

Contingent Continent

Spatial and Geographic Arguments in the Shaping of the Nineteenth-Century United States

ABSTRACT This article highlights how Americans used intertwined arguments about space and geography to justify and denounce different territorial configurations from the late eighteenth century through the Civil War. These arguments wove together ideas about geography (a set of physical, topographical features) and space (the human constructs that shape movement and human relations) in everything from theoretical arguments about the ideal size of republics to specific ideas about how rivers, mountains, oceans, and other features related to the proper shape of the nation. Americans evoked a variety of assumptions about how the physical landscape shaped human activity. They also made arguments about space and the ways that places were physically, and thus should be politically, connected. Highlighting an underappreciated current of manifest disunion, this article illustrates how different factions used geographic and spatial arguments not only to support and condemn varied expansionist visions, but also to justify disunion and secession. **KEYWORDS** expansion, secession, manifest destiny, territory, space, geography

In December 1811, with war against Great Britain on the horizon, the Kentucky representative Richard M. Johnson spoke optimistically of the possibility that Britain's colonies in Canada would soon become part of the United States. "The waters of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi interlock in a number of places," he explained, "and the great Disposer of Human Events intended those two rivers should belong to the same people."¹ Almost fifty years later, in February 1861, with another war looming, the North Carolina senator Thomas L. Clingman expressed a starkly different view. "In examining the map of America," he noted, "I have often been brought to the conclusion that it seemed as if Providence had marked out on it two great empires—one lying on the Mississippi and around the Gulf of

1. *Annals of Cong.*, 12th Cong, 1st sess. (1811), 458.

Mexico; the other upon the basin of the St. Lawrence.” Clingman concluded, “It would seem as if the political, and the social feelings of the Northern and Southern sections of the Union were drifting in the direction of the flow of these immense rivers, and that future nationalities were to have their forms determined by these natural divisions.”²

Although separated by time and historical events, these two politicians shared a belief that geography provided a blueprint for their nation’s territorial destiny. Yet what is most striking is that they came to such different conclusions about the very same geographic features. For Johnson, river valleys foretold U.S. expansion to the north; for Clingman, they presaged the nation’s division. As it turned out, both men were wrong.

Taken together these statements suggest two important truths about the nineteenth-century United States: first, its citizens often predicted that geography would determine the shape of their nation; and, second, they were usually wrong. The way the United States looks today was not the product of geographic features or abstract spatial principles, but rather of politics, violence, diplomacy, and contingency. As the geographer D.W. Meinig has argued, “The shape of the United States is the result of historical chance as well as geographic calculation, and none of it is ‘natural’ in any forceful sense of that term.”³

But this point of view would have seemed counterintuitive to most nineteenth-century Americans who, like Johnson and Clingman, were accustomed to the idea that God, nature, and incontrovertible spatial principles dictated their nation’s shape. The most familiar examples of this way of thinking can be found in the rhetoric of manifest destiny, which emerged in debates over the annexation of Texas in the 1840s. It is perhaps for this reason that most historians associate geographic determinism with manifest destiny and expansion.⁴ However, geographic and spatial arguments were not

2. Cong. Globe, 36th Cong., 2d Sess. (1861), 727.

3. D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 2, *Continental America, 1800–1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 202.

4. The clearest assertion of this argument is from Albert K. Weinberg in *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*. Interestingly, Weinberg’s chapter on “Geographical Predestination” begins with arguments concerning U.S. acquisition of Canada and the Floridas in the early nineteenth century, well before the term “manifest destiny” was coined in 1845. Weinberg, like many historians since, took a wide view of manifest destiny, using it to frame the history of U.S. expansion writ large, rather than restricting it to the 1840s and 1850s. It is also worth noting that although Weinberg framed “geographical predestination” as an ideological component of “nationalist expansionism,” he also acknowledged that opponents of expansion used geographic arguments to support their positions as well. Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist*

deployed by expansionists alone. To the contrary, the notion that God, nature, or geography had made a particular national “destiny” “manifest” was omnipresent in arguments both for *and against* expansion, and in support of a diverse array of national territorial configurations.⁵

Examining some of the early debates about U.S. territoriality, this article highlights the ways in which Americans used intertwined arguments about space and geography to justify and denounce different territorial configurations from the late eighteenth century through the Civil War.⁶ In these arguments, ideas about geography (a set of physical, topographical features) and space (the human constructs that shape movement and human relations) were woven together in everything from theoretical arguments about the ideal size of republics to specific ideas about how rivers, mountains, oceans, and other features related to the proper shape of the nation. In discussing national territory, Americans often argued that it was geography—not politics, economics, or demographics—that should, and in fact had, determined the proper boundaries for the nation. In evoking geography, they turned to

Expansionism in American History (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963 [first published 1935]), 43–71. For other histories of manifest destiny see, Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 [first published 1963]); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012).

5. Geography was not the only way in which Americans evoked God's support for their nation. See Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

6. This article builds on the work of historians and geographers who have written about how geographic features, as well as ideas about geography, have shaped and been deployed to support different forms of imperial and national sovereignties, boundaries, and identities in North America and other parts of the world. See for instance, Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986–2004); Paul W. Mapp, *The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire, 1713–1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); James D. Drake, *The Nation's Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); John Logan Allen, *Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975); Susan Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Raymond B. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empire, 1400–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

a variety of assumptions about how the physical landscape shaped human activity. They also made arguments about space and the ways that places were physically, and thus should be politically, connected. While these spatial arguments sometimes relied on assumptions about the way geographic features such as rivers or mountains affected movement and communication, at other times they were rooted in more abstract conceptions of size and shape. All of these ideas about space and geography evolved as the United States dramatically expanded its territory and as technological innovations revolutionized communication and transportation over the first half of the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century Americans' diverse ideas about space and geography never comprised a consistent or unified ideology. Rather, Americans deployed arguments about geography both in warnings against acquiring new territory and in calls for expansion. And, although many geographic arguments were expansionist, as Americans both sought to make sense of the shifting shape of their nation and to construct arguments for continued territorial growth, such arguments did not coalesce into a clear vision of the nation's territorial destiny. Not only were geographic arguments used to support the divergent territorial visions of different factions, but they could also be deployed to support disunion and secession. Alongside arguments about the manifest destiny of U.S. expansion ran a powerful current of manifest disunion, in which expansion threatened to break the nation apart, and geography predicted division rather than unity.

* * *

Size was among the spatial concerns that most concerned early Americans. Early American expansionist thinking emerged against the backdrop of a widespread belief that only in small republics could the public good be known, agreed upon, and protected from special interests. This idea was most closely associated with the French philosopher Montesquieu, who wrote in *The Spirit of Laws*, "It is natural for a republic to have only a small territory; otherwise it cannot long subsist."⁷ Following Montesquieu, many early Americans believed that despotic authority alone could hold a large nation together. In the mid-1780s, with growing awareness of the failures of the Articles of Confederation and the need to strengthen the central government, there was

7. Charles de Secondat baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, vol 1 (New York: The Colonial Press, 1900), 120.

a resurgence of monarchist sentiment. The “extent” of the United States, noted James Wilson, “seems to require the vigour of Monarchy.”⁸

As they sought to strengthen the federal union, supporters of the Constitution confronted assumptions about the dangers of a large republic. Writing in *Federalist 14*, James Madison insisted that, although a true democracy would necessarily “be confined to a small spot,” representative government made it possible for a republic to “be extended over a large region.”⁹ Moreover, as he explained in *Federalist 10*, a large republic possessed advantages over a smaller one, which was more likely to be riven by factionalism.¹⁰ These arguments, which seem to refer primarily to questions of population size, were also spatial. In response to critics who worried about the physical distances separating representatives from their constituents, Madison emphasized that roads and canals would bind the nation together, facilitating politicians’ movement between peripheral districts and seats of power.¹¹

Territorial expansion exacerbated anxieties about size and distance. Americans worried about how the addition of new states might affect the union. Article XI of the Confederation contained a provision for the incorporation of Canada but stipulated that the addition of any other foreign colony would require the approval of nine states.¹² Raising concerns in 1785 about the incompatibility of republican government and extended dominion, a Philadelphia newspaper acknowledged “the unwieldiness of our present governments in extent of territory” and warned that settlers in both Maine and the West were “panting for a separate independence and cession of territory.”¹³

Fears about physical expansion seemed to have greater merit when the republic threatened to break apart in the 1780s. The secession of the western territories seemed imminent in the aftermath of the Revolution, as settlers

8. Rufus King’s notes of James Wilson’s speech, June 1, 1787, in Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1911), 1:71.

9. James Madison, *Federalist No. 14*, “Objections to the Proposed Constitution From Extent of Territory Answered,” from the New York Packet, November 30, 1787, available through “The Federalist Papers, Library of Congress website, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_14.html, accessed January 22, 2015.

10. Madison, *Federalist No. 10*, “The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection,” November 23, 1787, available through “The Federalist Papers, Library of Congress website, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_10.html, accessed March 31, 2016.

11. Madison, *Federalist No. 14*.

12. Cathy D. Matson and Peter S. Onuf, *A Union of Interests: Political and Economic Thought in Revolutionary America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 60–61.

13. *The Freeman’s Journal or the North-American Intelligencer*, June 15, 1785.

complained about eastern officials' failure to provide military support, secure land titles, and guarantee access to the Mississippi River. Independence movements emerged in present-day Tennessee and Kentucky.¹⁴ Noting the problems caused by the "great distance" between "the Americans who pass the Mountains" to Kentucky and "the executive authority of their respective Governments," James Wilkinson, a high-ranking U.S. general who also spied for the Spanish Empire, predicted in 1787 that Congress would not satisfy the Kentuckians' demands and that the "evident consequence" of that failure would be "a distinct confederation of the western inhabitants."¹⁵

Sectional divisions and the confederation's weak structure raised the possibility that the United States would be divided into three or more separate unions. Many Americans expected that the states of the southern, middle, northern, and western regions might separate and recombine to form smaller, sectional republics. This alternative configuration seemed to offer a compromise in creating republics that were larger than the states but smaller than the entire union. The physician and politician Benjamin Rush noted the circulation of proposals to divide the union into three parts: "These confederacies they say will be united by nature, by interest, and by manners, and consequently they will be safe, agreeable and durable."¹⁶

This division did not come to pass. Not only did the United States remain intact, it emerged in 1789 under its new constitution as a stronger federal union. Not long after, in 1803, the United States made its first significant territorial acquisition, the Louisiana Purchase. The Louisiana Purchase would nearly double the expanse of the United States, while raising fresh questions about the proper extent of the United States and the relationship between size, republican governance, and national integrity and unity.

It is important to note in this context that the Louisiana Purchase was something of an accidental expansion. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson

14. Kevin T. Barksdale, *The Lost State of Franklin: America's First Secession* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); Andros Linklater, *An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson* (New York: Walker and Company, 2009), 76–78; John M. Murrin, "A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," in Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter, eds., *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 333–48.

15. Wilkinson Memorial, presented September 5, 1787, in Miro and Navarro to James Wilkinson, September 6, 1787, from the Archivo Historico-Nacional, Madrid, Papeles de Estado, Legajo 3893A, as translated in William R. Shepherd, "Wilkinson and the Beginnings of the Spanish Conspiracy," *The American Historical Review* 9, no. 3 (April 1904): 498.

16. Benjamin Rush to Richard Price, October 27, 1786, in Lyman Butterfield, ed., *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, vol. 1 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), 1:408.

and Secretary of State James Madison were interested not in significantly enlarging the United States' territorial domain but rather in securing trade and national security objectives by acquiring New Orleans, along with East and West Florida if possible. It was not U.S. officials but rather Napoleon Bonaparte who, having decided to abandon France's North American claims after the disastrous campaign in St. Domingue (now Haiti), most shaped the course of U.S. expansion at this moment by insisting on selling all of Louisiana. Informing Madison of the vast territory they had committed the United States to purchase, the U.S. ministers acknowledged that, "An acquisition of so great an extent was, we well Know, not contemplated by our appointment," but explained that because the French negotiator "was absolutely restricted to the disposition of the whole . . . we finally concluded a Treaty on the best terms we could obtain for the whole."¹⁷

The Louisiana Purchase reopened the spatial debate about the proper size of the nation. Jefferson's Federalist critics worried that adding territory would exacerbate sectional conflicts, depress land prices, overtax federal military power, and make republican government impractical. The Delaware senator Samuel White supported the acquisition of New Orleans but concluded that "as to Louisiana, this new, immense, unbounded world, if it should ever be incorporated into this Union, which I have no idea can be done but by altering the Constitution, I believe it will be the greatest curse that could at present befall us. . . ." ¹⁸ "Our citizens will be removed to the immense distance of two or three thousand miles from the capital of the Union, where they will scarcely ever feel the rays of the General Government;" he warned, adding that "their affections will become alienated; they will gradually begin to view us as strangers; they will form other commercial connexions and our interests will become distinct."¹⁹ "We have already," White insisted, "territory enough."²⁰

17. Robert R. Livingston and James Monroe to James Madison, May 13, 1803, *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition: Secretary of State Series*: vol. 4, J.C.A. Stagg, ed., (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2010), available online at <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=JSMN-print-02-04-02-0711>, accessed January 14, 2016. For further discussion of the discrepancies between Jefferson and Madison's goals and the terms of the Louisiana Purchase, see Peter J. Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 39–41.

18. *Annals of Cong.*, 8th Cong., 1st Sess. (1803), 33.

19. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

20. *Ibid.*, 34. See also, Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 55.

Even some supporters of the Louisiana Purchase worried about enlarging the United States. Written under the name Sylvestrus, one pamphlet urged the federal government to refrain from selling any land immediately in order to avoid depressing land prices and dispersing the population. “To extend the confederacy as far as to the limits of Mexico,” he warned, “would probably produce a dissolution of the Union, and eventually change the type and character of our government.”²¹ Presaging a slippery slope toward imperial expansion and consequent imperial decay, he continued, “as we advance towards Mexico, we shall view its golden mines with the same cupidity that the Spaniards first beheld them; and this will no doubt lead to the nefarious project of conquering the Spanish dominions, first on this side, and then beyond the streights [sic] of Darien.”²² Revealing a similar fear of an imperial shift, Alexander Hamilton wondered whether Louisiana would be governed “as a colony, or to be formed into an integral part of the United States.”²³

By contrast, other Americans, most notably President Jefferson himself, began to construct a vision of an American republican empire that not only defied size restrictions but would be defined by continued expansion instead. In March 1805, Jefferson proclaimed, “I know that the acquisition of Louisiana has been disapproved by some, from a candid apprehension that the enlargement of our territory would endanger its union. But who can limit the extent to which the federative principle may operate effectively? The larger our association, the less will it be shaken by local passions.”²⁴ As the historian Peter S. Onuf has emphasized, Jefferson’s vision of a republican empire was made possible by his commitment to a federative union. He saw the United States as a confederation of small, independent republics—not one republic, but many *republics* that could, in theory if not in practice, be replicated indefinitely without sacrificing representative government.²⁵

21. Sylvestrus, *Reflections on the Cession of Louisiana to the United States* (Washington City: Samuel Harrison Smith, 1803), 23.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Alexander Hamilton [attributed], “Purchase of Louisiana,” *New York Evening Post*, July 5, 1803, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011), available online at <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=ARHN-print-01-26-02&mode=TOC>, accessed January 14, 2016.

24. Thomas Jefferson, “Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1805, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy, Lillian Goldman Law Library in Memory of Saul Goldman, Yale Law School, available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinauz.asp, accessed January 13, 2016.

25. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 1–2, 8, 15, 53.

If the United States was to be an empire, it would, expansionists insisted, be different from any that came before. “When the Romans extended their dominions, they never co-extended the rights of citizenship,” explained the South Carolinian David Ramsay. “Our government, formed on wiser principles, and founded on equal rights, has nothing to fear from an extension of its boundaries.”²⁶ “It can never be too large,” he proclaimed, “till the parts are so divided from each other, or the extremes so far asunder, as not to admit the convenient meeting of deputies in some central spot, for the purpose of deliberating on national concerns.” Noting that mail could travel from St. Croix and New Orleans to Washington in ten days, he concluded, “this cannot be affirmed of our present most extended limits.”²⁷

These views of expansion flipped the geographic imperative of small republics on its head. Rather than a danger to republicanism, size became a strength. Bolstered by population growth, the United States, Ramsay predicted, would rapidly expand across the continent. “What is to hinder our extension on the same liberal principles of equal rights, till we have increased to twenty-seven, thirty-seven, or any other number of states that will conveniently embrace in one happy union, the whole country from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean, and from the lakes of Canada to the Gulf of Mexico?”²⁸ Praising the “grandeur and magnificence” of the western hemisphere’s oversized mountains, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, and even the mammoths that had once roamed the continent, Ramsay asked, “May we not, therefore, indulge a hope, that the inhabitants of a country so eminently distinguished by the Author of Nature, are destined to form political associations of a large size . . . ?”²⁹ Like the continent on which it was founded, the United States, Ramsay believed, was meant to be big.

In the connection between the United States and the continent, we can see how expansionists joined the spatial arguments in defense of large republics, on the one hand, with arguments about the specific geography of North America on the other. Alongside the more abstract discussions about size and

26. David Ramsay, *An oration, on the cession of Louisiana, to the United States, delivered on the 12th May, 1804, in St. Michael's church, Charleston, . . .* (Charleston, 1804), 20, accessed through *Sabin Americana*, Gale, Cengage Learning, Harvard University Library, available online at <http://galenet.galegroup.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ac=CY3801066341&srchtp=a&ste=14>, accessed January 16, 2016.

27. *Ibid.*, 20. See also Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

28. Ramsay, *An oration, on the cession of Louisiana*, 21.

29. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

space, Americans also made arguments about the significance of specific geographic features—hemispheres and continents, oceans and harbors, rivers and lakes, and mountains and deserts. Arguing that geographic features were physical manifestations of a master plan, nineteenth-century Americans evoked them to naturalize a variety of different spatial configurations.

The continent was the largest and perhaps most significant of the geographic forms that Americans evoked to justify expansion. The idea that the United States and the continent should be coterminous is most often associated with the manifest destiny sentiment of the 1840s, but a strain of continental thinking had been present since the American Revolution. As the historian James D. Drake has argued, “during the formative years of the United States, continental presumptions colored political views, permeated political rhetoric, and gave shape to political action.”³⁰ That the revolutionaries thought of themselves as “Americans,” formed a “Continental Congress” and “Continental Army,” and established the United States of *America* all reveal the extent to which they identified themselves with the continent.³¹ As is perhaps not surprising for a group of people who had dubbed themselves “Americans,” many of the former British colonists presumed that they would eventually come to dominate the continent.

However, what exactly Americans meant by “the continent” and how they imagined the relationship between it, themselves, and the new government they were forming was neither clear nor consistent. The notion of a continent is itself a cultural construction.³² For the revolutionary generation, the term “continent” could serve as a way of distinguishing their territory from England or the British colonies in the West Indies. It could also refer either to all of the Americas, from Cape Horn to the North Pole, or rather just to North America, which at the time was understood to stretch from the North Pole to the Isthmus of Darien (present-day Panama), including all of Central America.³³ Moreover, as would remain true throughout the nineteenth century, in speaking about continental dominance, Americans were often fuzzy about whether they believed that their population, their ideologies, their government,

30. Drake, *The Nation's Nature*, 3.

31. *Ibid.*, 2.

32. Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

33. Drake, *The Nation's Nature*, 5, 113, 284. Jedidiah Morse, *The American Universal Geography, or a View of the Present State of All the Empires, Kingdoms, States, and Republics in the Known World, and of the United States of America in Particular, In Two Parts* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1793), 71–72.

or a combination of all three would extend over the continent. It was not clear that expansionists thought the boundaries of the nation would be coterminous with the continent, but simply that they assumed American people and ideas would come to dominate it.³⁴

Two observations from Jefferson attest to this ambiguity. In 1786 Jefferson insisted that “Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North and South is to be peopled. We should take care too not to think it for the interest of that great continent to press too soon on the Spaniards. Those countries cannot be in better hands. My fear is that they are too feeble to hold them till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them peice by peice [sic].”³⁵ Fifteen years later, he remained confident in republican governance and the demographic power of the American people. “However our present interests may restrain us within our own limits,” he predicted to Madison, “it is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself beyond those limits, and cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws.”³⁶ Jefferson’s use of “similar” in referencing government and law here is significant because it undercuts the notion that he assumed the continent would be unified under the authority of a single government. These ambiguities—about unified political control versus demographic dominance, as well as about what exactly was meant by the “continent,” or even the “American people”—continued to characterize continental arguments throughout the nineteenth century.

34. In writing about this ambiguity, Reginald Horsman distinguished between “continental expansion” and continental unity.” Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 86–87.

35. Jefferson to Archibald Stewart, January 25, 1786, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008–2016), original source Main Series, Volume 9 (1 November 1785–22 June 1786), 218, available online at <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/founders/TJSJN-01-09-02-0192>, accessed on January 21, 2016.

36. Jefferson to Governor James Monroe, November 24, 1801, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Albert Ellery Bergh, ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1907), 10: 296, available online through Hein Online Presidential Library, <http://www.heinonline.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.presidents/wrthojfsno005&cid=521&collection=presidents&index=presidents/wrthojfsn>, accessed on January 17, 2016.

To add to this complexity, at times Jefferson embraced a capacious sense of “Americans” that included the possibility that Indians and Euro-Americans would eventually become a single American nation. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 18–52.

To the extent that Americans embraced continental aspirations, they recognized that expansion would occur piecemeal. Different people focused on the importance or inevitability of acquiring different pieces at different times. Most early Americans assumed that the first step in U.S. continental expansion would come through the incorporation of British Canada. In thinking of themselves as “continental” in contrast to colonists in the West Indies, revolutionary Americans hoped that colonists in Canada, as well as Florida, would also break away from the British Empire to join the new confederation. In the wake of British defeat, Canada had remained under British control while Spain reasserted authority over the Floridas, but both regions remained objects of U.S. territorial desire.³⁷ Predicting that Canadians would seek to join the United States, the New Hampshire representative John A. Harper explained in 1812 that “it appears that the Author of Nature has marked our limits in the south, by the Gulf of Mexico; and on the north, by the regions of eternal frost.”³⁸ It was also at this time that Kentucky’s Richard M. Johnson made his assertion that “the great Disposer of Human Events intended those two rivers [the St. Lawrence and Mississippi] should belong to the same people.”³⁹

If some Americans imagined the continent as the geographic container of the nation, rivers were the geographic features that bound it together. At a time, before the development of railroads and gas-powered vehicles, when Americans primarily moved people, goods, and information by water, rivers were critical corridors of transportation. And no river loomed larger than the Mississippi. Cutting a north-south axis through the present-day United States and linking much of the center of the continent with its tributaries, the Mississippi has often served as the riverine heart of the country. But this was not always true. In the United States’ first decades, the Mississippi River was under Spanish control and distant from eastern centers of U.S. population and government. When Spain temporarily cut off U.S. access to the Mississippi in 1784, it provoked a crisis for American settlers in the West who depended on the river to carry their goods to market. The inability of

37. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*, 19–24, 47–53; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 133, 137–45; Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015); David Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire: The Struggle for Mastery in the Louisiana-Florida Borderlands, 1762–1803* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

38. *Annals of Cong.*, 12th Cong., 1st Sess. (1812), 657.

39. *Ibid.* (December 1811), 458.

the federal government to guarantee settlers' access to the Mississippi was among the foremost concerns of the western secessionists in the 1780s.⁴⁰

Although access to the Mississippi was a diplomatic issue, it also involved arguments about geographic determinism. It was not uncommon for settlers and officials to observe that it was geography, rather than diplomacy, that prevented the government in the East from exercising authority over the distant Mississippi. A French diplomat reported in March 1787: "It is not in vain,' say the Kentuckians, 'that nature has raised immense ranges of mountains between us and the United States; its intention was to separate us forever; our interests differ as much from theirs as our fertile plains differ from the sands of the Chesapeake; even our rivers, by flowing toward the Mississippi or St. Lawrence, indicate the route we should take to make our commerce flourish."⁴¹ Rather than clearly perceiving themselves as the vanguard of a westward-moving nation, many trans-Appalachian settlers turned to geography to explain their tenuous connection to the eastern states. As a supporter of the effort to form a new state of Franklin in western North Carolina explained, "Nature has separated us [from North Carolina]; do not oppose her in her work."⁴²

The United States weathered the storms of trans-Appalachian secession, but concerns over American access to the Mississippi persisted as the river remained under the control of the Spanish and, briefly, the French. It was with these concerns in mind that Jefferson sought to purchase New Orleans and ended up acquiring all of Louisiana. When the U.S. ministers wrote to Madison to explain how they had inadvertently acquired "an acquisition of so great an extent," they devoted most of their missive to celebrating their success in gaining access to the Mississippi. "A divided jurisdiction over the River might beget jealousies, discontents and dissensions," they explained. "But by this acquisition, which comprises within our limits this great River and all the streams that empty into, from their sources to the ocean, the

40. Jenny Morsman, "Securing America: Jefferson's Fluid Plans for the Western Perimeter," in *Across the Continent: Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and the Making of America*, Douglas Seefeldt, Jeffrey L. Hantman, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 45-53; Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire*, 115-203.

41. Louis Guillaume Otto to Comte de Montmorin, March 5, 1787, from French Foreign Affairs Archive, Political Correspondence U.S., v. 32, f. 207-209v0, Library of Congress transcription, as reprinted in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1775-1789*, Mary A. Giunta, ed. (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 1998), 211.

42. Judge David Campbell to Gov. Richard Caswell, Nov. 30, 1786, repr. in Samuel Cole Williams, *History of the Lost State of Franklin* (New York: The Press of the Pioneers, 1933), 116.

apprehension of these disasters is banished for ages from the U. states.”⁴³ The Louisiana Purchase shifted the Mississippi River from the problematic western boundary of the United States to its central transportation network.

By 1793 the geographer Jedidiah Morse could proudly point to the nation’s water transportation network as a source of national unity. Writing in *American Universal Geography*, Morse noted that “The United States, and indeed all parts of North America, seem to have been formed by nature for the most intimate union. The facilities of navigation, render the communication between the ports of Georgia and New-Hampshire, far more expeditious and practicable, than between those of Provence and Picardy in France; Cornwall and Caithness, in Great Britain; or Gallicia and Catalonia, in Spain.” In addition to evoking nature’s authority in his discussion of natural bodies of water, Morse was also quick to note how the construction of canals promised to further enhance the U.S. water transportation network.⁴⁴

Yet, even as Morse celebrated how both natural and man-made bodies of water unified the eastern United States, in the western half of the continent the lack of navigable rivers remained problematic. For centuries Europeans had assumed there must be a water route across North America—the fabled Northwest Passage.⁴⁵ Confidence in the existence of the Northwest Passage depended in part on what the geographer John Logan Allen has called “symmetrical geography,” a geographic logic that assumed continental symmetry. This logic, bolstered by wishful thinking, contributed to assumptions that transcontinental travel could be achieved by traveling up the Missouri River, performing a short portage through relatively low but gradually rising mountain ranges, and then continuing down another river to the Pacific.⁴⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, although exploration had revealed that there was no single water passage across North America, Americans and Europeans remained hopeful that it would be possible to cross the continent with relative ease by traveling on rivers divided by short overland stretches.⁴⁷

It was with these hopes about transcontinental travel and access to the Pacific that Jefferson dispatched Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their Corps of Discovery in 1803. In his instructions to Lewis in November

43. Livingston and Monroe to James Madison, May 13, 1803, *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition*, vol. 4, Stagg, ed.

44. Morse, *The American Universal Geography*, 149–50. See also Drake, *The Nation’s Nature*, 31.

45. Mapp, *The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire*, 283–311.

46. Allen, *Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest*, xxvi, 18–38, 52, 72, 178.

47. Morsman, “Securing America,” 53–55, 66–67.

of that year, Jefferson wrote, “The object of your mission is single, the direct water communication from sea to sea formed by the bed of the Missouri, and perhaps the Oregon.”⁴⁸ Seen in this light, the Lewis and Clark Expedition seems less the triumphant first step in achieving U.S. continental ambitions than a disappointing reality check (despite the expedition’s significant achievements in gathering information about western people, animals, plants, and lands). For if the expedition proved anything, it was that there was not a “direct water communication from sea to sea.” It discovered that “the most practicable rout which dose exist across the continent by means of the navigable branches of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers” included a passage by land of 340 miles from the Missouri to the Kooskooske, 140 miles of which passed “over tremendous mountains which for 60 mls. are covered with eternal snows.”⁴⁹

Upon returning to St. Louis in 1806, Lewis attempted to put a positive spin on the arduous trek through the mountains, noting the route afforded “immense advantages to the fur trade” and predicting “that in the course of ten or twelve years a tour across the Continent by the rout mentioned will be undertaken by individuals with as little concern as a voyage across the Atlantic is at present.”⁵⁰ Yet, despite this optimistic assessment, it would not be until the advent of western railroads that the journey across North America would approach the ease of a transatlantic voyage. Lewis acknowledged that the dreamed for transcontinental trade route to East Asia was not to be. He reported that “the advantages which [the passage] offers as a communication for the productions of the East Indies to the United States and thence to Europe will never be found equal on an extensive scale to that by way of the Cape of Good hope.”⁵¹

In the years following the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the Rocky Mountains would loom large in the American geographic imagination as a natural barrier. An awareness of this imposing natural obstacle contributed to arguments that the Pacific coast would become home to an allied, independent

48. Jefferson to Captain Meriwether Lewis, November 16, 1803, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Bergh, ed., 10:433.

49. Meriwether Lewis to Jefferson, September 23, 1806, The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress: Series 1: General Correspondence, 1651–1827, available online at <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbibo16499/>, accessed January 18, 2016. See also Allen, *Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest*, 352, 367.

50. Meriwether Lewis to Jefferson, September 23, 1806. See also Allen, *Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest*, 368–69.

51. Meriwether Lewis to Jefferson, September 23, 1806.

republic, rather than becoming incorporated into the United States. Praising John Jacob Astor's establishment of a trading outpost at the mouth of the Columbia River, Jefferson told Astor that he viewed the settlement "as the germ of a great, free and independent empire on that side of our continent, and that liberty and self-government spreading from that as well as this side, will ensure their complete establishment over the whole."⁵² Yet the chances of even that did not look very good for the next few decades, as Astor's venture fell on hard times almost immediately, and the British extended their influence in the vicinity of the Columbia River. Within weeks of the writing of Jefferson's letter, the British seized Astoria and renamed it Fort George. The post, along with the Columbia River region, remained under the effective control of first the North West Company and then the Hudson's Bay Company.

The relationship of the United States to the Pacific coast of North America remained a matter of debate and diplomatic negotiation throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Among the people who did the most to incorporate this territory into the nation was John Quincy Adams. As a diplomat, secretary of state, congressman, and president, Adams was at the forefront of the continentalist movement in the 1810s and 1820s. In 1819, he negotiated the terms of the Adams-Onís, or "Transcontinental," Treaty, in which Spain ceded its claims to Oregon and East Florida and recognized U.S. claims to West Florida. Later that year, he wrote that Europeans must recognize "it a settled geographic element that the United States and North America are identical." "The remainder of the continent," he insisted, "should ultimately be ours."⁵³

Despite Adams's insistence that U.S. continental expansion was geographically predetermined, his contentions revealed an awareness of geographic counter-arguments that expansion would lead to disunion. In 1824 he asserted that "a Government by federation would be found practicable upon a territory as extensive as this continent, and that the tendency of our popular sentiments was increasingly towards union."⁵⁴ Dispensing with the old spatially

52. Jefferson to John Jacob Astor, November 9, 1813, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Bergh, ed., 13:432.

53. "North American will be the United States," from *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Volume IV*, C.F. Adams, ed. (Philadelphia, 1874-1877), 4:437-39, reprinted in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire: Letters, Speeches, and Papers*, Walter LaFeber, ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 37.

54. "Debate over the possible extent of empire," from *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, 6:250-51, reprinted in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, 38.

limited argument, the Virginia senator James Barbour similarly noted “We have already ascertained, by the happy combination of a National and State Governments, but above all, by a wise arrangement of the representative system, that republics are not necessarily limited to a small territory—and that a Government, thus arranged, produces not only more happiness, but more stability and more energy, than those the most arbitrary. Whether it is capable of indefinite extent, must be left to posterity to decide.”⁵⁵ South Carolina’s John C. Calhoun also dismissed concerns that expansion would lead to disunion. He “thought that there would be no separation should we make settlements on the Pacific Ocean” and explained, somewhat ironically, that “the passion for aggrandizement was the law paramount of man in society, and that there was no example in history of the disruption of a nation from itself by voluntary separation.”⁵⁶

And yet, the arguments about the spatial limits of the United States persisted. For critics of U.S. expansion in Oregon, the distance between the east and west coasts and the difficulty of travel between the two seemed to augur a fundamental change in the United States—the establishment of permanent U.S. colonies. “We have not adopted a system of colonization, and it is to be hoped we never shall,” warned senator Mahlon Dickerson of New Jersey. “Oregon can never be one of the United States. If we extend our laws to it, we must consider it as a colony.”⁵⁷

This assumption directly contradicted the entire premise of Adams’s continentalist thinking. For Adams, establishing U.S. control of North America was part of a broader project of banishing colonialism from the western hemisphere. As James Monroe’s secretary of state, Adams was instrumental in shaping the Monroe Doctrine in which the U.S. government proclaimed: “the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintained, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”⁵⁸ In Adams’s mind, U.S. acquisition of East and West Florida, Cuba, and the Pacific Coast would not only aggrandize the United States, but would also contribute to decolonization.

55. Reg. Deb., 18th Cong., 2d Sess. (1825), 689.

56. “Debate over the possible extent of empire,” from *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, 6:250–51, reprinted in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, 38.

57. Reg. Deb., 18th Cong., 2d Sess. (1825), 690.

58. “The Monroe Doctrine,” President James Monroe’s Seventh Annual Message, December 2, 1823, from James D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 2:209–20, reprinted in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, LaFeber, ed., 110.

Arguing in 1823 that “the American continents . . . will no longer be subjects of colonization,” he insisted that American settlements on the northwest coast would be “constituent parts of the Union.”⁵⁹ Thus, between Dickerson and Adams there was a fundamental disagreement about the ability of the U.S. system of confederated republican government to span the continent.

This argument was not one that Adams won easily. Concerns about size, distance, and physical barriers to travel and communication continued to resonate. “But is this territory of Oregon ever to become a state, a member of this Union?” asked Dickerson in 1825. “Never. The Union is already too extensive.”⁶⁰ Beyond sheer size, Dickerson emphasized that between Oregon and the United States lay “an immense region . . . containing about 160,000 square miles, which, from the sterility of the soil, the want of food and water, can never be cultivated, and of course, never admit of a civilized population.”⁶¹ Indeed, for Dickerson this geography militated against westward expansion. The region, he said, “may prove of infinite importance to the United States, inasmuch as it is calculated to serve as a barrier to prevent too great an extension of our population westward, and secure us against the machinations or incursions of an enemy.”⁶² Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri came to a similar conclusion, although in his case the barrier to expansion would not be the Great Plains, but rather the Rocky Mountains. “The ridge of the Rocky Mountains may be named without offence, as presenting a convenient, natural, and everlasting boundary,” he proclaimed. “Along the back of this ridge, the Western limit of this Republic should be drawn, and the statue of the fabled god, Terminus, should be raised upon its highest peak, never to be thrown down.”⁶³ Predicting that Oregon could not be fully integrated into the United States, Benton placed his hopes for the region in the idea that a separate, independent republic would emerge there.⁶⁴

Regardless of continentalist aspirations and despite Adams’s success in securing joint U.S. occupation of Oregon with the British, there were few Americans and no U.S. authority in Oregon territory until at least the 1830s.

59. “Oregon and the British Claims,” from *American State Papers, Class I, Foreign Relations*, V, 446–48, reprinted in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, LaFeber, ed., 91–92.

60. Reg. Deb., 18th Cong., 2d Sess. (1825), 691.

61. *Ibid.*, 693–94.

62. *Ibid.*, 693–94.

63. *Ibid.* 712.

64. Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 87, 91; Jack Ericson Eblen, *The First and Second United States Empires: Governors and Territorial Government, 1784–1912* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 4.

As late as 1845, one U.S. congressman called for the “re-occupation of Oregon,” noting that “if we ever did occupy Oregon . . . it is certain we do not occupy it now.”⁶⁵ From the perspective of the United States’ European imperial competitors, the far western portion of North America remained tied less to the continent to the east than to the Pacific Ocean to the west. It was from the Pacific that the Spanish, English, French, and Russians had approached the continent, mapped the coastline, and established settlements. If Americans, like Adams, imagined that the founding of the United States marked the beginning of a European imperial retreat from North America, the opposite seemed true in the West where the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed increased exploration and the establishment of new Spanish missions in California and British and Russian fur trading outposts in the Pacific Northwest.⁶⁶

Even as Americans argued about transcontinental expansion to the Pacific, they mustered a variety of different geographic arguments in discussions over the incorporation of Spanish-controlled territories to the south. With Spain weakened by the Napoleonic wars and facing revolutions across its American colonies, U.S. officials first moved to take advantage of the weakened imperial grasp by extending U.S. territorial claims in Florida and Texas. Arguments supporting the acquisition of this territory, as well as Cuba, relied heavily on assumptions about U.S. connections to the Caribbean that blurred the divide between space and geography. The United States’ Caribbean orientation dated back to its pre-independence origins when Americans had aspired to include the Floridas in their new nation.⁶⁷ Instead, it would not be until the Louisiana Purchase that the United States both achieved Jefferson’s primary goal of acquiring New Orleans—a strategic commercial node connecting the trans-Appalachian West to the Caribbean by way of the Mississippi River—and established a foothold on the Caribbean itself. The president had also instructed agents to make offers for East and West Florida, but he valued these at significantly less than New Orleans, particularly East Florida, which did not border on the Mississippi and thus had no bearing on the control of

65. Cong. Globe, 28th Cong., 2d Sess. (1845), 199.

66. Alan Taylor, “Jefferson’s Pacific: The Science of Distant Empire, 1768–1811,” in Seefeldt, Hantman, and Onuf, eds., *Across the Continent*, 16–34. For more on the Far West during this period, see Claudio Saunt, *West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014); Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

67. DuVal, *Independence Lost*.

this crucial corridor.⁶⁸ In doing so, Jefferson demonstrated that he prioritized access to the Mississippi over securing more territory, filling in continental boundaries in the East, or even securing access to the Caribbean outside the Mississippi River watershed. These priorities aside, he and other Americans did recognize geographic advantages to acquiring the Floridas. In January 1803, a congressional committee reported that, along with the advantages to controlling the eastern bank of the Mississippi through the acquisition of West Florida, East Florida was “desirable” because of its “very fine harbors” and proximity to Cuba. Moreover, “it would likewise make our whole territory compact, and would add considerably to our seacoast, and by giving us the Gulf of Mexico for our southern boundary, would render us less liable to attack, in what is now deemed the most vulnerable part of the Union.”⁶⁹

For the next fifty years, arguments emphasizing U.S. geographic connections to the Caribbean would figure at least as significantly as continental rhetoric in arguments about national geography and expansion. These ideas were central to the acquisition of both West and East Florida, as well as ongoing debates over U.S. annexation of Cuba.⁷⁰ Despite the logic of continentalism, assumptions about the desirability of contiguous territory, and the fact that the United States never incorporated it, Cuba figured as prominently in nineteenth-century constructions of the ideal U.S. geography as Florida. Valued not only for its prosperous plantation economy, but also its strategic position at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, Cuba was among the most prized territorial plums of the nineteenth-century Caribbean. As we have already seen above, part of Florida’s desirability stemmed from its proximity to Cuba. With the U.S. acquisition of East Florida in 1819, this geographic argument became circular. In 1823 Adams noted that Cuba and Puerto Rico “are natural appendages to the North American continent; and one of them, Cuba, almost in sight of our shores, from a multitude of considerations has become an object of transcendent importance to the political and commercial interests of our Union.”⁷¹

However, despite U.S. interest in acquiring Cuba and the array of geographic arguments made to justify it, the Spanish Empire maintained its hold

68. Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 2:26.

69. *Annals of Cong.*, 7th Cong., 2d Sess. (1803), 373.

70. Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 2:23–24.

71. “Cuba and the law of gravity,” from John Quincy Adams to Hugh Nelson, April 28, 1823, *The Writings of John Quincy Adams, Volume VII* (New York: 1913–1917), Worthington C. Ford, ed., repr. in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, LaFeber, ed., 129.

on the island. Meanwhile, revolutionary movements swept Spain's mainland American colonies, stoking debates about how the United States would relate to these emerging republics. Initially, independence movements seemed to mark the fulfillment of Americans' expectations that their own independence would touch off a republican revolution that would sweep European empires from the Americas. Most Americans were initially sympathetic to the cause of Mexican independence, speaking of Mexico as a sister republic.⁷² And yet it was not long before many Americans saw the Mexican government's weakness as an opportunity for their own territorial aggrandizement. The pressing issue of Texas annexation and the pervasive sense that Mexico would not be able to maintain control of its extensive territory thrust the question of territorial expansion to the forefront of U.S. politics in the 1840s and 1850s.

It was in this period both that the term "manifest destiny" was coined and that the U.S. government most aggressively pursued territorial conquest. It is no coincidence that this period of unprecedented expansion followed on the heels of revolutions in transportation and communications technologies that made it dramatically easier for people, goods, and information to move more quickly across greater distances. The frequently noted "annihilation of space" "and," "by," or "with" time that was made possible by the proliferation of canals, railroads, steam ships, and telegraphs also rendered obsolete many of the older arguments about how size and distance restricted republican government.⁷³

Unlike the almost incidental acquisition of Louisiana, the U.S. annexation of Texas over the Mexican government's protests, its conquest of northern Mexico in the U.S.-Mexican War, and its diplomatic efforts to acquire additional Mexican territory, as well as territory in the Pacific Northwest and Cuba, comprised a clear expansionist agenda. The prominence of expansion as federal policy, however, did not signify the triumph of a single

72. James E. Lewis, Jr., *The American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783-1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Caitlin Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

73. Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 2:311-52; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Many nineteenth-century authors referred to the "annihilation of space" either "and," "by," or "with" "time." Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Martin Nicolaus, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 539; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 194; Alan Trachtenberg, "Foreward," in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), xiv.

ideological vision, but rather an explosion of debate about expansion, territory, and the future of the nation in which arguments about geography, as well as citizenship, race, and slavery, served a variety of competing purposes.

Expansionists who embraced the rhetoric of manifest destiny relied heavily on the logic of continentalism. Most famous was the claim of John L. O'Sullivan's *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in the summer of 1845 that it was the United States' "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."⁷⁴ But the language—and the spirit—of continentalism was widespread. Earlier in 1845, the Illinois congressman Stephen Douglas announced that he wanted to "blot out the lines on the map which marked our national boundaries on this continent, and make the area of liberty as broad as the continent itself."⁷⁵ In December 1847, the New York senator Daniel S. Dickinson argued, "North America presents to the eye one great geographical system, every portion of which, under the present facilities for communication, may be made more accessible to every other than were the original States to each other at the time they formed the Confederacy." He continued, "And the period is by no means remote, when man . . . yielding to the influences of laws more potent than those which prescribe artificial boundaries, will ordain that it shall be united in political as well as natural bonds, and form but one political system, and that a free, confederated, self-governed republic."⁷⁶

Between the rhetoric of continentalism and the U.S. acquisition of additional western territories in the 1840s, it has been easy for historians to present a narrative of ideological cause and territorial effect—expansionists preached a gospel of continental expansion and the United States achieved it. But, rather than being the cause of expansion, arguments about manifest destiny were attempts to justify the conquest of particular territories at a particular historical moment—and they were attempts that often failed,

74. "Annexation," *United States and Democratic Review* 17, no. 85 (July–August 1845): 5. Although John L. O'Sullivan has been credited with coining the term "manifest destiny," the historian Linda S. Hudson has concluded that this editorial in which the term first appeared was likely written by Jane McManus Storm who often wrote for the *Review*. Linda S. Hudson, *Mistress of Manifest Destiny: A Biography of Jane McManus Storm Cazneau, 1807–1878* (Austin: Texas State Historical Society, 2001).

75. Cong. Globe, 28th Cong., 2d Sess. (1845), 227. For more on Douglas's expansionism, see Robert E. May, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

76. Cong. Globe, 30th Cong., 1st Sess. (1848), Appendix 87.

as their critics, both within and outside the United States, rejected their logic. As the historians Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher have summarized, “‘manifest destiny’ was not, as historians so often imply, a deeply held American folk belief. Rather, it was the self-conscious creation of political propagandists.”⁷⁷

Moreover, it was propaganda that was often unsuccessful. Despite this, U.S. historians have mostly told the stories of U.S. expansionist successes. They have disproportionately focused on the territories the United States did acquire, assuming that because the United States became a nation that spanned that continent from east to west that this had been the primary goal. In writing the history of expansion as a triumphant transcontinental story, historians have chosen just one of the continental configurations that Americans imagined, and the one that happened to coincide closely (although not perfectly) with what the United States eventually assembled in the 1840s.

However, when mid-nineteenth-century Americans referred to the “continent” they imagined a space that extended from north to south as well as east to west. In this context, the expansionist achievements of manifest destiny become much more humble. “Manifest destiny,” in the words of the historian Frederick Merk, “meant expansion, prearranged by Heaven, over an area not clearly defined. In some minds it meant expansion over the region to

77. Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretative History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 200. See also, Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 73–74. For a recent account of how contemporary critics mocked the concept of manifest destiny, see Daniel Burge, “Manifest Mirth: The Humorous Critique of Manifest Destiny, 1846–1858,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 47 (Autumn 2016): 283–302.

Despite critiques that have revealed the problems of using manifest destiny to explain U.S. territorial expansion, it continues to play an explanatory role in many U.S. histories. A brief survey of widely used U.S. history textbooks provides the following chapter titles: “Manifest Destiny and Its Legacy,” “Manifest Destiny?: An Empire for Liberty or Slavery,” and “Fruits of Manifest Destiny.” And, while these chapters focus on the decades during which the term was coined, it is equally common to see historians broadly use manifest destiny to frame the entire history of territorial expansion and expansionist thinking in the United States and its colonial antecedents. David M. Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant: A History of the American People*, 16th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016); John M. Murrin, Paul E. Johnson, James M. McPherson, Alice Fahs, Gary Gerstle, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Norman L. Rosenberg, *Liberty Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, vol. 1, *To 1877*, 6th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2012); Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2014); Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*; Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Greenberg, *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*.

the Pacific; in others, over the North American continent; in others, over the hemisphere.”⁷⁸ For continental-minded expansionists it was as important that the United States stretch from the North Pole to the Isthmus of Darien as from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In 1838, a *Democratic Review* article about tensions between Canadians and the British Empire noted that “we can see no reason why, at some future day, our ‘experiment’ should not be in successful operation over the whole North American continent, from the isthmus to the pole.”⁷⁹ Andrew Kennedy, a representative from Indiana, urged Americans in 1846 “to cover the continent with our posterity, from the Isthmus of Darien to Behring’s strait.”⁸⁰

Although the prevalence of the isthmus-to-pole construction suggested that most Americans had come to think of “their continent” as North America, some continued to embrace a hemispheric geography, predicting that the United States would expand to encompass South America as well. In January 1845, the Illinois congressman John Wentworth mused that someday Texas, Oregon, Nova Scotia, Canada, Cuba, Mexico, and even Patagonia might send representatives to Congress as he believed God had “designed [the original states] as the great centre from which civilization, religion, and liberty should radiate and radiate until the whole continent shall bask in their blessings.”⁸¹

However, if proponents of manifest destiny achieved only limited success in pursuit of a continental nation, part of the power of manifest destiny, in both the period it was coined and for historians since, has been in its elasticity and lack of specificity. A term that was constructed to justify the annexation of Texas in 1845 could retroactively vindicate the Louisiana Purchase or proactively envision the conquest of Mexico, Cuba, or even Patagonia. Although its proponents often spoke in terms of continental expansion, the logic of manifest destiny meant simply that whatever happened was obviously meant to be, by God or nature.

Within this elasticity, a variety of distinct geographic arguments developed that were much more specific than the broad claims of continentalism. By looking more closely at these arguments it becomes obvious that manifest destiny was less a unified ideology than a convenient assemblage of rationales that sought to put nature to work in defense of particular visions of territoriality.

78. Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, 24.

79. “The Canada Question,” *The United States Democratic Review* 1, no. 2 (January 1838): 218.

80. Cong. Globe, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. (1846), 180. See also “The Texas Question. A letter from Alexander H. Everett,” *The United States Democratic Review* 15, no. 75 (September 1844): 252.

81. Cong. Globe, 28th Cong., 2d Sess. (1845), 200.

As they had done throughout U.S. history, expansionists at mid-century deployed arguments about contiguity and proximity but often in ways that burst the limitations of continentalism. Calling for the U.S. annexation of Cuba in 1858, President James Buchanan echoed Adams's earlier rationalization, emphasizing that "Cuba is almost within sight of our shores."⁸² And, if proximity justified U.S. annexation, he suggested, conversely, that distance from Spain meant that "its value to Spain is, comparatively unimportant."⁸³ Expansionists mustered arguments about proximity in support of the annexation of contiguous territory in Canada, Texas, Baja California, and other parts of northern Mexico as well.⁸⁴ To the extent that these acquisitions would have gradually filled in the pieces of a continental expanse they can thus be tied to continentalism. However, given that any specific piece of territory was proximate or adjacent to a particular region, these arguments also increasingly reflected sectional agendas, with northerners more likely to argue for the acquisition of Canada and southerners supporting the annexation of Texas and Cuba. Demonstrating how far the definition of proximate could be stretched, some Americans even used this logic in support of annexation of the Hawaiian Islands. Noting that the archipelago lay "within ten days sail, in the track of the trade winds, from the Pacific coast," "*DeBow's Review* concluded that "The Hawaiian Islands and the Pacific States and Territories of the United States are naturally and indissolubly allied to each other, in respect to their relative geographic position, as well as their respective interchangeable productions."⁸⁵

In addition to arguments about proximity, many Americans emphasized the strategic advantages of acquiring specific geographic locations. Perhaps nowhere were arguments about the commercial, military, and geopolitical significance of geographic features more important than in discussions about extending U.S. territorial control in California. In retrospect, the acquisition of California seems like a critical piece in the U.S. continental puzzle, but, at the time, U.S. officials' primary focus was on gaining access to California's harbors, not acquiring broad swaths of territory or claiming a continental

82. James Buchanan, "Second Annual Message," December 6, 1858, in *The Works of James Buchanan: Comprising his Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, vol. 10, 1856–1860, ed. John Bassett Moore (New York: Antiquarian Press Ltd., 1960), 251.

83. *Ibid.*, 252.

84. Oscar J. Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 22.

85. "Our Island Neighbors," *DeBow's Review and Industrial Resources, Statistics, etc. Devoted to Commerce, Agriculture, Manufactures*, March 1, 1857, 288.

expanse. Americans acknowledged the potential for agricultural settlements and mining in California, but their immediate goal was to secure San Francisco Bay, and to a lesser extent Monterrey Bay and San Diego Bay, and to do so before the British beat them to it. With this in mind, President Andrew Jackson approached the Mexican government in 1835 about purchasing just a strip of land to connect the United States to San Francisco Bay, and perhaps Monterrey as well. Ten years later, President James K. Polk offered Mexico up to \$20 million for a boundary that would transfer San Francisco Bay to the United States. For a boundary line that included Monterrey Bay, he would pay \$5 million more. And, for all of New Mexico, a vast territory that included Mexico's most well-established frontier settlements, he was willing to provide another \$5 million.⁸⁶ Much as with Jefferson's approach to the annexation of New Orleans, Polk's instructions revealed the importance of specific, strategically important geographic locations rather than the acquisition of large territorial expanses or a commitment to a continental aesthetic in boundary-making.

When the Mexican government refused Polk's offers, the president turned to war to achieve his territorial goals. The U.S.-Mexico War and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended it vastly enlarged the U.S. territorial domain, extending the nation's reach over much of the continent (although far from its entirety). But the new boundary line also reflected a continued emphasis on specific strategic locations, including San Francisco, Monterrey, and San Diego Bays and the contested Nueces Strip between the Nueces River and Rio Grande.⁸⁷ Thus, even continental acquisitions were shaped by an emphasis on the strategic importance of specific bays, rivers, islands, and valleys.

Arguments about the importance of such strategic sites emerged frequently in discussions about U.S. territorial interests in Cuba, Hawai'i, Alaska, and Mexico. Cuba's location at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, Americans frequently noted, meant that whoever controlled it would also control trade and transit through the entire Gulf, with implications for trade up the Mississippi River and across Central America as well. "[Cuba] commands the approach to the Gulf of Mexico, which washes the shores of five of our States," noted Secretary of State Edward Everett in 1852. "It bars the entrance of that

86. Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 2:143, 145.

87. Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19–22.

great river which drains half the North American continent, and with its tributaries forms the largest system of internal water-communication in the world. It keeps watch at the door-way of our intercourse with California by the isthmus route.”⁸⁸ An 1851 article in the [London] *Times* warned that “possession of Havana by the Americans would be to the Gulf of Mexico what Gibraltar was to the Mediterranean.”⁸⁹ A few years earlier, in 1848, when the Caste War in Yucatán seemed to create an opportunity for U.S. annexation of that territory, many U.S. politicians noted that Yucatán and Cuba together formed the “lock and key” of the Caribbean.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, with expanding U.S. interests in the Pacific, the strategic value of the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska also increased.⁹¹

By the 1850s expansionist arguments increasingly reflected contentious sectional divisions. As many scholars have noted, these debates were primarily about the relationship between race, slavery, and the future of the United States.⁹² That politicians and pundits often turned to geography to make their arguments should not distract us from the centrality of race and slavery, but rather illustrate how ideas about U.S. institutions and populations became entangled with beliefs about natural geographic features and the size and shape of national territory. Over the course of the 1840s and 1850s, both the incorporation of new territory and continued arguments about geography and national territory contributed to a variety of distinct, and increasingly divided, views of U.S. territorial destiny.

Take for instance arguments about the annexation of Texas, whose request to join the union reopened an intense debate about the proper shape of the United States. As historians have detailed, this was a debate that centered on slavery and international diplomacy.⁹³ However, while geography

88. Everett to the Comte de Sartiges, December 1, 1852, S. Doc. No. 13, 32d Cong., 2d Sess.,

89. *Times* (London), September 9, 1851, as quoted in Hudson, *Mistress of Manifest Destiny*, 147.

90. Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 2:355.

91. “Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting Correspondence in Relation to Russian America,” 19 February 1868, H. Doc. No. 177, 40th Cong., 2d Sess., 131–33; Hallie M. McPherson, “The Interest of William McKendree Gwin in the Purchase of Alaska, 1854–1861,” *Pacific Historical Review* 3, no. 1 (March 1934): 28–38; Howard I. Kushner, “Visions of the Northwest Coast: Gwin and Seward in the 1850s,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (July 1973): 295–306.

92. Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Hictala, *Manifest Design*; David Morris Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

93. Hictala, *Manifest Design*, 10–71; Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 219–54.

was clearly not what was most important in deciding whether or not Texas should join the United States, geographic determinism was a theme in the debates over annexation. Although the *Democratic Review's* 1845 article on Texas annexation is most well-known for introducing the term “manifest destiny,” another article on the same subject that appeared in the magazine a year earlier is even more revealing of the tortured geographic logic that could be put to work in the defense of annexation.⁹⁴ Rather than casting the acquisition of Texas as a steppingstone to the Pacific, as many historians have done since, this article emphasized the centrality of Texas to an American nation centered on the Mississippi River. “That Texas must sooner or later, from the very nature and necessity of things,” it argued, “coalesce into one political unity with the rest of the great Confederacy whose main seat is destined to be the vast Valley of the Mississippi,” it argued, “can scarcely fail to strike the most careless eye that will cast a glance over any map of the continent of North America.” The article then detailed how the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains framed the Mississippi River valley—“the magnificent region allotted already, by the unequivocal finger of Providence, for the main centre and home of the great republican confederated empire of the West.” Despite the caveat that a number of the rivers in Texas “do not actually empty into the great ‘Father of Waters,’ but into the Gulf,” the article insisted that Texas formed “an integral and essential part” of this region. “That the whole of this valley region,” it concluded, “thus symmetrically planned and adapted to its grand destiny, in the possession of the race sent there for the providential purpose—bounded on the north by the chain of the inland seas . . . and on the south resting on the northern line of the Gulf of Mexico, must, *must*, sooner or later, come together into one homogenous unity of political system, is a simple geographical fact which can only be questioned, as it appears to us, by one equally blind in mental and physical vision.”⁹⁵

Although this idea of a Mississippi-centric United States might have represented an attempt to appeal to a cross-section of Americans, the annexation of Texas—which lay below the Missouri Compromise line and in which slavery was already legal—was more easily incorporated into a distinctly southern and pro-slavery view of American destiny. The vision of the United States that southerners had in mind when they mustered

94. Jane McManus Storm probably wrote this article, as well as the 1845 editorial. Hudson, *Mistress of Manifest Destiny*, 45–53, 59–62.

95. “The Texas Question,” *The United States Democratic Review* 14, no. 70 (April 1844), 424–25.

geographic arguments in favor of the annexation of Texas, Cuba, and other parts of Mexico and the Caribbean was distinctly southern-looking and committed to the perpetuation of chattel slavery. Moreover, it was increasingly geographically centered on the Caribbean.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, many northerners committed themselves to a more commercial vision of the nation in which U.S. farms and cities would be connected by a vast commercial network reaching into the Atlantic, Caribbean, and Pacific. In this view, the geography of transportation corridors and trading hubs was highlighted. This commercial ideal certainly included Caribbean locations, most notably Cuba and the isthmus, but it was less likely to require outright annexation, especially if it meant emboldening the slave power. These national visions were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the sectional conflict surrounding slavery increasingly made them so.

By the end of the 1850s, geographic arguments were wielded not only in favor of competing visions of a greater United States, but also to support disunion. Southern secessionists (many of whom had enthusiastically spoken of the United States' manifest destiny) invoked a geographic logic to argue that secession was geographically determined. Pointing to the location of mountains and rivers, they argued that nature, not people, had predetermined that the United States should not be expanded, but divided. Writing in 1850, the South Carolina diplomat and secessionist William Henry Trescot insisted that "nature herself has drawn deeply the sectional lines." He pointed to "three grand divisions—the north, the south, and the west. The north and south this side of the Alleghenies; the west beyond it, having its Pacific border. . . . Upon this side of the mountains, two great sections, divided by the Ohio and the Potomac, from the Mississippi to the Atlantic." He explained, "Not only has nature drawn these lines, but history, in the action of its providential instinct, has followed their guidance."⁹⁷ Clingman's argument that "Providence had marked out on [the map of America] two great empires—one lying on the Mississippi and around the Gulf of Mexico; the other

96. Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Robert E. May, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Torget, *Seeds of Empire*.

97. William Henry Trescot, "The Position and Course of the South," repr. in *Southern Pamphlets on Secession, November 1860–April 1861*, ed. Jon L. Wakelyn (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 19.

upon the basin of the St. Lawrence” reflected a slightly different geographic logic but reached a similar conclusion.⁹⁸

Drawing on familiar arguments about geographic determinism, secessionists tapped into a current of manifest disunion that had long run alongside arguments in favor of American expansion. “We know . . . that natural boundaries control very much the form of nations,” Clingman argued. “A great and powerful force sometimes carries a nationality over boundaries; but nature conquers in the end.”⁹⁹ According to Trescot, these “ineradicable geographical lines” were intended for a national purpose—“God’s great commission—to divide the nations.” Drawing on examples from Europe, he insisted, “It is almost impossible to conquer nature. A dozen bridges across the Rhine would not identify the Frenchman with the German; a tunnel through the Alps would scarcely reconcile the Italian to the Austrian.”¹⁰⁰ Even as they embraced a radical political agenda in their attempt to create a proslavery republic, secessionists insisted that they were doing no more than bowing to the dictates of providence and nature.

A similar argument emerged in the West, where westerners with southern sympathies resurrected arguments about distance and the divisive nature of the Rocky Mountains to argue that the states and territories of the Pacific Coast should break from the Union to form an independent republic. The idea that such an entity, independent of the United States, would emerge on the Pacific had once seemed likely to even such ardent expansionists as Jefferson and Benton. Although California’s gold mines, the growth of American settlements, and fears of British competition made the retention of the Far West an important federal objective in the 1840s and 1850s, western newspapers and politicians occasionally raised the possibility of outright independence. Despite the rhetoric of continentalism, the distance between the east and west coasts and the challenges to transportation and communication posed by the mountains and deserts of the interior West continued to support a geographic counterpoint of disunion. Whether complaining that the federal government was ignoring their needs or distancing themselves from sectional strife, westerners argued that the thousands of miles and mountain ranges that divided them from the East

98. Cong. Globe, 36th Cong., 2d Sess. (1861), 727.

99. Ibid.

100. Trescot, “The Position and Course of the South,” 18.

impeded national unity and made it difficult for the government to carry out its responsibilities.¹⁰¹

Once again, the Rocky Mountains loomed large. As one editorial in the Portland, Oregon, *Democratic Standard* noted in 1855, “If nature ever marked out the division of countries, it has done so in North America. The vast chain of the Rocky Mountains present an unmistakable boundary, and we have reason to believe that these boundaries, laid down by an overruling providence, ought to be more strictly regarded.”¹⁰² These arguments gained urgency in the face of impending civil war. California Senator William Gwin predicted in 1861 that, “if [the Union] is ever broken up, the eastern boundary of the Pacific Republic will be, in my opinion, the Sierra Madre and the Rocky Mountains.”¹⁰³ A California newspaper offered its endorsement of a Pacific republic, explaining that “Situated thousands of miles from the distracted states, [California] would be an asylum of peace and safety in the eyes of the people of the older states, and thousands would flock to her shores, the effect of which must be to build up on the Pacific a mighty, prosperous and independent nation.”¹⁰⁴

Whatever we make of the geographic arguments produced by skeptical westerners and secessionist southerners, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the nation did temporarily fall apart during the Civil War. It was only through four years of warfare, a vastly strengthened federal government, the construction of the transcontinental railroad, and fundamental changes in the conception of citizenship that the United States reemerged to claim a unified territorial domain by the end of the 1860s. The United States’ territorial destiny, if that is what it was, was hard fought, highly contested, and made less by geography than by people, politics, and war.

* * *

In the 1840s and 1850s, exponents of manifest destiny sought to harness the logic of natural geography to a diverse set of expansionist causes. As the

101. Joseph Ellison, “Designs for a Pacific Republic,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (December, 1930): 319–37.

102. Portland *Democratic Standard*, July 1855, as quoted in Dorothy Hull, “Movement in Oregon for the Establishment of a Pacific Coast Republic,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (September, 1916): 183.

103. Cong. Globe, 36th Congress, 1st Session, Part I, (April 16, 1860), 1728. For more on Gwin, see Rachel St. John, “The Unpredictable America of William Gwin: Expansion, Secession, and the Unstable Borders of Nineteenth-Century North America,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 1 (March 2016): 56–84.

104. Sonora *Democrat*, as quoted in Ellison, “Designs for a Pacific Republic,” 335.

uneven achievement of their territorial ambitions and the crisis of the Civil War suggest, they were only partly successful in their own time and on their own terms. They have, however, been much more successful in the history books. In writing the history of territorial struggles in the nineteenth-century United States as a story defined by expansion and explained by the ideology of manifest destiny, historians have also disproportionately focused on how nineteenth-century Americans used geographic ideas to justify the expansion that did occur. In losing sight of the geographic and spatial arguments made by Americans who were committed to the ideal of a small republic or convinced that the Rocky Mountains would be a permanent barrier or certain that Cuba and the isthmus must eventually become part of the United States or determined that the South and North were destined to be divided, they have also narrowed the history of how Americans thought about geography, space, and national territory.

Arguments about space and geography naturalized the expansion of the United States, but they also served other functions. U.S. political leaders and journalists also drew on geographic and spatial logic to make a variety of arguments about the proper size, shape, and extent of the nation's territory and what the relationship between the government, the people, and the land should be. The debates that arose around these questions reveal a great deal about how nineteenth-century Americans thought about national territory, barriers to transportation and communication, the strategic importance of specific sites, and proximity, distance, and movement. They remind us not only that Americans disagreed about how, where, why, and whether the United States should add to or divide its territory, but also how easily these disagreements could be forgotten as Americans adjusted their ideas about space and geography to fit the changing shape of their nation. We must remember the diversity of geographic arguments lest we too fall into the trap of believing that the United States' borders were natural, deserved, or destined, rather than constructed, contested, and contingent. ■

RACHEL ST. JOHN is an associate professor of history at University of California, Davis.

NOTE

The author wishes to thank Andrew Isenberg, Vincent Brown, Glenda Carpio, Malinda Maynor Lowery, Jennifer Seltz, Ajantha Subramanian, Lissa Wadewitz, Louis Warren, Richard White, and the anonymous reviewers for the *Pacific Historical Review* for their comments and suggestions.