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Vast Early America: A Transcontinental Conversation.

The Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture's 27th Annual Conference at the Université de Poitiers, France

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Markus J. Diepold (University of Regensburg) comments on Vast Early America, German American Studies, and the inextricable (if sometimes obscured) links between Europe and the study of Early America. In light of the Omohundro Institute's first event outside of the continental US since 2001, held at the Université de Poitiers from June 19 to 21, 2024, it appears particularly pertinent to reflect on the scholarly, geographic, and institutional connections that have influenced the study of North American history in Europe and the US over the last century. In particular, Diepold asks what place the study of early America has held in German American Studies, and how a more intensified focus on this period of American history could benefit German scholars of American culture and history going forth. He also highlights how approaching vast early America can draw attention to the significance of spatial and temporal scales for American studies.

Highsmith, Carol M, photographer. *A piece of the vast Great Sage Plain in Montezuma County in extreme southwestern Colorado*. -05-28. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2015632643/. Public Domain.

> Dealing with the expansiveness and complexity of early America thus also means to ask whether it actually started in 40.000 BCE with the early migration of peoples across the Beringia land bridge, the complex Mesoamerican civilizations that developed from 2000 BCE on, or the first long-term trans-Atlantic contact in the fifteenth century.

The Vastness of Early America

The conceptual framing of *Vast* Early America is a relatively recent trend that nonetheless has deep ties with long-established traditions in the study of American history. Both expanding on and challenging some notions of the spatial framework of the Atlantic World—encompassing the places that were navigable across the Atlantic in the early modern period—the vastness of early America in important ways expands on the transnational entanglements that connected Britain, the west coasts of continental Europe and Africa, the east coasts of North and South America, as well as the Caribbean. As Karin Wulf describes it in her seminal essay, Vast Early America is not just a simple descriptive approach to the geography of the continent, but also influences our understanding of the chronology, the demographic dimension, and our methodological tools in tracing its history (Wulf 2019). Asking when exactly "early" America starts and ends, who features into the creation and is represented in studies of early America, and how we approach these diverse histories through the sources available to us are of central concern to this framework. As Wulf also explains in an interview on the topic, this approach is not trying to reinvent the wheel of early American studies, but rather to describe and draw connections between what a diverse array of scholars of early American have been doing for a while now (Covart 2021).

Consequently, Vast Early America challenges the teleological re-tellings of the origin story of the US-American nation that usually draws a relatively straight line from the founding of Jamestown in 1609 or the arrival of the pilgrims in Plymouth in 1620 to the fault lines of the Revolutionary period. Moreover, by not solely focusing on "guys in white wigs," but highlighting the Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and their descendants, as well as the polyglot European settler communities that actually lived in North America, the demographic dimension also serves to challenge this easy chronology (Covart 2021). Dealing with the expansiveness and complexity of early America thus also means to ask whether it actually started in 40.000 BCE with the early migration of peoples across the Beringia land bridge, the complex Mesoamerican civilizations that developed from 2000 BCE on, or the first long-term trans-Atlantic contact in the fifteenth century.

Crucially, this perspective then includes early American histories beyond the Thirteen Colonies at the heart of what became the United States, and thus considers important Indigenous histories, the history of Spanish colonization (particularly also of later US territory), and the British colonies in the Caribbean, that generally were of much greater importance to the British empire than its North American colonies (Covart 2021).

Methodologically, this also has significant implications. Importantly, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, Vast

Early America is not a field of study that can be comprehended in and of itself—one would need to know at minimum 400 years of history, the histories of four different continents, and the cultural histories of a wide array of different peoples—but rather an umbrella that connects scholars of different specializations. Consequently, we do not study early America but rather slices of it, such as 18th-century British America, the Spanish Caribbean, the Native Southeast etc., each of which brings their particular methods and source material with it (Covart 2021).

What Vast Early America does is put these diverse and specialized research areas in conversation, and thus also enables a transfer of methods. This then makes it possible for scholars to look at known materials differently, either by drawing new methods and approaches from these related fields, or simply asking new questions of the same sources. As Wulf stresses, this has already been going on for quite some time. Rather than intending to lay out a programmatic roadmap for where the field ought to go, Wulf, in her position as executive director of the OI, sought to describe the myriad and diverse ways in which scholars dealt with early America. Or, as Josh Piker puts it succinctly: "Vast was not something we needed to become" (Piker 2024). What the framework of Vast Early America adds on a fundamental level, however, is to see these deeply interrelated histories as *mutual histories*: "The cumulative scholarship of the past two decades has shown us how significantly we understand each area and discipline better in relation to the others, and that we understand early America *best* when it is most inclusive" (Wulf 2019).

The main square in Poitiers. Photo by Markus J. Diepold.

A Transcontinental Conversation

This mutuality and connectivity was also apparent throughout the Omohundro Institute's conference in Poitiers

this July (see the program for an overview). There were panels on Interethnic Violence, Captivity and Incorporation in the Indigenous Borderlands, the Circulation of People, Stories, and Memories in the French Atlantic World, Disability in the Vast Early Americas, and on cultural practices and the colonial encounters. These were only some of the diverse panels connecting Indigenous histories, the mobility of enslaved peoples, conceptions of the body in connection to societal norms, and the role of material exchanges for Indigenous and enslaved communities in the context of European settler colonialism. Exciting new bodies of sources, such as those of the Prize Papers project, were equally central to the conversations as the question of how we can re-examine well-known sources by taking on different perspectives or problematizing well-established frameworks such as that of settler colonialism or normative conceptions of the body, colonization, and the agency of enslaved peoples. The most thought-provoking discussions were those centering on questions of how we can communicate the vastness of early America to both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences.

The conversation between Hermann Bennett and Caroline Pennock (chaired by Gilles Havard) in particular broached the issue of how popular narrative histories of early America that center Indigenous perspectives on Europe and the perspectives of people of African descent (as Pennock's *On Savage Shores* and Bennett's *African Kings and Black Slaves* do to tremendous effect) can do justice to these complex histories, while also being accessible to a non-scholarly audience—and why it sometimes pays to fight your publisher on the issue of footnotes. In a similar vein, the Editor's Roundtable which put Judith Ridner (*Journal of Early American Studies*), Josh Piker (*WMQ*, OI), Carolyn Eastman (*WMQ*), and Elodie Peyrol-Kleiber (*Journal of Early American History*) in conversation with the audience, also tackled issues of how to bridge the gap between early American research based in Europe and US-based publishers.

This question of how non-Anglophone scholarship in Europe deals with Vast Early America and can be made more visible in the US was also of central concern during our roundtable discussion "Early American Studies outside the United States: Views on the International Scholarship," organized by the *Journal of Early American History*. Chaired by Jessica Roitman (as editor-in-chief Kristin Lee was unable to attend due to travel issues), Matteo Binasco (Università degli Stranieri di Siena, Italy), Agata Bloch (Institute of History of Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland), and myself. The discussion dealt with questions concerning when our respective language scholarships became interested in early America, what spatial or demographic connections might exist, which tensions exist between a push to publish for English audiences vs. writing in our own languages, and what general trends have been observable in recent years in terms of early American histories. Though it is difficult to generalize our particular national academic cultures and the different strands of scholarship that exist within them, two major trends were visible throughout our discussion. First, the institutionalized interest in American history mostly developed some time post-World War II, and second, early America was usually sidelined in favor of a focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American histories. I do not want to make the presumption that I can fully speak to the scholarly traditions my colleagues work within, which is why I want to illustrate these two issues through a focus on German-language histories of North America.

Germany and Early America

> the establishment of a German tradition of North American history was part of a re-education and democratization process initiated by the United States in post-WWII Germany. […] While [the] focus on German-American relations was subject to radical transformations in the 1990s, as a new generation of scholars increasingly dealt with questions of race, ethnicity, and gender as productive categories in their research, the study of early America remained an outlier in German academia.

In terms of what we currently understand as American Studies in Germany, German interest in the history and culture of North America was institutionalized in the immediate post-war years. The Amerika-Institut at the LMU Munich was founded in 1949, while the German Association for American Studies (DGfA/GAAS) and the John-F.-Kennedy-Institut für Nordamerikastudien at the FU Berlin (then still called the Amerika-Institut) were established in the early 1950s. Though they in some ways continued the traditions of earlier institutions, such as that of the Berlin Amerika-Institut, founded in 1910, this post-war moment also gave birth to a new perspective on German-American relations. As Ursula Lehmkuhl argues, the establishment of a German tradition of North American history was part of a re-education and democratization process initiated by the United States in post-WWII Germany (Finzsch et al. 2003). Consequently, for most of the latter half of the twentieth century, German scholars of North American history focused on periods and fields of intense German-American contact. As Volker Depkat points out, there were four major pillars of German historical research of North American history: "first, United States foreign policy and German-American international relations; second, German immigration to the United States; third, constitutional history from a comparative perspective; and fourth, the broad field of Americanization/Westernization studies" (Depkat 2009). These trends were also strongly driven by US interventions, such as the funding of guest professorships in the late 1940s. While this focus on German-American relations was subject to radical transformations in the 1990s, as a new generation of scholars increasingly dealt with questions of race, ethnicity, and gender as productive categories in their research, the study of early America remained an outlier in German academia.

Important exceptions to this were scholars such as Hermann Wellenreuther (Universität Göttingen) and Willi Paul Adams (FU Berlin) who had a strong focus on early America in their work from the 1970s on, and also already dealt with its vastness to some extent, such as through the inclusion of Indigenous histories (Wellenreuther 2000). However, early America as a specific field of study was frequently sidelined in favor of other histories or fields. This has both to do with the comparatively weak institutionalization of North American history in Germany, as well as the further marginalization of early American history within this scholarly context. For example, there are still around four to five times as many professorships in Eastern European history than in North American history in Germany, at the same time as professors for German history in North Carolina alone outnumber the professors focusing on the history of North America and the United States in the whole of the Federal Republic

(Depkat 2009).

An exact count of professors dealing with North American history is further complicated by the fact that not all scholars working in this field are institutionalized as historians, but rather are counted as belonging to the field of American Studies/Amerikastudien. As the latter encompasses and tries to balance literary studies, cultural studies, linguistics, language education, and historical studies, the institutional expectations of the diverse scholarly contexts that scholars in American Studies are supposed to be familiar with further makes a specialization in early American history an unattractive career choice. Further ambiguity also exists as some early modern historians outside of American Studies/Amerikastudien deal with the history of early America in some capacity. Most often this is done through the colonial histories of France or Great Britain, as in the case of Susanne Lachenicht (Universität Bayreuth).

All of this of course leads to the question: is early America simply of little relevance to American Studies in Germany today? It certainly appeared so to me when I first became interested in American culture and literature in my studies. As I assume is also true for many of my fellow students, my education on early America was constrained to Plymouth, Jamestown, and then the Revolution, with only cursory reference to the histories of Indigenous and enslaved peoples (it is important to mention here that I did my master's degree in Anglophone and American Studies in Austria, though I assume that the experience in Germany was then not radically different). However, despite this lack of an in-depth education in Early American Studies, or even the historical connections between the German-speaking world and America, many of the topics I encountered during my studies—slavery, white supremacy, or citizenship rights—all have deep roots in the earliest stages of American colonization. However, this *longue durée* of American colonization, as well as the diverse histories which challenge and complicate it, only truly became apparent to me once I had the privilege to specifically work with Indigenous histories and to connect with a number of great and generous scholars working within the realm of Vast Early America themselves.

One important facet, which our roundtable in Poitiers also centered on, is the tension between the scholarly hegemony of Anglophone academia and the somewhat marginalized position this can lead to for non-English language scholarship on America. Though this is again hard to quantify, the general consensus of our panel was that there exist institutional and career incentives to publish in English, since this enables one's books to be read more widely and thus can result in more stable funding when certain publishers, prizes, or other accolades are on one's résumé. Meanwhile, to be even published in the US or the UK one also has to follow anglophone scholarly and language standards, which can lead to a loss of culturally specific traditions of scholarship, while making it less accessible to readers not familiar with these standards. At the same time as the increased popularity of English as the lingua franca of academia has enabled conversations across continents and nationalities, the question of how non-English traditions can retain their particular character and perspective in the face of this homogenization remains.

This tension then might explain the relative obscurity of early American historiography in Europe, as it is neither fully seen as relevant to current cultural conversations, nor as entirely relevant for study of the early modern

period from a, say, German vantage point. Still, despite all this, a small number of German historians continue to publish important and meaningful studies on early America, its relation to Germany, and more broadly German American Studies. Recent publications such as Georg Fertig's (Universität Halle-Wittenberg) monograph on Palatine immigrants to North America (2000) and the large-scale collection of Lutheran administrative diaries in Pennsylvania that Mark Häberlein (Universität Bamberg), Thomas Müller-Bahlke (Universität Halle), and Hermann Wellenreuther edited (2019) add important dimensions to German emigration histories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Besides her recent work on the archives of Hermann Wellenreuther, Claudia Schnurrmann's (Universität Hamburg) scholarship on the Atlantic World likewise highlights important transcontinental connections. Meanwhile, Johannes Burkhardt (†), Volker Depkat (Universität Regensburg), and Jürgen Overhoff (Universität Münster) expose more intellectual connections between German federalism and the US constitution in their recent collection of essays. To an entirely different end, Heike Bungert's (Universität Münster) popular history on the Indigenous peoples of America, slightly provocatively entitled *Die Indianer* (2020), provides a highly fascinating correction of German perspectives and popular conception of Indigenous life through an informed engagement with recent Native American and Indigenous scholarship. It is not only historians who deal with early America, however. The research network "Voices and Agencies: America and the Atlantic, 1600-1865," led by Ilka Brasch & Elena Furlanetto (Universität Duisburg-Essen, 2021-24) seeks to critically engage with early American literature to highlight how the Atlantic world brought forth divergent agencies and shifting concepts of the self.

> ignoring the vastness of early America can only serve to limit our understanding of the Early Modern period, and American history and culture in general. All the questions that concern scholars of nineteenth and twentieth century America—such as civil rights, gender relations, agency, (post-)colonialism, and Indigenous rights—have deep roots in early America

While these are only a handful examples of German scholarship on early America, in combination with the conversations that occurred throughout the conference at Poitiers they highlight two important points. First of all, ignoring the vastness of early America can only serve to limit our understanding of the Early Modern period, and American history and culture in general. All the questions that concern scholars of nineteenth and twentieth century America—such as civil rights, gender relations, agency, (post-)colonialism, and Indigenous rights—have deep roots in early America. Second of all, by engaging in conversations across the Atlantic (as well as across European borders) and recognizing the vast chronologies, demographies, and methodologies that inform our diverse studies of America, we can more effectively challenge and complicate long-standing assumptions about the US, as well as refine our own approaches to current questions within the field of American Studies and beyond. While Vast Early America is not the be-all and end-all of Early American Studies, it provides an important framework that puts the diverse and *mutual* histories of America in context and, more importantly, in conversation.

Meanwhile, for the German context, a transcontinental but nonetheless spatially-rooted approach can help to make connections visible that might otherwise be lost in between the gaps of institutionalized fields. Whether it is Karl Marx drawing inspiration from Lewis Henry Morgan's writings on the Haudenosaunee, or early American lawmakers drawing from German federalism in outlining the constitution, there are important transfers across the Atlantic in both directions. Rather than being apprehensive of the seemingly inescapable influence of anglophone academia, it pays to expand the vastness of early America to Europe and in return ask how our national histories relate and in important ways influenced the diverse and polyglot spaces that became the United States. After all, as Karin Wulf has so succinctly shown, the study of early America can never be purely about North America but has to consider our *mutual histories*.

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