

ALBERT L. HURTADO. *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender and Culture in Old California*. ALBUQUERQUE: UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS, 1999; KENT G. LIGHTFOOT. *Indians, Missions, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers*. BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2005; JAMES A. SANDOS. *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions*. NEW HAVEN: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004

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Study of the California missions has come a long way since elementary school curriculum. For most, knowledge of these early Spanish and Native American interactions never exceeds a fourth grade diorama. We might recall the basic introductions and outcomes of Christianity, agriculture, and the early formation of a California society, but few ever question the deeper significance of these interactions. Recent scholarly interpretations of these basic facts help present a more complete picture of the California mission era and its inherent issues beyond the standards we learn as children as well as contextualize the mission system's role in subsequent history. James Sandos's *Converting California*, Albert Hurtado's *Intimate Frontiers*, and Kent Lightfoot's *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants* each emphasize different elements of California mission history, but taken together their works create a fuller illustration of the interactions taking place in eighteenth-century California, present the ef-

fects of those interactions, and show how they might fit into the broader study of borderlands history.¹

The initial encounters of indigenous populations and foreign settlers are commonly perceived negatively—an unquestionable clash between the people that inhabit a common space. California's earliest phase as a "borderland" certainly encompassed an element of clash, but was also a place of economic, sexual, and cultural exchange between people, whether for better or worse. A common analysis of this period by historians is to measure the success or failure of the mission system. As Sandos suggests, perhaps a more apt analysis would be to examine the Indian-Franciscan past in comparison to the mythologized or demonized past conceptualized by historians today.² Whether connoting a positive or negative history of California's settlement, there is no denying that a genuine understanding of the era lies in the interactions of the region's multicultural early residents. From Spanish priests and soldiers to Russian merchants to heterogeneous Indian groups, all of California's diverse peoples helped shape the events that became California mission history and in the process, their own respective identities.

In *Converting California*, Sandos offers a comprehensive examination of Franciscan and Indian life in California that together created mission history as we know it today, but that also features less typical elements of this history. Much of scholarly mission history has been reduced to two schools—"Christophilic Triumphant" (those who view the Franciscans as a positive influence in Native Californian life) and "Christophilic Nihilist" (those who view the Franciscans as committing genocide). In Sandos's interpretation, however, nothing is as simple as good or bad, indicating that these views are too rigid and that many variations existed concurrently to falsify either of these schools.³ Sandos presents numerous instances that refute both

¹ One of the prominent themes in the history of the West is the notion of a requisite borderland—a region in which two or more disparate cultures/ethnicities/societies come together and how their exchanges create this place. Some general but exemplary works on the early American borderlands include James F. Brooks's *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Douglas Monroy's *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (University of California Press, 1998); and *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S. – Mexico Borderlands History* Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, eds. (Duke University Press, 2004).

² James A. Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xviii.

the mythology and the demonization of the mission past, instances in which Franciscan priests have pure intentions for their wards and in which Indian neophytes (those new converts to Christianity) honestly want to make mission life a viable option for themselves. Although these are exceptions to the rule, what matters is that they do exist in an era that is often viewed in terms of extremes. As later evidence in this essay will show, his examination suggests that these cultures were indeed at odds with one another from full-on violence to more passive methods of dominance and resistance, but Sandos manages to go beyond the basic facts of these interactions and beyond the assignment of “good” and “bad” and develop the complexities of two disparate cultures coming together in the form of a dialogue rather than sheer contest. In the process, he manages to give agency to Indians while still showing some compassion toward the Franciscans.

Conversely, by emphasizing one aspect of mission history, Albert Hurtado’s *Intimate Frontiers* suggests that mission history is one of dominance and subjection. By looking at sex between the Spanish and Indians in eighteenth-century California, Hurtado claims that the West became more than a geographic frontier, but also one of intimacy—“frontiers of the heart, frontiers of the mind and frontiers of difference”⁴—in which people interacted in discreet ways that complicated the basic religious and economic exchanges associated with the missions. Furthermore, sex was a way to determine power relationships, whether by attempting to reform it in order to “civilize and Hispanicize” native populations as in the Franciscans’ case or by rape due to “stress, anger, and fear” as in the Spanish soldiers’ case.⁵ Despite these assertions, Hurtado states that Indians largely maintained their traditional sexual identities, identities that treated marital, premarital and extramarital relationships (as well as male homosexual transvestism) much differently than Spanish expectation, and for this reason, the missionaries’ efforts can be interpreted as unsuccessful in having a lasting, authentic impact.⁶

In a third interpretation, Kent Lightfoot’s *Indians, Missionaries and Merchants* takes a different approach and examines California’s mission system in comparison to the region’s Russian mercantilism. To analyze the native view-

⁴ Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), xxix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 19.

point within the colonial context, Lightfoot employs a systematic approach of looking at each colonizer's methods of enculturation, relocation, social hierarchy, labor, interethnic union, demography and chronology. In so doing, Lightfoot argues that Indian societies were (and still are) dynamic and recreated their own identities by incorporating new practices and customs from the colonial culture. He admits that the historical conception is to view the Franciscans as cruel and the Russians as good-natured (and as indicated in this essay later, it is difficult for historians not to agree with this juxtaposition), but that what really matters is native agency despite these colonial frameworks.⁷

Converging in this sense of agency, all three scholars aim to make all sides involved actors in their narratives and not simply relics of history. Historical treatment of California's population groups colors subsequent interpretations of how those groups interacted. Under Sandos, Franciscans are presented as both benevolent and cruel, providing for neophytes (albeit in a parental sense) as well as imposing strict regulations and punishments. Lightfoot describes their coercive practices, but also recognizes the fact that Indians were free to leave the missions before baptism. He likens missionaries' recruiting success to being "excellent salespeople" and not necessarily benevolent or malicious.⁸ If these representations allow for some compassion toward the Franciscans, Hurtado's depiction presents them as the antagonists of the narrative. He views the missionaries as the "monsters" in the vein of Christophilic Nihilists, at worst acting unreasonably brutish and at best merely being blinded by cultural misunderstanding. The Spanish soldiers, too, are determined by Hurtado to act beastly, but this notion is common among historians and will be illustrated in a later discussion of their interactions with Indians. How historians treat the Spanish, however, is secondary to the concept of Indian agency.

Each author makes careful note of ways in which Indian groups acted in their own rights and helped shape their own identities in the process. Indians posed a challenge to Franciscans, sometimes unintentionally, from their immense diversity of languages and their "baffling" practices, and sometimes by active forms of resistance. Franciscan efforts of "denaturalization," their attempt to detach Indians from a community identity and instill an individual

⁷ Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missions, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8, 19, 237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

identity held accountable to “civilized” behavior, according to Sandos, were complicated by these challenges.⁹ Although there is little discussion of non-mission Indian identity during this period, glimpses into neophyte uprisings offer proof that California Indians were not simply a subjugated people. The biggest revolt, at San Diego in 1769, destroyed the mission and killed most of its inhabitants including its priest. It was an all-out rejection of a Spanish system of cultural dominion and although it did not end the mission system, it was no less a blow to missionary morale and proved the Indians to be a major threat. Other instances of rebellion, despite being subdued quickly were equally significant in illustrating Indian agency against the odds. Something as simple as wearing a crucifix outwardly with a native talisman under a robe demonstrates a type of neophyte passive resistance. Regardless of whether they felt they could obtain power from both symbols or did it out of spite, the significance is that neophytes maintained their traditional customs within the context of imposed customs. In this way, according to Lightfoot, they not only created their own public and private spheres within the missions, but also recreated their identities in the process.¹⁰

All three authors provide a number of ways in which Indians interacted with California’s newcomers beyond the standard narrative of subjugation. Most prominently featured in the discourse of interethnic exchange is that of intimate relationships. Branching from these interactions are the ideas of identity formation and enculturation, and the notions of cultural success and failure. Lightfoot thus introduces a new group to the California mission era that do not receive much attention elsewhere—Russian merchants. Like most merchants throughout history, their primary purpose for settling a new area was to pursue commercial interests (in this case fur trapping), and they are perceived as taking a more hands-off approach to the surrounding peoples not directly involved in trade. Those Indians they did interact with were often their employees and sometimes their wives. Beyond this, Russian merchants maintained cordial, non-invasive relations with Indians and had little to gain from converting or “civilizing” their native neighbors (although this may not have been so had the Russian Orthodox Church played a role in the colony,

⁹ Sandos, 17.

¹⁰ Lightfoot, 112.

according to Lightfoot).¹¹ In this context, Indians were able to sustain their identity and borrow from the Russian colony as well.

This is not so with the secular Spanish. Soldiers committed acts of violence and rape against Indian women, acts that often left physical or psychological marks—be they pregnancy, disease, or traumatism—but were often unpunished beyond verbal reproach, with victims often receiving more questioning than the violators.¹² Few Spanish married Indian women during the mission era. In examining interethnic relationships, it is generally agreed that the missions were unsuccessful in procuring their desired changes through sexual reform and that the unintended consequences of sex between Indians and Spanish at this time brought about failure and misunderstandings between the groups rather than any fruitful exchange.

What makes these authors' narratives unique is that they take a systematic approach to examining Indian culture within a colonial context, thereby identifying and giving agency to all sides. Although Hurtado provides an honest depiction of California life in the mission era, he fails to provide sources or examples of how Indians acted on their own volition in response to the cruelty they faced rather than simply being continuously acted upon. Sandos shows Indians acting of their own free will as in their insurrections mentioned previously, but he does not go into much detail about their lives after the missions or provide any synthetic analysis of their identities at the end of the mission era. Lightfoot may provide the best synthesis in attributing a dynamic identity to Indians, able to engage with and incorporate new cultures. One criticism is that he consistently hints at a comparison between mission Indians and southern plantation slaves, but he never develops this into a full-fledged argument. This would be an interesting topic for further study, as missionaries were adamant about neophytes not being slaves in any sense of the word.

What appears to be a straightforward history initially turns out to be as complex as the area is diverse. With peoples inhabiting a space for vastly different reasons comes a clash of cultures. But while that is to be expected, the real significance is in how people are able to go beyond a clash and begin engaging with one another. Whether working for Russian merchants or main-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹² Hurtado, 13-18.

taining their own customs under a strict mission system, Indians were able to function within a colonial framework—passively or actively, publicly or privately—and create a new sense of identity. Whether this is seen as a success or a failure for the mission system in general is still up for debate. What we see in Sandos's, Hurtado's, and Lightfoot's works is an ability to overcome this debate and present a historical era in ways it may have been conceived by its participants.

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