

Maritime Borderlands

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Indigenous Americans' encounter with the world began at the water's edge. Initial encounters with Europeans happened on beaches, on islands, and on the water itself. As foreign powers began to colonize the Americas, saltwater fringes would form some of the most profitable and contested regions. This fact, which scholars have only recently started to examine with care, goes against common assumptions about where "borderlands" and "frontiers" are supposed to take shape. Looking to the continent's margins reveals a distinct category of contested spaces that did not work by the same rules as terrestrial ones. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, two particular American coastal regions faced economic, political, and cultural changes that were all connected to the underlying ecological dynamism of shorelines.

The first region, the Dawnland, is defined here as the coastline from Long Island to the Grand Banks, where Indigenous people met a long parade of foreign sailors, who started appearing well before Columbus sailed. The second, Caribana, encompasses the Lesser Antilles, the Leeward Antilles, and the Venezuela and Guiana coasts. This coast and islands, settled mostly by Kalinago (Carib) peoples, was hotly contested over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Europeans came to these archipelagos looking to form plantations in the rich soil, capture Indigenous slaves, and turn local resources into tradable commodities.

These two spaces were colonized simultaneously. Together, they were the key sites for three major processes that shaped the fate of the Americas. First, both regions were the site of complex exchange of maritime technology and knowledge between Natives and colonists that would ultimately profit Europeans most, yet nonetheless ensure the survival of Native peoples in both regions. The resulting narrative is one that casts Indian peoples as major players in maritime history, and by extension, global history. Second, these

two places were central to the intertwined rise of the English, French, and Dutch empires in the Americas. This process necessarily involved the Spanish as well, but mostly played out in the saltwater spaces of the Dawnland and Caribana. Lastly, both shorelines were starting points for the deeply connected histories of Native and African peoples in the Americas. The trade and exploitation of Native bodies served as a template, and in some cases, hastened the introduction of captured Africans to do the same work. Maritime labor, whether bonded or free, brought people from both sides of the Atlantic together, and both regions eventually became home to multi-racial African-Indigenous peoples who managed to survive centuries of persistent attempts to wipe them off the map.

There is one other connecting pattern: both regions illustrate profound links between the environment and the fates of empires. A common feature of all coasts is biodiversity. While geologically varied, all coasts are ecotones, that is, zones where two ecosystems overlap. The number of plant and animal species spikes in these in-between spaces, as the intermingling of many kinds of habitats creates phenomena that ecologists call edge effects. Estuaries and wetlands that straddle fresh and saltwater are particularly teeming with life. The constant shifting of barrier islands and wetlands due to storms, seasons, and sea level changes only add to constant churn of marine flora and fauna.

North America's broad continental shelf in the northwest Atlantic keeps water circulating within reach of sunlight, creating flourishing underwater pastures. Around the Caribbean basin, clashing tectonic plates created a chain of volcanic islands rising out of the sea, often ringed with coral reefs. These resource-rich areas caused clustering among the colonists. While inland settlements were typically anchored on separate river systems, island and offshore-oriented colonial zones were often crowded nearby. French, English, and Dutch trading posts and rival villages sat uncomfortably close together across the northeast coast. Throughout the West Indies, these same three European powers regularly jostled over islands, trading them back and forth through raids and sieges, or even splitting them in two. When these two histories are sketched out together, noting key distinctions and compelling similarities, these shorelines compel us to see relations between Indians, Africans, and Europeans in North America in a new light.

In the northern region known as the "Dawnland," two of the largest groupings of Indigenous peoples have similar names that mean roughly the same thing: "people of the dawn." The names Wôpanâak (or Wampanoag) and Wabanaki (a confederation consisting of the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet-

Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Eastern Abenaki peoples) can also be translated more technically as “people of the first light,” “people of the white light,” or more directionally, “easterners.” One of the constituent peoples of the larger Wabanaki confederacy, the Mi’kmaq, sometimes referred to the waters around them as “the Sunrise Ocean.” Today many scholars and writers use Dawnland as a name for the coast that is home to the Wabanaki, Wampanoag, and many more Indigenous peoples. Though the term emerges from the Wabanaki word *Wabanahkik*, it is used here as a blanket term for the New England and Canadian maritime coast. The image that word conjures – of a connected Indigenous coast that faced the sunrise – makes it a useful term for the larger region that hews closer to a Native perspective than a European one.

Over 100,000 people made this shore their home before the colonial arrival. They spoke dozens of distinct languages that all belonged to the Algonquian family, and there was no single political union among the many male and female leaders across the coast, who went by the titles of *sachem*, *sunksquaw*, *sachema*, and *sagamore*. All of these peoples relied on fish and shellfish as major staples of their diet, and used dugouts (sometimes rigged with skin sails) and birchbark canoes. The earliest captain to describe these shores in detail marveled that “with only the strength of their arms” coastal watermen “go to sea without any danger, and as swiftly as they please.”¹ From the Hudson to Newfoundland, European sailors encountered Algonquian mariners who impressed them with their bravery, agility, and navigational knowledge. The major cultural distinction on land was between farmers and hunters, as maize agriculture became less sustainable to the north. Many northern Wabanakis subsisted primarily on hunting, fishing, and gathering, though some traded for corn with southern neighbors. The peoples of the dawn shared similar stories of a giant who formed this rugged shore, who went by various names: Gluskap (Wabanaki), Maushop (Wampanoag), Weetucks (Narragansett/Mohegan-Pequot), and Maughkampoe (Lenape).

A key feature of the Dawnland was hidden underwater. Beginning with the Georges Banks and the Nantucket Shoals off Cape Cod, a long chain of banks ran diagonally to the northeast, culminating in the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. Most of these uplands, created at the end of the last Ice Age, mark the rind of piled earth left at the southern terminus of the mile-thick glacier that once sat upon the continent. Over the last 10,000 years, these

¹ Giovanni da Verrazzano, “Translation of the Cèllere Codex,” Susan Tarrow, trans., in Lawrence C. Wroth, ed., *The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 139.

landmasses have been drowned beneath rising seas. From an oceanographic perspective, this line of offshore plateaus was perfectly positioned to act as a nursery for sea life. Coming from the north is the Labrador Current, a deep, cold flow that rides up sloping sides of the continental shelf and toward the banks, like winds rising over a mountain range. This upward flow creates a phenomenon that marine scientists call “upwelling,” in which a current picks up decomposing organic matter from the seafloor that is rich with nutrients. Meanwhile, the Gulf Stream, a warm surface current that flows from the south, heats the shallow water atop banks, and serves as a route for migrating whales and fish. River runoff from the shore also carried loads of nutritious waste toward these offshore plateaus.

When cold, dense waters mixed with the warmer, sunlit water atop banks, the potent mix of sunshine and nutrients fed giant populations of phytoplankton, the tiny plants that live in the water column. These floating clouds of plant life that surround banks act like oceanic pastures. Like plants on land, they bloom in spring. The annual flourishing draws similar blooms of zooplankton, tiny marine animals. The resulting clouds of microscopic life support a wide and rich food web that includes innumerable jellies, dense schools of fish, predatory sharks, social groups of whales and dolphins, and flocks of seabirds. On some European maps from the seventeenth century, these banks were illustrated as islands made of fish. Living on the fringes of these fisheries, some peoples of the dawn likened “their store in the Sea, to the haire of their heads.”²

European incursions near the Dawnland long predated the moment Christopher Columbus stumbled upon a Bahamian beach in 1492. Norse sailors and traders – the people also known as Vikings – had fished the Grand Banks as early as the eleventh century, and likely made landfall at points south in the Dawnland region. The next wave of foreign sailors were fishermen who came in the late medieval period, when many fisheries off Europe were increasingly depleted and stressed. Secretive Portuguese and Basque fisherman, who had been working their way west across the North Atlantic, arrived at Newfoundland by the 1490s at the latest, and began setting lines and nets off its coast every springtime with the annual bloom. Cheap, nutritious fish protein had long fueled the growth of economies and families in Western Europe. Moreover, Christians ate fish in place of meat on Fridays and during Lent, a practice that created an enduring market.

² John Smith, *Description of New-England* (1615) in Philip L. Barbour, *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), I, 334.

Early in the sixteenth century, word spread from port to port about the bounty of American fisheries. When the English explorer John Rut sailed into the harbor of St. John's, Newfoundland at the height of the 1527 summer fishing season, he "found eleven saile of Normans [from Normandy], and one Brittainne [from Brittany], and two Portugall Barkes, and all a fishing."³ A recent study estimates that the numbers of foreign sails heading to this region only continued to grow: by the 1560s the fishing fleet off America was well over 100 strong annually. The average tonnage of ships heading to the Grand Banks may have even rivaled the tonnage of hulls heading to Spain and Portugal's colonies in Central and South America at the same time (though fish was never as profitable as gold or silver).

The visiting fishermen did their best to avoid the peopled mainland, favoring isolated islands or peninsulas for their small onshore settlements. These were seasonal camps, not permanent colonies, made of simple houses and stages for drying fish. Here, they built "huts like the natives," following the Indigenous practice of stripping bark off trees "to cover whole stages and lodging houses."⁴ The first Dawnlanders to barter with the camps were likely Mi'kmaq and Beothuk. Fur was a central commodity. A 1583 inventory of items brought by Mi'kmaq traders to a French outpost included a wide variety of pelts and skins, including those of moose, deer, seals, otters, beavers, martens, and lynx. In return, Indigenous traders sought items made of metal that offered sharp cutting edges and durable, lustrous materials for beads. Soon foreign goods spread far from the coast, and began to appear at distant spots in the Indigenous continent, as well as further down the Dawnland coast.

Within a few decades of first contact with fishermen-traders, Mi'kmaqs began to eye another kind of European-made object: their sailboats. Specifically, they began to appropriate pinnaces and shallops, the small craft that fishermen brought with them within the holds of their ships. The early Basque and Breton codfishers left some of these boats behind over the winter, where Native people saw them as free for the taking. Soon some of these Indigenous sailors turned pirate. Mi'kmaq men surprised the pinnace of

³ John Rut to Henry VIII, August 3, 1527, in James A. Williamson, *The Voyages of the Cabots and the English Discovery of North America under Henry VII and Henry VIII* (London: The Argonaut Press, 1929), 105.

⁴ Marc Lescarbot, "The Voyage of Monsieur De Monts into New France" (1605) in Charles Herbert Levermore, ed., *Forerunners and Competitors of the Pilgrims and Puritans* (Brooklyn, NY: The New England Society of Brooklyn, 1914), 1, 176 ("huts"); John Downing, "A Brief Narrative Concerning Newfoundland," September 24, 1676, British Library, Egerton Ms. 2395/562 ("stages").

Étienne Bellenger in 1583 with a sudden ambush, slaying two sailors and taking the craft. Encounters like this, where locals relieved the foreigners of their smaller boats, became common across the coast. Some visiting sailors, in responding to Native interest, also sold or lent boats to Indigenous mariners. At the same time, explorers began to see Indians as valued navigators, abducting dozens of men and boys to serve as pilots. The intruders came to trust their kidnapped guides' advice over "the opinion of our best Sea-men of these times," for they "understood the Natives themselves to be exact Pilots for that Coast, having been accustomed to frequent the same, both as Fishermen and in passing along the shoare to seek their enemies."⁵

Indian sailors soon became ubiquitous in European accounts. When Bartholomew Gosnold's bark came in sight of the Maine coast in 1602, he was promptly greeted by a small sailing vessel manned by eight men who were almost certainly Mi'kmaq. Crossing through the same waters in 1609, Henry Hudson spotted "two French shallops full of the country people."⁶ Thereafter foreign sailors witnessed Mi'kmaq-made birchbark sailing vessels and European-made vessels that had been outfitted with specifically Native touches, like a small sailboat that had a moose painted on its sail – in Wabanaki mythology, moose and whales were the same creature who took two different forms and ruled over land and sea. Native sailors also began reproducing land-based hierarchies on the water, with sagamores and war chiefs serving as captains on the water, and donning European-made clothes of "sea-fashion" while aboard their commands.⁷

Just as Natives were increasing their range across the Sunrise Ocean, Europeans began making tentative attempts at claiming footholds on the Dawnland proper. The English had schemed to turn the harbor at St. John's Newfoundland into a permanent colony as early as 1577, but it remained only seasonally occupied until the 1630s. The French named the coast to the south "Acadia," and began attempting year-round settlement in 1605 at St. Croix (now Maine) and Port-Royal (now Nova Scotia). The latter became the first permanent French mainland settlement south of the St. Lawrence seaway.

⁵ Ferdinando Gorges, "A Briefe Narration of the Originall Undertaking of the Advancement of Plantations into the Parts of America," in *Sir Ferdinando Gorges and His Province of Maine*, 2 vols., edited by James Phinney Baxter (Boston, 1890), II, 10.

⁶ Henry Juet, "The Third Voyage of Master Henry Hudson, Written by Henry Juet, of Lime-House," in *Sailors' Narratives of Voyages along the New England Coast, 1524-1624*, edited by George Parker Winship (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1905), 182.

⁷ John Brereton, *A Briefe and True Relation of the Discoverie of the North Part of Virginia* (London, 1602) in David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, eds., *The English New England Voyages, 1602-1608* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1983), 145.

A year later, the English attempted a colony to the south, at the mouth of the Kennebec River, but abandoned it in 1607. Another small group of English founded a village at Plymouth in 1620, and the Dutch West India Company soon followed with an outpost on Manhattan in 1625. These colonies were always tiny on land, but overlapped as expansive coastal zones.

From this point on, the two southern zones – New England and New Netherland – simultaneously claimed the same stretch of Dawnland waters, the glacially created bays between the Hudson and Cape Cod. The Indigenous bays between them proved both profitable and dangerous. In the mid-1620s, Dutch traders started dealing in Native shell beads called *zeewan* or *wampumpeag*, which became an intercultural currency that coastal peoples bartered for European wares, and inland people accepted as payment for furs. The English quickly followed the Dutch example and the two rivals were competing near the shores of Long Island Sound, where Pequots and Narragansetts had become the dominant wampum-makers. Archaeologists have found evidence of coastal peoples harvesting massive amounts of clam and whelk shells in this period to make the beads, and large middens of clamshells from this period are still found around Long Island Sound. Intensified coastal activity increased contact between neighbors. Living in between the scattered foreign outposts, Native canoemen became the favorite postmen of many colonists. The foreigners also began to build their own simple dugouts after Indian designs. Like the Mi'kmaq had decades earlier, some southern Dawnlanders looked to acquire boats to expand their realms, but the settlers had far fewer to sell than the itinerant fisherman to the north.

Tensions soon rose between European and Native merchants alike, and the English were particularly disturbed by a pattern of seaborne attacks. Western Niantics and Pequots killed the Englishman John Stone and sunk his bark on the Connecticut River in 1634. Two years later, a Narragansett-allied faction killed the trader John Oldham and seized his pinnace. The English used these murders as grounds to wage a war of conquest against the Pequots in 1637. The so-called Pequot War featured terrifying massacres, and enabled an English land-grab along Long Island Sound, which curtailed the Dutch traders' eastern ambitions. Just a few years later, after Raritans attempted to take a Dutch craft in 1641, the Manhattan-based colony began to agitate for a similar war against their Lenape neighbors. Led by Director Willem Kieft, the war began in 1643 and quickly turned against the Dutch. Unlike his English neighbors, Kieft neglected to recruit Native allies, and after two surprise massacres, the Indigenous people of the lower Hudson rallied

together and fought a desultory war against the Dutch that lasted for two years, before the two sides reached a begrudging peace.

As the Dutch and English colonial populations grew, the trade in furs and wampum slowed. Taking advantage of this economic shift, newcomers pressured coastal peoples to sell land, while their loose livestock wrought havoc on the clambanks and marshes that were so key to the Indigenous diet. Still, Algonquians remained a military threat. Both the English and Dutch feared the coastal sachems would ally with each other, and both suspected a joint Indian-colonial invasion was coming during the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the 1650s and 1660s. The English, who were more numerous and more attentive to Native protocols, managed to keep the majority of sachems on their side. They definitively conquered the Dutch colony in 1674, renaming it New York. With their rival vanquished, the English intended to cement their hold on the coast, attempting to police their Wampanoag neighbors. The decline of local fur trade weakened coastal peoples economically, but, conversely, they were now better armed, as the Dutch began openly trading in firearms before the English evicted them. In response to several provocations, Metacom, sachem of the Pokanoket Wampanoag, began to rally together a coalition of allies to halt English overreach. The resulting conflict is best known as “King Philip’s War,” so named after the English title for Metacom.

When relations with Wampanoags turned hostile, the English preemptively seized and scuttled hundreds of canoes from Manhattan to Cape Cod. Colonists patrolled the coast trying to prevent the anti-English coalition from recruiting allies and moving men and supplies. Though the historical cliché about the war was that it was Indians’ last attempt “to drive the English back into the sea,” the actual outcome was that Indians themselves were pushed into the deep. Hundreds of people from the southern Dawnland were sold into slavery in King Philip’s War and ended up scattered across the West Indies and Europe, linking this frontier war to the rising demand for enslaved labor in the larger Atlantic. It was also a key point of connection to the maritime borderland of Caribana.

Thousands more Indians living at the margins of New England had little choice but to seek out maritime labor as their primary means of survival. Among the first were the Indians who began to work for colonists hunting whales. Using their long experience with handling small boats and navigating this particular shore, these whalers employed colonial harpoons and furnaces to process their catches for the international market for whale oil. Their labor was not sold fairly, though. Colonial overseers underpaid Indian whalem

and overcharged them for basic supplies and household necessities, meaning many of these whalers worked in a form of debt peonage.

The combination of Indigenous knowledge, colonial tools, and exploited labor was all too effective: within four decades of the beginning of shore whaling, nearshore populations of right whales and pilot whales were nearly extinct. The first boom and bust of the shore fishery was similar to overhunting of beavers, deer, and bison elsewhere in North America. This overhunting, like the others, was caused by Indigenous labor combined with colonial profit motives, but has not previously been interpreted as a similar process perhaps because it occurred offshore. The crash of nearshore whaling would lead colonists to invent the try-works, a shipboard furnace that allowed whalers to process their catch on the high seas. That technological breakthrough would allow Yankee captains and their Native crews to become the very first deep-sea whalers who operated without a shore base. Heading out in search of deep ocean species like the sperm whale and unexploited populations of right whales and humpbacks, Native men still provided most of the shipboard labor, and in doing so would begin to travel the world.

Meanwhile, in the northern Dawnland, Wabanakis had entered King Philip's War voluntarily, and had a far different outcome. Led by an Eastern Abenaki man, known as Mogg Heigon or "Captain Mogg," Wabanaki watermen looked to profit from attacks on the English fishing fleet. In the final phase of the war in the late 1670s, Wabanakis raided or seized over twenty colonial fishing vessels. A skilled pirate and shrewd leader, Mogg Heigon help develop a strategy that would serve his fellow people of the dawn for the next nine decades. Wabanakis across the Gulf of Maine emulated his strategy of maintaining varied fleets of colonial-built boats, ranging from the diminutive shallops to multi-masted schooners. Often turning to the French at Port-Royal, Acadia (Nova Scotia) as suppliers, Wabanaki seawarriors took thousands of tons of colonial-caught fish along with the vessels themselves, and sometimes even pressed New England sailors to serve aboard their watercraft.

Unlike the Native people to the south, who preferred the English to the Dutch, the Wabanakis found the French to be superior allies to British and were thus able to curtail settler expansion into their lands over much of the eighteenth century. During this period, the British attempted to restrain Wabanaki seafaring by blockading estuaries and maintaining patrols, and fought over access to the waterpower inland falls. But English speakers only came to claim the region by first defeating and expelling the French in the

1750s and 1760s. Only once they had removed their European rivals' small footholds on land could the British set about expelling Wabanakis from the sea.

By the eve of the American Revolution, English-speaking colonists had finally become rulers of Dawnland waters. Still, even as the shoreline ceased being an active military front, its waterways remained complex places of cultural contestation. The confusing geography of marshlands, barrier islands, and labyrinthine estuaries long remained a place where Native people (along with escaped slaves and smugglers) found refuge from colonial surveillance. Maritime work also began to change the face of Indigenous communities. Algonquian people in southern New England began incorporating other "people of color" into their families, as they intermarried with African American enslaved and freed people through their regular work in port cities. Many of these Native men and biracial men who served as mariners slowly began to accumulate wealth, and by early nineteenth century, many served as officers under white captains, while a select few even owned and commanded their own whaleships. Wabanakis who found themselves landbound by colonial dispossession also sought out wage labor in the region's agrarian and industrial economy.

By foregrounding water and coastal resources, we can see how the actions of maritime Indians to the south unintentionally hastened the English conquest of the Dutch colony, while seaborne Indians to the north would long stymie New England's expansion into their waters. We can also see how the riches of local sea life and Indigenous maritime knowledge both created connections and fostered conflicts between all societies on these saltwater frontiers. A different story with similar themes would play out a thousand miles to the south, in the island-strewn azure waters between Florida and South America.

The origins of this tropical maritime borderland lie deep: not just beneath the sea, but below the earth's crust. For millions of years, the Caribbean plate has been wedging its eastern flank up and over the Atlantic plate. As the edge of the descending Atlantic plate plunges into the earth's molten core, it pushes hot liquid rock upwards, causing massive plumes of lava to shoot out of vents in the seafloor west of the plate boundary. Over millions of years, submarine volcanoes emerged as a long arc of islands along the plate's eastern edge. Known collectively as the Lesser Antilles, this crescent-shaped archipelago begins east of Puerto Rico and ends at the South American main, where a separate cluster of nearshore islands are known as the Leeward Antilles. Many of these islands are ringed with coral reefs, some remain

volcanically active, and all serve as stepping stones for flows of people, flora, and fauna, particularly coming from the massive delta of the Orinoco River. This exchange directly tied these islands to the coastline that today is claimed by Venezuela and the Guianas.

American Indian mariners explored and began settling these islands centuries before 1492. The two major peoples in the Antilles were known as the Taíno and the Island Caribs (or Kalinago). Their precise territories and movements before Columbus (and after) are hard to trace, but archaeological evidence suggests these islands were sites of cultural exchanges and movement for many centuries. Christopher Columbus described Taíno peoples, the dominant group across the Greater Antilles to the Virgin Islands, as hospitable and welcoming, as a contrast to the supposedly warlike and hostile Caribs who lived on the remaining volcanic Lesser Antilles to the south. This dichotomy would later serve to distinguish the “friendly,” “gentle” Taínos to be targeted for missionizing, as opposed to “enemy,” “man-eating” Caribs who could be legally taken as slaves. Still, anthropologists suggest there was a grain of truth in this distinction between northern and southern islanders, as the Taíno had far more open and inclusive trade networks before contact, while Caribs tended to trade within closed networks and regarded outsiders as enemies. Neither Taínos nor Caribs appeared to have a sense of overarching ethnic identity before Europeans arrived: the labels reflect colonial perspectives more than Indigenous realities.

Still, some general similarities apply to all the Native peoples of the Caribbean. All were ocean-going peoples whose ancestors came from the South American mainland, and linguists believe most spoke Arawakan languages. All peoples island-hopped in dugouts the Kalinago called *kana:wa*, a word that Columbus spelled as *canoa*, which became the root of *canoe*. The mainland was home to other Arawakan groups, as well as the Warao, who spoke an unrelated language but like the islanders, had an intensely maritime culture – Warao translated as “canoe maker” or “canoe owner.” A historian recently argued that we should treat these islands and coast as a coherent place called Caribana, long connected by trade, captive-raiding, intermarriage, and fishing that linked the many bands of the Kalinago, making it “a region created by Indigenous people, but misinterpreted by colonists.”⁸ The words “Caribana” or “Caripana” often appeared over this region in European maps. But the label was elastic. It changed

⁸ Carolyn Marie Arena, “Indian Slaves from Caribana: Trade and Labor in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2017), 34.

size and shape depending on the map, reflecting both growing colonial familiarity with the region and the movements of Kalinago peoples in response to foreign intrusions.

During Columbus's third voyage, he found a small archipelago west of the Orinoco Delta that was rich with beds of pearl-producing oysters. Soon the Leeward Antilles islands of Margarita, Cubagua, and Coche (now the Venezuelan state of Nueva Esparta) became known collectively as *Costa de Perlas* (the Pearl Coast). Here the local Guayqueri, a group that was perhaps linked to the coastal Warao, had long harvested and worn the jewels. Early in the sixteenth century, these locals mostly traded their pearls to visiting Spanish sailors in exchange for European-made goods. As the Spanish sought to collect pearls on their own, they decided that rather than try to enslave the Guayqueri, they could staff the fishery with Native slaves from elsewhere. In seeking out potential pearl-divers, slavers targeted the Kalinago and the Lucayan peoples of the Bahamas, who were famed as strong swimmers and divers. In time, Spaniards eager to expand their labor force would reclassify the Guayqueri as "Caribs," because applying the infamous label permitted them to be enslaved as well.

Slaves on the Pearl Coast were subject to brutal working conditions aboard canoes, which Spanish colonizers had quickly adopted and turned into floating overseeing stations. Oyster boat owners came to be known as *señores de canoas*, or "lords of the canoes," though the term *canoa* was used broadly to refer to both Indigenous and European-made small craft employed for pearl fishing. Forced to spend long days swimming depths of up to twenty-four feet in search of oysters, divers faced all sorts of perils. They were at constant risk of shark attacks, salt sores, hemorrhaging lungs, blown eardrums, and being trapped underwater. Spanish overseers regularly whipped their enslaved divers for working too slowly, and sometimes required them to lodge in locked cells overnight. This work taxed the immune systems of the enslaved swimmers, and diseases like dysentery were rampant. Many divers died just days after starting their work. The *señores de canoas* valued their slaves' lives so little that they sometimes threw the dead overboard rather than halt the diving: though these bodies only attracted sharks, further endangering the men still working in those waters. Small wonder, then, that when the Dominican friar, propagandist, and advocate Bartolomé de las Casas aimed to expose Spanish abuses of Native peoples, he highlighted the Pearl Coast as a particularly cruel place, even worse than the notorious gold mines of New Spain.

Pearl fishing did not just abuse Indigenous bodies; it put enormous stresses on the fragile island and coastal ecosystems that nourished oysterbeds. Mere decades after their establishment, the Spanish-controlled pearl grounds faced a crisis. On the pearl islands, growing herds of invasive livestock ate the land bare, and cacti soon replaced grasses. The process of denuding the earth for animal feed and firewood would happen again and again each time Europeans took possession of an island in Caribana. Later visitors would note that these treeless isles were eerily lacking birdsong. Marine biologists have estimated that in the boom of pearl fishing that peaked in the 1520s, enslaved divers harvested 1.2 billion oysters. Massive mounds of oyster shells dating to the colonial fishery are still plainly visible on the islands of the Pearl Coast.

Increasingly, Spanish innovators designed devices that could rake the seafloor for oysters, with some claiming their devices could eliminate the need for enslaved divers altogether. Though one such dredge appeared to work reasonably well, many local pearl fishers pointed out that the technology ultimately damaged oysterbeds, and that its backers undervalued the vast amount of knowledge their Indigenous divers had cultivated. The enslaved pearl fishermen knew the flows of currents and settlement patterns of oysters, and some even claimed the Native divers could detect the subtle noises oysters made (more likely, the sound of shrimp and other species that were drawn to the same food sources).

Caribana's enslaved workforce became increasingly African by the mid-sixteenth century. As introduced epidemics caused mass deaths of many Taíno and Kalinago, Spain turned to the west coast of Africa, where the Portuguese had already begun a slave trade. Here they would find many African peoples who, like Native Americans, surpassed the aquaphobic colonists in swimming and diving ability. Still, Indigenous and African slavery coexisted for a long time in the region. The 1500s were a boom time for Spanish slave raiding around the Caribbean basin. Historians estimate that 650,000 Native people were captured and transported away from their homelands in the colonial period, with many tens of thousands being taken from Caribana. Since slavers were reluctant to try to steal people from uncharted Indigenous-controlled lands, much of the captive-taking actually happened on the water, as slavers targeted Kalinago canoes at sea or in the waterways of Orinico Delta.

The newly captured faced many fates: they could end up digging in mines, working in colonial plantations, or laboring as servants in wealthy Spanish households across the Atlantic. In the West Indies, they almost always ended

up working alongside African people, and rather quickly started to intermarry and combine traditions with them. In the seventeenth century, at least one ship carrying dozens, perhaps hundreds of enslaved Africans, wrecked off the island the Kalinago called *Youroumaÿn* and the English called St. Vincent. The survivors were rescued by the islanders and welcomed into their communities. This hazy, poorly documented incident was one of several origin points of the Afro-Kalinago peoples from the island that colonists later called “Black Caribs.”

By the turn of the seventeenth century, the slave ships coming from Africa were joined by ships filled with whites. These Europeans were not from the Iberian Peninsula, but rather France, England, and the Netherlands. This trio of powers would all begin scouting the Caribbean for potential colonies around the same time. Since Spain had laid claim to the mainland and the best ports of the Great Antilles, the latecomers first converged in Caribana, a region whose small islands and seemingly impenetrable river deltas attracted little Spanish investment (outside of the Pearl Coast). Dutch and English traders attempted to forge alliances with the Kalinago and the mainland Yao people. By the year 1620, as demand for tobacco spiked in Europe, the English sought to profit from the rich volcanic soils of Caribana, making footholds on Kalinago isles. First was St. Christopher (St. Kitts), later called “the mother island,” in 1623, Barbados in 1627, Antigua and Montserrat in 1632, and Nevis in 1638.⁹ The French also formed settlements on St. Christopher around the same time as the English, they and the Dutch both established presences on St. Martin in the 1630s, while France claimed Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1635. The Dutch were most prominent south of Caribana, establishing colonies on mostly Arawak territories in Guyana in 1615, and on Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao in the 1630s, islands with large natural salt pans, where the Dutch soon put Indigenous and Black slaves to work.

As Spain grew irritated at these upstarts, and rival Europeans jostled among themselves, the Kalinago shared some of these islands uneasily with tobacco growers and traders. In the beginning of these colonies, much of the tobacco the settlers brought back to Europe was actually grown by Kalinago farmers. Native islanders adapted and accommodated in this initial stage of engagement. By 1600, they had begun to rig their larger canoes with sails modeled on European designs and reportedly undertook long ocean passages

⁹ Charles Wheeler, “An Account of the Charibby Islands,” April 3, 1676, British Library, Egerton Ms. 2395, 533.

of several days to traffic with European outposts, and sometimes even engaged in piracy on the high seas.

After the English massacred and enslaved up to 2,000 Kalinago people on St. Kitts in 1626, many Indigenous groups retreated southward. By the mid-seventeenth century, the island colonies transitioned from tobacco to sugar, a move that greatly increased their populations and led some governors to attempt to remove the remaining Indigenous people off their home islands. Even in the face of this removal, the Kalinago still retained the islands of Dominica and Youroumajn (St. Vincent) as their primary strongholds. Some places like the islands of Granada and St. Lucia remained contested for decades, and at points held both colonial and Native villages.

By the second half of the seventeenth century, Greater Caribana had become kaleidoscopically complex: Kalinago, French, English, and Dutch could each claim dominance over some islands, while other spots remained contested and co-occupied by various permutations of all four peoples. And a vibrant canoe-borne trade in food, firewood, weapons, captives, and information made all these settlements interdependent to varying degrees, despite near-constant inter-imperial squabbling and continued colonial attempts to extirpate Kalinago peoples through slave raiding and wholesale massacres.

Yet Kalinagos still had reserves of a precious commodity: local knowledge. According to one anonymous source, by the 1660s, French and English sailors made an annual pilgrimage in June to the Kalinago's autonomous islands of "Dominico and St. Vincents to know when their would bee any Hurricanes that year."¹⁰ That account relayed that the Kalinago believed that hurricanes arrived according to the phases of the moon or lulls in the trade winds; other sources declared stormy skies, a red sun, enlarged stars, and the lack of clouds over hills foretold their arrival. Finding ways to anticipate these storms was valuable information for colonists, who were stunned by the force of tropical systems. French and English accounts commonly referred to Kalinago weather forecasting, revealing how foreign sailors still turned to Indigenous mariners who had navigated these seas for far longer than they.

Kalinago leaders signed their first peace treaty with the English in 1660, but they soon found that no treaty would protect them from continued slave raiding and territorial incursions, as their status as "Caribs" made them targets for enslavement. For some, the obvious answer was armed resistance.

¹⁰ Anonymous, "Concerning Hurricanes and their Prognosticks & Observations of My Owne Experience Thereupon," c. 1661, BL Egerton Ms. 2395 fol. 619–620.

Led by a man known as “Indian” Warner – the son of St. Kitts’s first governor Thomas Warner and a Kalinago woman – forces of men from Dominica made seaborne raids on Barbados, Antigua, and Montserrat from the 1650s to the early 1670s. Some of these raids were in fact in service of the Dutch and French, with whom they had allied against the English at points in the Anglo-Dutch Wars. Though he had eventually made peace with the English, Thomas “Indian” Warner died on Christmas Day 1674, in a massacre led by his half-brother, Philip Warner. Imperial officials in London were aghast at Philip’s fratricide, and charged him with murder. But a jury in Barbados later acquitted the Englishmen. Though Europeans regularly denounced the practice and frowned upon it, the trade in enslaved Indians continued, albeit at a slower pace, through the rest of the century.

Well into the eighteenth century, Dominica and Youroumaÿn eluded complete European control. Both the English and French would try to maintain timbering and provisioning outposts on the colony and occasionally raid their shores for slaves, but the bulk of these two mountainous and volcanically active islands remained in Native hands. The Indigenous populations had somewhat self-segregated into groups the colonists called “Red Caribs” (predominately Kalinago peoples) and “Black Caribs” (Afro-Kalinago, today known as the Garifuna people). The latter was more prevalent on Youroumaÿn, while the former group was found on both islands.

Both “Black” and “Red” Kalinagos would form alliances with the French authorities in Martinique and tolerate a settler population on Dominica that grew slowly. During the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), the English cited the longstanding Kalinago alliance with the French as a pretext for seizing both islands for George III, though the French would briefly regain control of both islands in the American War of Independence. The “Black Caribs” or Garifuna resisted British rule on St. Vincent well into the 1790s. Under the leadership of the charismatic Joseph Chatoyer, and backed by French allies, the Garifuna fought an unsuccessful rebellion against the British that ended in 1796 not long after Chatoyer’s death. His supporters faced a forced expulsion to the coast of Honduras. In their exile, many Garifuna survived by turning to maritime wage labor, and their communities soon spread along the Central American coast.

While the palm-lined beaches of Caribana look nothing like rocky shores of the Dawnland, their histories have uncanny resemblances. The work of extracting wealth from oysterbanks, clambanks, and saltpans could resemble labor regimes in plantations and mines, while the activities of fishing and whaling at sea were more similar to hunting in grasslands and woodlands. The routes of currents and winds shaped travel routes over saltwater in ways

not unlike how rivers and valleys channeled transit on land, though these routes were even harder to find (being invisible and only discovered through Indigenous guides or trial and error). The Native practice of adopting European-style boats or sails was loosely analogous to their adoption of horses onshore, in that they increased their reach while hunting, trading, and fighting. But unlike horses, sailboats cannot independently reproduce, meaning colonists could restrict and discourage this practice more readily. Moreover, canoes could just as easily be repurposed by colonists to expand their surveillance over Indians and their incursions into Indian territory.

On both shores, European exploitation of coastal and nearshore resources was only possible with Indigenous knowledge, technology, and labor. Coastal Natives also came to appropriate and repurpose European boats and gear for their own needs. As colonists gradually made small footholds on the shore, coastal resources and maritime industries remained a central economic connection between all societies in these saltwater frontiers. Changing demand or availability of maritime commodities like shells, pearls, whale oil, and salt had an enormous bearing on relationships between settlers and Indians. In pockets along the coast, Native-built vessels became everyday working craft for all peoples, while canoe-born piracy was a constant concern for passing sailors.

In the Dawnland and Caribana, Indigenous maritime skills and colonial greed combined to cause dramatic ecological degradation, first in the fifteenth-century pearl fishery and then in eighteenth-century shore whale fishery. Spanish inventors who responded by engineering oyster-dredging devices were not so unlike the Nantucket whalers who invented the try-works (the shipboard blubber-rendering furnace) – both were reacting to an unsustainable use of Native labor and damage to fragile coastal ecosystems with technological solutions. Pearls were also not unlike wampum. The mollusk-made jewelry acted as a hard-to-regulate currency in the early Spanish Atlantic, where, just like wampum beads, pearls were accepted as substitutes for hard specie.

While the basic triad of Spanish, French, and British (and later, Anglo-Americans) are the dominant foreign actors in landed borderlands, another player, the Dutch West India Company, appears equally important from an oceanic perspective. In both regions, Indigenous people found themselves caught in the intercolonial conflicts among the French, English, and Dutch. The Kalinago islands that remained between the interspersed claims of rival empires were not unlike a similar pattern found in the Dawnland, where Algonquians held key necks and islands between the overlapping outposts of the Dutch and English.

Larger Atlantic wars affected both regions simultaneously. In the midst of the Anglo-Dutch Wars, as the English dreaded the specter of Dutch-allied Algonquians attacking their towns, their nightmares came true in the English Antilles, where Dutch-allied Kalinago canoes besieged their countrymen at the very same time. The French also played similar roles in both places, strategically maintaining alliances with the Wabanaki to the north and the Kalinago to the south as a means to restrain British expansion through much of the eighteenth century. After holding the British at a distance with their naval defenses for centuries, both Wabanakis and Kalinagos would face aggressive British incursions after the defeat of the French in the Seven Years' War.

Similarities abound between Metacom and Thomas "Indian" Warner, who both began their political careers as close allies of the English but found themselves alienated and vilified by their former friends. Mogg Heigon, and the later seaborne Wabanaki raiders who followed his lead, might also see a familiar figure in Garifuna leaders like Joseph Chatoyer, who also took to the seas to defend their homelands, and long played the French off the British. Moreover, the peoples of the Dawn and the peoples of Caribana sometimes came into direct contact. Dozens of enslaved Wampanoags ended up in the same Caribbean plantations as captured Kalinagos on Barbados, and a small number of Kalinagos ended up being taken to New England by white owners, most famously the Salem "witch" named Tituba, a woman historians now think was Native, not Black.

Shorelines were also sites of Indigenous survival. As colonial economies matured, Indigenous men often became a major part of the maritime workforce. Being enslaved or pushed into the lower strata of the Atlantic economy would increasingly bring Indian and African-descended communities together. Doubtless some Indigenous men from both areas met in the fo'c'sle of European ships, as these maritime peoples continued seafaring out of both tradition and necessity. The resulting intermarriages and cultural blending were helpful strategies for immediate survival, but led later authorities to claim that the Indigenous people of the shore, who were now part of multiethnic communities of color, were extinct.

To be sure, some of the common features of maritime borderlands laid out above – especially inter-imperial competition and cultural hybridity – are defining features of landed borderlands as well. The ways historians study seaside spaces differ from landlocked ones, however, especially when we consider the central process of dispossession. The problems of marking boundaries, controlling access to either Indigenous or colonial realms, and

mapping present entirely new challenges on open water. Activities like sea patrols could resemble the functions of a fence, while armed ships could act like floating forts, but neither had the essential fixity that makes a fence a fence or a fort a fort. Very few documents resemble the deeds, treaties, and coerced quitclaim deeds that are standard in territorial studies. Thus, historians who examine the borderland processes centered on mappable or quantifiable forms of dispossession find maritime spaces vexing. Precisely describing how Indigenous people lost access to and control of maritime spaces is far more challenging.

Surveying these places together produces some surprising findings that contradict settler-centered stories that tend to prioritize land acquisition and inland exploration. Canoes were more than just the tiny boats overwhelmed by foreign sails but rather key connecting vessels that both sustained and constrained colonies; Native knowledge of the shore facilitated both colonial schemes and local resistance to foreign rule; even enslaved Indians acted as cultural brokers and skilled labor. Foregrounding Indigenous people as maritime actors gives us a clearer picture of their roles in the creation of a single, connected ocean world.

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