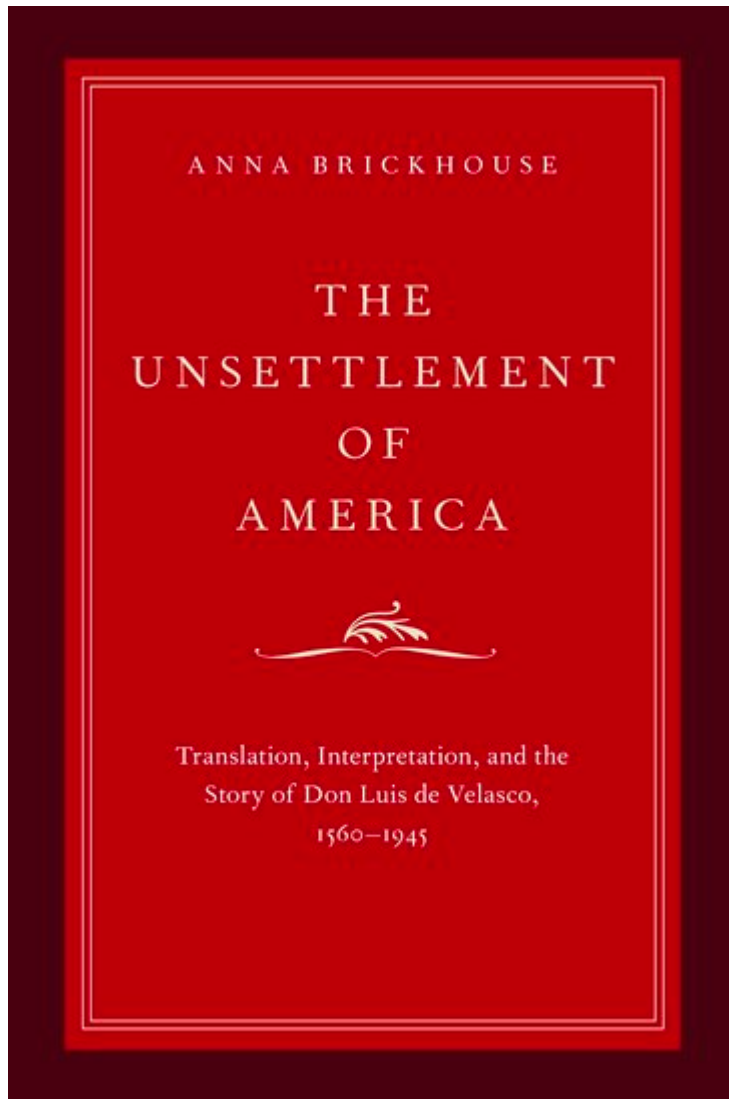
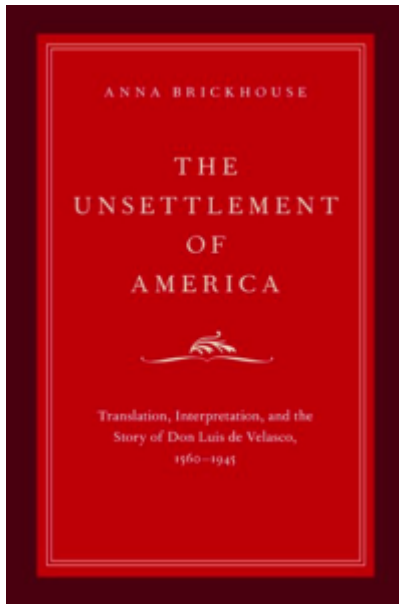


## An Un-Founding Father



November is peak public-outreach month for early Americanists, so if your riff on the Pilgrim curriculum feels tired, try out this angle with your audience. Tisquantum or Squanto—whose adeptness in English and multiple Algonquian dialects famously saved the colony—also spoke Spanish. He had lived in Malaga, where Spanish priests rescued him from his English abductor and where he met Amerindians from many parts of Spain’s empire. As Anna Brickhouse tells it, by the time he met the Plymouth group, Squanto was already “worldly, in the exilic, political sense of the term” (43), equipped with “a transatlantic and hemispheric perspective upon the potential consequences” of colonization (44). He had firsthand experience of globalized slave markets that fed the endless need for labor in the New World; he had heard stories about wrenching upheavals in the lives of people who resembled him. He knew what might be coming.



Anna Brickhouse, *The Unsettlement of America: Translation, Interpretation, and the Story of Don Luis de Velasco, 1560-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 384 pp., \$69.

The late Benedict Anderson [wrote](#) that “the most instructive comparisons . . . are those that surprise,” and this arresting portrait of “Hispanophone Squanto” in *The Unsettlement of America* is the lead-in to a series of just such illuminating surprises. Brickhouse travels fluidly between the disciplinary territories of history and literature with as much suppleness as Anderson himself. With its persistent exploration of multilingual source materials and its measured movement from the telling detail to the macro-level interpretation, *The Unsettlement of America* deals a stunning blow to whatever might be left of the notion of English primacy in North America. As two major book awards (to date) attest, it makes a compelling case for what scholars trained in literary analysis can bring to the task of interpreting history: a careful attention to the slipping points between and within language systems, to the performative stance that narrators take, and to the ways a story can be adapted, imitated, misread, and re-circulated through different genres across space and time.

*The Unsettlement of America* revolves around a personage, the Algonquian-speaking Indian known as Paquiquineo or Don Luis de Velasco, and a critical concept, unsettlement, that he embodies. Taken from his home in present-day Tidewater Virginia to the Spanish court, Don Luis returned to the Americas on the king’s command to help settle the northern reaches of *La Florida*. He accompanied a party of Jesuit missionaries to his homeland, Ajacán, in 1570 as their translator and go-between. When a Spanish ship returned two years later, they found the priests dead, the trappings of their religion desecrated: the plot, a survivor reported, of the supposed convert Don Luis. Unlike the mythologizing stories about later indigenous translators who made European incursion into North America possible (Squanto foremost among them), that of Don Luis has been mostly purged from both Spanish and English American memory,

perhaps—Brickhouse suggests—because of his apparent embrace of a project of unsettlement. *Unsettlement*, a key term throughout, is defined as a strategy “undertaken by an indigenous subject and involves the concrete attempt to annihilate or otherwise put an end to a European colony, or to forestall or eliminate a future colonial project” (2).

Read as the deepest treachery against not only the Jesuit expedition but against European civilization itself, Don Luis’s story has profoundly *unsettled* readers over the centuries, in the different sense of the term that was also current in the sixteenth century: “to confound, to change a fixed opinion or view, or leave in a state of uncertainty” (3). Ultimately, it’s the “fixed opinion” of the field of American studies, even or perhaps especially in its ascendant “transnational” phalange, that Brickhouse aims to surprise into productive uncertainty. Like much recent scholarship in early American studies, *The Unsettlement of America* works toward a more Native-centered narrative that emphasizes indigenous agency and adaptation. The Don Luis portrayed here is not a simple figure of resistance but a sophisticated rhetorician: one among many cultural mediators between the European and indigenous worlds who performed what Brickhouse calls “motivated mistranslations” (13) in thoughtful response to colonial circumstances. Translation is not only a recurring theme, but one of her own tasks as well, since *The Unsettlement of America* also intersects with another major current of recent scholarship: multilingually grounded studies of the French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch colonial projects in the Americas that guided, subverted, or competed with the English one. Such comparative colonialist work can’t be accurately subsumed under the “transnational turn” in American studies, since it precedes the national era—but this book, with its unusually capacious chronological reach, converses across period divisions in the field, too: it “brings the early modern Native hemisphere into critical relation with our contemporary transnational one” (12).

The book is divided into three parts of two chapters each. Parts I and II explore a range of Spanish sources from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries to meditate on the discourses of settlement, beginning with Columbus’s effort in La Navidad and moving on to other places in that vast expanse of eastern North America that the Spanish claimed as *La Florida*. As Brickhouse works her way through this spider web of texts to show how the destruction of the Ajacán mission got elevated into fable, she takes us along some fascinating side paths. The *mestizo* intellectual Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca, whose 1605 *Historia de la Florida* contains an influential version of the Don Luis story, also offers a different perspective on the personal account by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca that many early Americanists have adopted into their syllabi. While Cabeza de Vaca poses as an exemplary translator of indigenous lifeways—in contrast to another Spanish captive he meets, Juan Ortiz—Garcilaso’s version presents both as “cross-cultural failures” (141) who misinterpreted Indian messages. We also learn about a kind of mirror image to Don Luis: Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, a Spaniard who lived for seventeen years among the Calusa in present-day Florida. After being redeemed (or was

he?) by the Spanish, Fontaneda stressed the difficulty of converting and conquering the Calusa, as if to put a damper on the settlement plans, and Brickhouse speculates that he might have crossed paths with Don Luis prior to the Ajacán episode.

The “might have” here hints at the undocumented and undocumentable: Brickhouse seeks to “shed light upon what and how Don Luis . . . knew, and how this knowledge shaped both historical outcomes and subsequent writers’ responses” (89). She argues for “a kind of reparative critical approach . . . that seeks to construct imaginative or speculative possibilities rather than merely to expose or destabilize an ideological position” (8). This plausible-speculation approach pays off at the climax of Part II, where she examines another Spaniard’s claim to have encountered Don Luis some years afterward, enjoying high status among a group of sovereign Indians who traveled and traded between Florida and Cuba. Whether or not that *cacique* was indeed the same man, the systematic Indian revolts that rocked Spanish settlements along this southern Florida coast after 1572 admit the possibility that after Don Luis left Ajacán, he went on to warn the Guale, Timucua, and Calusa against Spanish designs. To imagine such networks of communication is to acknowledge “the hemispheric potential of indigenous revolt” (187), a possibility unthinkable to generations of Euro-Americans. Don Luis’s sharing of information can’t be conclusively proven, but this is precisely Brickhouse’s point about method: sometimes unknowing our learned assumptions (that indigenous people would not organize rebellion across tribal lines, for instance) “requires both the associative and the imaginative flexibilities of intellectual and speculative history, respectively” (41).

It goes without saying that *The Unsettlement of America* works against the narrative of a U.S. national character of hardy English fortitude that originated in Plymouth—a myth that really took hold only in the mid-nineteenth century. Part III of the book picks up the thread of Don Luis’s story as it was transmitted in English by nineteenth-century U.S. novelists and historians: among them Robert Greenhow (a plagiarist of that great plagiarizer, Poe), who discovered—and then suppressed—evidence of the Spanish settlement of the Chesapeake, lest it challenge English rights to first discovery; and William Cullen Bryant, who “recasts the Ajacán narrative as Anglo-America’s primal, counterfactual, nationalist fantasy” in which the Spanish had taken North America. We also learn about the Catholic historian in the 1840s who mistakenly thought colonial *La Florida* corresponded to the state of Florida, and thus spent fruitless hours looking at the wrong maps; about the significance of Don Luis for the Omaha activist Susette La Flesche; and, in the final chapter, about the Southern Agrarians in the twentieth century who novelized and dramatized the colonization stories of early Virginia to ground U.S. origins in the South, for better or worse.

More than one of these fictive versions places Don Luis in Jamestown—which, like St. Augustine, Florida, and the spot in El Paso where Juan de Oñate claimed the southwest for Spain, has been promoted, with centenaries and

commemorations, as an alternate North American “first.” These pre-1620 colonial sites were never forgotten, but rather relegated to a second-tier regionality in contrast to the supposedly more determinative Plymouth. Even as new excavations reveal more of the Spanish port of Santa Elena in South Carolina, the Tristan de Luna settlement in Pensacola, and other sixteenth-century sites of Spanish-Indian contact, the exact location of Ajacán remains unfixed: a 1935 plaque near Quantico memorializing the “Jesuit martyrs” suggests they sailed in on the Potomac River, while other contemporary boosters argue for the Rappahannock, the York, or the James. This confusion seems apt. For Brickhouse’s larger purpose is not to win the battle of commemorative sites, but to challenge the perspective that labels one kind of colonial contact as a failure, the other a success. Thanksgiving provides a good moment to ponder the interestedness of any such claim—and an occasion to reflect on the indigenous critical perspective emblemized by Don Luis, an “unfounding father” (4). “Unsettlement” does not claim to be a new master narrative, but a heuristic—a way of getting around restrictive habits of thought. It makes this wonderful book difficult to imitate, but rich to think with and upon.

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