Crossing Borders, Tangling Tales:
A New Spatial History of the Nineteenth-Century World

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Note to Readers
The following draws on a larger book project, Empire’s Castaway: An Adventurer and the Nineteenth-Century World. That project seeks to place borderlands history on global foundations—taking as its point of departure the travels and entanglements of a nineteenth-century British sailor who drifted into the China Seas and Indian and Pacific Oceans and ended up a peasant villager in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. I use his trajectory and those of his border-crossing cohort to envision a scale-shifting view of world history, in which globetrotting vectors—whether on land or at sea—get tangled up in the open-ended, humanized contingencies of local history.

In this piece, I focus primarily on the spatial-historical elements of Empire’s Castaway. It’s not quite as polished as I’d hoped, due to the craziness of the beginning-of-semester. I’ve cobbled it together from a few different shorter pieces—including parts from a couple of un-footnoted papers—and so the result is a bit of a patchwork (with notes in some places, none in others). I thank you in advance for your patience, and I look forward to your feedback!
BORDERLANDS HISTORY has embarked on voyages hardly imagined a generation ago. Ever since it was first established in the 1920s as the anchor point of a broader, hemispheric history, the field has led historians into unfamiliar historiographies and archives. Yet now it is taking unprecedented spatial leaps. From its former haunts in the far northern frontiers of New Spain and the U.S.-Mexico border region, borderlands history is now drifting out across the steppe of Eurasia, the *sertão* of Brazil, the highlands and seaways of Southeast Asia. What we once envisioned as a uniquely American history has increasingly become a way of seeing the world.¹

Yet the impact of this globetrotting remains limited. Historians may deploy such keywords as *borderlands* and *frontiers* widely, but the circulation of monographs and their insights is far more localized. Few U.S.-Mexico borderlands historians read about borderlands in Patagonia or Pakistan, and fewer still see the U.S. or Mexico differently after doing so. Despite our desire to see the world, our global passages tend to be sojourns. We consider commonalities, register differences, and then sail home. The idea of a larger borderlands history is further challenged by a provincialized view of borderlands as regional, subordinate spaces; shaped by their distinct orbits around specific nations, empires, and other institutional centers of gravity.²


² For ways historians have used the terms *frontier* and *borderlands*, see Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *Journal of American History* 98 (September 2011), 338-61. Both terms start with dividing lines—*frontier* histories tending to privilege a view from one side (the side of empire or nations), *borderlands* histories tending toward more open-ended perspectives.
To move forward, we must learn to see borderlands histories not just as analogous tales—in which comparisons often reaffirm prior categories, essences, and spatial orbits—but also as tangled tales, linked by idiosyncratic itineraries, open-ended crossings, and unforeseen resonances. We can also profit from a broader notion of borderlands. Borderlands historians typically focus on lines in the sand, whether among empires or nations or between state and non-state spaces. They organize their world view around terrestrial, sedentary relationships. They rarely focus on people in motion and rarely drift far from shore. In what follows, I take a more nomadic, amphibious view—one that incorporates relations of mobility, on land and at sea—as a way of resetting our compasses. Such a view can push us to study borderlands and their crossings in a wider range of spaces; it can help us de-provincialize our borderlands tales; and, most importantly, it can help us begin to see the history of the world differently.³

One might say that global history—with its world-encompassing webs, relations of mobility, and supranational frames—already does this work for us. But global history has its blind spots. In its emphasis on the rise and intensification of long-distance contacts, it tells a tale not unlike that of most national histories, in which a fragmented world of localized spaces yields to modern processes of incorporation. This is a powerful narrative, driven in large part by recent visions of globalization. But it makes imperfect sense of a border-crossing longue durée in which the spatial webs of nations, cultures, markets, and institutions were powerful but hardly ever all-encompassing—and in which even the most confident effort to reorganize space around the modern “grids” of nations or markets could lead to unanticipated (if not also localized, unstable, and uncertain) ends.⁴

If global history cuts a highly-selective path through space and time in its globalizing telos, it also privileges a top-down view that can miss much of the substance of world history. As historians William McNeill and Richard White remind us, histories play out at multiple scales. At one scale, we see ships hauling cargo through a coastal maze of islands, estuaries, and jungle rivers. At another, a

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village go-between translates for a naval purser. At another, two nations go to war; and at another, migrants, guns, and money cross seas and continents. Each scale reveals some things and obscures others; yet “it is impossible to look at one scale without encountering others,” White tells us. To see the world, he proposes, it is not enough to open up our lens. We must also move across scales—the local, the regional, the national, and beyond—and ask how scales relate. To really see the world, we must become nomads ourselves.5

Borderlands offer powerful vantage points for transcending these blind spots. As portals to other realms, transfer points in global circuits, and zones of overlapping institutional and sovereign power, borderlands both reinforce and destabilize visions of spatial incorporation. They also serve as useful points of entry into scale-shifting approaches. As crossing-over places, they can propel us into broader vistas while also grounding our inquiries. Borderlands, in this sense, are places where globetrotting vectors get tangled in the local contingencies of the world. To be sure, scales entangle everywhere. But due to the liminal place of borderlands in nested, state-centered visions (in which localities add up to constitute regions—and regions add up to constitute empires and nations), they can be profitable sites to engage such entanglements. They represent perfect jumping-off places for open-ended journeys across space and scales.6

The challenge for borderlands historians is to find meaningful ways to study these dynamics at a global scale, without losing sight of the local interfaces—the spaces where worlds crossed over, the nodes where global networks took shape, the fault lines where the kinetic energy of borderland dynamics shattered, subverted, or redirected trajectories.7 The challenge is also to see the world up close, without getting lost in the world. One might begin with a place, just as a fisherwoman finds a

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5 William H. McNeill, “A Defence of World History: The Prothero Lecture,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 32 (1982), 75-89; and Richard White, “The Nationalization of Nature,” Journal of American History 86 (December 1999), 976-86; quote p. 979. McNeill uses the metaphor of a tree. A tree is a tree, he writes, yet it is also millions of cells and many millions of molecules. A tree is also part of a forest, which is part of a global ecosystem. Different patterns emerge at different scales, each pattern has meaning and significance, and each has the potential to disappear from view, depending on the scale. McNeill, “World History,” 82-84.

6 My argument here is largely pragmatic. One may say that my view of sidestepping nested spatial hierarchies of states and gravitating towards the liminality of borderlands reinforces a centrist view. As true as this may be, it is often easier to begin from the frayed edges when disassembling and reassembling a fabric. Moreover, I would argue (as the historian Natalie Rothman has argued for trans-imperial contexts) that borderlands are productive spaces for examining both how historical dynamics transcended incorporationist logics and how incorporationist processes and identities were produced. Natalie Rothman, Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2012), 7.

7 For kinetic energy in borderlands contexts, see Pekka Hämäläinen, “What’s in a Concept? The Kinetic Empire of the Comanches,” History and Theory 52 (February 2013), 81-90; but I also draw here on Pekka Hämäläinen, “ Empires in Motion,” and Samuel Truett, “Kinetic Regimes in the Mexican North and Sulu Sea,” Workshop on Kinetic Empires, Oxford Centre for Global History, University of Oxford, November 6, 2013.
promising current and casts a net for the world to pass through. Or one might dive in and drift with the world to multiple shores. One might seek a prevailing current: a traditional strategy of colonial historians, migration scholars, and others who track people at large scales through past worlds. Or one might begin locally and idiosyncratically, by finding a traveling companion and seeking passage on the next stagecoach, train, or schooner.

Following the lead of such historians as Linda Colley, Emma Rothschild, and Natalie Zemon Davis (to name a few), I am drawn to the potential of this final strategy. What might we learn about the past by seeing the world and its borderlands through the entanglements of individuals and their ever-shifting, border-crossing cohorts? The point of this exercise is not simply to consider mobility and entanglement in multiple places, and at multiple scales—but also to approach these dynamics in a humanized way, as historical actors would have experienced them: locally, intimately, and with an incomplete sense of prevailing currents.8

It was my own local view of the world—and my imperfect sense of its prevailing currents—that led me to my traveling companion in 2005, deep in the rare book and manuscript collections of the Huntington Library in Los Angeles. His name was John Denton Hall and he sailed from London’s East India Docks in 1843, a young adventurer’s apprentice, to see the world. I met him on the other side. In 1849, he jumped ship with countless others in the gold fields of California. After months of unremarkable luck, he fell in with a crew of mestizo and indigenous Ópata miners from the Mexican borderlands of Sonora—and when they prepared to return south to the tiny village of Cucurpe, they invited him to tag along. “I could not speak a word of Spanish, nor my companions English,” he later wrote. “But youth and the love of adventure . . . decided me.”9

Hall imagined he’d spend a few years in Sonora, recoup his losses in a Mexican bonanza, and sail back to England. Instead he fell in love with a local girl, began to raise a family, and soon found himself entangled in a realm that lay hundreds of miles from the nearest seaport. When his mining ventures failed, and they almost always did, he became a jack-of-all-trades: a surveyor, a smuggler, a traveling doctor, a village scribe. At first he kept a diary, recording his adventures and encounters with the passion of a sojourner. Fifteen years in, the diary became a sober memoir, written at night

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9 John Denton Hall, *Travels and Adventures in Sonora; Containing a Description of its Mining and Agricultural Resources and a Narrative of a Residence of Fifteen Years* (Chicago: J.M.W. Jones Stationery and Printing Co., 1881), 9-11.
by the dim flicker of a tallow candle. Then one day in the 1860s—distracted by village work, battles among mestizo-Ópata strongmen and their rural entourages, and wars with Apaches from the north and French-occupied Mexico to the south—he stopped writing altogether.10

In retrospect, it is a miracle that Hall’s memoirs survived. They gathered dust for years, and things might have ended there. But then in the late 1870s, now a village elder, he took his tale from the shelf, jotted a few notes in the margins, and sent it into the world. It ended up in Chicago, where it was typeset and printed by a local press, J.M.W. Jones, best known for its output of railway tickets, maps, timetables, and booster pamphlets. Years later, one surviving copy made its way west to the manuscript and rare book vaults of the Huntington Library.11

Among accounts of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Hall’s memoirs stand out. The expense and care put into their production would typically suggest a large print run, but only five copies survive. Booksellers knew little to nothing of their existence for years—and they remain largely unknown to historians. They’re also incredible for their perspective. Peasants rarely put their stories on paper. What we know of nineteenth-century Mexican villages often comes from literate sojourners, usually years later, often from a great distance. Hall’s portrait of Cucurpe, instead, is precise, sensitive, and immediate—reflecting his status as an adopted son. He understands his Mexican and Ópata cohort as few outsiders can, evoking George Simmel’s figure of the “stranger”: the newcomer who “comes today and stays tomorrow.” This is an individual whose liminal, yet enduring, position in village life allows him to bridge, to broker, to go between.12

What’s also striking about Hall’s account is what he leaves out. He begins mid-stride, as he’s leaving California. He bids farewell to five nameless partners at Angel’s Camp, and heads south. We have no idea how he came to California, and in the 300 pages of his narrative, he says nothing of his Mexican family. The villager who invites him south is simply “Don Chico,” and Mr. C is the name of a

10 From clues in Hall’s Travels and Adventures, it looks like he kept a regular diary for a year or so before work and family intervened. From that point on, his diary was a sporadic affair.


12 For Georg Simmel’s figure of the “stranger,” see George Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), 143-49. Simmel’s views, dating back to the early twentieth century, continue to be important for work on go-betweens; see, for instance, his influence on essays in Simon Shaffer, et al., ed., The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820 (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2009).
carpenter from Texas who joins Hall and Don Chico in their Mexican mining ventures. Hall’s choice to keep his personal life to himself makes the historian’s work hard. It took me years to track down a wife and children; longer still to verify which of Cucurpe’s Franciscos was Don Chico. And I’ve yet to fully unmask the enigmatic Mr. C.13

Figure 1. Hall’s *Travels and Adventures in Sonora* (Huntington Library, San Marino, California).

Equally elusive, if also more intriguing, is Hall’s globetrotting past. It’s intriguing because he brushes it aside, yet plants tantalizing clues throughout, a trail of bread crumbs to other worlds. On his way to Mexico, a sojourn with the Yuma Indians reminds him of his youth among the indigenous communities of Borneo. He finds himself fumbling for words in Malay and Bengali. In Cucurpe, the use of tortillas as utensils calls to mind the use of chopsticks in opium-trading “chow chows” on the

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13 It was largely on the suspicion that he married locally (how else, I wondered, could he have been able to get so close to the heart of the village) that I began to look for a wife and family. I still know next to nothing about his coordinates or companions in the gold diggings. Don Chico was Francisco Altamirano y Altamirano, head of the Cucurpe militia (in its campaigns against Apaches, in particular); and Mr. C was Henry “Enrique” Clarke, born in London and raised as a child in frontier Texas (dues point to the Buffalo Bayou, across from Galveston Island) before he drifted west to California. The mother of Hall’s children, Francisca Palomino, may have been a common law wife; I find no record of a marriage, but this was not uncommon at this time.
China coast. Sugar mills in the nearby countryside remind him of sugar mills near the Ganges River in India. Then there’s the sea captain he meets on the Mexican coast in 1851, with whom he’d once battled China Seas pirates. “I shall never forget his surprise,” he later writes. “I must confess I was not rigged in a sailor-like manner, my dress being a short Mexican jacket, long buckskin moccasins, and a tall Mexican hat.”

These flashes of Hall’s prior life pulled me in, and I began to track clues. Shipping news gave the name of the sea captain on the coast, Sir Henry Keppel, commander of *H.M.S. Maeander* and later Admiral of the Royal Navy. I tracked Keppel back in time to 1843—to pirate-fighting campaigns off the coast of Borneo. Meanwhile, a genealogist led me to a Mexican-American desk worker in Texas, Tony Dalton, puzzling over the odd British sailor who’d washed up in his great-great-grandmother’s village in Mexico to become his great-great grandfather. Tony’s closet yielded old letters from Hall’s siblings—whose memories led me to a London charity school named Christ’s Hospital. The school’s discharge registers gave me the rest. A young orphan named John Denton Hall, apprenticed in 1843 to a band of merchant-adventurers, bound for Borneo.

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15 For Keppel’s voyage in the China Seas and the Pacific basin on *H.M.S. Maeander*, see Henry Keppel, *A Visit to the Indian Archipelago in H.M. Ship Maeander*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), and for his campaigns against Borneo pirates, see Henry Keppel, *The Expedition to Borneo of H.M.S. Dido for the Suppression of Piracy*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1846). For memories of Christ’s Hospital, see Charles Hall to John Denton Hall, May 22 1878, Tony Dalton Papers; for Hall’s apprenticeship to the London merchant-adventurer, George
I then did something that few scholars of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands do. I began spending my vacations in the British archives, following ships, sailors, and other drifters to the far side of the world. With Hall as a traveling companion, I traced new paths through the nineteenth century, and around the globe. Spaces that I’d never connected to the U.S. or Mexico—much less a remote village in the middle of nowhere—gathered substance in my mind’s eye, transforming my sense of how the world and its border-crossing places fit together.

In the discussion ahead, I use my travels with Hall as a point of departure for imagining new world-history coordinates. I return to Richard White’s scale-shifting view, in particular, as a way of recovering a broader spectrum of entanglements. I’m interested not only in linking the global to the local, but also in rethinking mid-scale aggregates. Historians love crowds, clinging to the warmth of larger patterns, and we often begin with prior ideas about which aggregates (nations, villages, tribal communities, diasporas, etc.) matter most. Some might even think it pointless to pull someone like John Denton Hall from such assemblages, as if under a microscope, since individuals find their most important place within aggregates. Disaggregate individual trajectories, a critic might say, and they can become trivial outliers, anomalies, exceptions, or problematic metonyms.16

Yet if we begin with individuals, assemble their cohorts, and work from there to larger-scale networks—if we dismantle and then reconstruct aggregates from the ground up—we can often test our assumptions about which aggregates matter. We may find that people were imperial, ethnic, or market actors, but not in the containers that we’d mapped out for them. Where we thought we saw anomalies, we might find anomalous patterns that force us to rethink our categories. We might find more people than expected spinning from their orbits; like molecular free radicals, decoupling from and reconnecting global nodes, wiring the world together in new ways.

In John Denton Hall’s world, empires, nations, and global markets matter greatly—but three other dynamics share the stage. Entanglements of patronage and family are the first two of these. They simultaneously reinforce and destabilize imperial, national, and market spaces and are central to the realms I discuss here. I also pay attention to spatial resonances—the ways that relationships in different places played out similarly due not simply to global entanglements, but also to resonant

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16 This is particularly true for social histories of non-elites, of so-called “ordinary” people—in which the larger significance of individual actions might be harder to demonstrate—and it has become true for particular non-elite indigenous groups who have found their place more clearly within such social-aggregate-driven fields as anthropology. One starting point for thinking about this dynamic in an American context is Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of Carolina Press, 1997).
local contingencies. Because we prefer tales of cause-and-effect, we often explain such dynamics in a top-down fashion, attributing parallel effects to global causes. Yet drifting ship to ship, village to village, we often see resonant local causes—effects not so much of a globalizing logic, as of what the historian Lauren Benton has called (in the context of imperial history) the “anomalies of empire,” in which the larger linkages and patterns of a global-imperial world often emerged from the “oddities or singularities” of local historical conditions.17

A view of the world from its local entanglements and resonances can significantly transform a view of global history that privileges long-distance contacts and mobility. In such a view, a drifter like Hall can figure prominently, but British or Mexican villagers—or the native peoples of Borneo and the Arizona-Sonora borderlands—fall out of sight as local eddies in larger, world-encompassing streams. And yet, through their small-scale entanglements and resonant actions, the Samal-Iranun of the China Seas, the Dayaks of Borneo, the Mexicans and Ópata of Cucurpe, and the Apaches from present-day Arizona were part of a larger border-crossing history that was as much of their making as it was that of those who traveled or traded long distances, launched imperial or market ventures from powerful positions, or washed up one day in someone else’s village.

By taking on a traveling companion, I am not seeking a more humanized view of a world we already know. I am seeking to explain a world we only barely suspect—a world often held together by a thousand local decisions; a world in which the smallest unexpected detail can flip assumptions of spatial power and hierarchies on their head. Hall, a child of empire, sailed into a world he did not fully understand, and he soon found himself tangled up in the world. Like him, we would do well to revisit our assumptions about the spaces, scales, and actors of history if we wish to fully understand his border-crossing world and its uneven, unstable spatial coordinates.

There was little at first to presage the road ahead. John Denton Hall was born 1827 to a well-heeled family of pottery manufacturers in landlocked Staffordshire. In 1832, soon after he turned five, his father declared bankruptcy, and ran away to America to avoid debtor’s prison. His mother Hannah gathered her five children and joined a brother, Ashlin Bagster, a peripatetic railway pioneer. When

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Bagster became the manager of the new London & Birmingham Railway in 1837, they moved to the northern fringes of London. Hannah then had John baptized, took him down to Newgate Street near the Thames River, and enrolled him in Christ’s Hospital.  

Figure 3. The King's Boys of Christ's Hospital, *London Town* (London: Marcus Ward, 1883).

Christ’s Hospital had been founded during the sixteenth century for poor boys cast into the street by the dissolution of the monasteries. In 1837, it remained a charity school, but a boy needed a patron; he needed to be presented by one of the school's governors. Hall secured the patronage of John Pirie, a prominent shipping agent in the East India trade and soon to be Lord Mayor of London. Christ’s Hospital housed the Royal Mathematical School, a school within a school, whose forty most talented boys were trained for a life at sea, as navigators or maritime surveyors. These were the so-called King’s Boys, provided for by royal subsidy. Pirie had gauged Hall’s potential, and Hall did not disappoint. With a knack for math and maps, he became a King’s Boy at the age of twelve.

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Then the news came in short, tragic bursts. First, his father’s death, somewhere in America, followed by Ashlin’s sudden demise at the age of thirty, on railroad business up near Derby. Then, a few days short of his thirteenth birthday, he heard of his mother’s passing in Birmingham. As aunts and uncles sorted his siblings along a slender thread of households from Hampstead to London, Hall threw himself at his studies and the prospects of a new life at sea.20

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, an adventurer named James Brooke drifted east from Singapore to Borneo. Brooke had grown up in a mixed Anglo-Indian household north of Calcutta, a son of a prominent East India Company judge. The Company was in decline, having cut its maritime branch in 1834, opening the China Seas to a new cohort of merchant-adventurers. Brooke was one of many moving out from India in search of new frontiers, a journey that had led him into the inter-imperial, multi-ethnic borderlands of maritime Southeast Asia.21

In early August 1839, as Hall puzzled through sextants, almanacs, and *Bonnycastle’s Algebra*, Brooke sailed his yacht up Borneo’s Sarawak River. He hoped to trade with the indigenous Dayaks and Chinese colonists of the interior, but he and his mixed cohort of British and Orang Laut (Lingga-Riau Malay) adventurers were soon ensnared in battles between coastal Malay gentry and agents of the Sultan of Brunei—whose seat of power lay hundreds of miles east along the coast. After Brooke helped the Sultan’s men establish control and broker a peace, he was awarded a position within the Sultanate as a petty ruler over Sarawak, a province roughly the size of England.22

In 1842, as the self-styled White Rajah of Sarawak settled into his new quarters in the small Malay village of Kuching, his agents in London outfitted a merchant brig to prime the trade between Sarawak and Singapore. In January 1843, they visited Christ’s Hospital to meet the graduating class of the Royal Mathematical School. In March, two young apprentices, Henry Steele and John Denton Hall, boarded the 250-ton *Ariel* with their new master, a former East India Company mariner by the name of George Steward. As the Thames dwindled behind them, new vistas beckoned: Cape Town, the Indian Ocean, Anjer Roads, Singapore, Kuching.23

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20 For Ashlin Bagster see “Deaths,” *Derby Mercury* (Derby) 10 July 1839; for parents Thomas and Hannah Hall, see “Deaths,” *Staffordshire Gazette and Standard* (Stafford), 16 May 1840.


Soon after the *Ariel* reached Sarawak, the venture entered treacherous seas. Brooke and his agents turned their attention to the antimony- and gold-mining regions of the interior, and began to set up new trade relations with their Dayak, Chinese, and Malay neighbors. As the business hobbled along, they began to feud over the future of their tiny adventurer enclave (at the time, less than two dozen strong). Early in 1844, maritime raiders from the nearby Sulu Sea—the so-called “pirates” of Borneo—began gathering along the northern coast. That August, George Steward joined the White Rajah and the British naval officer Henry Keppel against their new foes. He was last seen as pirates dragged his bloody body from his gig into the jungles of the nearby Skrang River.24

![Figure 4. James Brooke, “White Rajah” of Sarawak, 1847 (National Portrait Gallery, London).](image)

Apprenticeships dissolved, Henry Steele stayed on the island with Brooke, and Hall plunged headlong into the China Seas. In Singapore, he joined *H.M.S. Samarang*, a surveying vessel tasked to map the East Indian Archipelago after the Opium War of 1839-42. Parlaying his mathematical skills into a position as assistant navigator, he drifted for two-and-a-half years across a range of maritime

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borderlands. Eastward the hydrographic crew sailed into the multiethnic fringes of the Brunei and Sulu sultanates; north to the Loo-Choo (Ryukyu) Islands that bridged China and Japan; south to the Sulu Archipelago and nearby Mindanao, an embattled borderland (as it remains today) between the Christian Philippines and Islamic Indonesia; then west across Dutch and English lines, into the heart of the Indian Ocean and points beyond.25

When the Samarang returned to London in early 1847, Hall hovered at the city’s edge with other sailors along East India Road, near the docks. His sense of the world was now simultaneously localized and thousands of miles away. By April, he was back at sea as the second mate on the Royal Albert, a cotton- and opium-trading frigate bound for India and China. Commanded by the Irishman Anthony Scanlan, who sailed the first cargo of Chinese tea direct to Dublin in 1835, the Royal Albert led Hall into a unique maritime world of its own—anchored in the ports and estuaries of South and East Asia. They waited out monsoons in Bombay, threaded the Malacca Straits to Canton, and then moved opium from the Malwa plateau of west-central India north along the coast toward Shanghai. They wintered with other British sailors at Whampoa Island, in the throat of the Pearl River. After the spring monsoons let up, they sailed west to Calcutta, and then up along the swollen Hooghly and Ganges rivers toward the foothills of the Himalayas, in search of return cargo.26

Figure 5. William John Huggins, Opium-trading ships anchored at Lintin on the Pearl River (1824).


By the time Hall returned to the East India Docks shortly before Christmas, 1848, the world had turned on its axis. Economic crises in Europe had unsettled the East India trade, and the streets were ablaze with tales of California—a country irrigated by rivers of gold. What Hall did next is not exactly clear. According to his memoirs, he sailed for Callao. Perhaps he did so on a merchant ship with the guano trade, or perhaps it was on a private schooner for California, that paused along the coast of Peru to let adventurers stretch their legs before sailing on. This part of his global trajectory is a mystery. I’ve searched endless crew lists, but many crew lists never returned to London. They rotted with ships in San Francisco bay, as sailors deserted in droves for the diggings.27

With his navigator’s training and strong record of advancement, Hall no doubt saw America as a sojourn. Plunging across the desert into Mexico, he wondered more than once why he’d traded the deck of a ship for the back of a mule. “I’ve taken the weather casing off the Horn and the Cape of Good Hope,” he chuckled, “but the pitching was nothing in comparison to what I experienced on the back of that confounded jade.” “I was not,” he wrote, “advent at that kind of navigation.”28

Cucurpe changed things. Hall and Don Chico took on a partner, the Texas drifter, Mr. C, and poured their pesos into a string of stubborn mines. Months bled into years as they waited for their gambles to pay. Then there were the two village girls—Francisca Palomino and María Encarnación Bonillas—who took Hall and Mr. C into their homes, and wove them into family webs. Tomás came in 1859, followed by Carlos, named after Hall’s father and orphaned brother. Names navigated the gap between nations, but also had a way of fading. By the time Hall was buried in Cucurpe in 1892, his own had wilted away. Neighbors remembered him as the peasant villager, Juan Dentón—his surname vanishing, Mexican-style, as a matronymic.

Hall’s transformation from British sailor to Mexican villager was hardly typical, and far from inevitable. Apart from a tiny enclave of foreigners in the port city of Guaymas—made up largely of British, U.S., and Spanish drifters in the British-dominated Pacific-and-China trades, who came after Mexican Independence in the 1820s and became coastal merchants—few English speakers lived in Sonora in 1850. The nearest U.S. settlement was Doña Ana, New Mexico, 375 miles through Apache lands and the rugged Sierra Madres. This changed after 1854, when the U.S. annexed 30,000 square

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miles from Mexico in the Gadsden Purchase (soon to be southern Arizona), moving its border closer to Cucurpe. Hall might have moved north, as many did, to pursue his fortune among white English speakers. The border raises questions. Why Mexico? Why not something easier?29

Figure 6. A scene near Cucurpe, Sonora (1851), John Russell Bartlett Collection, Brown University.

The answer was bound up in struggles similar to those that Hall witnessed as a youth in the China Seas. During the 1850s, Sonora was plagued by filibusters (from the Dutch vrijbuiter, or land pirate) from the north. Among the most notorious was William Walker, who briefly invaded Sonora and Baja California with a crew of adventurers in 1853, before moving on in 1855 to take Nicaragua (a venture that resonated in striking ways with Brooke’s Sarawak). Two years later, the Californian Henry Crabb followed in Walker’s footsteps. Hoping to create an independent “Republic of Sonora.” Crabb and his army of filibusters seized the town of Caborca in April, 1857—only to lose their lives in a bloody battle with Mexican volunteers (many recruited in nearby Cucurpe).30


30 Hall focuses a fair bit on filibusters throughout his memoirs; for a larger context, begin with Robert E. May, Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002); but also see Joseph Allen Stout, Jr., The Liberators: Filibustering Expeditions into Mexico, 1848-1862 and the Last Thrust of Manifest Destiny (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1973), and Amy S. Greenberg’s Manifest Manhood Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For
These invasions unsettled a land already wracked by generations of violence. Hall and Mr. C sought refuge north of the border, but Arizona was no better. There they met Henry Titus, a former soldier-of-fortune with Walker in Nicaragua, hoping to recover his losses in Arizona’s mines. When Titus hired Hall and other Cucurpenos to work his claims in 1859, things quickly fell apart. A mob of former Crabb supporters rode through the nearby Sonoita Valley that May, killing several Mexicans and terrorizing countless others. When Hall rode in pursuit, he was thwarted by white settlers who labeled him as a “greaser.” The so-called Sonoita massacre marked a line in the sand, forcing Hall to make a decision. Packing his saddlebacks, he headed south, bidding adios to his short-lived venture into the barbaric American West.31

Figure 7. Stereotyped View of “Greasers” from Sonora, J. Ross Browne, *Tour Through Arizona* (1869)

And so the seasons passed, as the British adventurer, John Denton Hall, became the Mexican villager, Juan Dentón. These were not easy years. The uncertainties of small-scale mining kept Hall in motion, from one mountain range to the next. When the mines failed to deliver, he drifted among the villages as a healer—learning native plants, and mastering indigenous cures. In this borderland between Apaches to the north, and Mexicans, Ópatas, and Yaquis to the south, his travels frequently

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cut across enemy lines. Cucurpe rooted him in place at certain seasons—but contests among village factions also sent him on the road, to seek refuge in nearby Magdalena, Rayón, Tucson. Hall’s global horizons shrunk, but his life remained as nomadic, as unsettled, as ever.32

Cucurpe’s isolation was briefly shattered in the 1860s as a new cohort sailed from California with stamp mills, steam engines, and capital. Like previous adventurers, they came in search of lost mines—this time, at the front edge of a seismic wave rippling out from the Comstock Lode. Among their ranks was a young engineer, Louis Janin, who visited the mines that Hall, Don Chico, and Mr. C had nursed to life. It was Janin who pushed Hall to tell his tale—to lure outsiders in, to capitalize on his local knowledge of Mexican mines. A new railroad bill had been passed, California was teeming with energy, and it would only be a matter of time before Mexico became the next big thing. But by 1865, the California bubble had burst. As suddenly as they had come, Janin and his fortune hunters weighed anchor and vanished into the Pacific.33

And so the castaway snuffed his candle and put his tale on the shelf. Things may have ended there, were it not for a chance meeting in Tucson in 1879. An Army Quartermaster, William Myers, was passing through from California to his new post in Chicago. He met a villager named Hall, who was waiting out a revolt down south. Perhaps their discussion turned to silver, a subject of interest to Myers. The villager gave Myers a manuscript and a hand-drawn map of mines. In Chicago, Myers had the manuscript typeset and the map traced by a young topographical engineer in his office. He had them printed and bound by J.M.W. Jones, a printer on Dearborn Street.34

It was an expensive print run, intended for a select cohort of readers. Four of five surviving copies were signed by magnates of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, a Chicago-centered railroad that had projected new lines across the border—among them, the Sonora Railway. These magnates had a close relationship with Quartermaster Myers, who used the Santa Fe system to supply the U.S. Army’s war against the Apaches. But military traffic wasn’t the only thing on their mind. Myers and

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33 Janin report in Reports, Prospectus and By-Laws of the Santa Teresa de Jesus Silver Mining Co. (San Francisco: Turnbull & Smith, 1864), 10-26; but see also Janin diaries, HM 64294 (1863), and HM 64295 (1863-64), in Papers of Louis Janin (Addenda), Huntington Library, San Marino, California

his Santa Fe associates had also begun to speculate in mining properties along the Sonora Railway’s projected route through the mineral-rich lands around Cucurpe. Hall’s memoirs, his insider’s guide to the borderlands, led the way.35

Figure 8. Detail from Hall’s map with proposed Sonora Railway. Hall, Travels and Adventures (1881).

Hall surely anticipated this. He would have viewed the conquest of Apaches and the arrival of railways as an end to isolation, violence, and poverty. Handing his story to Myers, he envisioned the modern world that had eluded adventurers in the 1850s and 1860s. It would arrive too late for him, but not for his children and grandchildren. Railroads would lead to mining camps and barrios on both sides of the line, turning peasants into wage workers, turning Mexicans into Americans. So began another border-crossing tale, long after the British sailor in their Mexican family tree took his final paseo through the hills of northern Sonora.

It’s relatively easy to frame Hall’s border-crossing story in the context of the American West and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the frame that led me to his memoirs in the Huntington Library. The story might begin—as Hall’s memoirs began—in the California gold fields, with its formative nineteenth-

35 Five copies of Hall’s memoirs survive; copies at the Weldon (Western Ontario) and Huntington libraries are inscribed by Elijah Smith; a copy at the Houghton Library (Harvard) has the bookplate of T. Jefferson Coolidge and is inscribed by S.A. Kent; and a fourth, at the Beinecke Library (Yale), is inscribed by H.C. Nutt. All were Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad magnates.
century struggles between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans. It might continue with the subsequent elaboration of these relationships along the Arizona-Sonora border; and it might end half a century later, with the conquest of the Apaches and the arrival of the transcontinental railroad: the dawn of a new modern era and its border crossings.

The story begins full of possibilities, at least for John Denton Hall, who imagines Mexico as a land of opportunity. Things are different for his Mexican and Ópata companions, who are returning south in the shadow of the 1850 Foreign Miners Tax, after which gangs of white men violently drive Mexicans (and other Latin Americans) out of the gold fields. The same overland journey that opens up space for Hall represents a shrinking of space for his Mexican friends. And yet by the time of the 1859 Sonoita Massacre, which echoes the racial violence of California’s gold camps, Hall has become more like them. His spatial coordinates have shrunk accordingly. They’ve shrunk due to the battles between Apaches and Sonorans, to the political and ethnic struggles among mestizos and Ópatas, to his isolation from commercial and transportation networks. These things limit his capacity to move through and transform space as he desires. In the end, he has only his traveling tale—a message in a bottle—to whet the appetites of other border-crossing nomads.36

As far as stories go, this one is compelling, and even useful. But like all narratives, it exposes some relationships and obscures others. Among other things, it incorporates the U.S. West and U.S.-Mexico borderlands into a particular kind of border-crossing history—one that hinges primarily on north-south binaries. It may tell a compelling tale about the United States and Mexico, but it misses other border-crossing relationships. Most importantly, it ignores the open-ended currents that led Hall to this part of the world in the first place, and which continued to shape his trajectory (and that of his ever-shifting cohort) long after he had made himself at home there.

To consider these currents, we need to open the lens wider, to see Hall’s border crossings at a larger scale. His story begins locally enough in the English pottery-making village of Burslem, but to understand his father’s bankruptcy—the trauma that set Hall in motion—I must float west down the Trent & Mersey canal, from the Staffordshire Potteries to the port of Liverpool. I must trace the transoceanic circuits that bound the pottery-making firm of John Hall & Sons to consumers in North America. I must follow plates and saucers to Boston’s North End—where Hall’s uncle John, and his wife Caroline (the daughter of a New England glass-and-earthenware merchant) lost a losing battle

for America’s dinner tables. I have to situate a broken business and a dislocated family in the wider border crossings of the Atlantic World.

Hall’s subsequent travels across the English countryside with his uncle, the railroad pioneer Ashlin Bagster, connected him to global networks of technology and empire that would find echoes in his later passage to the Americas. Ashlin was the protégé of the English railroad engineer, Robert Stephenson, a man famous for his industrial transformation of England—but who cut his engineer’s teeth in South America, in the silver mines of Colombia. Then there were the wider, global horizons of Christ’s Hospital, preparing the King’s Boys as navigators, hydrographers, surveyors. There, Hall joined the likes of John Septimus Roe, Thomas Cass, and John Bushnan, renowned in the nineteenth century for their surveys of Western Australia, New Zealand, and the frozen Arctic.

Figure 9. Scene on the Sarawak River, Henry Keppel, *The Expedition to Borneo of H.M.S. Dido* (1846).

If Hall started out modestly as an adventurer’s apprentice, his path into the China Seas also led to a larger stage, a stage shaped by British empire, but also transcending empire. James Brooke and his cohort relied on the political and military support of Whitehall and Greenwich, but they also drew heavily on the Asian networks of the East India Company—a space of “corporate sovereignty” that both articulated with and worked autonomously from the London-centered empire. The crew of adventurers who took Henry Steele and John Denton Hall to Sarawak, and the London merchants who backed the scheme, all came from the same East India Company circles of the early nineteenth-century China trade: a powerful world held together by ships, ports, and seasonal border crossings; a nomadic world largely unto itself.
Hall’s later cohort of opium traders drifted in similar nomadic realms, bound not only to far-off London, but also to Bombay, Calcutta, Canton, Edinburgh, Singapore, Manila, Salem, and Boston. If their financial networks centered on London, their webs of affiliation, trust, and information (key features of a trade that was illicit in China) were often linked to intimate nodes of a vast community of Scots abroad. To understand the maritime worlds that Hall saw from the decks of the *Samarang*, I must take in English, Spanish, Dutch, and French fleets; Chinese, Japanese, and Arabian diasporas; sultans, rajahs, and their island entourages. I must consider countless borderlands not only between empires, but also with maritime indigenous regimes, who like indigenous regimes in North America often exerted power at considerable scales. I must consider larger shifts that led the British to send the *Samarang* east in the first place: the Opium War of 1839-42, the opening of new Chinese treaty ports, the need to make the poorly-charted Eastern Archipelago legible both to empire and to a new generation of maritime entrepreneurs.

In the Pacific, too, Hall drifted in a larger-scale world—interwoven in part by British fleets, linking India, China, Australia, and New Zealand (on one side) to Chile, Peru, Mexico, California, and Vancouver (on the other), but also interwoven by webs of trans-Pacific migration, as well as by vast indigenous networks focused on insular nodes such as Hawaii or Tahiti. We often equate gold rush California with land-crossing pioneers, but in Hall’s world, Pacific routes to California loomed large. The Pacific also exerted a strong influence over the western U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In the 1850s, the state of Sonora was bound far more tightly to British trade on the coast than it was to the United States. Such was the trade, in fact, that brought Sir Henry Keppel face-to-face with John Denton Hall in Mexico in 1851. This is a chance reunion that makes sense only on a larger scale, moving beyond continental, U.S.-Mexico binaries.

Yet to fully understand Hall’s entanglements, I must also look closer. I must also follow him across borders at much smaller scales. The story of his journey from Staffordshire to the jungles of Sarawak, to the decks of *H.M.S. Samarang* and the opium clippers, and then east across the Pacific to the Americas, has all the characteristics of the picaresque. A border-crossing trickster moves adrift from society, making his way through the world by his wits and his roguish charm. Yet at a smaller scale, different patterns emerge—connecting the nodes of his global itinerary differently and giving them a different sequential and spatial logic.

At a smaller scale, for instance, I see webs of patronage that can be hard to discern at larger scales. I see Robert Stephenson, who through his networks of London industrialists and merchants connected his protégé, Ashlin Bagster, to John Pirie, the broker-prince of the East India Docks. John Pirie becomes Hall’s patron at Christ’s Hospital—and as Hall moves into the world, Pirie is never far
behind. He was a partner of the consortium of merchant-adventurers who sailed John Denton Hall and Henry Steele to Sarawak. This same cohort had intimate ties with Money Wigram and Anthony Scanlan—the owner and commander, respectively, of the Royal Albert. They also had the ear of Sir Edward Belcher, the surveyor-commander of the Samarang, who started his tour of the East Indian Archipelago with a courtesy visit to (and glowing report on) Brooke’s Sarawak.

Figure 10. Navvies on Stephenson’s London & Birmingham Railway near Hall’s London home (1836).

Hall appears on the Samarang’s muster as a volunteer—apparently set free after his master, George Steward, was killed by Borneo pirates. Sir Edward Belcher’s private correspondence tells a different tale. It turns out that the surveyor had his eye on Hall ever since he arrived in Sarawak—most likely drawn to his mathematical pedigree. When Hall drifted into Belcher’s world in 1844, he did so because Steward’s fellow adventurers transferred an apprentice from one master to the next. Hall’s talents would eventually set him free, bringing him to the upper decks as the ship’s assistant navigator. But his crossing from island to ship depended largely on others. It was anything but the unfettered passage of a globetrotting picaro.

Across Hall’s trajectory, local communities of men and their intimate networks of affiliation figure just as powerfully as empires and nations in setting spatial coordinates. As it turns out, I can trace the cohort that held Hall’s maritime world together to a single ship in the East India Company fleet, Castle Huntly. James Brooke first saw the China Seas from its decks in 1830, escaping the East India Company’s army—and he built his Sarawak venture through men he met on board. After the
Company grounded its fleet in 1834, most of Brooke’s former messmates moved into networks tied to *Castle Huntly* purser Henry Wright, now a partner with Jardine, Matheson & Co., Canton’s largest opium-trading firm. Among these was James Gard’ner, a later *Castle Huntly* purser, who purchased the *Castle Huntly* and became a broker and Brooke’s agent in partnership with former *Castle Huntly* mate Henry Wise. (Gard’ner and Wise also represented a young Irishman named Anthony Scanlan, at that point a captain of the Jardine Matheson opium clipper, *Hellas*.)

In 1842, soon after Brooke moved into the Malay village of Kuching, Henry Wise formed his own firm with former Calcutta-China trader John Melville, and took over Brooke’s agency business. He then sent a fellow East India Company messmate from his *Castle Huntly* days, George Steward, to Sarawak with the new apprentices, Henry Steele and John Denton Hall. Meanwhile, back in London, the lawyer John Templer—the well-connected brother of yet another *Castle Huntly* officer—became Brooke’s chief publicist. It was through John Templer’s publications that Brooke eventually became a media sweetheart of Victorian England—and it was through Templer’s friends in the Admiralty, in 1843, that Sir Edward Belcher was commanded to swing by Sarawak on *H.M.S. Samarang* to make a favorable report on the White Rajah’s China Seas speculation.

Figure 11. Painting of the Indiaman, *Castle Huntly*, by Captain John Wills Johnson (early 1840s).
If some relationships among communities of men allow me to assemble mid-scale cohorts of significance, other members of these cohorts take me on parallel paths, leading outward from nodes of entanglement to their own idiosyncratic ends. For the two and a half years that Hall spends with other men on the Samarang, I can follow him through the daily accounts of two others: the captain, Sir Edward Belcher, and a teenaged midshipman named Frank Marryat. Both published accounts of the journey in the late 1840s, which allow me to use them as proxies for my own globetrotter.

Belcher and Marryat let me see the world as Hall sees it, but each of these men also maps his own, idiosyncratic path through the world—entangling with Hall’s tale, but also tracing parallel and resonant tales. Belcher’s story begins in America, in Nova Scotia. In his teens, he moves to England, joins the navy, and becomes assistant surveyor to the Blossom, taken by Frederick William Beechey in the 1820s to explore the coast of California and the Bering Strait. In his thirties, he publishes his Treatise on Nautical Surveying (the Royal Mathematical School’s standby) and returns to the Pacific, surveying the coasts of North and South America in the Sulphur. In his travels, he illuminates many of the same parts of maritime Mexico and California that enter Hall’s trajectory. In 1840, he sails to Singapore, maps Hong Kong’s Victoria Bay, and enters the Eastern Archipelago. Then, in the 1850s, as Hall drifts east to Mexico, Belcher returns to the Arctic, a final frontier of British exploration that he views much as Brooke views Sarawak, and as Hall (in telling ways) will view Mexico.

Figure 12. Frozen into Northumberland Sound, Edward Belcher, Last of the Arctic Voyages (1855).

It’s hard to consider Frank Marryat’s trajectory without thinking about his father, Frederick Marryat, the celebrated pioneer of the sea novel. Frederick’s entanglements with Hall’s path were legion. He was Belcher’s first cousin (their mothers were sisters from a prominent Boston family),
and a midshipman under Admiral Thomas Cochrane, a naval officer who famously crossed national borders to lead the Chilean Navy in its wars of independence—and whose cousin, Admiral Thomas John Cochrane, later watched over Hall. A fellow midshipman under Cochrane in Chile was William Wyndham—who later married a *mestiza* from the Philippines, and became merchant prince of Jolo, Sulu. Windham was a critical go-between for Keppel, Brooke, and Belcher, as they sought to impose their authority over others in the China Seas. He is also a prominent character in both Belcher’s and Marryat’s accounts of the *Samarang*’s swashbuckling adventures.

Such tangled family and patronage networks were typical of the Royal Navy. One thing that set Frederick Marryat and his son Frank apart were their efforts to extract literary value from these imperial realms. Famed for his *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (which motivated later novels by C. S. Forester and Patrick O’Brian), the elder Marryat also wrote the *Travels and Adventures of Monsieur Violet in California, Sonora, and Western Texas*—a title that John Denton Hall had in mind when he wrote his *Travels and Adventures in Sonora* decades later. His father’s adventure tales watered the ground for Frank Marryat’s 1848 *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago*—as well as for later travels in the wake of his China Seas shipmate, John Denton Hall. In 1850, Frank set sail, by way of Panama, for California. He arrived in San Francisco weeks before Hall drifted south to Mexico. Neither mentions the other, but Marryat’s *Mountains and Molehills; or Recollections of a Burnt Journal* does help me imagine how a British globetrotters like Hall found their way through gold rush California.

![Figure 13. Former ships in gold rush San Francisco, Frank Marryat, *Mountains and Molehills* (1855)](image)

To understand Hall’s own journey (but also, more generally, how the China Seas changed in the 1830s and 1840s), I must begin with intimate cohorts like these. I can begin with single ships—whether trading vessels such as the *Castle Huntly* (where an intimate cohort of sailors carried a load
of cotton from India to China, and began to weave intimate webs that would have a great bearing on future events in the region), or surveying vessels like *H.M.S. Samarang* (representative of a new age of state power in the same region, and setting in motion its own intimate entanglements; eventually leading from the China Seas west to unforeseen shores).

These practices of mobility—of navigating across borders by the stars of patronage, guided by intimate communities of men—will follow John Denton Hall to Mexico. He comes to Mexico with the basic mining skills of tracing veins and digging holes. But turning ore into silver requires a new skill set, which he obtains only by apprenticing himself again—this time to a Mexican amalgamator. Then there is the alchemy of becoming Mexican. This is intimately bound to his friendship with Don Chico, a military leader and Apache fighter in a region ruled by the same kind of military patronage that shaped Hall’s travels at sea. Hall and his friend, Mr C, become *Cucurpeños*—but only by serving as officers in Don Chico’s Apache-fighting militia. In this community of violence, military patronage turns these strangers into villagers—but it also turns them into men who can depend on the loyalty and labor of other village men.

Figure 14. Amalgamating silver ores in Sonora, J. Ross Browne, *Tour Through Arizona* (1869)

As a network of historical entanglement across borders, patronage works hand in hand with family, as men and women work in tandem to pull outsiders in. I have already mentioned Francisca and Encarnación, the village girls who pull Hall and Mr. C into family networks. These are webs that in a small village like Cucurpe are difficult to disentangle from those of patronage. Similar dynamics take men across borders and root them in place in Sarawak, where both George Steward and Henry...
Steele take on female Malay companions. Both men have mixed-race children, and Steele’s intimate ties help him become fluent in Malay, a skill that secures for him a place on the island as interpreter and cultural go-between.

In Sarawak, too, it is difficult to disaggregate entanglements of family from entanglements of patronage. Steward and Steele were two of about twenty British newcomers in a locality controlled by Malay gentry, who most likely brokered companionate unions to incorporate these adventurers into their entourages. The women may have been daughters of elite families—but more likely, they were captives brought in by maritime raiders from elsewhere in the China Seas, a typical pattern in creating mixed-community entourages in Sarawak. And since the Sarawak Malays were matrilocal, the ability of local elites to give captive women to their followers was a critical part of keeping male entourages anchored in place.

I can only speculate how deeply Hall found himself entangled in these Sarawak networks, or the extent to which his companionate border crossings in Sonora might have been built on previous experiences. It’s clear, however, that much did jump the gap between local borderlands in Asia and North America. Months spent with Chinese miners in Sarawak—and then surveying and smuggling for wages across the China Seas—built for Hall a skill set that served him well as a miner, surveyor, and smuggler in California and Mexico.

His time in Asia may even help explain his periodic stints as a traveling doctor in Sonora. He quickly gained a mastery of indigenous ethnobotanical practices on the ground in Cucurpe, and was apparently celebrated among the Ópata as a healer. There was nothing in his training in England to even remotely prepare him for this. As a youth on the upper decks of the *Samarang*, he may have been called upon to assist the ship’s doctor. But in Sarawak and on the China seas he also circulated among men for whom botany and indigenous medicine was an obsession. One companion, a fellow teenager named Hugh Low, became known in scientific circles for his accounts of Borneo plants and cures. Low’s expeditions through indigenous space—his keen eye for native botanical knowledge—shared much in common with Hall’s later descriptions of Ópata ethnobotany.37

37 For Low’s accounts of Sarawak, see Hugh Low, *Sarawak: Its Inhabitants and Productions: Being Notes During a Residence in that Country With His Excellency Mr. Brooke* (London: Richard Bentley, 1848), and *A Botanist in Borneo: Hugh Low’s Sarawak Journals, 1844-1846*, ed. R.H.W. Reece (Kota Kinabula [Borneo]: Natural History Publications, 2002). For Hall’s accounts of botany and folk medicine among the Ópatas, see Hall, *Travels and Adventures*, 27-29, 32-33, 80-81, 95, 167-79, and 293-95. “[My mother] would say, he was a doctor that had traveled and learned healing arts from around the world,” and used these among the Ópatas, one great-great-granddaughter told me (without knowing anything of Hall’s ethno-botanical treatises): “He would treat them for their illnesses and receive wood, animals, food, gold, and turquoise nuggets as compensation.” Email from Aída Bustamante to Samuel Truett, November 17, 2009.
These connections come in many forms. Sometimes one can sketch lines of cause and effect between borderlands. In other instances, borderland relationships can resonate powerfully across space. This was true with the Sulu archipelago, into which Hall sailed in 1844, and the borderlands of Sonora and the Apachería, which Hall later called home. The Sulu archipelago, which bridged the Sulu and Celebes seas, was a borderland between the Philippines to the north, and Indonesia below. It divided Christian and Islamic realms and zones of Spanish, Dutch, British, and Malay influence. At its heart was Jolo, an island from which the Sultan of Sulu ruled the archipelago and parts of nearby Borneo—and which anchored a kinetic regime of saltwater nomads; a regime, to paraphrase Pekka Hämäläinen, which exerted power over others by keeping relations around them in motion.38 This regime swirled around the demand for bêche-de-mer, pearl shell, tortoise shells, and birds’ nests to trade to the Chinese for tea; markets in slaves to gather these products; and markets in arms for the slaving industry. Slaves were introduced by Samal and Iranun raiders whose networks centered on the nearby island of Balangingi and the southwest coast of Mindanao. These nodes articulated with Malay hierarchies and trading networks on Jolo—and Samal and Iranun raiders were augmented by vast populations of Filipino renegados who apostasized to Islam and then became raiders, parlaying their local knowledge of reefs, coves, and coastal villages.39

These saltwater nomads—who moved seasonally with the monsoons, controlling coasts and estuaries from Papua New Guinea to the Bay of Bengal, and encircling Borneo and the Philippines—encompassed a realm almost a third of the size of the Mongol empire at its peak. These were the so-called pirates that challenged Brooke’s control of space in coastal Sarawak. Crossing the Sulu zone, the crew of the Samarang depended on a go-between named William Wyndham. Born in Ireland or Scotland, Wyndham cut his mariner’s teeth in the Pacific as a mate under Lord Thomas Cochrane’s illustrious command of the Chilean Navy in Chile’s Wars of Independence (1818-1822). Later in the 1820s, he had married a Philippine mestiza from Iloilo, acquired his own schooner, and set up shop on Jolo. His connections to the Sultan of Sulu, his mastery of Spanish, Visayan, and Tausug tongues,

38 Hämäläinen is interested in what he calls “kinetic empires,” expanding nomadic regimes that relied on long-distance mounted raids, tribute-yielding excursions, seasonal expansions, transnational diplomatic missions, and control over shifting economic nodes. These regimes turned mobility into a strategy, thriving by keeping things—violence, markets, attachments, possessions, themselves—fluid and in motion. Hämäläinen, “Kinetic Empire,” and “Empires in Motion.” When I paraphrase Hämäläinen, then, I also extend his organizing insights to regimes that were not imperial in scope (even though the Sulu sea system shares much in common with his primary examples, the Mongol and Comanche systems). See Truett, “Kinetic Regimes.”

39 For these dynamics of maritime mobility and power, see James Francis Warren The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asia Maritime State (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), and James Francis Warren, “Saltwater Slavers and Captives in the Sulu Zone, 1768-1878,” Slavery and Abolition 31:3 (September 2010), 429-49.
and his success in the pearl, mother of pearl, and tortoise shell trade, catapulted him to prominence on the island—where the Sultan gave him the position of datu, aristocratic chief. “Dressed in Malay costume and from long residence among them” noted Henry Keppel, Wyndham “had assumed much of both the appearance and manner of a native.”

Wyndham shifted and drifted across the China Seas as comfortably as his Samal and Iranun neighbors did. As a merchant, he connected Malay, European, and indigenous markets for the China trade; as a datu, he controlled labor and mediated disputes; and as a local representative of Manila, Singapore, or the Sultan of Sulu (as it suited him), he served as a diplomat, aided smugglers, bought, sold, or redeemed captives, and harbored fugitives of all kinds. Windham happened to drift into the right place at the right time, but the China Seas were filled with endless others like him: pragmatic, multi-lingual shape-shifters who thrived in the seams between cultures and regimes.

In Sonora, Hall moved within a similar kinetic realm; a space shaped in part by the forces of Mexican, Apache, and U.S. expansion, and in part by local practices of mobility. The highlands near Cucurpe where Hall, Don Chico, and Mr. C wandered in search of gold and silver, were dominated by Chiricahua Apache communities that held power over neighbors by staying in motion, and obliging others to follow suit. Not unlike the Samal and Iranun raider-slavers of the Sulu Sea, Apache raiders absorbed goods and captives with great skill, focusing like their Indonesian counterparts on women and children and building reputations for their conversions of Mexicans into Apaches (much as Sulu polities became famous for their *renegado* fleets). Grasslands became seas in a different form, with horses replacing Malay *proas* and grass replacing saltwater—embodying for imperial agents all that sedentary “civilization” was not.

And yet it was not that simple. In the upland savannas of Sonora, as in the waters of Sulu, denizens of sedentary regimes rarely stood still. Ópatas and mestizos moved seasonally into Apache lands, when Apache hunters and gatherers followed the seasons elsewhere, to hunt cattle that had drifted into the *Apachería*, or to plunder old mines abandoned by prior Spanish or Mexican owners after prior generations of Apaches had moved south. The seasonal foundations of this kinetic world would have resonated for Hall, who hailed from a land of “pirate winds,” as Spanish villagers called them—the monsoons that signaled the beginning of annual maritime raids. These foundations also made Mexicans shape-shifting border crossers—an aptitude that Juan Dentón swiftly took to heart, mastering on land what his Sulu Sea counterpart, William Wyndham, mastered at sea.41

Such resonances—the familiar drift of unfixed space and of wandering peoples—gave Hall’s trajectory its most powerful coordinates. If the borderlands of the China Seas and northern Mexico resonated in this way across the nineteenth-century world, so too did their eventual subjugation by the mid-1880s. The conquest of the Apaches coincided more or less with the conquest of Samal and Iranun raiding-and-slaving regimes, signaling in terrestrial North America, as in maritime Southeast Asia, the triumph of sedentary empires.

In Juan Dentón’s Mexican borderlands, this conquest was tightly bound up with the railroad, that space-fixing technology that first set Hall in motion in England—and which, by his story’s end, had caught up with him on the far side of the world. As Chicago’s railroad magnates print and then circulate Hall’s tale in preparation for a new border-crossing era, they prepare also to fix Hall’s own

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travels in place by annexing his open-ended tale to a history of U.S. expansion, west and then south across the continent.

From a larger, border-crossing perspective, then, we see similar borderlands in Mexico and the China Seas collapsed and fixed in place by states, technologies, and imperial teleologies. And yet even here, our story gets pulled in countless other directions. The railway magnates who circulated Hall’s memoirs might have been thinking about more than westward expansion or Mexico. Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, who owned the copy of Hall’s memoirs that wound up in Harvard’s library, was President of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad; but he also came from a prominent opium trading family in Boston. And Elijah Smith, the Santa Fe Railroad magnate who owned the copies at the Huntington Library and the University of Western Ontario, was a son of a leading New Bedford whaling ship builder.

Figure 16. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad system, from Chicago to Hall's Sonora (1891)

The Santa Fe Railroad owed a great deal to the capital that the parents and grandparents of its Boston directors had accumulated in the China and Pacific trades. Hall’s story facilitated border crossings of a new terrestrial empire—but his journey to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands by way of the China Seas and the Pacific resonated with men like Coolidge and Smith in ways that we cannot fully appreciate unless we take a broader view. With perhaps a touch of nostalgia, these men must have seen themselves and their own family stories entangled with Hall’s tale. George Taber, a member of Smith’s New Bedford cohort, voiced these resonances this way when pitching Hall’s Mexican mines...
to his friends. Hall had come to Mexican as a “sea-captain,” Taber wrote, and had become “’capitan’ of the district where he now resides.” Hall thus set out a path that the U.S. sons of Pacific maritime entrepreneurs, turning family capital to new continental ends, might emulate in their own imperial crossings into Mexico.

In the 1880s, after *Travels and Adventures* had been printed on Dearborn Street, the original manuscript drifted west across the continent to San Francisco. I know this because the bibliophile, Hubert Howe Bancroft, refers to it later in the decade in two volumes of his multi-volume works on the Pacific region of North America. How the manuscript got there or where it eventually ended its journey, I still don’t know. All I know for sure is that soon after Bancroft perused the manuscript, it vanished for good from the historical record.

My quest for the lost manuscript has tangled me up in one last, idiosyncratic way with Hall’s global nineteenth century, and its maritime horizons. I have assumed, due to the time and care that William Myers put into the publication of Hall’s story, that he kept the manuscript in his possession. In February 28, 1881—the same month that he signed the presentation copy in Yale’s collections—he was assigned Chief Quartermaster of the Department of Dakota. From one borderland, in which campaigns against Apaches were entering a new violent stage, Myers traveled north to another, in which a generation of violence against the Lakota Sioux was about to culminate in the surrender of Sitting Bull. Assuming that Hall’s manuscript moved to Dakota with Myers, it found itself once again entangled in histories that were tied much more clearly to terrestrial empires and borderlands than to their global maritime counterparts.

And so how did the manuscript manage to break free from all of this, to return to its starting point, in maritime California? The answer, much like much of Hall’s own trajectory in the Americas, may be tied up with the peregrinations of family. Not long after reaching Dakota, Myers fell ill—and by 1883, he had retired from active service. He died in 1887, in New York City. If Hall’s manuscript remained in the family, it probably went to his daughter, Sallie, who had married in San Francisco in 1878 and remained behind. As it happens, Sallie’s husband, Charlie Page, was a book collector, part of a small community of San Francisco bibliophiles that included Hubert Howe Bancroft. To get Hall from Quartermaster’s headquarters in Dakota to Bancroft’s desk in San Francisco, one could hardly ask for a better go-between than Sallie Myers Page.

Charlie Page may have even heard a little something of John Denton Hall’s adventures. Page had helped found the Yale Club of California, and one of the prominent members of his Yale circle in San Francisco was the mining engineer, Louis Janin—the individual I’ve pegged as the one who got Hall to commit his tale to paper in the first place. I’ve been in touch with the descendants of Charlie
and Sallie Page—and so far they have found nothing in their family papers to suggest a relationship with my castaway or his manuscript. Granted, Charlie Page's San Francisco office burned in the fire that followed the great earthquake of 1906. It may be that my trail ends there.

If John Denton Hall’s journey does end with Charlie Page, then the story that Page placed in his book collection in the later 1880s may have resonated in ways that New Bedford whaling-scion-turned-railroad magnate Elijah Smith, or former China trader Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, may have recognized. For Page—like Smith, Coolidge, and, of course, John Denton Hall himself—knew about being washed up on the beaches of empire. Several years before, Page had sailed north to California from his childhood home of Valparaiso, Chile. He was the son of a American drifter named Thomas Stokes Page and his Chilean wife, Anna María Liljevalch. Thomas Stokes Page, like John Denton Hall, had set himself up in Latin America as a healer. And in 1849, like Hall, Page migrated to California. I can only conjecture, but perhaps the two crossed paths on the maritime roads between Valparaiso and San Francisco en route to new lives in continental North America.

I’ve spoken with many of Hall’s descendents, and none had ever heard of his tale; and some were surprised to learn that their village predecessor was literate! From their perspective, the road that brought the curious English sailor to their village so many years before led to different ending points. The modern age that Juan Dentón had yearned for during most of his adult life continued to bypass Cucurpe. Even today, the village lies off the beaten track. Over time, it dwindled, as children and grandchildren moved to larger towns and cities on both sides of the border. Hall’s great-great-grandson, Tony Dalton, goes down the list over coffee in Dallas. Two aunts live just over the pass in Magdalena, he tells me, but most have moved to Texas or Arizona or California—or somewhere else in Mexico, far away from Cucurpe.

Tony reads his great-great-grandfather’s memoirs, and he dredges up a wealth of childhood memories—prospecting with his Mexican uncle in the same mountains that failed John Denton Hall. It runs in the family, he tells me. My uncles and great-uncles sunk most of what they had into those hills, and I’d probably do the same. On a lighter note, he says, I like making pottery and now I know why. It came with John from England to Mexico, and my mother brought it north. I understand it now, Tony tells me. Making pottery runs in my blood.

Tony means this literally; he believes such things. And for me, it works nicely as a metaphor for the broader view I’ve been trying to develop here. History circulates a lot like blood and family, whether across vast oceans, across borders, or in the intimate spaces of villages, ships, households, or wandering mining camps—where ordinary people bring fragments of the past at large together, in place—wherever that place may be—in an effort to work, live, reinvent, and pass it all on.
Stories like these remind us why it’s important to open up our border-crossing histories, to launch our voyages in many directions, on multiple scales; to see the world without overlooking the local, the intimate, the familial, the idiosyncratic. Such tales can serve to remind us of the quotidian relationships that anchor borderlands in place while connecting them to other places and to wider horizons. It’s important, as historians, not to forget these relationships. They’re what keep us from getting lost in our desire to see the world.