The Transnational Turn in American Studies: 
A View from the Water

Gavin James Campbell


For over a decade, the “transnational turn” has fundamentally reoriented American Studies, suggesting new approaches to familiar topics and entirely new subjects for inquiry. Placing the United States within a global context, scholars have shown that, as Thomas Bender aptly phrases it, “the nation cannot be its own context.”¹ Opening up the links between the US and its many global contact points has challenged older narratives of “American exceptionalism,” and demonstrated the complex interaction between “foreign” and “domestic” in the shaping of US empire, identity and racial and gender

ideologies. The transnational turn’s greatest success is opening new subfields such as borderlands, the Atlantic World, and more recently Pacific World, which work above and below the level of national histories.

Geography means that America’s transnational contacts have often been forged over water. This suggests that maritime history can play a significant role in the transnational turn. In his survey of global maritime history, for instance, Lincoln Paine argues that while “the view from the land” has been “our default perspective,” an aquatic view shows how “much of human history has been shaped by people’s access, or lack of it, to navigable water.” Oceans, agrees the anthropologist John Mack, are by their nature “arenas of transnational interchange” because they are one of the basic ways distant societies come into contact. Maritime trade, moreover, widens contact zones making water an essential ingredient of many transnational narratives, whether discussing people, goods or ideas. Maritime history, therefore, seems uniquely positioned to shape transnational American Studies, and leading scholars in maritime history have repeatedly announced their imminent


breakthrough to mainstream relevance. “For historians,” W. Jeffrey Bolster predicted in 2008, “the past has never looked so watery.”

And yet dry land still prevails, leaving maritime history the province of scholars with more enthusiasm than influence. That may change, however, with a spate of new transnational studies in which the seas plays a major role. Although their topics and time periods vary, and although several of the authors would not call themselves maritime historians, nevertheless together these works demonstrate the promise of pushing American Studies further out into the water.

Especially refreshing are two new books challenging historiography that keeps Native American scholarship anchored to land. From early colonial contact to the “closing of the frontier,” scholars of Native American history have crafted a relentlessly terrestrial narrative. But in his remarkable study, The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast, Andrew Lipman argues that “Indians met Europeans as fellow mariners.” (4) Long before Europeans arrived, coastal tribes relied upon the waters for food, spiritual sustenance and trade, making the sea for them “a conduit, not a barrier.” (25) As a result, when Dutch and English settlers began arriving

---


on Long Island Sound in the seventeenth century, they met a people with profound understanding of local waterways. This, Lipman argues, reminds us that those early “coastal encounters were formed by two maritime cultures, never just one.” (55)

Through six chronological chapters Lipman explores the maritime setting of early Dutch, English and Indian contact. New settlers and Natives were, for instance, deeply interested in each other's naval technology. Though colonial settlers mastered long-distance transatlantic travel, their ships became a liability in Long Island Sound’s shallow waters, and were expensive to craft and difficult to maintain. As a result, European settlers quickly adopted lightweight Indian birch bark and dugout canoes. At the same time, however, Indians began experimenting with European ships, which could carry more and often required less physical labor. That kind of mutual exploration also impacted the production of wampum, the Sound’s basic medium of economic exchange. Wampum predated European contact, but new tools bought through transatlantic trade made crafting it easier, faster and led to production of a new highly-prized purple type. At the same time, wampum’s value also lead to conflicts over controlling the whelk and clam banks that produced wampum’s raw materials, meaning that in both ship design and in the wampum trade, saltwater formed a vital part of the contact zone.

The period of relatively balanced power between the Dutch, the Indians and the English evaporated in the mid-seventeenth century as Europe descended into global contests for empire. The impact in North America was profound. A series of major military conflicts, including the Pequot War (1637-38) and Kieft’s War (1643-45), dramatically altered relations between Indians and European settlers in Long Island, ending what Lipman calls the “initial tentative, maritime-based stage” of contact and beginning a “more invasive, territorial-based stage in which the foreigners openly tried to subjugate their Native neighbors.” (129) Yet even here Lipman shows the value of a maritime perspective, showing, for instance, the degree to which European colonists focused on destroying canoes and other ways Indians could make war from
the water. Lipman also follows those Native Americans captured in war and sold into Caribbean slavery, as well as others who helped inaugurate New England’s whale and its coastal fishing industries. That is, though Indians faced difficult choices and decreased territory, the sea nevertheless remained a vital point of contact between themselves and the broader world.

Indeed, in the largest sense, *The Saltwater Frontier* effectively shows how water links Indians to transnational history. “In most Atlantic studies,” Lipman observes, “indigenous Americans are still landbound onlookers with little reach beyond their immediate shores.” (11) Yet Native American fishing, trade and nautical knowledge, along with their ability to disrupt imperial schemes, made them powerful players in an emerging Atlantic world. Even as their material power and their demography declined, Lipman shows how they remained linked to the larger transnational world. “Gatherings of Algonquian seamen in whaleboats bobbing deep in the Pacific or in the smoky grog shops of London could temporarily turn these far corners of the earth into profoundly indigenous places,” Lipman notes. (246) As a result, “telling the stories of saltwater frontiers can uncover the many unexpected ways in which Native history could be both global and modern.” (246)

With similar intentions, Nancy Shoemaker’s *Native American Whalemen and the World: Indigenous Encounters and the Contingency of Race* examines Native American whalers in the “golden age” of American whaling (ca. 1830-1890). Though not strictly a work of maritime history -- Shoemaker is more interested in racial formation and identity -- she uses Native whaleman to demonstrate how maritime life shifted and morphed Indian strategies for navigating American racial ideology. And, like Lipman, Shoemaker shows how Indian sailors link the Native American story to a larger, transnational history. “By traveling the world, mastering ocean navigation, and accumulating knowledge of the globe’s great diversity,” she writes, Native whalemen not only challenged racism, they also challenge widespread assumptions that the Native American experience can be summarized as simply a tale of territorial losses and reservation confinement.
Shoemaker estimates that in the mid-nineteenth century one of every six New Bedford whale ships included at least one (and often more) Native American crew. And as white labor fled the industry’s increasingly harsh working conditions, talented Indians began rising into the officer class. Racism still kept them caged; few ever became ship owners or captains. But in an ironic twist, widespread stereotypes of Indians as brave and “natural” hunters “put them in the right place for promotion.” (38) Despite hardships Indians took the work, Shoemaker notes, because they had to make a living, and the conditions were no worse than farming, day labor and domestic servitude. And, if they stuck with it, their experience translated into higher paying positions and increased esteem. “Whaling provided income for native whalemen and their families while also offering them occasions to exercise authority and earn respect in ways that small-scale farming and farm labor never could.” No less important, she concludes, Native whalemen were emotionally invested in their work and had an “ambition to be regarded as good at their jobs.” (34)

Shoemaker is particularly adept demonstrating the nuanced ways maritime life complicated Indian racial status, identity and self-perception. Nineteenth century Indians were not, of course, American citizens, but as “American-born seamen of color on overseas voyages, they were entitled to the same protection afforded white native-born and naturalized Americans.” (41) Furthermore, the rules of seafaring life upended many common racial customs. So, Shoemaker argues, rank often outweighed race as a central fact of maritime life. Those who endured hard years of journeyman service “learned to live by rank’s rules and appreciated what rank afforded them: pay equity for those at the same rank and, for officers, a high status and better living conditions.” (59) Moreover, “ship rules protected and legitimated the privileges of those in command, no matter their race.” (66) As a result, at sea Native Americans worked with a modified set of racial rules, ones in which they had the chance to hold “positions of authority and respect” as officers “entrusted with property worth many thousands of dollars and the safety of the crew.” (76) This did not
make the ship a racial utopia, and the benefits of rank and experience often evaporated once an Indian returned home. Rather, deep-sea life temporarily shifted the place of Indians in the American racial hierarchy, revealing how those hierarchies were a historical (as opposed to “biological”) contingency. As a fine example of how fluid and ambiguous racial ideologies could become at sea, Shoemaker points out that when Native American whalemen encountered Pacific Islanders, “their status as American sailors took precedence in defining them ... because the situation they were in delegated to others the role of native.” (126)

Like Lipman, Shoemaker puts Indians on the water. In both cases the result is a sophisticated understanding of how Natives used the oceans for their own aims, and the ways in which their maritime life put them into contact with a larger world. Rather than hunkering down on diminishing lands, Indians pushed the boundaries, and in so doing they urge Native American studies out onto the water to discover new, transnational aspects of the Native American experience.

Taking an even more expansive understanding of the sea’s impact, Stephen Berry’s *A Path in the Mighty Waters: Shipboard Life and Atlantic Crossings to the New World* argues that “the ocean actively shaped historical experiences through its distinct rhythms.” (3) An historian of religion, Berry particularly wants to show how the long voyages of eighteenth-century European settlers and African slaves to British North America allowed “different faiths to commune with another” and thus “anticipated the American approach to denominationalism, involving mutual acceptance and competition, openness and exclusivity.” (6) The sea, Berry argues, nurtured early American religious pluralism.

In ways that echo Shoemaker, Berry points out that shipboard life warped and reshaped many land-based ideologies. An average voyage from England to British North America lasted seven to ten weeks, and “the physical confinement aboard ship offered a moment of social freedom during which migrants
could potentially reshuffle their cultural priorities within their temporary communities.” (4) This was not chaos. Many old norms prevailed, none more heart-rending than the white supremacy sustaining the slave trade. Those long voyages seemed to have stirred among white officers and crew relatively little moral reflection. But particularly on ships transporting white settlers, Berry argues, the long time and cramped spaces offered the opportunity -- and sometimes the unavoidable necessity -- to temporarily abandon old norms. The sublime and often terrifying new maritime environment inspired religious introspection, and prolonged encounters between sometimes hostile religious traditions helped travelers see their fellow believers in new ways. Many toned down their own righteousness and learned to see the value in rival faith traditions. The ship, in short, “facilitated encounters across multiple social divides, and as the voyage progressed those relationships held the potential to produce new understandings of each other as well as of the world.” (114)

Berry makes an expansive claim that the journey germinated American religious tolerance. Maritime historians have hotly contest whether shipboard life forced substantial changes in land-based racial, gender and class ideologies, but their work usually focuses on the men (and the few women) who made the sea a career. Clearly the experience profoundly shaped some travelers, but making a ten-week sea voyage a taproot of American religious pluralism seems to strain the evidence. Moreover, since Berry largely confines his narrative to the sea voyage, it is difficult to confirm any evidence of the journey’s subsequent social and religious impact. Nevertheless, Berry shows again that scholars must abandon an unspoken assumption that the sea is a kind of “interlude” between acts on land, and instead examine how, as he writes, “the ocean wrought human culture even as it transmitted it.” (7)

In a similar way, Dane A. Morrison’s True Yankees: The South Seas and the Discovery of American Identity argues that maritime voyages helped shape American national identity in the period from the Treaty of Paris (1783) to the Treaty of Wanxi (1844). Rather than looking for that identity in the Atlantic World or within the United States, however, Morrison looks
to encounters in the South Seas. As Americans in the early Republic sought to establish themselves alongside older European rivals in the China trade, they brought a timid cosmopolitanism and an eagerness to be treated as a “legitimate” nation. By the Jacksonian period, however, Americans had developed a brash self-confidence, albeit one with hard racialist edges, and a touchiness about perceived slights to America’s rising power. Morrison uses the South Seas journeys of six American travelers to sort through that evolution of an American identity that “began as tentative and tolerant and grew into a national character both more confident and less empathetic.” (xxii) His project shows that national identity was not internally created, but through transnational contact with native peoples and European colonists in the South Seas.

Like Berry, Morrison makes the assertion that international journeys shape domestic ideologies. Yet, unlike Berry, who makes the case that sea voyaging directly shaped American religion, Morrison makes no “direct causal connection” between trips abroad “and the construction of a national identity,” but instead shows how “cumulatively, the ‘news from the East’ carried by hundreds of American men and women contributed to the construction of that identity.” (xvi-xvii) This seems a reasonable assertion, but unfortunately Morrison retreats almost entirely from the water itself, focusing instead on lands where Americans disembarked. To be fair, Morrison is not writing maritime history. But he also misses an opportunity to engage a wider debate about how sailors shaped American identity, citizenship, race and masculinity. As Shoemaker and Lipman convincingly demonstrate, for

instance, Native American sailors complicated American identity and racial ideology, and attention to the diverse maritime workforce ferrying his South Pacific sojourners would add insight into non-white contributions to American identity. In short, if Berry makes perhaps too bold a claim for the ocean’s influence, Morrison does not wade out far enough.

Among the books under review, Brian Rouleau’s, *With Sails Whitening Every Sea: Mariners and the Making of an American Maritime Empire* best demonstrates how maritime history can aid the transnational turn. Focused on the long nineteenth century, Rouleau reminds us that most historians of the era narrate a gradual transformation from Manifest Destiny, focused on North American territorial expansion, to an overseas empire of commercial expansion. Yet he points out that US ships sailed the Pacific Ocean decades before California entered the Union or the US government effectively controlled its territory west of the Mississippi. Before the Civil War the nation’s merchant marine, in both size and economic power, was second only to Great Britain and thousands of American sailors forged transnational paths well before those places ever saw an American soldier, diplomat, missionary or businessman. Because “the power in making relationships with local populations...did not lie with the republic’s appointee[s],” Rouleau argues, “seafarers are best considered agents in the internationalization of U.S. history.” (115, 9) As America’s “working-class diplomats” and the “country's international face,” sailors reveal how nineteenth-century American history is maritime history. (7, 6)

Despite their ubiquity, Rouleau argues that sailors are overlooked actors in the history of American foreign policy. He guides readers through their working-class ideology of race, class, masculinity and patriotism, how they transported that ideology abroad, and the consequences for both native peoples and the United States. So, for instance, Rouleau studies the startling popularity of blackface minstrelsy among sailors who put on shows to “introduce” America to Pacific natives. Those peoples often adapted minstrelsy to confront issues within their own societies, but the long-term impact, Rouleau argues, was
spreading “ideas about the inferiority and capacity of nonwhite peoples” that eventually shaped the power dynamic between the US and its Pacific neighbors. (70) In another chapter Rouleau shows white mariners reaching back to a mythic history of Indian-colonial contact to simplify, map and understand the diverse range of peoples they encountered. Again, however, the metaphor proved crippling; by the 1830s “Indian country’ was less a clearly defined area and more an idea or imagined border used to demarcate a racialized geography of not just a continent but the world.” (98) The minstrel show and the Pacific “Indian” therefore were racial ideologies with “very real consequences in the development of American foreign relations,” Rouleau writes. “In lashing out against peoples abroad they deemed inferior, sailors worked aggressively to entangle the world in a racial order that was Anglo-American in origin but global in implication.” (115)

In another section, Rouleau examines the sailors’ “shadow economy” and its impact on larger US trade. Demand for profits meant slashed wages and sailors responded by swindling their low-level, native trade partners abroad. In fact, sailors proved shrewd, anticipating exchange rates and planning trade purchases before their voyage to maximize profit. In return, natives quickly learned the products sailors wanted, and together they created a market that ran just below the surface of the markets run by ship owners and merchants. As natives learned swindling in return, however, white sailors’ racial and masculinist resentments were inflamed, and the resulting violence often damaged larger commercial interests. The result was a complex class conflict pitting Americans against native trade partners as well as against each other. Diplomats, religious leaders and capitalists tried “reforming” the sailor into a more compliant worker, and one less likely to disrupt large-scale trade networks. Not surprisingly, however, exploited sailors tried exploiting natives in return, “justifying” their intemperance with racism and swaggering patriotism. As a result, Rouleau urges us to reconsider America’s maritime expansion. Rather than a “simple dichotomy between subjugated native and white authority figure,” we need attention as well to how “class interfered with racial paradigms of power,” and that “internal” conflict over patriotism,
masculinity, race and profit spilled outside the US borders with enormous consequences for all involved. (129)

In short, Rouleau’s extraordinarily nuanced and sophisticated work demonstrates the ways a maritime approach invites new perspectives on American history and historiography. Pushing the narrative of American expansion off land, for instance, Rouleau demonstrates the ways “maritime encounters...formed a large portion of the foundation for both public opinion in the US about various other countries and peoples and developing ideas about the American people among the globe’s other populations.” (8) Putting seafarers at the center of American maritime expansion therefore incorporates working class voices not just to be “fair,” but because those seafarers profoundly shaped America’s understanding of itself and its relations with the world.

Collectively these books show how a maritime perspective enriches the transnational turn. As the Atlanticist Alison Games notes, a large imbalance still remains between “a history of places around the Atlantic versus a history of the Atlantic.”9 The books under review help redress that imbalance, highlighting how maritime history opens new research subjects and brings in silenced or marginalized voices. Pushing further, Jeffrey Bolster has proposed attention to “the living sea” and its impact on human societies. “In the Age of the Ocean, circa 1500 to 1800, people not only crossed oceans and used them to stitch together empires of commerce and meaning,” he points out, “but also relied on ocean products and services as never before. The salient connections were not only across oceans, but between people and the sea.”10 All the books under review powerfully demonstrate that greater attention to the maritime world in its fullest dimensions -- technology, ecology, work, economy, race, national identity, transnational contact, gender, empire, class -- will yield new insights and stories. Covering more than seventy percent of the globe, the

9 Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,” American Historical Review 111 (June 2006): 741; emphasis in original.
10 Bolster, “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History,” 21, 23; emphasis in original.
seas are, as Stephen Berry observes, “a distinct site of human interaction and history.”

Distinct but not separate, and maritime history therefore deserves a larger part in American Studies’ transnational turn.