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Edited by Eliga Gould, Paul Mapp, Carla Gardina Pestana
Excerpt
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General Introduction: What is America and the World?

MARK PHILIP BRADLEY

The *Cambridge History of America and the World* (CHAW) offers a far-reaching and novel account of American engagement in the world from 1500 to the present day. CHAW takes as its interpretive starting point a deceptively simple insight: adopting frameworks that cut across rather than stop at the nation's borders could upend established stories and generate new interpretive possibilities. What might happen, as nineteenth-century American historian Thomas Bender asked in a seminal 2002 essay, if historians followed "the movement of people, capital, things, and knowledge" across borders in ways that ignored artificial and state-defined boundaries?¹ An outpouring of work over the last two decades has followed this transnational turn in US history to deprovincialize how we understand the American past. It has now produced a fundamentally new history of America and the world.

Infused with common transnational sensibilities, this novel scholarship has taken a variety of interpretative paths. Some of these new histories were pioneered by diplomatic historians who increasingly placed the perceptions and policies of presidents, diplomats, and generals on a global stage or employed new and sometimes non American-based archives to illuminate the perspectives of non-state actors from the worlds of business, activism, religion, and what we now call nongovernmental organizations. Other scholars have crafted social and cultural histories, offering a wider vision of American engagement in the world by exploring how the construction of

¹ Thomas Bender, "Introduction," in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 11. In what was a generative moment for the transnational turn in American history, see also Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, "Where in the World is America?: The History of the United States in a Global Age," in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 63–99; and David P. Thelen, "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 965–975.

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American state and society has intersected with global forces and contestations over identity abroad. At the same time this work shares many of the convictions that have animated new work on the Atlantic world, slavery, borderlands, migration and the environment, and in critical race and queer studies. In all these ways, historians have embraced multiple transnational optics to reimagine how US history was made.

CHAW brings this exciting new scholarship together for the first time to map the contours of these transformative approaches to the place of America and Americans in the world. In some ways *CHAW* builds upon more traditional diplomatic approaches to the field. It gives sustained attention, for instance, to such key moments in US international history as the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, the nineteenth-century US rise as a world power, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. But importantly the volumes open out to other larger and smaller analytical frames for apprehending American engagement in the world while at the same time situating multiple actors and developments within broader global political, social, economic, cultural, and ecological processes.

The four volumes that make up *CHAW* feature more than 120 contributors from a variety of subfields within American history who explore these new explanatory vistas. While many diplomatic historians are among the contributors, the volumes cast a more inclusive scholarly net to include historians of Native America, the Atlantic world, slavery, political economy, borderlands, empire, the family, gender and sexuality, race, technology, and the environment. Collectively their contributions offer essential starting points for readers coming to the field for the first time, and serve as a critical vehicle for moving this scholarship forward in new directions.

The history of early America and the world that unfolds in Volume I occupies an especially important place in this Cambridge history. As readers will see, it quite self-consciously does *not* foreground the thirteen colonies that became the United States or the Revolutionary War, nor does “America” simply connote British America as it once did for many histories of American foreign relations.² Volume I opens with first contacts in the early fifteenth century in the waters off North America’s northeastern and western coasts,

² For example, the 1995 *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* opened in 1776, while a revised edition pushed the date back but only to the 1750s: Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Volume I: The Creation of the Republican Empire, 1776–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; revised edition 2015 authored by William Earl Weeks). See also the chronology for George C. Herring’s important survey text *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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where fishing and fur brought Native peoples and Europeans together, and in the tropical band around the Caribbean and the territories that made up the Inca and Aztec empires, where exotic commodities along with gold and silver attracted the Spanish. It then moves to the comparatively late arriving colonists like the Dutch, French, and finally the English, who were left with what would become British North America. Indian Country, which in 1825 still covered much of what was later the continental United States, receives sustained attention throughout the volume, reflecting the crucial ways in which Native American history has become central to new narratives of America and the world. So, too, the histories of men and women brought as slaves or indentured servants to the colonies that European settlers founded.

Volume I carries the narrative of early America and the world through relations between the great empires, Indigenous as well as European, before turning to revolutionary challenges to those empires. Here the focus is not only on the American Revolution but also antislavery campaigns, the broader Atlantic revolution, and state-making in the early republic. At the same time, contributors offer a set of thematic essays on statelessness, imperial trade, international law, women, the environment, and the circulation of ideas. It is important to note that much of the scholarship informing Volume I has occurred in isolation from the general field of American foreign relations, and its more traditional focus on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In offering a layered understanding of the complex nature of empires in the making, the volume provides a completely original take on America and the world in the early period. As the volume editors suggest, early America was a “messy, complicated and multi-directional world.”³ Those transformative insights set many of the central interpretative pathways for the volumes of *CHAW* that follow.

Volume II takes the story of the United States and the world from the War of 1812 to the imperial wars of 1898 in Spain and the Philippines. Here, too, the essays that make up the volume mark a fundamental shift in how historians now see this period from global perspectives. “[I]mperial denial and self-congratulation,” the editors of Volume II note, often colored an earlier historiography of this era, whereas in these chapters the nineteenth-century United States emerges as “an exclusionary nation-state forged in violence *and* an expansive, multiethnic imperial formation.”⁴ The Mexican-American War and the

³ Eliga Gould, Paul W. Mapp, and Carla Gardina Pestana, “Introduction,” to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 45.

⁴ Jay Sexton and Kristin Hoganson, “Introduction,” to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 8, 9.

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Civil War, explored here in their transnational and global dimensions, become the fulcrum that links the volume's consideration of continental expansion and settler colonialism on the one hand and the late nineteenth-century worlds of industrial capitalism and racialized imperialism on the other. As one contributor to the volume puts it, these interpretative modes uncover "the myriad ways in which American history in the nineteenth century is inseparable from an understanding of the world beyond the United States."⁵ Together the chapters that make up Volume II illuminate the multiple pathways through which what had been previously seen as an isolationist nineteenth-century United States were in fact embedded in global fields of imperial power.

None of the nineteenth-century developments foregrounded in Volume II of *CHAW* emerge as preordained. The contributors painstakingly trace out the remarkable contingencies shaping the exercise of political and economic power over the course of the century from the perspectives of multiple actors. In part an emergent transportation and communication infrastructure along with a blue water navy and a growing state bureaucracy began to bind and integrate the national economy. At the same time iterative panics and extreme economic volatility increasingly linked the United States to the firmament of Victorian globalization and brought new domestic social unrest and political instability. Just as the state and its role in the rise of a two-ocean American empire is disaggregated in these chapters, the engagements of multiple non-state actors receive sustained consideration, among them migrants from Europe and Asia, African American activists, working-class mariners, Christian missionaries, military personnel, and Indigenous peoples. The making of space in the nineteenth-century American state is always near the surface of the volume, particularly the fluidities of its population and borders, processes of racialization and practices of ethnic cleansing, and the vast ecological transformations wrought by unrestrained capitalist development.

The first half of the twentieth century, sometimes oversimplified and even more often overshadowed by the Cold War that followed in an earlier historiography, emerges in Volume III of *CHAW* as a revolutionary era. "There was nothing inevitable," the volume editors point out, about "American global ascendancy."⁶ They remind us that for all the transformations of the previous century, the United States in 1900 was still very much a developing nation. And

⁵ Nicholas Guyatt, "The United States between Nation and Empire, 1776–1820," Chapter 1 in *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 36.

⁶ Brooke L. Blower and Andrew Preston, "Introduction," to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9.

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yet between 1900 and 1945, it became an industrial powerhouse, creditor and cultural model for Europe, administered a host of new overseas colonies, and lent military might, manpower, and resources including the invention of the first nuclear weapons to the winning of two world wars. Americans also became entangled in global processes of modern state-making and supranational governance, encountering new transnational political, ideological, and economic challenges as they went.

Focusing on the rise of the United States to world power status between 1900 and 1945, the chapters that comprise Volume III address the larger impact of the decisive US involvement in two world wars while foregrounding unresolved tensions and contradictions between American commitments to liberal internationalism and self-determination. The volume also explores the ways in which virulent forms of structural racism continued to drive policy at home and abroad. Individual chapters highlight the complexities of exercising American power as an empire, a transatlantic partner, and as a great power in World War I. They also explore competing visions of world order, among them Wilsonianism and Leninism, international organization, law and humanitarianism, Black radicalism, women's movements, religious politics, and nativism. The concluding chapters take up the nature of American participation in World War II through a consideration of the political, economic, and cultural impact of the era's growing global interdependence.

The story of American foreign relations after 1945 has usually been told as a Cold War narrative. In Volume IV of *CHAW*, the Cold War emerges as an element, rather than the defining event, of the era. The volume editors are intent to explore the varying components that contributed to the preponderance of American power in this era, but they are also keen to understand what they call "the internal fissures, divergences and contradictions that came with that increased power."⁷ An accounting of the simultaneous rise of the postcolonial and Cold War worlds is central to the chapters that make up this final volume. As the Soviet-American rivalry intensified, the fall of empire and the rise of the sovereign state under decolonization after World War II dramatically increased the number of newly independent nations. In 1945 there were fifty-one member states in the United Nations. Today there are 193, with most of them in what we now call the Global South. The chapters in the volume also point to the fragility of this state based order. The

⁷ David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani McAlister, "Introduction," to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9.

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Cold War was only cold in the West. Hot wars in Korea, Vietnam, and later Africa, along with sustained US campaigns of covert action against what were seen as left-leaning governments in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, often brought havoc and devastation in their wake, in part prompting massive transnational migration that unintentionally would put the United States on a path toward becoming a majority-minority country by the middle of this century.

Volume IV also traces the ways in which the intensification of neoliberal capital flows beginning in the 1970s, along with the growing power of non-state challenges by human rights and environmental advocates, put further pressure on more conventional notions of American state sovereignty and power in the late twentieth century. Chapters on what the volume editors characterize as contestations over the rule of states uncover the often destabilizing role of oil, global religious formulations, and an emergent queer geopolitics in American engagements in the world during this period. At the same time chapters that trace the involvements and commitments of African Americans and Native Americans in a variety of transnational projects open up the actors and issues that were critical to the making of America in the world after 1945. As the editors suggest, the post-Cold War world that closes the volume, particularly the forever wars following the September 11 attacks and the specter of climate change, further deepened the fluidities of power in an era in which the United States was often thought of as a singular superpower.

The chapters that make up all four volumes of *CHAW* can be read in multiple ways. Perhaps the configuration that allows readers to see just how radical a departure they are from past ways of seeing American foreign relations is to encounter them topically across time and space. For instance, each volume features chapters on Indigenous peoples and their centrality to a fuller understanding of how a plurality of “Americans” operated in the world. The environment also receives sustained treatment. An ensemble of chapters on the centrality of geographies and ecologies in the making of early America opens up Volume I, and this major interpretative thread gets taken up in subsequent volumes. Empire is another important strand across the volumes in chapters that place American empire in a global perspective, whether it be the encounter of Indigenous peoples with European and later American empires, the rise of intertwined domestic and imperial American empires in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the tensions between empire, decolonization, and domestic social movements after 1945. The complex story of Americans and the world from 1500 to the present

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gains further nuance and richness in chapters throughout the four volumes that explore the histories of capitalism, gender and sexuality, borderlands, race and ethnicity, migration, religion, human rights, and humanitarianism. I encourage readers to pick up one or more of these threads that seem most intriguing, and to read the chapters on that subject across the four volumes to better appreciate the critical building blocks through which collectively *CHAW* offers a transformational set of new interpretative approaches to the American past.

Questions of power are always at the center of work by historians of American foreign relations. Power in an earlier scholarship and for some historians today can sometimes be disconnected from the global flows and processes that affected other states and peoples. This kind of American exceptionalism was reinforced in the period after 1945 when many policy-makers and some of the scholars who chronicled their footprints in the world insisted that the preponderance of American power meant that opening up a discussion of its potential messiness and fragility was a fool's errand. The chapters that make up the four volumes of *CHAW* suggest a different path forward, offering histories that are simultaneously connected to the world and attentive to the multiple particularities, and singularities, of the American experience. Each of the contributors to these volumes helps us see a critical piece of how that more capacious vision moves toward a fundamentally new understanding of the exercise of American power in the world.

The final volume of *CHAW* lands on the Anthropocene with a searching chapter in which historian Joshua Howe points to the opportunities and potential perils that this conceptualization of climate change poses for future scholarship. He also reminds us that planetary environmental change, and the outsized role the United States has played in it, shapes our present century in ways that Americans cannot fully control. Howe writes, "Time will tell how – and how well – America deals with the world it has made."⁸ Together the four volumes that make up this *Cambridge History of America and the World* provide a frame to help us better come to terms with the always contingent, often unequal, and sometimes dangerous worlds that a diverse cast of American peoples have made and unmade, and to anticipate what future worlds may be in the process of becoming.

⁸ Joshua Howe, "America and the World in the Anthropocene," Chapter 31 in *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 751.

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Introduction: What Does America and the World “Mean” before 1825?

ELIGA GOULD, PAUL MAPP, AND CARLA GARDINA
PESTANA

Studying “America and the World” in the period before the advent of the United States carries a different meaning than it does after 1776. As used by historians of the modern United States, as in the other volumes in this series, America and the world usually refers to the foreign policy and global interactions of the American republic, with the United States occupying the role of an independent power and, increasingly, an empire. This volume calls for a different agenda: to understand how the United States emerged out of a series of colonial interactions, some involving Indigenous empires and communities that were already present when the first Europeans reached the Americas; others the adventurers and settlers dispatched by Europe’s imperial powers to secure their American claims; and still others men and women brought as slaves or indentured servants to the colonies that European settlers founded. For most of the 300 years after the first European voyages of discovery, we use America to refer not to a single political entity, much less an empire, but rather to a space within which other states, peoples, and empires, many of them centered outside the Western Hemisphere, interacted and vied for supremacy and control.

Invariably, the early history of America and the world is the history of contacts among places and peoples that had formerly been largely separated. Mostly fruitless Norse ventures and errant Pacific craft aside, Eurasia and Africa had little to do with North America before the late fifteenth century. Then, Europeans in growing numbers and with greater persistence began visiting North Atlantic fisheries, exploring Atlantic coasts, and gradually establishing their presence and that of Africans, who were sometimes among their number, in American lands. A handful of Europeans had come

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before 1492 to look briefly at Vinland, perhaps to trade for timber in Labrador, perhaps even to fish in the mists of the North Atlantic. After 1492, Europeans fatefully, and by many measures tragically, came to stay.

For European interlopers, two kinds of sometimes overlapping regions were initially most valuable and attractive. One was the tropical band around the Caribbean, where populous societies and the prospects of exotic commodities attracted the Spanish. The second was the vast territories of and around the Inca and Aztec Empires, with piles of gold and silver and settled

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populations already accustomed to providing labor and tribute to rulers. Both empires boasted individuals and institutions available for seizure, replacement, repurposing, and even cooperation and union. The Spanish built not just on the ruins of Tenochtitlán, but on American imperial and social traditions that were not ruined. They sometimes married into Indigenous noble families, fought alongside Indigenous soldiers as allies and auxiliaries, and emulated the labor drafts and tax collection of their Indigenous predecessors. Caribbean America, and the old Aztec and Inca imperial centers and the mineral rich areas near them, paid big and, especially as intruders exploited new silver mines and erected sugar plantations, paid for centuries. Columbus did not find the Asia he sought, but, if wealth and wonders are any measure, he and his successors did find Indies.

Beyond these two regions, a third area attracting Europeans was not so much a part of North America, but rather the teeming waters off its northeast coasts. Codfish were not so glorious as precious metals and subjugated peoples, but hundreds of fishing boats came for hundreds of years, supporting sturdy little piscatory villages all over Western Europe, and providing untold thousands of Europeans with Friday protein from American waters. Atlantic fishing also led to drying stations on the shores of places like Newfoundland and the barter of European metal goods for American furs between transient fishermen and Indigenous peoples. Native Americans knew Europeans long before John Smith and Samuel de Champlain set foot on their coasts.

South of the fisheries, the east coast of North America had less to offer than Caribbean, Meso, and Andean America. It was out of the way of the focal points of European activity, it presented no obvious benefits, and it remained mostly untouched for a century after Columbus. These lands were less easily reached from Europe by sea, since wind and currents carried sailing ships down toward the Caribbean more easily than across to the Chesapeake and what became New England and Nova Scotia. Florida was settled only because it lay along the sea route back from Spanish America to Seville, and the Spanish occupied it after annihilating a French outpost that threatened to prey on American gold and silver traveling to Hapsburg coffers from more southerly lands. When settlers finally made a stand in this area, they began from a position of relative weakness, coming in small numbers, and dependent on local residents for knowledge and aid.

On the other side of the continent, North America's west coast presented rocks, fogs, and treacherous currents to Spanish navigators, but no promise of another Peru. Inland, the sharp pens and the best – and worst – efforts of *adelantados* like Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Francisco Vázquez de