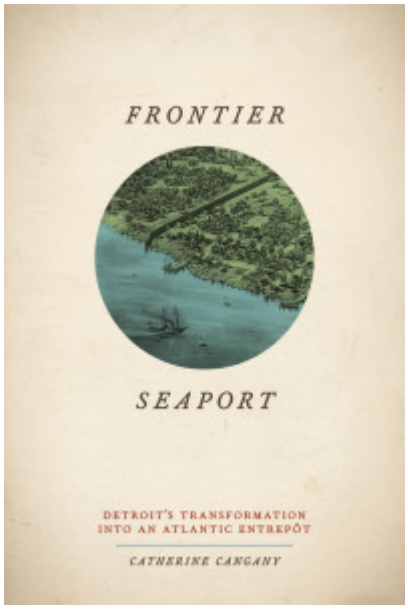
On the Edge of the Atlantic World in the Interior of North America

FRONTIER SEAPORT

DETROIT'S TRANSFORMATION INTO AN ATLANTIC ENTREPÔT

CATHERINE CANGANY



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In *Frontier Seaport: Detroit's Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepôt*, Catherine Cangany explores what might best be called the "soft economics" of Detroit's integration into the Atlantic world. She contends that Detroit was "poised at the intersection of East and West, empire and frontier, core and periphery, and imperialism and localism" (3). This tension between the city's imperial significance and its remote location, Cangany stresses, "hastened Detroit's economic and cultural incorporation into the broader Atlantic world," even as it generated the idiosyncrasies that set early Detroit apart from many other settlements in the North American interior (3). For Cangany, Detroit was neither an imperial city within a frontier region, nor a peripheral outpost servicing a core. It embodied both, and she hopes to draw historians toward an "awareness of the full interdependencies, interrelatedness, and mutual constitutiveness of West and East" (5).

Cangany's book contributes to two not wholly distinct bodies of work: scholarship on the Great Lakes borders and borderlands, and on imperial consumerism. Although initiated by scholars interested in the interaction between indigenous peoples and Europeans, in the past decade historians such as Alan Taylor have extended the borderlands concept into the nineteenth century and onto disparate white populations. Meanwhile, others, illustrated by T.H. Breen, have moved consumerism to the center of the experience of empire. Cangany seeks to bring these two strands of scholarship into conversation by tracing the development of Detroit's role as a market for commonplace consumer items and the critical role of the fluctuating borders in the Great Lakes region in determining its character.

In order to present this "Janus-faced" view of Detroit, Cangany has assembled sources remarkable for both their number and variety: letters and ledger books from the city's early merchants; probate and criminal court records; papers of the French, British, and American military commanders stationed at the city;

travel narratives; newspapers from as far away as South Carolina; Congressional statutes; and images and material goods (168). These allow her to study the material culture of Detroit's residents and their attitude toward the claims of sovereignty asserted by constantly changing imperial powers over their affairs. Likewise, they provide her evidence of Detroiters' simultaneously cosmopolitan and provincial status.

Frontier Seaport can be divided into two parts. Chapters one through three examine Detroit's incorporation into the Atlantic economy. Cangany eschews another treatment of the fur trade for a detailed analysis of the commerce in such items as textiles, dining ware, moccasins, and books. Despite being the better part of a thousand miles from the Atlantic coast, she finds that the city's merchants carried a remarkable array of goods including chocolate, nutmeg, olives, and hair powder. While these may seem oddly out of place on the frontier, they serve as evidence for Cangany's argument that early Detroit was "profoundly tied to Atlantic commercial culture, saturated with the same transnational goods and the accompanying fashions that were popular in urban spaces" (43). Moreover, the city's merchants' ability to draw on credit from overseas and sell on credit locally facilitated the residents' conspicuous consumption that further bound them to the Atlantic economy.

Having made a convincing case for Detroit's cosmopolitanism, Cangany devotes chapters four through six to describing the city's localisms and the conditions that allowed them to flourish through the early nineteenth century. Here her evidence is more subtle, and her extrapolations bolder. She contends that even as their business dealings bound Detroit more tightly to the Atlantic economy, the city's merchants resisted the accompanying loss of economic and political autonomy. They mastered the art of petitioning as they first defeated efforts by the French, British, and Americans to impose non-local judiciary oversight, and then confounded the endeavors of American officials to rebuild the settlement in a grandiose but alien manner after the fire of 1805.

Her most potent evidence, however, comes from the widespread, casual smuggling of common goods—blankets, whiskey, and apples among them—by local residents across the Detroit River. However much they desired the reliability that came with imperial order in their transnational commerce, locals expected autonomy when trading with neighbors who just happened to live on the other side of an international border. After all, residents had exchanged goods back and forth across the Detroit River, Cangany notes, for nearly 100 years before the river had been transformed into a border. She sees their illicit trade as "a measured local response to deleterious federal interference" (171). Apathetic customs officers and incongruous customs laws designed for the Atlantic seaboard rather than the Great Lakes aided their cause. For Cangany, smuggling "offer[s] further evidence of Detroiters' resistance to full incorporation into the American regime and the Atlantic world" (172).

Cangany writes in a precise and economical manner reflecting the diligence of her research. Yet she clearly enjoys crafting her analysis, as can be seen in

the wordplay in which she engages. The subtitle of chapter three, “the fashioning of moccasins,” for instance, refers to both the manufacturing and popularity of this footwear.

Given the emphasis on the tension between localism and cosmopolitanism, one may wonder at the selection of the work’s subtitle, “Detroit’s Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepôt.” This subtitle undersells the scope of the project and perhaps misses a chance to draw the attention of scholars interested in empire, capitalism, and borderlands. Even as *Frontier Seaport* makes noteworthy contributions to two of the analytical frameworks in which it positions itself, it also raises important questions regarding their utility. Detroiters certainly seemed eager to tie themselves to the Atlantic world, but just what that means is unclear. Was the Atlantic world simply a set of rules and practices for economic exchange, or a collection of common consumer goods? By 1796, when the United States took formal possession of Detroit, the networks of exchange and communication that contemporary scholars refer to as constituting the “Atlantic world” had been in existence for 300 years. Surely it too developed, changed, and took on new meaning.

Detroit’s days as a cultural borderland are far behind it, but its position adjacent to Canada still makes it a geographical borderland, and as Cangany notes, that location provides ample opportunity for illicit trade. Is this still localism at work? Does this mean the casual smuggling in which the city’s population engages today is evidence of their continued resistance to incorporation into the Atlantic, or now, the global economy? More to the point, do borderlands foster the development of one variety of a localism that manifests in every locality? And if every place has its localisms, are borderlands truly significant? *Frontier Seaport* is a stimulating work with a thought-provoking thesis that is undergirded by a solid body of research. It is a valuable addition to anyone interested in commerce and empire, borderlands, or Great Lakes history.

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