

Borders, Nationalities, and Resistance:

The San Patricios Brigade and Immigrant Soldier Defection in the Mexican-American War

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—Introduction—

During the Mexican-American War, a loosely comprised group of American soldiers defected to the Mexican side, forming what would come to be known as the San Patricios – or Saint Patrick’s – Brigade. This group, as perhaps implied by its name, consisted heavily of Irish immigrant soldiers and was led principally by an Irishman named John Reilly. The brigade fought under a modified Irish flag with the (in Ireland) famously patriotic words: *Erin go Bragh*, meaning *Ireland Forever*.¹ The shamrock-green background with the gold harp at its center reinforced a very Irish-centric patriotism on the San Patricios cause. However, despite the emphasis on Irish identity and sympathy, the San Patricios were by no means all Irish. The brigade consisted of many, mainly Catholic, immigrants from other Western and non-Western European countries, as well as native and European Mexicans, and African-Americans from the U.S. South.² Although the Irish born majority among the brigade clearly felt some aesthetic or romantic cultural affiliation with Ireland, there is little evidence to suggest the group conceived of itself as an actually Irish army in the national sense, and although they fought valiantly for the Mexican side, in strict terms they cannot be said to have counted as Mexicans either.

The story of the San Patricios Brigade provides a rich opportunity for looking into some of the cultural challenges posed by national identities and nationalizing agendas. The fact that John Reilly deliberately changed the band’s name from the “Legion of Foreigners” to the “San Patricios”³ is one example that displays a marked interest in shifting the collective image away from an identity centered on not belonging, to one of defined membership – and from a basically

¹ Michael Hogan, “The Race Question and Manifest Destiny,” in *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*. (Guadalajara, Mexico: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1999), 105.

² Ibid. 57-59.

³ Michael Hogan, “Elements of Controversy,” in *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*. (Guadalajara, Mexico: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1999), 41.

anti-national image to a more “anational” one. If this is the case then the San Patricios may be understood, at least partially, as having attempted to carve out a pseudo-national space of their own. Additionally, this group, by its very actions, can be understood to have utilized the ambiguity of national and geographic borders to assert their oppositional stance against the legitimacy of nation state authority. By asserting a basically fictional, yet spirited sense of culturally centered national identity, the San Patricios were able to resist those forms of legitimate national authority over them while simultaneously engendering a rudimentary sense of unity and homogeneity.

In general, most of the summarized and readily available information on the San Patricios calls to attention a handful of social reasons historians have proposed as central to the defection of this particular group to the Mexican side. What is not especially abundant in the historical literature available is a thorough consideration of motivations not stemming from a binary system of differences and similarities between two nation states and two opposing cultures. The majority of accounts merely place Irish immigrant soldiers directly between American and Mexican soldiers, and centers on the Irish image of the brigade while accounting little for the other ethnic members except to acknowledge them as equidistant in status in terms of class, religion, and ethnicity. Viewing the San Patricios Brigade as simply reactionary, and dualistically opposed to the American culture and military, obfuscates the complexity of the phenomenon by attempting to make the group’s reversal look natural, as if it were merely a reversal in the sense of “switching sides.”

The body of this paper is divided into three sections. The argument central to each of them, discussed from alternate angles, continues with the idea that the San Patricios, by way of organized defection, did more than simply challenge one nation state by joining another. Their

fighting loyalty to Mexico was ideologically supportive of the similarities Mexican soldiers held in common with San Patricios soldiers. However, this allegiance was not related to a full scale dawning, so to speak, of a Mexican national or cultural identity. The challenge, in fact, was pitted against both nations states, despite the fact that Mexico received dedicated support from the brigade. The San Patricios, though ultimately defeated, were momentarily successful at creating their own cultural space via an anational group stance. Their rejection of the authority of nation states, between and within which they operated, is particularly interesting given their careers as soldiers, who on the surface would appear to have obvious national ties. The San Patricios, marginal within the American military, and marginal in terms of the larger picture of the immigrant experience in mid-nineteenth century America, nevertheless offer some insight into the development of the U.S.: from a politically recognized nation state, to a culturally nationalized state as well.

The first section of this paper focuses on social disparities within the American military and the Irish experience in the U.S. in the 1840s, and summarizes the reasoning provided by previous historians concerning motivations for Irish desertion. Ultimately, the very country dependent on foreigners for its own growth was contradictory in the sense that the ‘foreigners’ fighting so much of the war were denied the status of respected soldiers; chances of their entry into social membership in civilian American society following the war would have seemed very slim to most. The second section focuses more closely on resistance to national authority by the San Patricios and the subtle ways in which this oppositional stance was accomplished, as well as some of the challenges present in attempting to interpret how the San Patricios understood themselves. Rather than motivated by materially self-serving behavior, the creativity of the San Patricios is seen as employed toward the aim of defining a peripherally legitimate sense of

cultural self and collectivity. The ways in which the San Patricios tested and challenged the limits of the dominant nationalizing agenda is framed by the peculiar nature of American nationalism in the 1840s. The third section, which also serves as a conclusion, employs border theory and contemporary writing on American cultural studies to focus specifically on issues of spatiality, and the physical and psychological enlargement of borderlands in terms of self-determination, imagining, and identity.

From the American Side:
—Irish Immigrants and Social Disparities Among U.S. Soldiers—

Issues of race, class, and national status heavily dictated social conditions for American soldiers during the Mexican-American War. The high level of diversity in the army, in terms of these identifying characteristics, led frequently to a hierarchal and oppressive social structure not unlike the experiences of minorities and target populations in American society at large. Despite the fact that as a nationally conscious culture today, we tend to cite acts of behavior that occur in the military as isolated from the larger culture – as somehow understandable only in terms of war’s own spaces and boundaries – the military in fact serves as an excellent microcosm of nineteenth-century American society. The social stratosphere in the military is condensed, and highly visible as well as often exaggerated. Aspects of mainstream cultural thinking and socially normalized behavior are magnified and easier to locate here than among civilian populations and institutions, given the highly naturalized process of hierarchy, and dominant-subordinate relations in war.

The Irish Famine, beginning in 1845, coincided abruptly with the start of the Mexican-American War in 1846. Whereas the Irish who had tended to immigrate to the U.S. earlier had been economically middle class and for the most part Protestant, this new wave constituted

working poor, many without employable skills, all of whom were without land and without a place to return to once the war was over, and virtually all of whom were Catholic.⁴ The high number of Irish hired, literally, “off the boat” to fight in the war quickly found themselves engaged in a transnational war, both sides of which were foreign to them. Who was going to be included in the newly expanded and improved “America” was an issue of contest, which was fought in the form of cultural battles along typical lines of race, class, religious affiliation, and national status.

The Mexican-American War itself marked, dead center of the nineteenth century, a period defined by two major developments in the U.S: rapid rise in immigration, mainly from European countries – and geographical expansion, mainly Westward. However, European immigration, previously from mainly Northern and Western European countries, now included unprecedented numbers from the less popular Southern and Eastern European countries. Incidentally, Ireland was included among new nationalities of immigrants generally unfavored by Americans with nativist and Anglo-Protestant roots – and they were loathed perhaps the most. This anti-Irish mentality, far-reaching in American society at the time, was not only economically rooted, but also racially charged. Hogan notes, in reference to 1840s use of phrenology in the U.S. that “...besides the Negro, only the Irish were subjected to the degree of degradation and reductionism which was applied to the Mexicans.”⁵ “[Such] categories are arbitrary and unscientific and more often than not based on sociological and political considerations [rather] than on anthropological ones,”⁶ but they certainly had an effect on the

⁴ Hogan, “The Race Question and Manifest Destiny,” 96.

⁵ Ibid. 97.

⁶ Ibid. 99.

welcome Irish soldiers received in the American military. Legal citizenship obtained by serving in the army would lead to victorious but inferior social status not all that different from their sub-ranking military status. For the Irish in particular, whose experiences with racial and economic oppression were exclusive to British practices of abuse in Ireland, "...the traditional Anglo bias and hatred against [them seemed] simply carried over into the United States."⁷ Westward expansion – previously a matter of mere divide and conquer interspersed with unnamed "Indian Wars" – now involved a full-scale war between nation states. This particular war was thus pivotal in terms of developing a broader American sense of cultural nationalism: one unified by the ideal of a collective continent, despite geographically centered and sectional cultural identities.

What is revealed upon a closer examination of the makeup of American forces during the Mexican-American War is a story more heterogeneous and layered with individual instances of agency and opportunism than could be said to exist, on a more dichotomous scale, in a largely racialized and land-based war between two nations. Historian Paul Folsom does a thorough job in his book, *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*, of unraveling the relational differences between soldiers in American services, illuminating a landscape of class-dominated conflicts that were directly representational of the larger realities of American society during the mid-nineteenth century. The most significant distinction Folsom makes is between two types of American soldier. He writes, "in using the military as a lens through which to view American society and thought in the 1840s, it [is] crucial to understand two opposing poles of military organization and philosophy, the regular

⁷ Ibid. 103.

army and the volunteer militia.”⁸

Clarifying this differentiation in one of his later chapters Foos observes that “[r]egular army recruits tended to come from the eastern states and were more heavily immigrant than the volunteer forces, which were preponderantly from the South and West.”⁹ Although not true in every instance, what this implies is that the volunteer army comprised of a more elite class of soldiers who had ideological ties to American nativism, and a more developed sense of patriotism, as evidenced by their interest in volunteering themselves to the war effort. However, volunteers also exercised more rights and had access to more resources than their fellow recruit soldiers. On the other hand, derived mainly from the Northeast, the stock of the regular army was made up of a higher percentage of immigrants. According to Foos, “[a] sample of [the] records showed 40 percent of recruits to be immigrants; 35 percent could not sign their own names; their average age was about twenty-five [and in] 1850-51 over 70 percent of regular recruits were immigrants.”¹⁰

Given the hierarchical tendency within the armies, “recruits were continually reminded that they occupied a static and inferior position in society.” “European immigrants, who were non-citizens, were considered mercenaries for the most part by their officers and had no patriotic motivations. They were often mistreated ... used as stand-ins for exhausted pack mules and horses for moving cannon and munitions.”¹¹ This dichotomy stands to illuminate, according to Foos, “...the often schizophrenic ways in which Americans thought about the military – as the

⁸ Paul Foos, “Introduction,” in *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 9.

⁹ Paul Foos, “The Regular Army and Antebellum Labor: Service and Servitude,” 23.

¹⁰ Ibid. 23

¹¹ Hogan, “The Race Question and Manifest Destiny,” 91.

lowest sort of common labor and the most vaunted civic duty.”¹² Between recruits and volunteers, recruits were most inclined to identify or find empathy with the Mexican side. Closer proximity in terms of class and religion to the “enemy” invariably held some sway in a low-ranking deserter’s choices, even if his choices tended to be primarily opportunistic and self-serving, and even if he followed economic gain more consistently than ideological conviction.

The resulting inter-military conflicts, centering primarily on race, class, and religion, were subtly tied to the nationalizing ideologies governing American society at the level of thought. Ideas and prejudicial opinions were then, as may be expected, often extended to practice at the levels of discipline and outright abuse in many cases involving recruit soldiers. Volunteer soldiers felt themselves not only privileged at the level of material resources and the higher retention of their own individual freedom, but they exercised their belief in their own superiority and rightful claim to American identity and citizenship by enacting many of the same judgments on lower ranking recruit soldiers that they were known to enact on Mexican soldiers and communities. According to Foos, “The regular army subjected immigrant and poor soldiers to harsh discipline. These men deserted the service in large numbers, most seeking nonmilitary employment, with a small but significant minority joining the Mexican army to fight against their nominal countrymen.”¹³

It is possible that American volunteer soldiers was not even fully aware of the consequences recruit soldiers faced following an American victory against Mexico, and that due to this they could not fully empathize with what so frequently, to them, seemed to constitute recruit ambivalence or disloyalty toward American identity. Still, ideology aside, what the

¹² Paul Foos, “Introduction,” 10.

¹³ Ibid. 6.

volunteer militia and the recruit forces had in a common was a predominantly material interest in personal gain, since both knew themselves to be fighting a war that promised new lands available at little to no price as its ultimate payoff. Here again, the recruits were the ones who were predictably to fall at the bottom of the social hierarchy. What Foos notes in this case is that the volunteer's "...sense of negotiation and self-interest followed to some degree the materialistic goals of manifest destiny, and these goals were paramount over idealistic concerns. American political writers [at the time] invoked classical and revolutionary images of soldiers 'rewarded with land,' ennobling what might otherwise be seen as mercenary conquest..."¹⁴ In this sense then the regular army, as a hired and wage-earning body of soldiers, could not have been said to be fighting the same war as the volunteers – either in terms of ideology or material interest. "On the American side, common soldiers realized that their part in conquest would be as wage-earning guardians of the propertied classes, Mexican and Anglo, with their 'glory' collected in the form of atrocities against the poor and dispossessed. This was a betrayal of recruiting promises: a demoralized soldier tended toward desertion and riot."¹⁵ A handful of them organized: the San Patricios were among these few.

Al Otro Lado:
—San Patricios Resistance in the Borderland, Betwixt and Between—

Soldier defection was incredibly common during the Mexican-American War; more so in fact than during any other American war.¹⁶ Among deserters, the majority was not so clearly

¹⁴ Paul Foos, "Discipline and Desertion in Mexico," in *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 88.

¹⁵ Paul Foos, "Introduction," 8.

¹⁶ Paul Foos, "The Regular Army and Antebellum Labor: Service and Servitude," in *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 25.

definable with regard to which side of the war they counted themselves on after desertion. What makes the San Patricios so unique then is their commitment to the Mexican cause, and their highly developed sense of enmity toward the U.S. For this reason, it is important to separate them from the more typical variety of deserter, who sought economically based means of self-advancement and preservation that did not involve full identification with, and commitment to, the “enemy.” Historian James Callaghan notes that, “the professionals among [the San Patricios] knew that Mexico was going to lose the war and that, as one of them wrote, ‘we fight with the halter around our necks.’”¹⁷ Given how much there was to forfeit fighting on the losing side of a transnational war, what was at stake, it seems, also had to be about more than material gain or self-interest. Despite the fact that ideological motivations for desertion go against the larger body of literature, which tends to focus on soldier defection as necessarily a form of agency utilized to ensure better individual conditions, the organized resistance of the San Patricios to the oppressive social conditions they experienced in the American recruit armies suggests something more.

Furthermore, if accepting the overwhelming evidence that points in favor of understanding the San Patricios as ideologically and morally motivated toward collective desertion, then even so it is insufficient to conceive of this reality solely based on the idea that changing loyalties constitutes a full explanation of their actions. The fact that Mexico received full support by the San Patricios, and that the Patricios’ ideological and characteristic traits were more closely aligned with Mexican soldiers than many American soldiers, does not alone verify the notion that the San Patricios were simply switching over from one nation state to another.

¹⁷ James Callaghan, “The San Patricios,” *AmericanHeritage.com* 46, no. 7 (November 1995), http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1995/7/1995_7_68.shtml (accessed April 25, 2010).

Earlier, in my introduction, I argued that viewing the San Patricios Brigade as reactionary, and dualistically opposed to the American culture and military, obfuscates the complexity of the phenomenon by attempting to make the group's reversal look natural, as if it were merely a reversal in the sense of "switching sides." Their efforts can be better understood in terms of a collective attempt to define a space between nation states that offered a peripheral, yet personally legitimized sense of cultural unity and selfhood. In fact, there are some other considerations to be made, not the least of which includes agency on the side of the Mexican government to recruit would-be deserters from American ranks.

Callaghan tells how, "Under the cover of night, John O'Reilly and a few Irishmen, wearing their old U.S. uniforms, ranged through the camp [at Matamoros], dropping off leaflets that called upon Taylor's European-born soldiers to recognize the U.S. presence on the Rio Grande as an aggression upon which 'the civilized nations of Europe look with utmost indignation.' The leaflets were signed by Gen. Pedro de Ampudia."¹⁸ Thus attempting to invoke the sympathies and consciousnesses of sub-ranking American soldiers of European birth or affiliation, the Mexican government was dually conscious of social strife existing within American forces, and sought to depict the U.S. as not merely unjust and oppressive toward Catholics and selected races, but toward Mexico specifically. In this way, Mexico was active in its attempt to strengthen the similarities between the two parties. In fact, since desertion was so common on the American side, Reilly and the few men he left with were not initially missed, and when they came back they did indeed bring promises of material reward for joining Mexican forces. "Three weeks later [they returned] this time delivering leaflets addressed to the Irish, Germans, French, and Poles... Any one of them who chose to go to Mexico would receive full

¹⁸ Ibid.

citizenship and a land grant of at least 320 acres.”¹⁹ It should be noted however, that these offers of enticement were not that different from what was promised recruit soldiers by the American government, although choosing *not* to desert also increased your chances a hundred percent that you wouldn’t be caught and severely punished or hung for desertion.

In one of her chapters titled “Commitment to the National Group,” Elizabeth Theiss-Morse argues, “If we think of national identity as a social identity, rather than as a simple manifestation of patriotism or the national principles that people hold or people’s nativist tendencies, the concept takes on important dimensions that have been largely ignored ... People are members of their national group. Any understanding of national identity needs to take into account both the social influences and pressures that affect national group membership.”²⁰ The San Patricios would certainly have experienced larger themes related to an American nationalizing agenda firsthand. They were engaged in the very war that was to be decisive in the American consciousness as one fulfilling and justifying the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The positive elements of this doctrine lay in the promises of free land, economic gain, and a degree of self-sufficiency allegedly founded on something nobler than conquest and plunder.

The negative aspects, however, were also felt, since the very narrow-mindedness of American Manifest Destiny was often vulnerable in the sense that it depended entirely on an invisible, and overly romantic ideal of “Americanness.” Faith and subscription to this ideal excluded many who were willing or trying to meet the criterion short of an entire reinvention of the self or their communities; and for those who operated at the bottom of the social hierarchy,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, “Commitment to the National Group,” in *Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59-60.

the after effects of victory must have felt less than merely to be expected. The war that was, on the one hand, expected to broaden the country's sense of a nationally collective consciousness, on the other hand was operating negatively against groups, which the dominant ruling classes sought to exclude from this newer, and bigger "America." Because so much of developing Western American identity was in the process of being founded on the ideal of land ownership, beyond vaguer forms of prejudice and questions of cultural entitlement, the conflicts were really about who got a piece of the pie, and thus really about how many pieces the pie would be cut into.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny specifically advanced an ideal cultural end product that would produce a geographically and teleologically unified state; but at the same time, it seemed into take into fuller account the physical dimensions of U.S. growth than it did those more qualitative aspects of national, and thus cultural, expansion. The Mexican-American War was mainly about annexation: about acquiring a section of Mexico for U.S. possession with the goal of consolidating that section of continent not only into existing national boundaries, but into the existing culture as well. Hogan notes, "Americanism was a concept that had not yet been concretized by the majority of the inhabitants of the United States. There was little real sense of national unity, of cohesion. Loyalties tended to be personal, local, or at best regional."²¹ Most Americans in both the 18th and early 19th Centuries considered themselves Virginians or Texans first, and only tentatively, abstractly, or in contrast to the Europeans, as 'Americans.'²² Mid-nineteenth century westward expansion was the impetus, which, while in effect creating greater social and physical distance between Americans, was perceived to unify them nationally as a

²¹ Hogan, "The Race Question and Manifest Destiny," 85.

²² Ibid. 87.

whole. Immigration at this time already posed nationalist concerns, but this war exacerbated the question even more: how to consolidate large, initially “foreign” populations into an only loosely defined and geographically variant collective identity, which itself was only just undergoing the process.

On the edges of a blooming patriotism still primarily invested in the process of Western expansion as a means of defining itself “America,” as an idea more than a reality in the West, left a lot of room at this stage in terms of both geographic and psychological space. One has to wonder at the immigrant’s intellectual response to the racism, classism, and anti-“other” mentality of so many high-ranking officials and volunteer types, which counted as a “pro-American” stance of identification. To the immigrant, their own status as mercenary, while working toward the ideal of citizenship, must have seemed terribly ironic given the hodge-podge variety of what seemed to count, one minute and not the next, as American. Hogan makes the astonishing observation that even as late as 1848, “...there was no single national anthem played by the army band. Sometimes it would be ‘Hail Columbia’, other times ‘Yankee Doodle’, still others ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’” When the flag finally went up over the Halls Of Montezuma in 1848 at the end of the Mexican-American War, the army band played a medley of all three.”²³

Hogan argues that “Clearly, the [San Patricios were] perceived as both Irish and Catholic by those against whom they fought, and by their allies. That the majority of the San Patricios fought [under a modified Irish flag] indicates as well their perception of themselves.”²⁴ Hogan also quotes, semi-humorously, a Jewish author and artist, Luis Camnitzer, who remarks,

²³ Ibid. 89.

²⁴ Ibid. 105.

“Pretending to be Irish-Catholics in this war at this time would have been akin to pretending to be Jews in Nazi Germany.”²⁵ Whether motivated primarily by offers that seemed more generous or likely to materialize than the promises laid out by the American government, or whether ideologically and morally driven to an empathetic stance of martyrdom against American values dominant in the recruit armies, the San Patricios still constituted an organized group of essentially nation-less individuals.

Confusing cultural and racial identification toward Ireland with a nationalistic agenda is erroneous; at the same time, theorizing about the cultural politics of space and organized desertion as a means toward protecting cultural legitimacy and homogeneity, is not well supported unless the more objective realities and truths are placed along side this idea. Realistically, participating in at least one side of the war was vital to survival and any sort of future, which these soldiers could have hoped for. It was also practical, if you were going to desert at all, to seek out the company and protection of other armed bodies in order to enhance your chances of survival, and lessen your chances of being captured or killed. We should, however, not limit ourselves to the purely objective aspects of historical movement and phenomena. A full consideration of geographic spaces, as shaped and changed by the politics and ideologies inhabiting them, is warranted. People, we understand, do not merely inhabit their social groups, irregardless of the space they operate in, or ambivalent toward the psychological and self-authenticating ways in which space can be utilized and enhanced to their own ends.

Conclusion, With Room for Space:
—Borders and Ambiguities in the Imagination—

The majority of history available on the San Patricios has been conventionally descriptive and historiographic in general. Despite the rare nature of the brigade, sources have remained

²⁵ Ibid.

focused on a basic narrative account, and have paid little to no attention to the cultural and theoretical ramifications of the group's positional occupancy in time and space. The existence of the San Patricios barely makes footnote status amid the broader American discourse devoted to a recording of the Mexican-American War. Beyond a general appreciation of historical uniqueness, a rigorous cultural and theoretical analysis is basically lacking from written accounts, and this fact alone attests to the way in which a country's history is also shaped by conscious and unconscious pulls of a nationalizing agenda perpetually in motion.

Since this paper aims to contribute, at least somewhat, to existing secondary historical literature on the San Patricios, it is partially a methodological interest on my part, as to why previous historians have resisted or ignored the opportunity for a larger investigation of the problem of soldier defection during the Mexican-American War. Why is it that U.S.-Mexico border theory – and more broadly speaking, cultural studies of borderland spaces and subjectivities – have not been applied to, or discussed in tandem with, the San Patricios Brigade? Unless it is just the case the idea has not been stumbled upon before, my own answer to this question is twofold. I suspect that in the postmodern, revisionist-conscious field of history writing, the subject of race has become problematic in ways it could not have been visibly problematic earlier. When we struggle to incorporate race and an admission of conquest into the writing of American history, we invariably use our modern day conceptions about race to inform us where to search out stories of oppression and under- or misrepresentation in the past. “Whiteness” in the academy still has blind spots when checking the rearview mirror, because definitions of whiteness have changed rapidly and contradictorily over time, obscuring a clear view of social reality across a broad temporal and geographic space. The mainstream whiteness of Irish-Americans in cotemporary American society virtually eliminates the racialized status

they occupied formerly, and even in the nineteenth century, geographic relativity shaped a racialized experience that would have been much different in say, Boston, as opposed to the border in Mexico.

The other half of this absence – of history not merely descriptive with regard to the San Patricios – has to do with an American inaccessibility to international historical texts. The San Patricios story in Mexico is an entirely different story than it is here, and not just in purely dualistic terms of the Traitor-Villain versus the Martyr-Hero. When the San Patricios and their Mexican allies were finally defeated by American forces near the end of the war, their ensuing punishments were not unusual in terms of the sort generally reserved for deserters, but they were still highly exaggerated and symbolic. Callaghan notes that since so many had deserted before the war began officially, many “...could not be executed under the U.S. articles of War. And on the same argument John O’Reilly could not be executed either. [He was given] the stiffest punishment allowable for desertion in peacetime: fifty lashes and a branding with the letter D for ‘deserter,’ the brand to be set ‘high on the cheekbone, near the eye, but without jeopardizing the sight.’”²⁶ For those who did hang, “Col. William S. Harney, commanding the execution detail, pointed his sword toward the fortress and told the condemned that at the very moment the Mexican flag was replaced with the Stars and Stripes— ‘the flag you have dishonored’ —they would die.”²⁷ The attempt to yolk an image of dying deserters with a victorious flag, and the branding of human flesh to symbolize outcast and socially rejected criminals of wartime anti-Americanness, were certainly part and parcel to the nationalizing agenda. More subtly, however, these acts betray an aura of fear on the part of U.S. officials at the time, which inhabited a vast,

²⁶ James Callaghan, “The San Patricios,” *AmericanHeritage.com*

²⁷ Ibid.

foreign terrain that could barely be claimed their own at this stage. More than merely serving to punish and dismiss deserters, the peculiarity of the flag and D-for-deserter devices may arguably be understood as a way to mark social and geographic boundaries on human bodies, where they were otherwise missing from the socially diverse and politically ambiguous physical landscape.

In one of her chapters titled, “America in the Borderland,” Patricia Nelson Limerick observes that following an American victory over Mexico in 1848, “The resulting division did not ratify any plan of nature. The borderlands were an ecological whole; northeastern Mexican desert blended into southwestern American desert with no prefigurings of nationalism. The one line that nature did draw—the Rio Grande—was a river that ran through but did not really divide continuous terrain.”²⁸ Thus physically ambiguous landscape combined with a politically and socially volatile level of ambiguity, which necessitated the establishing of new borders and lines of trespass – within and upon the official border – whether on the landscape itself, or on the human individuals inhabiting this space.

U.S.-Mexico border theorists Gloria Anzaldúa, and José David Saldívar, both offer a cultural studies avenue for thinking of borderlands as unique from other types of spaces: as overlapping with conflicting and competing cultures, but also as separate and justifiably distinct from both dominant cultures occupied by the cultural inhabitants of nation states. Implications of these ideas stem quickly into problems of national identities, not only in terms of defining existing national identities, but concerning a way in which to articulate the dialogic space necessary in order to reify and translate those nation-stateless identities increasingly present in our globalizing and post-modernizing world. Saldívar also distinguishes cultural inhabitants of

²⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “America in the Borderland,” in *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. (New York: Norton Press, 1987), 222.

la frontera –the fluid and more pluralistic version of the definite, and essentially immutable “American frontier” long posited since Frederick Jackson Turner – as operating “between cultures,” instead of “without culture.”²⁹ In this way, it becomes possible to shift the thinking process from peoples and temporary populations as merely inhabiting subaltern and intercultural spaces, by conceiving their realities in terms that transcend borders, making them central to their own geographic (spatial) and cultural (psychological) peripheries.

Between Mexico and the U.S. today, and in other parts of the world, it is more common to theorize about postcolonial and postmodern identities that are contemporary and living, than it is to theorize about identities confined to history. In this paper, however, I have been interested in seeing how these ideas can be pushed back in time – and if at least as far as the 19th century – if border theory is more broadly applicable in a timeless sense: able to acknowledge the realities of unrepresented, sub-trans- or anational groups of people inhabiting nationally ambiguous or changing environments. From these geo-culturally, philosophical and psychological imaginings – I conceive of the San Patricios – not as a group that was distinctly or self-consciously directed toward the goal of accomplishing a self-determined and defined culture. There is not enough information available on the day-to-day lives of the brigade’s individual members to have attempted such an undertaking, and the brigade was arguably too few in number to argue any thesis concerning culture specifically. However, the ideas put forth by Anzaldúa and Saldívar, permit the argument to be made: that the San Patricios operated and interacted in a space psychologically enlarged by its lack of definable national borders, and also by its complex and materially competitive social stratosphere.

²⁹ Salvidar, José David, “Cultural Theory in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands,” in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23.

Although the San Patricios defected from the American side to the Mexican side, there is little evidence that they conceived of themselves as Mexicans once they decided that they were *not* American. The San Patricios – comprised of an immigrant base of culturally, nationally, and geographically uprooted individuals – also comprised of the lowest socially ranked members of the American army in terms of race/ethnicity, class, and religion. Whether fleeing or not, and whether defeated or not, the San Patricios were still marginally successful in creating a temporary, and historically unmarked space of culturally centered national-like identity: one that was more resistant toward the authority and legitimacy of nation states broadly speaking, but that also included an aspect of positively asserted separate identity.

In an essay titled “Poststructuralism and History,” Kevin Passmore writes that “Often the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism are used interchangeably, [however] ... it is more useful to see the former as a broader category covering a range of tendencies in contemporary culture that share the conviction that the proper focus of artistic and intellectual enquiry is ‘representation’ rather than ‘reality’ (Passmore: 119.) This notion of “representation” allows for apparently scattered bits and pieces to count as justifiable “wholes;” it allows new and creative connections and definitions to be asserted; it also implies that there need not even be a series of bits and pieces *amounting* to a whole, but rather existing: philosophically set free from any final whole. Attempting to do so consciously acknowledges the disadvantages of teleologies when looking at the past, and resists the continual urge for closure that would justify piling anything up high enough to begin calling it “reality.” Anzaldúa’s assertion that “rigidity [on the border] means death,”³⁰ is a truth the San Patricios doubtless understood, which motivated their actions

³⁰ Anzaldúa, Gloria, “La conciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness,” in *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 101.

to choose a few gains they valued over an ultimate loss. The same flexibility would have been required of other soldiers subject to the same oppressions in the American recruit armies, who resisted desertion, choosing instead to navigate the space they already inhabited with its attendant consequences and rewards. And while her discussion of the birth and consciousness of *la mestiza* is certainly a bit of a stretch to connect with the resistance and agency of the San Patricios, the language is still bound to be applicable where historians look into the past and discover *mestizas* not previously known to have existed. Any argument for tolerance of ambiguity will need to be more radically employed if it is to hold to up to time, which is not discrete and subject to organization, but rather also fleeting, and continuous, just as our imaginings of ourselves are the same.

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