Introduction: Reversed Colonialism

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From approximately 1750 to 1850, Comanches—as warriors, traders, and diplomats—dominated the American Southwest. Known as the “Lords of the South Plains,” these formidable Indians “manipulated and exploited the colonial outposts in New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and northern Mexico.” The Spaniards, French, Mexicans, and Anglo-Americans, Dr. Hämäläinen asserts, “were all restrained and overshadowed” by Comanche hegemony. In short, The Comanche Empire chronicles “the familiar tale of expansion, resistance, conquest, and loss, but with a reversal of usual historical roles: It is a story in which Indians expand, dictate, and prosper, and European colonists resist, retreat, and struggle to survive.” In this selection, Hämäläinen discusses recent scholarship and proposes his cogent arguments.

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This book is about an American empire that, according to conventional histories, did not exist. It tells the familiar tale of expansion, resistance, conquest, and loss, but with a reversal of usual historical roles: it is a story in which Indians expand, dictate, and prosper, and European colonists resist, retreat, and struggle to survive.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, the Comanches were a small tribe of hunter-gatherers living in the rugged canyonlands on the far northern frontier of the Spanish kingdom of New Mexico. They were newcomers to the region, having fled the political unrest and internal disputes in their old homelands on the central Great Plains, and they were struggling to rebuild their lives in a foreign land whose absorption into the Spanish world seemed imminent. It was here, at the advancing edge of the world’s largest empire, that the Comanches launched an explosive expansion. They purchased and plundered horses from New Mexico, reinvented themselves as mounted fighters, and reenvisioned their place in the world. They forced their way onto the southern plains, shoved aside the Apaches and other residing nations, and over the course of three generations carved out a vast territory that was larger than the entire European-controlled area north of the Río Grande at the time. They became “Lords of the South Plains,” ferocious horse-riding warriors who forestalled Euro-American intrusions into the American Southwest well into the late nineteenth century.

The Comanches are usually portrayed in the existing literature as a formidable equestrian power that erected a daunting barrier of violence to colonial expansion. Along with the Iroquois and Lakotas, they have been embedded in collective American memory as one of the few Native societies able to pose a significant challenge to the Euro-American conquest of North America. But the idea of a Comanche barrier leaves out at least half of the story. For in the mid-eighteenth century Comanches reinvented themselves once more, this time as a hegemonic people who grew increasingly powerful and prosperous at the expense of the surrounding societies, Indian and Euro-American alike. Gradually, a momentous shift took shape. In the Southwest, European imperialism not only stalled in the face of indigenous resistance; it was eclipsed by indigenous imperialism.

That overturn of power relations was more than a historical glitch, a momentary rupture in the process of European colonization of indigenous America. For a century, roughly from 1750 to 1850, the Comanches were the dominant people in the Southwest, and they manipulated and exploited the colonial outposts in New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and northern Mexico to increase their safety, prosperity, and power. They extracted resources and labor from their Euro-American and Indian neighbors through thievery and tribute and incorporated foreign ethnicities into their ranks as adopted kinspeople, slaves, workers, dependents, and vassals. The Comanche empire was powered by violence, but, like most viable empires, it was first and foremost an economic construction. At its core was an extensive commercial network that allowed Comanches to control nearby border markets and long-distance trade, swing surrounding groups into their political orbit, and spread their language and culture across the midcontinent. And as always, long-term foreign political dominance rested on dynamic internal development. To cope with the opportunities and challenges of their rapid expansion, Comanches created a centralized multilevel political system, a flourishing market economy, and a graded social organization that was flexible enough to sustain and survive the burdens of their external ambitions.
The Comanches, then, were an interregional power with imperial presence, and their politics divided the history of the Southwest and northern Mexico into two sharply contrasting trajectories. While Comanches reached unparalleled heights of political and economic influence, material wealth, and internal stability, the Spanish colonies, the subsequent Mexican provinces, and many indigenous agricultural societies suffered from a number of disruptions typical to peripheral regions in colonial worlds. Without fully recognizing it, the Spaniards, French, Mexicans, and Anglo-Americans were all restrained and overshadowed in the continent’s center by an indigenous empire. That empire—its rise, anatomy, costs, and fall—is the subject of this book.

Great American Indian powers have captivated scholarly imagination since Hernán Cortés fought his way into Tenochtitlán and Francisco Pizarro marched into Cuzco. Over the years, historians and archaeologists have uncovered several imperialistic or quasi-imperialistic Native American polities that dominated other indigenous societies. The Aztecs, Incas, and other empire-builders in the precontact Americas come easily to mind, but one might, with a little more effort, also think of the Powhatans in early seventeenth-century Tidewater Virginia, Haudenosaunee—the Iroquois confederacy—in the seventeenth-century Northeast, or the Lakotas on the nineteenth-century northern plains.

This book belongs to that genre while also stepping outside of it. Comanches, it shows, fought and subjugated other Native societies, but more important to their ascendancy was their ability to reduce Euro-American colonial regimes to building blocks of their own dominant position. Comanches achieved something quite exceptional: they built an imperial organization that subdued, exploited, marginalized, co-opted, and profoundly transformed near and distant colonial outposts, thereby reversing the conventional imperial trajectory in vast segments of North and Central America.

Comanches, moreover, did that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the high tide of imperial contestation when colonial powers jostled for preeminence across North America. The colonial Southwest was a setting for several dynamic and diverging imperial projects that converged and clashed in unexpected ways. As Spanish, French, British, and U.S. empires vied with one another over land, commerce, and raw materials, Comanches continued to expand their realm, profoundly frustrating European fantasies of superiority. The result was a colonial history that defies conventional wisdom. A longstanding notion has it that the course and contours of early American history were determined by the shifts in Euro-American power dynamics and the reactions of metropolitan headquarters in Madrid, London, Versailles, Mexico City, and Washington to those shifts. The Southwest, however, is a striking exception. Metropolitan visions mattered there, but they often mattered less than the policies and designs of Comanches, whose dominance eventually reached hemispheric dimensions, extending from the heart of North America deep into Mexico. Indeed, Comanche ascendancy is the missing component in the sweeping historical sequence that led to New Spain’s failure to colonize the interior of North America, the erosion of Spanish imperial authority in the Southwest, and the precipitous decay of Mexican power in the north. Ultimately, the rise of the Comanche empire helps explain why Mexico’s Far North is today the American Southwest.
Yet for all their strength and potential for expansion, Comanches never attempted to build a European-style imperial system. A creation of itinerant nomadic bands, the Comanche empire was not a rigid structure held together by a single central authority, nor was it an entity that could be displayed on a map as a solid block with clear-cut borders. Unlike Euro-American imperial powers, Comanches did not seek to establish large-scale settlement colonies, and their vision of power was not direct rule over multiple subject peoples. They did not publicize their might with ostentatious art and architecture, and they left behind no imperial ruins to remind us of the extent of their power. Preferring informal rule over formal institutions for both cultural and strategic reasons, Comanches nevertheless created a deeply hierarchical and integrated intersocietal order that was unmistakably imperial in shape, scope, and substance. The numerous Comanche bands and divisions formed an internally fluid but externally coherent coalition that accomplished through a creative blending of violence, diplomacy, extortion, trade, and kinship politics what more rigidly structured empires have achieved through direct political control: they imposed their will upon neighboring polities, harnessed the economic potential of other societies for their own use, and persuaded their rivals to adopt and accept their customs and norms.

To understand the particular nature of Comanche imperialism, it is necessary to understand how Comanche ascendance intertwined with other imperial expansions—New Spain’s tenacious if erratic northward thrust from central Mexico, New France’s endeavor to absorb the interior grasslands into its commercial realm, and the United States’ quest for a transcontinental empire. Comanches, to simplify a complex multistage process, developed aggressive power policies in reaction to Euro-American invasions that had threatened their safety and autonomy from the moment they had entered the southern plains. Indeed, the fact that Comanche territory, Comanchería, was encircled throughout its existence by Euro-American settler colonies makes the Comanches an unlikely candidate for achieving regional primacy. But as the Comanches grew in numbers and power, that geopolitical layout became the very foundation of their dominance. Their overwhelming military force, so evident in their terror-inspiring mounted guerrilla attacks, would have allowed them to destroy many New Mexico and Texas settlements and drive most of the colonists out of their borders. Yet they never adopted such a policy of expulsion, preferring instead to have their borders lined with formally autonomous but economically subservient and dependent outposts that served as economic access points into the vast resources of the Spanish empire.

The Comanches, then, were an imperial power with a difference: their aim was not to conquer and colonize, but to coexist, control, and exploit. Whereas more traditional imperial powers ruled by making things rigid and predictable, Comanches ruled by keeping them fluid and malleable. This informal, almost ambiguous nature of Comanches’ politics not only makes their empire difficult to define; it sometimes makes it difficult to see. New Mexico and Texas existed side by side with Comanchería throughout the colonial era, and though often suffering under Comanche pressure, the twin colonies endured, allowing Spain to claim sweeping imperial command over the Southwest. Yet when examined closely, Spain’s uncompromised imperial presence in the Southwest becomes a fiction that existed only in Spanish minds and on European maps, for Comanches controlled a large portion of those material things that could be controlled in New Mexico and Texas. The idea of land as a form of private, revenue-producing property was absent
in Comanche culture, and livestock and slaves in a sense took the place of landed private property. This basic observation has enormous repercussions on how we should see the relationship between the Comanches and colonists. When Comanches subjected Texas and New Mexico to systematic raiding of horses, mules, and captives, draining wide sectors of those productive resources, they in effect turned the colonies into imperial possessions. That Spanish Texas and New Mexico remained unconquered by Comanches is not a historical fact; it is a matter of perspective.

In this book I examine the Comanche power complex as part of an emerging transatlantic web that had not yet consolidated into an encompassing world economy. Seen from this angle, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Southwest and Mexican North emerge as a small-scale world-system that existed outside the controlling grip of Europe’s overseas empires. Comanchería was its political and economic nucleus, a regional core surrounded by more or less peripheral societies and territories whose fortunes were linked to the Comanches through complex webs of cooperation, coercion, extortion, and dependence. The world-system approach to history has often been criticized for being overly strict and mechanistic, which it is. I have used its spatial language and metaphors selectively but also advisedly, fully aware that they convey a certain kind of rigidity and permanence. Viewed against the backdrop of constantly shifting frontiers of North America, the intersocietal space the Comanches occupied and eventually dominated was marked by unusually hard, enduring, and distinctive power hierarchies.

This Comanche-centric world was by no means self-contained; it was anchored from its inception to the broader colonial world through the strong administrative and economic networks among New Mexico, Texas, northern Mexican provinces, and Mexico City. But these institutional linkages often had less impact on the colonies’ internal development than Comanche policies did; the troubled and convoluted history of New Mexico, Texas, Coahuila, and Nueva Vizcaya may have had as much to do with the Comanches as with the ebb and flows of New Spain’s imperial fortunes. In fact, the systemic connections between Comanchería and northern New Spain gave the Comanches a modicum of exploitative power over the Spanish empire as a whole. When New Mexico was founded at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was expected to fuel Spain’s imperial veins with raw materials and laborers, but by the eighteenth century the colony was leaking so much wealth into Comanchería that it could survive only by continuous financial backing from Mexico City. Texas functioned through much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a money-draining, often tributary defensive province against Comanche expansion. By subsidizing its far northern frontier, then, the Spanish empire in effect drained itself to feed and fend off an indigenous empire.

Although I focus on a particular place in time in this book, my arguments engage in the broader debates about colonialism, frontiers, and borderlands in the Americas. Over the past three decades, historians have conceived entirely new ways of thinking about Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and their tangled histories. Moving beyond conventional top-down narratives that depict Indians as bit players in imperial struggles or tragic victims of colonial expansion, today’s scholarship portrays them as full-fledged historical actors who played a formative role in the making of early America. Rather than a seamless,
preordained sequence, the colonization of the Americas is now seen as a dialectic process that created new worlds for all involved. Indigenous societies did not simply vanish in the face of Euro-American onslaught. Many adjusted and endured, rebuilding new economies and identities from the fragments of the old ones. Indians fought and resisted, but they also cooperated and coexisted with the newcomers, creating new hybrid worlds that were neither wholly Indian nor European. By foregrounding indigenous peoples and their intentions in the story of early America, recent scholarship has reinvigorated a field that only a generation ago was suffocating under its parochial and mythologizing tenets.

Significant as this revisionist turn has been, it is not complete. Too often the alterations have been cosmetic rather than corrective. Historians have sanitized vocabularies and updated textbooks to illuminate the subtleties of colonial encounters, but the broad outlines of the story have largely remained intact. Outside a cadre of Native and early American specialists, the understanding of Indian—Euro-American relations is still limited by what Vine Deloria, Jr., called “the ‘cameo’ theory of history”: indigenous peoples make dramatic entrances, stay briefly on the stage, and then fade out as the main saga of European expansion resumes, barely affected by the interruption. With too few exceptions, revisionist historians have limited themselves to retelling the story of colonial conquest from the Indian side of the frontier. They have probed how Native peoples countered and coped with colonial expansion and have largely overlooked the other side of the dynamic—the impact of Indian policies on colonial societies. Such an approach reinforces the view of European powers as the principal driving force of history and tends to reduce indigenous actions to mere strategies of subversion and survival. To recover the full dimension of Indian agency in early American history, we must once again reevaluate the intersections among Native peoples, colonial powers, frontiers, and borderlands. We have to turn the telescope around and create models that allow us to look at Native policies toward colonial powers as more than defensive strategies of resistance and containment.

This book offers new insights into that effort, and it does so by questioning some of the most basic assumptions about indigenous peoples, colonialism, and historical change. Instead of perceiving Native policies toward colonial powers simply as strategies of survival, it assumes that Indians, too, could wage war, exchange goods, make treaties, and absorb peoples in order to expand, extort, manipulate, and dominate. Instead of reading Indian dispossession back in time to structure the narrative of early America, it embraces the multiple possibilities and contingency of historical change. At its most fundamental level, it promotes a less linear reading of Indian-white relations in North America. After the initial contacts, when Indians usually held the upper hand over the invaders, the fate of indigenous cultures was not necessarily an irreversible slide toward dispossession, depopulation, and cultural decline. As the history of the Comanches illustrates, almost diametrically opposite trajectories were possible. Before their final defeat in the canyonlands of the Texas Panhandle in 1875, Comanches had experienced an astounding ascendency from the margins of the colonial world into imperial prominence as a dominant people who thrived and expanded in the midst of Euro-American colonies for over a century.

The history of Indian–Euro-colonial relations, as we today understand them, is inseparable from the history of the frontier, which forms another theoretical thread of this study. Over the past fifteen years or so, the frontier has made a forceful reentry into the very center of North American
historiography. Recast as a zone of cultural interpenetration, the frontier is finding new relevance among historians who not so long ago had rejected Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis as an ethnocentric and narcissistic rendition of the European takeover of North America. Instead of Turner's binary dividing line between civilization and savagery—or as seedbed of American virtues—historians have reenvisioned the frontier as a socially charged space where Indians and invaders competed for resources and land but also shared skills, foods, fashions, customs, languages, and beliefs. Indian-white frontiers, new work has revealed, were messy, eclectic contact points where all protagonists are transformed—regardless of whether the power dynamics between them are evenly or unevenly balanced. This has brought the frontier closer to its rival concept, the borderland, which Herbert Eugene Bolton, the pioneering historian of Spanish North America, coined to challenge Turner's constricted Anglo-centric vision. Skepticism toward the nation-state as the main unit of historical analysis, a hemispheric vision, an appreciation of cultural and political mutability, and an emphasis on indigenous agency are the traditional strengths of borderlands history; today they are the strengths of frontier studies as well.

This book makes use of several insights of new frontier-borderland studies. On a macrolevel, it shows how Comanches moved goods, ideas, and people across ecological, ethnic, and political boundaries, creating transnational (or transimperial) networks of violence and exchange that defied the more rigid spatial arrangements Euro-American powers hoped to implement in the Southwest. On a microlevel, it shows how Comanches forged intimate small-scale, face-to-face markets with Euro-Americans, creating nascent versions of what Daniel Usner has called "frontier exchange economies," self-sufficient trade systems that mostly existed outside of the burgeoning transatlantic economy. It describes how Comanches forced the colonizers to modify their aggressive ways and at the same time recalibrated some of their own practices to adjust to the Euro-American presence, engaging in the kind of process of mediation, mutual invention, and cultural production Richard White has called "the middle ground." Geopolitically, Comanches' Southwest would seem to fit into Jeremy Adelman's and Stephen Aron's recent redefinition of a borderland: it was a place where interimperial rivalries enhanced Native peoples' strategic options by permitting them to play off colonial powers against one another.

And yet the new frontier-borderland studies can explain the world I am describing only partially. The Southwest depicted in this book is a violent and traumatic place where Natives and newcomers saw one another more as strangers and adversaries than as co-creators of a common world; it was only incidentally a place where frontier exchange economies or middle grounds could flourish. When Comanches and Euro-Americans met to discuss such contentious and conceptually slippery matters as war, peace, reciprocity, loyalty, and justice, they sometimes relied on creative and expedient misunderstandings that were so fundamental for the creation of middle grounds, but more often than not, they understood each other all too well and generally did not like what they saw. Euro-Americans deemed Comanches needy, pushy, oversensitive, and obstinate in their pagan beliefs, and in turn appeared greedy, arrogant, bigoted, and grotesquely boorish to Comanche sensibilities. In the end, most attempts at meaningful cross-cultural mediation crumbled against the insolence of Euro-Americans and the impatience of Comanches. Negotiating from a position of growing physical and
political power, Comanches adopted an increasingly assertive stance toward colonial powers. Their foreign policy became less a matter of accommodating Euro-American expectations than rejecting, reforming, or simply ignoring them.

Viewed broadly, the Southwest under the Comanche regime becomes a case study of alternative frontier history. From a Comanche point of view, in fact, there were no frontiers. Where contemporary Euro-Americans (as well as later historians) saw or imagined solid imperial demarcations, Comanches saw multiple opportunities for commerce, gift exchanges, pillaging, slave raiding, ransom ing, adoption, tribute extracting, and alliance making. By refusing to accept the Western notion of sovereign, undivided colonial realms, they shredded Euro-American frontiers into their component parts—colonial towns, presidios, missions, ranches, haciendas, Native villages—and dealt with each isolated unit separately, often pitting their interests against one another. In the colonial Southwest, it was Comanches, not Euro-Americans, who mastered the policies of divide and rule.

Similarly, Comanches' assertive and aggressive policies toward Euro-Americans were only secondarily a borderland product. Comanches certainly benefited from their location between competing colonial regimes, but they had little in common with the Indians found in most borderland histories. Rather than marginalized people balancing between rival colonial regimes to enact minor alleviations in imperial policies, Comanches were key players who often forced the would-be colonizers to compete for their military support and goodwill and navigate their initiatives and intentions. In character and logic, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Southwest was unequivocally a Comanche creation, an indigenous world where intercolonial rivalries were often mere surface disturbances on the deeper, stronger undercurrent of Comanche imperialism.

In popular imagination, the American Southwest before the United States takeover in 1848 is a study in imperial failure. The overstretched and stiffly bureaucratic Spanish empire, with its North American headquarters in Mexico City, had spread its resources too thinly across the Western Hemisphere to affix its northernmost provinces firmly into its imperial structure. The French, while more resourceful than their myopic Spanish rivals, were too erratic and too preoccupied with Old World power politics, the British colonies, and Canadian fur trade to do anything imperially impressive with Louisiana or the western interior. The fledgling Mexican Republic was so fragile and fractious that it lost both New Mexico and Texas in less than three decades. Reduced to a caricature, the Southwest of the mainstream view appears a medley of politically weak and isolated Native tribes, exhausted empires, and dysfunctional republics, a fragmented world ripe to be absorbed by Anglo Americans who alone possessed the imagination, drive, and means to subjugate and control vast regions. If weighed against such a background of imperial indifference and political impotence, Comanches' accomplishments would seem to diminish in significance: their ascendency intersected with exceptional Euro-American vulnerability, and they became a dominant power by default.

I start with a different premise—far from an imperial backwater, the Southwest was a dynamic world of vibrant societies, and Comanches had to suppress and absorb vigorous imperial projects to achieve dominance—and draw on a string of pathbreaking studies that have given the
history of the early Southwest a new look. Dismantling the long-standing stereotype of reactionary and unimaginative Spanish colonists, David Weber has demonstrated how high-ranking authorities in central Mexico and local officials in New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana constantly and creatively modified the empire’s frontier policies to extend Spanish claims and power into the heart of North America. That same political and strategic dynamism, Weber has further shown, defined the Mexican Southwest, although the infant republic lacked the resources and expansionist ambitions of the Spanish empire. Ross Frank has demonstrated that Bourbon-era New Mexico was more tightly integrated into New Spain’s imperial centers and consequently more dynamic and prosperous than has been assumed, and Andrés Reséndez has revealed a robust Mexican nation-building project in the north after 1821. Ned Blackhawk has drawn attention to the Spaniards’ enormous capacity to employ—and endure—violence in advancing their imperial interests. In revisiting the history of the Comanches, ethnohistorians like Morris Foster and Thomas Kavanagh have dispelled the stereotype of a simple hunting society by uncovering elaborate political systems, social institutions, trade networks, and pastoral herding economies. Together, these and other new studies have demolished the old image of the Southwest as a world of innately passive peoples, frozen in time and disconnected from the main currents of American history.

Historians have also begun to create new syntheses that illustrate how this rediscovered human ambition, energy, and ingenuity shaped the evolution of cross-cultural relations in the Southwest. Gary Clayton Anderson has examined the region as a contested and culturally elastic meeting ground where many Native groups resisted conquest through ethnogenesis, by constantly reshaping their economies, societies, and identities. In a seminal study, James Brooks has recast the region as an ethnic mosaic connected by an intercultural exchange network that revolved around “kinship slavery” and blended indigenous and colonial traditions of servitude, violence, male honor, and retribution into a distinctive borderlands cultural economy. With such insights, the Southwest is now emerging as a vigorous world of enduring social subversion where Natives and newcomers remained roughly equal in power and where familiar dichotomies of Indians and Europeans, or masters and victims, often became meaningless.

I also take a broad long-term look at intercultural relationships in the Southwest but draw a distinctive, two-pronged conclusion. I show how Comanches cooperated and compromised with other peoples but also argue that their relations with the Spaniards, Mexicans, Wichitas, and others remained grounded in conflict and exploitation. Comancheria’s borders were sites of mutualistic trade and cultural fusion, but they were also sites of extortion, systematic violence, coerced exchange, political manipulation, and hardening racial attitudes. The key difference between the existing studies and this book centers on the question of power and its distribution. According to Brooks’s landmark Captives and Cousins, for example, the intricate patterns of raiding, exchange, and captive-seizure knitted disparate peoples into intimate webs of interdependence, equalized wealth distinctions among groups, and worked against the emergence of asymmetrical power relations. The Southwest he—and others—portrays was a place of nondominant frontiers where neither colonists nor Natives possessed the power to rule over the other. My argument, in a sense, is more traditional: such actions as raiding, enslaving, ethnic absorption, and even exchange generally benefit some groups more than

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they do others. In the Southwest, moreover, that process toward inequality was a cumulative one. Once the Comanches secured their territorial control over the southern plains in the mid-eighteenth century, they entered into a spiral of growing power and influence that stemmed from their ability to extract political and material benefits from the urban-based societies in New Mexico, Texas, and the Great Plains.

The conspicuous differences between earlier studies and this book arise from different conceptual framing and scaling. Recent works on Indian—Euro-American relations in the Southwest—as in North America in general—share a particular focus: they look at events through a local lens, stressing individual and small-group agency over the larger structural forces. Suffed with subaltern interpretations, they tend to focus on the fringe peoples living on the frontiers' edges and trace how they engaged in cross-cultural dialogue and came together to form new hybrid communities, gradually shading into one another. Occupied with the local, the specific, and the particular, they are less concerned with the broader political, economic, and cultural struggles. Hierarchies of power, privilege, and wealth, while not ignored, are relegated to the background of the central story of cross-cultural cooperation and assimilation.

In this book, in contrast, I examine the inhabitants of the Southwest in larger aggregates. While recognizing that ethnic and cultural boundaries were often porous, I look at those peoples as they identified and understood themselves: as distinct groups of Apaches, Comanches, Spaniards, French, Mexicans, and Anglo-Americans. With this shift in frame and focus, local arrangements may become somewhat blurred and lose some of their primacy, but the broader panorama opens a clearer view to the governing macroscale dynamics. It shows that the American Southwest, for all its wide-ranging cultural mixing, remained a polarized world where disparate ethnic groups clashed and competed bitterly with one another, where inequities of wealth and opportunity remained a tangible fact of life, and where resources, people, and power gravitated toward Comancheria.

Besides adjusting the analytical scale, the reconstruction of Comanche power has entailed a basic visual reorientation. Instead of looking at events from colonial frontiers inward—a traditional approach that inevitably ties explanations to contemporary Western biases—this book looks at developments from Comancheria outward. Viewed from this angle, Comanche actions take on new shape and meaning. Acts that previously seemed arbitrary or impulsive fall into coherent patterns with their own internal logic and purpose. A foreign policy that previously appeared an opportunistic search for microlevel openings on white-controlled imperial frontiers now emerges as planned, synchronized, and domineering. We see how Comanches did not merely frequent colonial markets; they fashioned an imposing trading empire that mantled much of the Southwest and the Great Plains. They did not merely respond to political initiatives dictated from abroad, but actively sought and stipulated treaties. Far from being situational opportunists, they fused exchange, organized pillaging, and targeted destruction into a complex economy of violence, which allowed them to simultaneously enforce favorable trade agreements, create artificial demand for their exports, extort tribute payments from colonial outposts, and fuel a massive trade network with stolen horses, captives, and other marketable commodities. Seen from Mexico City, the far north often seemed chaotic and unsettling; seen from Comancheria, it appears nuanced, orderly, and reassuring.
Understanding Comanches' rise to power requires more than unearthing previously veiled patterns and structures; it also requires describing events and developments on Comanche terms. To capture the fundamental nature of the Comanche empire, we need to uncover meanings behind words, motives behind actions, strategies behind policies, and, eventually, the cultural order that drove it all. This, however, is a daunting task because the available sources do not readily lend themselves to deep cultural analysis. Euro-American colonial records, the documentary spine of this book, address virtually every aspect of Comanche political economy from warfare, exchange, and diplomacy to material production, slavery, and social relations, but although the records are rich in depiction and detail, the picture they yield is nevertheless the one-dimensional view of an outsider. Government reports, captivity narratives, travelers' journals, and traders' accounts tell us a great deal about Comanche actions but rarely shed light on the cultural motives behind those actions. Few contemporary observers possessed the analytical tools to understand the subtleties between Native and non-Native cultural logic, and even fewer possessed the ability—or the inclination—to write down what they learned. The available sources are thus almost invariably infected with gaps, accidental misreadings, and intentional misconstructions, leaving historians to work with material that is fragmentary at best and outright erroneous at worst.

In my endeavor to recover Comanche motives and meanings from the flawed evidence, I have employed an array of historical and ethnographical methods. I have prioritized accounts that recount, even in a mutated form, Comanche voice—while keeping in mind that that voice is recorded through a cultural colander and that it belongs often to privileged headmen, seldom to the poor and deprived, and virtually never to women and the young. I have cross-checked Spanish, French, Mexican, and Anglo-American documents against one another to create more stereoscopic and, arguably, more accurate portrayals of Comanche intentions and objectives. Throughout the writing process, I have compared historical documents to ethnographic data, processing Euro-American-produced materials through an ethnographical filter. This has involved a cautious use of "upstreaming" whereby one works back from more recent and more complete ethnological observations to decipher practices and behaviors of earlier periods. Even more reluctantly, I have sometimes relied on "side-streaming," deducing interpretations about Comanche cultural values from generalized models of Native societies of the Great Plains and other regions.

This kind of methodological layering and rotation of viewpoints helps outline the broad contours of Comanche cultural order, but the resulting picture is still only an approximate one. Regardless of their origin, all colonial records are marred with similar deep-seated biases, while upstreaming runs the risk of presentism, tainting analysis with a sense of static timelessness; it assumes that Native peoples and their traditions have somehow been immune to modernity and have somehow remained unchanged through centuries of dispossession, population loss, and cultural genocide. Side-streaming threatens to submerge unique Comanche traits under crude blanket definitions of Indians in general and Plains Indians in particular. Shortcomings like these can produce what historian Frederick Hoxie has called "cookbook ethnohistory": complex cultures are collapsed into shorthand recipes, human behavior is reduced to a culturally or genetically determined reflex, and individual
impulses become irrelevant. As an antidote against this kind of trivialization, Hoxie urges historians to describe societies in their own, inherently asymmetrical terms and create less linear stories that leave room for the surprising and the puzzling.

Taking a cue from Hoxie, I have embraced rather than downplayed the contradictory aspects of Comanche behavior. The Comanches depicted in this book were empire-builders who did not possess a grand imperial strategy and conquerors who saw themselves more as guardians than governors of the land and its bounties. They were warriors who often favored barter over battle and traders who did not hesitate to rely on lethal violence to protect their interests. They were shrewd diplomats who at times eschewed formal political institutions and peacemakers who tortured enemies to demonstrate military and cultural supremacy. They were racially color-blind people who saw in almost every stranger a potential kinsperson, but they nevertheless built the largest slave economy in the colonial Southwest. Their war chiefs insulted, intimidated, and demeaned colonial agents with shockingly brutal words and gestures, but their peace leaders spoke eloquently of forgiveness, pity, and regret, using elaborate metaphors and ritual language to persuade their Euro-American counterparts. Above all, the Comanches were not a monolith obeying an unyielding cultural code but rather an assemblage of individuals with different and sometimes conflicting personalities, interests, and ambitions. They shared certain core values and objectives, but they also disagreed and quarreled over the methods, goals, and costs of their policies. The Comanche society, in short, was a complex one in which several standards of conduct coexisted simultaneously.

Historian Bruce Trigger has explained Native American behavior from a slightly different angle than Hoxie by focusing on the underlying mental processes of learning, judging, and reasoning. Assuming a middle course of the long, drawn-out debates over cross-cultural variations in human motivations, Trigger argues that while traditional cultural beliefs continued to shape Native American responses to European contact and colonialism, in the long run more universal pragmatic assessments and calculations came to play a dominant role. This kind of cognitive reorganization, Trigger maintains, occurred at all levels of behavior but was most visible in those areas that relate more directly to Indians’ material well-being—technology and power. For Trigger, the outcome of colonial contact was not a makeover of Native Americans into “universal economic men,” but was it an unyielding persistence of otherness.

Following Trigger, I pay particular attention to the changes that occurred over time in the underlying principles of Comanche behavior. The introduction of horses, guns, and other Old World technology arguably prompted Comanches to view their place and possibilities in the world in a different light, while close political and commercial interactions with colonial powers exposed them to the logic and laws of European diplomacy and the market. Comanches may have initially perceived European goods through the mold of their idiosyncratic traditions, but that did not prevent them from grasping the tremendous military and material advantages of horses, firearms, and metal—or from employing those advantages against Euro-Americans themselves. Similarly, like many other indigenous peoples, Comanches may have at first viewed the mounted, gun-using newcomers as all-powerful otherworldly beings, yet within years they learned to manipulate the Spaniards’ all-too-human weaknesses to their own advantage. Within a generation or so after the first contact, Comanches had learned to distinguish between
the motives and methods of the different colonial powers and to exploit those differences to advance their own political and economic agendas. Grounded in utilitarian calculations of self-interest, such behavior was rational in the sense most contemporary Euro-Americans and later historians would have understood the term.

And yet the yawning gulf separating Comanche and Euro-American cultural and mental worlds never disappeared—far from it. Regardless of their universal features, the actions and policies of Comanches remained embedded in a system of reality that was distinctly non-Western in nature. To the limited extent that it is possible to unveil the intentions that went into the actions of eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century Indians, it seems plain that the rationale of Comanche behavior remained worlds apart from that of Euro-Americans.

On the face of it, Comanche actions fell into unambiguous categories—trading, raiding, enslaving, and so forth—that were easily recognizable and understandable to contemporary Euro-Americans and modern historians alike. But the similarities are only skin deep; a more focused look reveals how Comanche actions time and again transcended familiar categories and defied easy labeling. Unlike Euro-Americans, Comanches did not separate trade from larger social relations but instead understood it as a form of sharing between relatives, either real or fictive. They considered theft a legitimate way of rectifying short-term imbalances in resource distribution rather than an antagonistic act that automatically canceled out future peaceful interactions. They killed, waged war, and dispossessed other societies, not necessarily to conquer, but to extract vengeance and to appease the spirits of their slain kin through dead enemy bodies. Capturing people from other ethnic groups did not necessarily signify a passage from freedom into slavery but a move from one kinship network to another. Even gift giving, the leitmotif of American Indian diplomacy, contained what appears at least on the surface a striking contradiction. Like most American Indians, Comanches considered gift exchanges a prerequisite for peaceful relations, yet they demanded one-sided gift distributions from Euro-American colonists, readily relying on violence if denied.

Like many other imperial powers, then, Comanches employed aggressive power politics without necessarily considering their actions as such. They built a hierarchical intersocietal system with policies that were often geared toward securing gifts, conciliation, reciprocal services, and new relatives from peoples whom they may have considered as much kin and allies as strangers and enemies. Indeed, the fact that Comanches did things differently may well have been one of their greatest political assets. Their ability to move nimbly from raiding to trading, from diplomacy to violence, and from enslaving to adoption not only left their colonial rivals confused; it often left them helpless. Western insistence upon uniformity in principle and action, a disposition that manifested itself most clearly in centralized state bureaucracies, rendered their policies slow and heavy-handed in comparison to Comanches’ strategic fluidity. Euro-Americans compartmentalized foreign relations into distinct, often mutually exclusive categories and found it exceedingly difficult to deal with peoples who refused to recognize such categories. Unable to dissect, classify, and comprehend the Comanches and their actions, colonial agents were also unable to contain them.

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Herein lay the ultimate paradox. While initially Comanches adjusted their traditions, behaviors, and even beliefs to accommodate the arrival of Europeans and their technologies, they later turned the tables on Europe’s colonial expansion by simply refusing to change. By preserving the essentials of their traditional ways—and by expecting others to conform to their cultural order—they forced the colonists to adjust to a world that was foreign, uncontrollable, and, increasingly, unlivable.

The chapters that follow tell two intertwined stories. The first story examines cross-cultural relations on the southern plains, in the Southwest, and in northern Mexico from the perspective of Comanches, exploring how this nation rose to dominance and how it constantly reinvented itself to sustain external expansion. The other story looks at events from the standpoint of the Spaniards, Mexicans, Apaches, and others who variously competed and cooperated with the Comanches but ultimately faced marginalization and dispossession in the Comanche-controlled world. These two stories are woven into a single narrative thread, which in turn is embedded within the broader framework of Europe’s overseas expansion. This contextual approach shows how local, regional, and global forces intersected to shape Comanche expansion and how Comanches both suffered and benefited from fluctuations and contingencies in the emerging transatlantic world. Comanche expansion lasted for a century and a half, but it was not a linear, uninterrupted process. There were surges, lulls, retreats, and regroupings, and the Comanche power complex went through repeated mutations, many of them epochs unto themselves. The chapters that follow are organized around those shifts and cycles, which both reflect and challenge the more traditional historical turning points in American history.