

The multiple imaginaries of the American nation

by Jules Naudet

Rachel St. John explores the diverse range of nation-building projects that vied for legitimacy and land across the continent during the XIXe century, illuminating the diversity of North American political history and the contingency of national growth and definition.

Rachel St. John is a historian of nineteenth-century North America and the United States. Originally from California, she received her BA and PhD from Stanford University. St. John was on the faculty at Harvard University and New York University before returning to California to become Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Davis, in 2016. Her first book, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western US-Mexico Border*, was published by Princeton University Press in 2011. She now is completing her second book, *The Imagined States of America: An Unmanifest History*. In this new narrative of nineteenth-century North America, St. John explores the diverse range of nation-building projects that vied for legitimacy and land across the continent during this critical period of political transformation. Illuminating the diversity of North American political history and the contingency of national growth and definition, this book challenges narratives that take U.S. growth and dominance for granted. St. John's work has been supported by numerous fellowships and institutions. Most recently, during the 2023-24 academic year, she was an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University.

Books and Ideas: How important is the view of the American nation as a consistent, coherent, and unified entity in both academia and mainstream narratives? What forms does it take?

Rachel St. John: Americans, in academia and in elementary school textbooks and popular culture, tend to think of the 19th century as the moment at which the United States came of age. And so this is a story that centers on the growth of the nation, the idea that the United States is born in 1776 and the 19th century is the moment when it comes into its own.

And a lot of it has to do with expansion. It also faces the crisis of the US Civil War. And there's sort of a sense in that moment that either the nation is going to die or it's going to go on, but it survives. And as a result of that, the United States becomes a mature nation. And this is something we can see both in academic books and in the way that we celebrate the 4th of July in the United States.

It gives you the sense that the United States was always one thing. It was almost like a person in that it could grow or it could die, but it was always going to be one thing. And that growth itself is natural. And I think that's fundamental to how we see 19th century U.S. history. And I don't think it's actually entirely correct.

So in place of that single story, what I've become really interested in is the great variety of ideas about what kinds of nations could either be sustained or be created in 19th century North America. It was a space that inspired all sorts of ideas about different kinds of political national formations. So we have things like independent indigenous nations.

There are lots of those that exist before the birth of the United States, and they evolve and persist throughout the 19th century. But also, you have all sorts of different people from around the world coming to North America and projecting their own ideas of North America as a space where they can create nations. Some of those people come from within the United States.

Groups like Mormons, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who don't feel like they are fully included within the United States. Imagine creating a theo-democracy. African-Americans who are enslaved and denied rights consider their own formation of black nations in the United States. So you have all sorts of different people who really are able to imagine different alternative nations in North America. And the more I look at 19th century North America, the more I see

that that is really the normative experience, not the creation of these huge, heterogeneous, continental spanning nations. No one would have imagined that at the very beginning of the 19th century.

So I'm currently writing a book, *"The Imagined States of America: The Unmanifest History of Nineteenth-Century North America"*, in which I seek to challenge these overarching narratives of American history to really emphasize the contingency in the diversity of nation making, by looking at all these different groups of people who were involved in nation building projects in 19th century North America.

Books and Ideas: You propose a history of American nation building that focuses on the intersection of diverse projects, rather than on the mainstream idea of a single teleological American project. What other unmanifest imaginaries hybridized and contributed to shaping the US?

Rachel St. John: In 19th century North America, there were all sorts of different people who were thinking about how to organize people, power, and territory. Those included empires that we often focus on. They included the leaders of the United States and Mexico and Canada, but it also included people who were operating on smaller scales, members of the religious minority groups, members of some subordinated racial groups;

People who could just as easily, or at some time be part of the mainstream US project, but were so ambitious that they thought they could break away and create something different. The Confederate States of America is probably the most famous one of those, but they're actually a large number of people who envisioned their own polities in other parts of the United States as well.

One of the things that is particularly interesting to me about this diversity of national imaginaries is that we tend to assume that there's one idea of what a nation can be, and that people might break away from that. But what I see, actually, is that there are many different origins, by a large number of people, again, of different races and classes and religions and backgrounds, who are thinking through the possibility of actually controlling their own destinies, of carving out space where they can pursue their own national vision. There's just a lot more people who are politically involved than we usually give them credit for.

One of the ways I think we can see how the narratives of US history embrace these different people is the ways in which American historians – and again, this has

been translated into the general public, into elementary school education, into popular narratives – is how they have included some people in that grand national narrative and pushed other people out of it.

So one of the examples of this is the idea of manifest destiny. So manifest destiny is an 1840s political slogan that favored expansion, particularly U.S. annexation of the Republic of Texas. And historians have taken that idea and used it to apply to all of the United States to suggest that the continent was waiting to become under the control of the United States.

And in the process, certain people, people like American settlers who left the United States and went to Texas, became Mexican citizens for a time, then declared independence. They get rewritten into U.S. history as if they were always pursuing American expansion. Another example of this, is a Swiss trader named John Sutter, who came from Switzerland to the United States, ended up in California under Mexican control, tried to carve out his own principality in the Central Valley of California.

And somehow, in the mainstream narratives, he ends up being seen as a predecessor to Americanism, someone who is trying to drag the United States to California with him, when he had no connection to the United States until the U.S. conquest of California.

Books and Ideas: Along what lines do some projects become more or less influential in what actually becomes of the United States? Are there patterns in the way multiple contingencies lead some projects to be co-opted and others to be resisted and opposed, if not oppressed?

Rachel St. John: One of the things people often ask me is if I'm working on a project on failed states. My answer to that question is no. Many of the projects that I'm working on, particularly indigenous nations, continue to persist in some form to this day. Others leave legacies behind them. They get incorporated into the United States. And one of the things that I'm most interested in, looking at the diversity of nation building projects, is how all those different projects influence the development of the nations that emerged out of them, most significantly, the United States, but also Mexico and Canada to some extent as well.

I think it's absolutely important for Americans and people around the world to understand that the United States did not just naturally grow, it could only expand

and gain people and power and territory by incorporating all these different national visions: in some cases, that involved defeating them militarily. In other cases, it involved incorporating them into the nation in ways where they still had power.

And it's actually quite surprising, I think, who ends up with power and who doesn't. So the Confederate States of America are the most famous of the projects that I look at. And people would think that a secessionist movement that had to be violently suppressed in the most bloody conflict in U.S. history might have led to terrible consequences for those people, that they would lose power and never regain it.

And in fact, the history of Reconstruction, and particularly the post Reconstruction period, down to this day, show how Southerners who were in power before the war were in many ways able to hold on to power. At the same time, indigenous nations that sided with the Confederacy in Indian Territory, groups like the Cherokee Nation, suffered incredible costs because of that war.

They lost additional land in new treaties that the United States imposed upon them. They were forced to change the terms of citizenship. So there are real consequences to the ways in which Americans are able to incorporate these different groups. Not surprisingly, in U.S. history, a lot of this has to do with race, groups that are dominated by white Americans, even when they were outright treasonous, were often able to be reconciled to the American nation, whereas other groups could only be subordinated through ceding political power, coming into the United States as subordinate members.

And overall, I think this really changes the narrative we have of U.S. history, which is often seen as a progressive narrative, as the United States becomes more heterogeneous and more people gain citizenship. And there certainly are progressive elements about that, progressive elements that need to continue to be contested and worked out going forward.

But I think it's also important to recognize that many groups of people were forced to give up their aspirations of having an independent nation of their own, in order to become subordinate members of the United States.

Books and Ideas: What does your history tell us about the capacity of minority movements to be acknowledged and integrated into the national project, and hence benefit from the power of the American state? Is the abandonment of their countercultural dimension the necessary price to pay?

Rachel St. John: As a 19th century historian, I'm always deeply attuned to what we can learn about the 19th century, and thinking about how that shaped the 20th century and where we are now in the 21st century, but also what that might imply for going forward beyond this point. So on the one hand, studying the way in which these alternative nations were either quashed or incorporated into the United States shows us how the US state consolidated its control over the continent by using its military, by creating a political structure that was able to incorporate nonwhite people, but still was entirely structured to support the interests of white moneyed people for the most part.

And that was really how the United States built itself in the 19th century, and it did so by foreclosing opportunities for other people to have their own nations by trying to strip existing nations, particularly indigenous nations, of their land and of different dimensions of their sovereignty. One of the things I think is very important to emphasize, though, is that these nations did not entirely go away.

And one of the things that I learn from the 19th century is that the existence of these alternative possibilities in the past also suggests that other possibilities could exist in the future. We've gotten used to the idea that nation states should operate on one scale. They should be continent spanning. In the case of the United States, they should be heterogeneous, that it's best to have big states that include a lot of people and a lot of territory.

And looking at the 19th century suggests that things could have been smaller, and that it might be possible for people to have their interests better represented on a smaller scale.

I think the other thing that's important to recognize is that in the United States, there are a lot of sort of normative value claims about freedom, equality and citizenship, and what a lot of scholars have shown over time is that the meaning of those things changes over time and is contested, and that some of the way in which those terms were defined were explicitly about denying rights and sovereignty to other groups of people, and that we need to continue to think about how to make those more inclusive, to make them more representative, to bring more people into shaping the structures of power that shape their lives.

When most Americans tell the history of the 19th century, it's a progressive story which is about the expansion of rights and freedom and citizenship. And I think

it's important in these alternative national stories to show that one of the ways in which the United States was able to do that was by expecting those nations or those groups to give up their own hopes of having independent nations.

And this works out differently for different groups of people. There's one way in which we can see this story as one, as so many things in 19th century United States, that was largely dictated by race. So that for some groups of people, particularly indigenous people, the 19th century was a story largely of loss of land and loss of sovereignty, not complete loss, because those nations still exist today and continue to exercise sovereignty, but that the 19th century was a particularly bad time for indigenous nations as the United States carved away their power.

I think there are other groups that are more complicated. African Americans throughout the 19th century often debated whether it was going to be best to stay within the United States and assert their rights within the nation, or if they needed to leave the United States entirely to strike out and create their own independent nation. And I think the events of the 19th century suggest that there was a good reason that they were torn between those two things.

One of the central struggles of U.S. history has been to create a nation in which black people can be fully free and recognized and have rights; and that's a struggle that goes on today. For the most part, people who identified as white were more successful in being able to have their interests represented. And I think one of the most interesting groups are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who were a very marginalized group during the 19th century.

Throughout the 19th century, but partly through abandoning their religious commitment to polygamy, they were able to become integrated into the United States. And so I think for most groups, different groups are able to see different parts of their identity, of what holds them together as a community and what they're invested in more easily than other groups, and the United States has been able to accommodate those groups in different ways over time.

One of the things I think is important, watching all these different groups and their ability to integrate into the United States is to think about how this shaped American institutions and ideology, that ideas that Americans idealize, like freedom, were actually much more complicated, and that creating freedom for some groups of people often meant denying other groups of people that freedom at the same time, and

that for many groups, being part of the United States meant giving up something, where they might have had more control over their futures.

One of the things, although I see these projects happening across the 19th century, that really became apparent to me as I worked on this book, is how much the power of the US state increased over the course of the 19th century. Americans today will still sometimes talk about the idea of seceding, and you'll hear people talking about Texas seceding; or maybe California will break off on its own.

And having worked on secessionist movements and other alternative nations in the 19th century, that always strikes me as basically impossible today. The US state in the 19th century was so much weaker. It was so much less present in people's lives. And one of the products of the 19th century of the US government's attempt to assert control over the continent and all these diverse people and places, is that the state became much more powerful, and that process continued through the 20th century as well.

So that now for a state to break away is virtually impossible: the state of California doesn't have a huge military that could allow it to break away from the U.S. Army, which is the largest military in the world. Californians wouldn't know where to pay their taxes anymore. So much federal funding goes to all the states. And this is partly a product of the 19th century, the growth of this state apparatus that makes its presence felt in people's lives in very significant ways. And I think for some people that can seem scary. In other ways, it creates opportunities for those people to place demands on that government to make sure that they are represented and included as well.

Published in booksandideas.net, 4 October 2024