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Imperial Borderland? Fear and Rivalry in representations in print of the landscape of Carolina and Louisiana 1660-1753

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Biography:
Catherine Armstrong’s latest monograph on Landscape and Identity in North America’s Southern Colonies was published with Ashgate in 2013. Another book An Historian’s Guide to Non-Textual Sources came out with Bloomsbury in 2015. She has also co-organised two international conferences in London and Montpellier examining slavery outside the plantation.

Abstract:
For the first half-century of settlement by Europeans, the colonies of Carolina and Louisiana were imperial borderlands. Looking west, Carolinians were among the first settlers to highlight and experience the threat that the French posed once they had traversed and mapped the length of the Mississippi. Although during this period the efforts to claim, survey and document landownership were flourishing, the reality of struggling to clear and use tracts of many hundreds of acres meant that much of the region remained ‘wilderness’ despite being nominally owned by Europeans.

This paper compares British and French printed accounts that symbolically brought this land under control. I argue that European efforts to bring the landscape, flora and fauna of the southeast under control were problematic even in areas not previously understood as ‘borderlands’, such as parts of Charles Town and New Orleans themselves. While the accounts do reflect a feeling of increasing imperial confidence on the part of the British and the French, during this period neither was able to fully control the landscape they professed to have mastered. This paper shows that it was the vulnerability, not the strength, of these powers that struck the authors whose work is surveyed here.

Keywords: borderlands, imperial, Carolina, British, French, exploration, landscape
For the first half-century of settlement by Europeans, the colonies of Carolina and Louisiana were imperial borderlands. Looking west, Carolinians were among the first settlers to highlight and experience the threat that the French posed once they had traversed and mapped the length of the Mississippi. Although during this period the efforts to claim, survey and document landownership were flourishing, the reality of struggling to clear and use tracts of many hundreds of acres meant that much of the region remained ‘wilderness’ despite being nominally owned by Europeans.

This paper will compare British and French printed accounts that symbolically brought this land under control, examining the different ways that early eighteenth-century commentators negotiated the problem of untamed lands that could be a habitat for hostile natives, runaway slaves, wandering livestock or even eloped wives. I will argue that European efforts to bring the landscape, flora and fauna of the southeast under control were problematic. While the accounts do reflect a feeling of increasing imperial confidence on the part of the British and the French, during this period neither was able to fully control the landscape they professed to have mastered. This paper will show that it was the vulnerability, not the strength, of these powers that struck the authors whose work is surveyed here.

In the 1670s the initial French explorations to find the headwaters of the Mississippi set out from Michigan under Joliet and Marquette. They were working to explore and claim the region for the French, to make money from the fur trade and to mitigate the power of the Jesuits in the region.\(^1\) Marquette’s journal became the accepted account of the journey and revealed some fascinating encounters with the landscape such as the recording of the vivid cave paintings of animals and birds on limestone bluffs at present-day Alton, Illinois, with Marquette praising the ability of the ancient Native artists saying “artists in France would find it difficult to paint them so well”.\(^2\)

La Salle’s voyages of the 1680s were the first to attempt to settle a French colony in the Gulf region. La Salle admitted that he was motivated by a fear of the encroaching English: “it is highly necessary to carry on this discovery”, he wrote, “for had the English notice of it, they might by means of this river trade with the Illinois, Miamis, Nadonessians and other savages spoil for ever our commerce”.3 He believed that he could create a vast trading empire encompassing the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. Although La Salle, beset by opposition from his own men, disease, hunger and lack of financial support, finally died penniless in Louisiana of Yellow Fever, his efforts bore fruit as the French established a military post at New Orleans and another at Mobile.4 In the French account of the last voyage of M. de la Sale down the Mississippi, published in English in 1714, M. Joutel, far from describing the landscape in which his friend died as forbidding and fearful, praises the natural beauty of Louisiana.

We must not look there for rich and stately cities or lofty structures or any of those wonders of architecture...but we may there admire Nature in its beautiful simplicity as it came from the hands of its creator without having been alter’d or depraved by Ambition or Art.5

In 1737 John Brickell repeated similar sentiments in his description of North Carolina: “to those that travel through the woods of Carolina that turn your eyes which way, you will have nothing but pleasing and diverting objects and the more to be admired being the work of nature and not of art”.6

The English initially learned of the French intentions to settle the region through the publication of Louis Hennepin’s Description of Louisiana. Hennepin accompanied La Salle on his voyages and his journal went through many editions in both Paris and London. A review of the 1685 Paris edition appeared in the Philosophical Transactions for that year and the anonymous reviewer was unsure “whether the design of the author were to take possession of the great continent or only to convert the country”.7 In the 1698 London edition the plans of the French became a little clearer, as Hennepin claimed that the French wanted to establish a colony “on some part of the great river so soon as they have agreed upon the boundaries or limits which the Lords Proprietors who claim by a patent...but there being

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7 Philosophical Transactions, vol. 15, no 170 (1685), p. 980.
space enough for both”. Despite the flurry of letters and pamphlets alerting English readers to the threat of the French on the frontier, very few French settlers actually made it to the region during this period. Many accounts were published about Louisiana but in reality few settlements were made and those that were made were chaotic, with the ruling classes such as Sieur Bienville struggling to keep control. Although in theory land use in New Orleans was much more tightly controlled by the French government than by the British in their colonies, however, it was Bienville in New Orleans, not his colonial masters in Paris, who had to make decisions about land use. Bienville instructed that “all inhabitants must have their land enclosed by pallisades within two months or they will be deprived of their property,” and later he had ‘forbidden all the inhabitants to go and cut wood within the cypress groves especially those which are near New Orleans without his written permission’.

Despite the disorganised nature of the settlements, the residents of Carolina were not convinced of the benign intentions of the French. In 1698-99 Sir Edward Randolph reported in his letter to the Board of Trade that “I find the inhabitants greatly alarmed upon the news that the French continue their resolution to make a settling at Messasipi River from whence they may come over land to the head of the Ashley River without opposition”. While every true Englishman sensed the superiority of his own nation without having to be instructed, the decision makers of England had to keep themselves informed about events in America so that they could maintain this imperial tradition. In 1714, a reminder about this came from an unlikely source: a Frenchman! In that year Monsieur Jeutel’s account of the French voyages of exploration in the Mississippi valley were published in England and Jeutel included a message to the British gentry reminding them that “they who design in particular to serve their prince abroad are obliged to understand the interests and pretentions of foreign states”. His reminder was timely. From 1700 onwards, the focus of European warfare moved dramatically towards North America’s southern colonies as the French and Spanish crowns became aligned under the Bourbon claim. This meant that the communications between British government representatives in America and London became more significant. Reports such as that in the Coe Papers from the Carolina Assembly directed to the Lords Commissioners for Trade in 1719, which pointed out that Carolina “is the frontier of the

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British empire on the said main to the south and west and exposed to the incursions of the French and Spaniards and barbarous savage Indians”. 13 In another, more positive document to the President of the Privy Council, the assemblymen claimed that

the French have not yet made any progress in planting that country [i.e. the Carolina backwoods], subsisting themselves either upon the supplys that come from France or upon what they buy of the Indian. 14

As Steven Oatis has argued, luckily for the British government, in matters of rivalry with the French and Spanish, the colonists usually saw themselves as ‘imperialists’, willing to do the work of the British in protecting the frontier. 15

The French were particularly feared because of their proximity to the English, the possibility that they might convert the natives and turn them against Carolina and the worry that they might dominate the trade of the region because of their control of the great river. Another concern was that the French were making more effort to document and understand the landscape, and their accounts were being published for the entertainment and promotion of understanding back in Europe. John Lawson wrote in the preface to his natural history of Carolina that it was a shame that many of the English settlers “are persons of the meaner sort uncapable of giving any reasonable account of what they met withal in these remote parts”, and that, by contrast, the French “outstrip us” by sending out clergy and gentlemen who record their travels in journals. This problem inspired Lawson to write his seminal account. 16

Initially the Carolinians hoped to halt the French development in the area by building rival frontier settlements. One such was a Welsh colony planned by Pryce Hughes in 1712-13. He wrote to the Duchess of Ormonde from his home in Chester, South Carolina explaining that “our fears here of the growing interest of the French make us redouble our industry. We’re no ignorant of their barbarityes to the New England men [...] they are but encroachers at best”. 17

The extent of his ambitions was revealed in an undated letter to his “brother Jones”. He wrote

13 ‘Address to the Lords Commissioners for Trade’, Coe Papers, Commissioners of Trade Collection, 11/569/2, Caroliniana Library, Columbia, SC.
14 ‘To the Right Honourable, Charles Lord Viscount Townsend’, Coe Papers.
that subsequent groups of settlers should arrive at his colony “by sea to the mouth of ye Mesisipi and not by way of Carolina”, but he admitted that this route was not currently possible: “but those must come here first there being no body as yet to receive them at the Mesisipi”. Pryce Hughes confirmed that he had seen the Mississippi Valley region with his own eyes and enmity of the French was not the only reason to settle there: its fertility was beyond compare. He wrote

this summer I’ve been a considerable way to the westwards upon the branches of the Mesisipi where I saw a country as different from Carolina as the best parts of our country [i.e. presumably Wales] are from the fens of Lincolnshire.

In 1720 an anonymous tract was published in London entitled *Some Considerations on the Consequences of the French Settling Colonies on the Mississippi*, discussing why, within less than a generation, the French had risen to become a true threat to England’s security in the region. The author wrote, “if these new settlements are permitted to be carried on, the English trade will in a great measure be ruined on the continent of America”. He metaphorically invoked the power of the mighty Mississippi saying that it could be fatal in the hands of the French: “the Mississipi will drown our settlements on the Main of America”. This supported the 1701 findings of the anonymous author of *An Essay upon the Government* who claimed that the landscape of America assisted the French attempts to achieve dominance in the region. He wrote “the two great rivers of Canada and Meschasipe run a long way up into the continent and from these two rivers without much difficulty may be had a communication with those vast lakes that lye to the westward of the English colonies which will make the French masters of a great and profitable trade with the Indians”.

The relationship between the Carolinians and the French and the southeastern landscape is more complicated than the confrontational one revealed by the promotional pamphlets. As early as 1685 when the revocation of the Edict of Nantes was passed, Carolina had been settled by a number of French Huguenot families and more had since trickled across the Atlantic via London. Shaftesbury and Locke were particularly keen to encourage dissenting settlers and they publicised among their networks in London the land opportunities and the

19 Ibid.
offer of naturalisation. The Huguenots in Charleston were as keen as the settlers of English origin to see their Catholic countrymen kept away from the English settlements. The folk memory of the settlement of Carolina by French Huguenots in the 1560s under Jean Ribault lingered on well into the period of English settlement. The Charleston Huguenots took a full part in civic life but also held rural plantations and were innovative in agricultural development, leading the colony’s move into rice cultivation in the early eighteenth century. Representatives of their community were also Indian traders and transatlantic merchants.22 Huguenots were also willing to expose themselves to the dangers of the frontier in order to rival the settlements established by the French Catholics in the Mississippi Valley. According to Francis Parkman, in 1699 Huguenots were part of the failed settler group under Daniel Coxe whose progress was averted by Bienville at English Turn.23

It is impossible to understand how the settlers in the English colonies interacted with the French on the Mississippi frontier without bringing the Native Americans into the story. This triangular relationship permeated every travel account written about the interior of this region. The English feared that the French would persuade the natives not to trade with them and even encourage the natives to undertake military action against English settlements. D’Artaguiette’s manuscript account about his voyage from New Orleans to what he called “Choctaw country” written in 1722-23 showed that these fears were well founded. D’Artaguiette painted a picture of peaceful Indian and French co-existence, with the only difference between the Indian settlements and the French being the method of subsistence. The Indians were great meat eaters, including the “crocodile or alligator which they catch with considerable skill”, whereas the French grew “rice, beans, maize and other vegetables necessary to life. Their greatest trade is poultry which they go to New Orleans to sell”.24 However, like the British, the French relationship with the original inhabitants was often tense. In the 1740s Antoine Bonnefay recorded that he was kidnapped by the Cherokee and taken down the Tennessee River towards their territory. Coming to the town of Tellico, he met three English traders and a German who were free to come and go, and some French men who had been kidnapped several years before and two black slaves who had run away from

23 Francis Parkman, Half a Century of Conflict (Boston, 1893), p. 142
the British settlement. It is unclear whether the kidnapped French men had ‘gone native’ and now considered themselves Indian or whether they were still being held as captives.25

With their manuscript and published accounts, British and French explorers contributed to the burgeoning knowledge about the backcountry regions. Some of these explorers were also traders, but the goal of their journals was to enhance European knowledge of a still uncertain landscape. For example, Bonnefay recording his experiences of native power in Cherokee country wrote that:

Of the 52 villages which compose the nation of the Cherakis only the eight which are along the river are our enemies. The other villages remain neutral either because of their remoteness or their spirit of peace. Carolina is 15 days journey by land from the village where I was, Virginia 20 days and the Alibamons 10 to the south.26

Similar was Tobias Fitch’s visit in 1725 to the Creeks during which he met the chiefs of a number of towns and negotiated their support. He reported a conversation with one of the native chiefs Hopeahachey who was represented by Fitch as perceiving the developing English land use, saying:

when you English are at home your dyet is kept more under command. Your chattle are kept in large pens and likewise your sheep; your turkeys and ducks are at your doors. Now with us it is not so, we are forced to hunt and take a great deale of pains to get our provisions before we eat it.27

However, knowledge learned from the natives was not always accurate, due to poor communication or wilful deception. For example the account of the remote parts of Carolina produced by John Lederer’s expedition of 1672 was erroneous in identifying a non-existent lake because of his inability to understand the natives’ sign language.28 These errors persisted in maps of the region into the mid-eighteenth century although Joel Gascoyne and John Lawson worked hard to refute them.29 One of the most common misconceptions natives

29 Ibid, p. 486.
transmitted to the English was the distance between places. Father Marquette, a French missionary travelling in the Tennessee region in 1673, met some local natives who “assured us it was not more than ten days journey to the sea”, when in fact the distance was over 1000 miles.³⁰

An examination of literature discussing the relationship between Louisiana and Carolina and the perceptions of the landscape shows that there were many similarities between the two nations’ interpretations and that it was their wariness of each other that triggered this. As in Carolina, an initially over-optimistic, almost romanticised view of the potential and beauty of Louisiana gave way to a more pragmatic and nervous assessment of the fragility of the settlements within the region of the powerful Mississippi. Natives helped both nations to comprehend the landscape in which they lived but at times they also wilfully or accidentally misled the white settlers. While the confidence of each nation’s rhetoric dragged settlers in to the European imperial world, assessments of the region by those who lived there reflected other concerns and showed that because of being imperial borderlands, the eighteenth-century Louisiana region was a place of uncertainty for all those who claimed a share in it.

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