the Spanish distinguished different parts. The littoral of South America

³ “The great gulf of the Ocean Sea from La Esperada and Dominica along the entire coast of Tierra Firme, Yucatan, Gulf of Tierra Firme, and the North Sea Islands was named after the Cannibals” (transl. GW).

acquired the name *Tierra Firme* which the English translated as the Spanish Main. In English usage this latter designation, however, soon expanded when the ports of *Tierra Firme* as well as the Spanish galleons *en route* to or from Spain became targets of attacks around the approaches and exits of *Tierra Firme* by pirates – those epitomes of freedom from all restraint who equipped with *lettre de marque* from European kings lurked and provisioned in the many islands of the Lesser Antilles. As Carl Sauer notes: “Thus sailing to the Spanish Main became called sailing on the Spanish Main. By this extension and transfer of meaning the English language acquired the first inclusive name for *Tierra Firme*, the West Indies Islands, and the intermediate sea” (Sauer 1966: 3). Thus, the English terminology, The Spanish Main, became equivalent to the original Colombian *Islas* and *Tierra Firme*.

The Spanish Main is thus an interesting example of a designation which simultaneously stood, on the one hand, for one empire’s (Spanish) turf and the central role it played in that empire’s possessions – note, for example, the *Castilla de Oro* nomination which suggests both likeness to and immeasurable difference from the metropole – and, on the other hand, for a borderlands territory, Spanish control of which was being continually contested and undermined by emerging powers (England, France) who, brought on the wings of the same untethered and capitalist idea of freedom, scrambled for pieces of the Americas yet unsecured using to this end a legion of mercenaries like *Frères de la Côte* or the Brethren of the Coast also known as pirates, buccaneers, or freebooters. The Spanish Main became the theater of this rivalry, while the most notorious Brother of the Coast was perhaps Henry Morgan who in 1670 destroyed Panama City, kidnapped its wealthy citizens for ransom, and stole away with most of the loot to Jamaica, where he was granted governorship, admiralship and the title of “sir” by Charles II. A popular song hails Morgan and implicates the Spaniards: “Ho! Henry Morgan sails today / To harry the Spanish Main, / With a pretty bill for the Dons to pay / Ere he comes back again” (Setz after Bolton 1933: 455).

The Americas as borderlands

What the example of the Spanish Main illustrates is that the territories claimed by Europe in the wake of Columbus have never been mappable in a way that is stable, and that contested claims have always overlapped albeit often hidden by names and discourse. Therefore, only by (re)membering these conflictive interests and remembering that they originate from the same root cause of breaking away from the “old”, will we be able to piece together a more informed map of the colonial Americas as European borderlands.

To achieve this, however, there is another borderlands map that needs to be remembered and brought to bear on our contemporary vision. A chance of glancing at it was offered to Columbus during his fourth and last voyage which began in March 1502. By October that year his four ships reached the coast of Central America for the first time. Near the coast of Honduras they made landfall on the island of Guanaja (named by him *Isla de los Pinos*) occupied by the Mayans (Sauer 1966: 130). There, his son Ferdinand reported an important encounter: “a canoe as great as a galley (...) came loaded with merchandise from western parts (...)” (Sauer 1966: 128). The Admiral ordered the canoe captured and thus came in the possession of:

a sample of all the things of that land. He then ordered that there should be taken from the canoe whatever appeared to be most attractive and valuable, such as cloths and sleeveless shirts of cotton that had been worked and dyed in different colors and designs, also pantaloons of the same workmanship with which they cover their private parts, also cloth of which the Indian women (...) were dressed such as Moorish women of Granada are accustomed to wear (Ferdinand after Sauer 1966: 128).

Other items included swords “cutting like steel”, copper hatchets, “bells and crucibles for smelting”, roots, grain, corn wine “like the beer of England”, and seen for the first time, cocoa “kernels which serve[d] as money” for the Native populations (Ferdinand after Sauer 1966: 128). Sauer comments that the pillage of the peaceful Indigenous traders,

gave a preview of an extensive and elaborate native commerce, in this instance between central Mexico and the Gulf of Honduras. The cargo was being brought from the west and some of it came from distant parts. The cotton goods (...) from Yucatan. The tools and weapons (...) from central Mexico (...). The copper bells and good copper axes indicate Michoacan as a source. The kernels that served as coins (...) [from the] Pacific coast (Sauer 1966: 129).

Sauer explains that “[t]his was the first contact with the merchant class which would later be found throughout New Spain and even farther (...). When Nuño de Guzman came to Pánuco coast at the northern end of the high native culture, a native merchant there gave the first account of the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, a thousand mile journey to the north” (1966: 129).

The Admiral’s obsession with gold, however, blinded him to the significance of the moment. Identifying “the new coast with Champa of Indochina” (Sauer 1966: 129) he sailed on to Panama. The encounter with the Indian trading canoe packed with goods of the Americas stands symbolically as the first European contact with the high cultures of the New World. It signaled the existence of “an elaborate and

extensive native commerce” (Sauer 1966: 129), trading networks stretching from the interior of North America to the interior South, from the Gulf to the Pacific. These networks can be understood as borderlands.

Another such network, this time stretching between the North American interior westward towards the Pacific was revealed in a 1542 encounter between Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and the Kumeyaay at the present-day San Diego Bay in California. A day after Cabrillo anchored there, the official report of the expedition reads,

three large Indian men came to the ship. With gestures they indicated that bearded men who were clothed like us and armed like the men on the ships were wandering about the interior. They called the Christians “*Guacamal*”. They gestured that the men were carrying crossbows and swords. They ran around as if on horseback and motioned with their right arm that the men were throwing lances. They indicated that they were afraid because the Spaniards were killing many Indians in the region (Beebe, Senkewicz 2001: 36–37).

Evidently, the Kumeyaay had heard of the Spanish activities in the Americas. Steven W. Hackel suggests that they “had anticipated the Spaniards’ arrival, perhaps even prepared for it” (2005: 32). But how would they have known? One possible explanation can be inferred from documents of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado’s expedition in search of the cities of gold (Cibola) which spanned the current territories of Sonora, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. In a letter to Viceroy Mendoza dated August 3, 1540, Coronado reports: “They tell me this valley of Los Corazones is five days travel from the Mar de Oeste. I sent [someone] to summon Indians from the coast to tell me about their existence” (Coronado after Flint, Flint 2005: 255). It is possible that the men that the Kumeyaay told Cabrillo about were Coronado’s soldiers on a mission to “summon” Indians from the Pacific coast. For even though the hypothesized location of Corazones is either the “Ures Gorge ... in what is now central Sonora” (Flint, Flint 2005: 601) or “near modern Rosario, Sonora” (Flint, Flint 2005: 653, fn. 35), while the Pacific Ocean here refers to the Gulf of California, we know that the Kumeyaay and other tribes maintained intertribal links spanning great distances. Rupert Costo speaks of California tribes journeying “miles and miles to a southwestern Pueblo knowing there would be a chance to trade, to gamble, to participate in a festival, and to renew friendship” (Costo 1987: 15). Florence Connolly Shipek says that the Kumeyaay and other California tribes, maintained links with the Colorado River tribes, as well as the Pueblo and Hohokam tribes through “long and continued interaction and intermarriage between the two areas” (Shipek 1987: 30). Because Coronado’s journey was marked by violent conflicts with numerous Indian tribes it is also possible that the news of these confrontations, for example at Cibola (Zuni Pueblo)

in July 1540, could have also reached the Kumeyaay along these routes. Richard Flint and Shirley Cushing Flint speak of “rapid, long-distance communication and even intervisitation that were commonplace among people of Tierra Nueva. About two months after the vanguard of the Coronado expedition arrived at Cibola (...) linguistically unrelated people more than 350 miles away already had detailed and quite accurate descriptions of Europeans” (Flint, Flint 2005: 189).

These examples reveal to us only some of the maps of America’s borderlands that had preceded the European contact and which the colonists would later exploit for their own purposes, building upon the ancient established routes their own dreams, imposing their own names like Camino Real.

Columbus’ debacle in Panama is well known. There, however, he was first to learn about the passage to the Pacific. Once Balboa crossed the Isthmus a whole new world of borderlands opened up. Consider that a mere fifty years later “Luis de Velasco, (...) viceroy of New Spain based in Mexico City, commissioned conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi to establish a Spanish presence in the Philippines” (Starr 2007: 34). Legazpi achieved the transpacific assignment “within seven years and thus linked New Spain and the Philippines across the Pacific. New Spain would continue to rule the Philippines from Mexico City until 1822” (Starr 2007: 34). Starting in June 1565 the “Spaniards traded throughout the region – in Japan, China, the Moluccas, Siam – gathering into Manila the riches of Asia for shipment” (Starr 2007: 34) and transporting them by galleon across the Pacific, along the coast of the Californias, then across the Valley of Mexico, and later via the Spanish Main to Spain. Thus, the Pacific was turned into Europe’s borderlands. And note that once the Americas were thus connected with Asia, the Columbian misnomer for the Indigenous Americans gained a retroactive validity.

The Manila enterprise postponed the project of colonization of California but the passage through Panama served as an important new super-borderlands of the Americas, a transit zone between the North and South Seas, a passage to and from Peru and later on a superhighway to and from the gold mines of California. Aleksander Hołyński was a Polish journalist who in 1850 travelled on steamboat from the US to Havana and then via the Isthmus to San Francisco. His, *La Californie et la routes interocéaniques* (1853; in Polish translation *Byłem przy narodzinach Kalifornii* (1981)) was the first book on California published in Europe. The French title clearly suggests the author’s global borderlands vision, with California framed within the context of an intercontinental, international global network of exchange.

Hołyński’s account of the passage through Panama gives us a portrait of a tumultuous era of movement, when thousands upon thousands, mostly but not only Anglo-Saxon gold prospectors crossed daily in order to get on the first steamship going north. Most were drunks, loafers and men full of reckless bravado coming in what in today’s terms might be termed unruly caravans, packed into boats to

twice their capacity. The Yankees, says Hołyński, attempted to monopolize the transportation on the river Chagres (1981: 72), which resulted in a bloody conflict with the local Indians. They established the city of Colón to build a railroad there. Hołyński describes the city of Panama: “This city, a gateway to the lands favored by ambition, lust for fame and gold, has become **a meeting place** of peoples (...). **A meeting place** of precious metals from South America and goods brought from Europe, a permanent market place between the two worlds” (Hołyński 1981: 89 – transl. GW; my emphasis)⁴. Hołyński also asserts that after decades of tribulations, not the least of which was its burning and sacking by Morgan and two other pirate attacks later, the isthmus and the city of Panama was on the brink of “resurrection”. This had already begun around 1840 when the Wheelwright’s steamboat connection to Peru, Ecuador, and Chile was opened (Hołyński 1981: 93). But “the true resurrection” asserts Hołyński (1981: 94 – transl. GW)⁵, and “a future more luminous than its past”⁶ Panama owes to California (1981: 94 – transl. GW). Like a snake, Hołyński adds, Panama sheds its skin and starts anew although here and there ruins of the former glory stand out despite nature’s rapid reclamation of what is left untouched. He links then the future of the isthmus, the bustling meeting place of peoples and markets, with the future of the gold region in the north.

Although he was mistaken about the potentials of the gold deposits in California (Hołyński 1981: 179) he was right in linking Panama’s future with that of the big player in the north. The popularity and the lasting legacy of the Panama California exposition which took place in 1915 in San Diego in celebration of the opening of the Panama Canal testify to the vital links between the two regions and the central role of Central America for California’s identity. It was the Isthmus of Panama and more generally, Central America, that has continually offered Americans a location of great strategic value. Indeed, the last time Americans showed how much they value that region was a little over thirty years ago when George H.W. Bush invaded Panama.

Contact zones and artistic practices

I have tried so far to revive our memory of some American routes of exchange. On the one hand, I have pointed to the anterior American borderlands, networks of communication that had existed before and coevally with the European intrusion.

⁴ “To miasto, brama do krainy, którą upodobały sobie ambicja, chęć sławy i żądza złota, stało się miejscem spotkań ludzi (...). Miejscem spotkań cennych metali z Ameryki Południowej i towarów z Europy, stałym targowiskiem wymiany między dwoma światami”.

⁵ “[p]rawdziwe swe zmartwychstanie”.

⁶ “przyszłość bardziej błyszcząca od przeszłości”.

On the other hand, I have argued that the European arrival was spurred by a new European epistemology of untethered freedom which often translated to violent subjugation of the periphery and created planetary borderlands stretching from Europe across the Atlantic via the Spanish Main to Mexico, the Isthmus of Panama, on to South America as well as to California, further to Asia and back. Such a conceptualization of the borderlands builds on and expands historian Donald C. Cutter's idea of the Spanish Borderlands extending "as far as Hawaii, Guam and the Philippine Islands" (Cutter after Habell-Pallán 2005: 23). Turner's glorification of the Anglo settlers' movement across the North American continent is thus placed in a proper perspective. Westward movement across the North American land mass was just one of many projects articulating European aggrandizement and Eurocentric narcissism. This was never unidirectional, but it was frequently very ugly.

My text's multidirectional, multicentric, transborder movement of historical memory and imaginations, or to adapt Michelle Habell-Pallán's phrasing, "[t]his geographical imagining of a *transfrontera* space" (2005: 23) aims to problematize the idea of a modern insular nationhood, the insularity of borders of modern bounded states, and narratives upon which these states build their myths. In this project I follow the example of Mary Louise Pratt who in *Imperial Eyes* (1992) develops the concept of the "contact zone' (...) the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (1992: 6). Pratt explains that for her, "Contact zone' (...) is often synonymous with 'colonial frontier'" (1992: 6). Pratt writes:

"contact zone" is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term "contact," I aim to foreground the interactive improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters (...). A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized (...) not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (1992: 7).

Thinking in terms of *transfrontera* spaces or contact zones, concepts related in many ways to the Black Atlantic (Thompson 1984; Gilroy 1993), allows us to see the connections between distant regions and peoples, and puts the homogenizing identity projects, represented by, for example, what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls "corporate America" in their proper perspective underscoring instead

“multiple attachments, multiple identities, and multiple commitments” (Appadurai after Burszta et al. 1998: 112), as well as a proliferation of difference. Appadurai says that “what America and other countries (...) need is (...) [a] cosmopolitanism of the past (...) an image that would enrich our historical imagination” (Burszta et al. 1998: 111). He adds: “Myths are things to be imagined, and I (...) place a remarkable emphasis on the idea of imagination as a key part of the social property that must be cultivated” (Burszta et al. 1998: 112). In connection with this, he advocates building a cosmopolitan future “around difference and not universalism” striving toward the acknowledgement and not suppression of “social complexity and peaceful multiplicity” (Burszta et al. 1998: 112) which can be envisioned as cosmopolitan borderlands of geographies and imaginaries.

Just like historians and anthropologists, artists have an important role to play in this project of ushering in the conception of “contact subjects” and the world as borderlands or contact zones. For example, as Habell-Pallán reminds us, Latino theater has for a long time worked with the idea of the “Greater Borderlands (...) in the development of a sense of ‘Hispanicity,’ to use Nicolás Kanellos’s term, connecting – however tenuously – Latino populations in the Southwest and in the Southeast” (Habell-Pallán 2005: 23). She adds that an imagined “*transfronterospace* is consistent with those of more recent theorists of the Greater Borderlands who take into account both areas’ territorial conflict and the cultural *mestizaje* that occurs there. This more expansive conception of the borderlands as a Greater Borderlands *transfrontera* phenomenon laid the groundwork for the construction of the narrative of an inter-American diaspora” (Habell-Pallán 2005: 23).

The work of Los Angeles-based actor/performer/director Roger Guenveur Smith can serve as one example of an artistic practice which seeks to break from the confines of bounded and linear identity formation and envisions a broader trans- and inter-American space which as it enacts a geographical movement across space also engenders a trans-historical and trans-subjective imagination of difference rooted in the plural subversive maroon oppositional consciousness. In his solo show *Blood and Brains* Smith says: “I’ve gone from Jamestown / To Trenchtown / To Jonestown [Guyana] / ... / Fugitive / In the jungles of Surinam / and the hills above South Central” (Smith 2000: 340).

Another example of an artistic practice which seeks to break from the confines of bounded and linear identity is a scene from *Anthem* (2002) a play by Richard Montoya of Chicano performance trio Culture Clash. It brings to the fore the subjectivity of a Panamanian refugee. Speaking directly to the audience at Arena Stage Theater in Washington D.C the character declares: “your President Bush, he killed thousands of people here in Panamá” and he adds, “Muerte a los Americanos” (Culture Clash 2003: 184). Crucially, in the capital of the United States, this indictment of American interventionist policies brings to the fore the

irrepressible connectedness between the epicenter of American policies and the epicenter(s) of their consequences. It also foregrounds the moral weight that corporate America incurs and the affective toll it inflicts in the pursuit of its interests. This weight, a historian could add, is not unlike that incurred by Don Colón. Both Bush and Columbus instrumentalized territories and disregarded their peoples in universalist, absolutist fashions. In other words, Montoya speaks not only of the borderlands of military interventionism or those of the diasporic movements caused by them. He speaks also of the affective borderlands, of lasting burdens carried across borders, of borderlands of festering psychological wounds, and repressed or denied guilt.

“Circles upon circles upon circles”

I want to finish this consideration of contact zones in connection with artistic practice with an excerpt from *Sun Moon and Feather* (1981), a play by the Spiderwoman Theater, the longest running feminist Native American Theater in the United States. Founded in the 1970s by Muriel Miguel (founding member of the Native American Theater Ensemble, artistic director Hanay Geiogamah, and former member of Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater) and her two sisters Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel, Spiderwoman Theater takes its name from the Hopi goddess Spiderwoman “who taught weaving to her people” (Haugo 2000: 238). The artists are of Kuna/Rappahannock ancestry. Both their tribal lineage and the name of the company are significant.

Kuna are the people of the San Blas islands on the Caribbean coast of Panama while the Rappahannock are Indigenous to the Virginia lands in the vicinity of Jamestown, the first successful English settlement in the Americas. In other words, the ancestors of the sisters may have once encountered both Columbus (or Balboa) and John Smith. Thus, the sisters’ genealogy offers us another justification to think jointly of the Spanish Main and North America, that is, to (re) think the epic of greater America. The theater’s name, taken from the mythology of the Hopi, adds to this spatial imaginary another element, that of the Southwest. Together these three orientation points allow us to think of the group in terms of inter-American *transfrontera* borderlands both anterior to and resultant from the European presence. The adoption of the name from the Hopi mythology is also of epistemic and/or procedural significance. The theater describes its method as “storyweaving” which critic Ann Haugo describes as “combin[ing] the philosophies and styles of feminist theater with a traditional understanding of the power of storytelling and oral history” (Haugo 2000: 238). Muriel Miguel explains Spiderwoman Theater’s method:

Storytelling is the way you feel and know where you are within your family, your clan, your tribal affiliations, and from there into the history of how you fit into the world. Storytelling starts at the kitchen table, on your parent's lap, on your aunt's and uncle's laps. Storytelling begins there, about who you are ... Then it continues from there about who you are in the family; of where you are as a tribal member, as part of that particular nation; then where that nation is in the community; and where that community belongs in the world. There's always circles upon circles upon circles. And that's how Spiderwoman approaches theater, through circles upon circles upon circles (Miguel in Haugo 2000: 228).

How this model of "circles upon circles upon circles" is put into action is illustrated by *Sun, Moon and Feather*, which is a layered narrative of overlapping private stories and sendups of popular culture. In one central scene the three sisters stand together in line:

MURIEL Every summer, my family went to the beach. We had a beautiful red and white bungalow on a beautiful beach by a beautiful bay.

(GLORIA gives MURIEL an incredulous look)

GLORIA Cedar Beach. A dilapidated old bungalow in New Jersey on a dirty beach off a dirty polluted bay.

LISA There was a fish house and twice a day there was a god-awful odor.

MURIEL My father bought a great big red and white boat with a great big windshield and a great big motor.

LISA That boat was a little bigger than a row boat and it had a motor in it that never worked.

GLORIA And Daddy and Uncle Joe set about to make that boat seaworthy.

MURIEL My father would stand at the helm of that boat with his brown safari hat and his wooden staff and he'd look out over the ocean. He was going to sail the seven seas.

LISA The only trouble was 'em.

ALL It never went into the water.

GLORIA It just stayed in the backyard.

MURIEL And every summer, my father would paint it, caulk it, pet it, hose it down; then all our friends and all our family would come (ALL *push very hard* SL.) And he would –

ALL Puuush it. To the other side of the yard.

GLORIA Then we would pose by it, on it and under it. (ALL *strike poses like being photographed by boat.*) And Daddy and Uncle Joe would [sic] stand at the helm and pretend.

LISA And then next summer, my father would paint it, caulk it, pet it, hose it down; then all our friends and all our family would come (ALL *push* SR.) And we would – ALL Puuush it. To the other side of the yard.

GLORIA Then we would pose by it, on it and under it. (ALL *strike poses.*) And Daddy and Uncle Joe would stand at the helm and pretend. And the next summer, my father would paint it, caulk it, pet it, hose it down; then all our friends and all our family would come. (ALL *push* SC.) And we would –

ALL Puuush it. To the other side of the yard.
 MURIEL Then one summer, it was ready to go into the water.
 LISA My mother gave a party. She made potato salad, punch and sandwiches.
 GLORIA All our friends and family – (ALL *push* DSC.)
 ALL Puuushed it into the water – (ALL *stare at the same spot on stage.*)
 MURIEL It started to take on water –
 LISA It was like a sieve –
 MURIEL We had to bail out the water –
 GLORA And then it sank.
 (ALL *still staring at same spot*)
 LISA Then Daddy said, oh well. Next summer. (ALL *shrug*) (Spiderwoman Theater 1996: 306–307).

The vast ocean before Daddy's boat is the Atlantic as seen from the east shore of North America. But only preparations, posturing at the helm and photos are accomplished. The boat never leaves, or rather is sunk upon its launch. The excerpt is part of a long performance, or only one story "circle" interwoven with many other circles of stories. But in our context, this particular story/circle offers an interesting counterpoint commentary to the myth of European agency opening the global borderlands and even in it we can discover not one but many circles of stories.

First, as it tells the story of the sisters' Daddy's boat it offers a mock restaging in reverse (eastward) of the Colombian enterprise, of *our* (after Todorov) Daddy's project. What remains of Daddy's boat are precisely pictures and inflated gestures not unlike those of Columbus as, for example, depicted by Emmanuel Leutze in the grandiose *Departure of Columbus from Palos in 1492* (1855) or in many other versions circulated in American history textbooks or films. And not only Columbus comes to mind. Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* (1861) resonate in this story/image. So do Daniel Sayre Groesbeck's depictions at the Mural Room in the Santa Barbara courthouse (see Hixson's essay in this volume). The sisters' Daddy seems to have internalized these narrative, mythical poses, images. Perhaps he believes himself now to have also inherited that unstoppable, future-oriented, manifest agency? His safari hat and staff in hand seem to suggest this. However, the shrug of the shoulders and "Oh well. Next summer" when the boat sinks would suggest otherwise. Although as with Columbus, narrative is his point of departure, unlike Columbus, it is not his end. If Columbus' "discovery seems in truth subject to a goal, which is the narrative of voyage" (Todorov 1999: 13) the sisters' Daddy is not impelled to leave, conquer, or even narrate **his** voyage. His project is circular ("Next summer") not linear, collective not individualistic, playful as opposed to profit-hungry. This is a family or communal ritual which is not subject to a goal other than its own circular doing.

Second, the story of Daddy's restaging of Columbus (and of Washington, Daniel Boone, and other "safari" explorers, etc.) is told and **restaged** by the three sisters. The performance in theater serves as a secondary (even tertiary) frame. It elevates Daddy's seemingly insignificant and futile project to the status of an origin myth. The contrasting of the wished-for "beautiful beach by a beautiful bay" with the actual "dirty beach off a dirty polluted bay" serves to confront the imaginary of the national origin myth of the pristine continent Columbus first saw and recorded in his journal in "superlatives" (Todorov 1999: 24) with the more mundane results of the Colombian legacy (dilapidation, pollution, odor, dirt). It points to imagination and memory as contested sites in which the public and the private are being continually negotiated. The retelling is a collective act. In Native American tradition oral storytelling is the fundamental communal act. Truth is arrived at in a collective enactment of circles of stories. Importantly it is a feminine agency that takes the lead here. The stories of the two men, the deep cultural code of Columbus (and all other "great" explorers) and the private story of Daddy's humble boat, are collapsed now by the force of the ancient practice of the women's storytelling. In other words, the restaging is both subsequent to both scripts and anterior to them. The male agency is enfolded within, secondary to the feminine web of weaving stories.

Gloria Miguel says, "I survive by telling my stories" (Huago 2000: 233) but that survival is not only her own. As we now know it is contingent on circles upon circles upon circles of other stories being told and retold. Thus, this is never an individualist story but one of family/tribe, of relations thus sustained. This is a democratic, multicentric, ever-transforming imaginary model of universal borderlands of stories.

Conclusions

Drawing on Spiderwoman Theater's methodology I submit in closing that the paradigm of circles upon circles upon circles may serve as a productive image and narrative model for (re)envisioning the idea of global borderlands. It may help us reimagine the overlapping/competing spatial trajectories, histories, narratives, imaginations, memories, affects which have been built since the island of the world broke free from its bounds of the ocean. On the one hand, Leutze and Jackson Turner privilege linearity of progress and heroization, and Bolton looking back and Hołyński looking forward envisage multidirectional routes linking points on the map. On the other hand, the pre-contact Indigenous people's routes stand as alternative maps of communication and trade in the Americas. The paradigm of circles upon circles upon circles engenders a map of the world

in a pluralistic and humane way: multi-centric and decentralized, coeval borderlands in which not only the private and public, the Indigenous and global but also the temporal, mythical, epistemic, affective, and anamnestic dimensions of our experiences are accorded equal standing. None is privileged, none occludes others. This is a spatio-temporal vision which is one response to decolonial scholar Enrique Dussel's call for the "new eyes ... of the other *ego*" (1995: 74) and which can perhaps be rendered best by George Lipsitz's definition of ethnomusicology: "universalism rich with particulars grounded in the dialogue of all, the dignity of each, and the supremacy of none (...) [and which] can help us see which differences make a difference" (2011: 189). This is the new frontier.

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