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Revolutions North of the Border: Independence, Rebellion, and Nation Building

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Introduction

This book examines how four transformative upheavals in North America—the American, Haitian, Mexican, and Canadian revolutionary moments—emerged from a shared Atlantic crucible yet produced strikingly different national trajectories. Rather than treating each as a self-contained story, we read them together to ask how conceptions of citizenship, race, and sovereignty were imagined, contested, and institutionalized from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. By following people, ideas, and commodities across borders, we uncover connections that conventional national narratives often obscure.

Our approach is comparative and connected. Comparative, because we analyze common problems—imperial reform, fiscal extraction, property regimes, slavery, and the legitimacy of political authority—across multiple sites. Connected, because we trace the circulation of news, revolutionary rhetoric, soldiers, refugees, and capital throughout an Atlantic world of ports and frontiers. This dual lens highlights both structural similarities and the contingencies that made outcomes diverge: a slave society seizing freedom and sovereignty, settler republicans redefining allegiance, a multiethnic kingdom fragmenting into a republic, and colonies transforming through rebellion and constitutional reform.

The United States emerged from the crisis of the British Empire with a republican project that married claims of natural rights to territorial expansion and market growth. Yet the language of liberty coexisted with chattel slavery, the dispossession of Indigenous nations, and restricted definitions of citizenship. Haiti's revolution, in contrast, was the most radical event of the era: an enslaved majority toppled slavery and colonial rule, declared independence, and asserted Black sovereignty. That achievement reshaped global debates over race and freedom even as Haiti faced diplomatic isolation, punitive indemnities, and internal struggles over labor and land.

Mexico's path to independence grew from Bourbon centralization, local grievances, and the collapse of Spanish monarchical legitimacy. Insurgency mobilized townspeople, peasants, castas, and Indigenous communities under shifting banners of religion, loyalty, and reform. The eventual compromise that secured independence left enduring tensions among church, army, regional elites, and popular actors, complicating the construction of a stable national state. Meanwhile, north of the United States, the Canadas experienced a slower, constitutional route to transformation: the rebellions of 1837–1838 exposed deep conflicts over language, land, and representation, prompting imperial reconfiguration and the gradual emergence of responsible government that set the stage for Confederation.

Placing these cases side by side clarifies how race and slavery, settler colonialism, and Indigenous sovereignty structured the possibilities of citizenship. In the United States, a civic republic expanded while entrenching racial exclusions; in Haiti, universal emancipation anchored a new polity that challenged racial hierarchies globally; in Mexico, corporate traditions and republican ideals intertwined; in the Canadas, constitutional reform tempered upheaval but preserved imperial ties and settler interests. Each trajectory was shaped by international pressures—war, trade embargoes, debt, and diplomacy—that linked North American revolutions to European rivalries, Caribbean economies, and continental borderlands.

The chapters that follow move from contexts to cases, then to cross-cutting themes. We begin with imperial geographies, social orders, Indigenous borderlands, and the intellectual languages of the age. We then examine each revolution's origins, leadership, and popular participation, paying attention to gendered labor, religious authority, and military mobilization. Finally, we turn to comparative analyses of race and emancipation, international consequences, migration and borders, and the long afterlives of revolution in memory and myth. Throughout, the book foregrounds ordinary people as well as elite actors, showing how households, villages, plantations, and parishes made—and sometimes unmade—revolutions.

By following these intertwined stories, we reconsider what counts as “revolution” north of the border. Not every transformation required a victorious war of independence; some unfolded through negotiated reforms that nonetheless redefined sovereignty and citizenship. In all four cases, the struggles over who belonged to the body politic—and on what terms—proved as consequential as battlefield victories. The comparative perspective offered here seeks to illuminate those struggles and the distinct nations they helped to create.

CHAPTER ONE: Geographies of Empire and Settlement

The North American continent that Europeans claimed and remade in the eighteenth century was never a blank map waiting for borders. Mountains, rivers, forests, and plains shaped the ambitions of empires and the routes of traders, soldiers, and settlers. The Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence funneled movement from the Atlantic toward the interior, while the Mississippi River pulled commerce south toward the Gulf of Mexico. The Appalachian range divided coastal colonies from the western backcountry, where Indigenous nations and colonial authorities negotiated everything from trade to military alliance. The Caribbean's windward and leeward islands linked the continent's northern rim to a maritime economy built on sugar, coffee, and enslaved labor, creating a corridor where news and people circulated with unusual speed. These features mattered. They constrained governors, guided rebels, and gave direction to the spread of settlers and the politics they eventually forged.

Atlantic empires were networks rather than monoliths, and none of the four revolutionary movements examined in this book unfolded in isolation. Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal jostled for territory and commercial advantage, while Indigenous confederacies—Haudenosaunee, Creek, Cherokee, Mi'kmaq, Algonquian nations, and others—played central roles as brokers of power. In the north, the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes tied the Canadian colonies to Atlantic commerce; to the south and west, Spanish provinces stretched from New Spain through Louisiana and Florida. The Caribbean, with Haiti as a jewel in Saint-Domingue, served as an engine of wealth and a crucible of radical change. Between these nodes moved people and ideas: sailors carried newspapers, merchants transmitted prices and rumors, soldiers carried military experience, and refugees carried grievances. This geography of circulation made revolution contagious, even as local landscapes shaped how rebellion took root.

The northern colonies—New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the Carolinas—grew by grafting European institutions onto Indigenous geographies. Coasts and navigable rivers determined where towns and ports clustered, while the interior beckoned with land but posed logistical and political challenges. In New England, rocky soils and winters encouraged shipbuilding, fishing, and trade; in the mid-Atlantic, fertile lands supported diverse grain and livestock; in the south, planters staked claims on tobacco and rice. Settlement patterns produced political cultures: town meetings in New England nurtured habits of local governance; proprietary and royal charters created hierarchies elsewhere. Yet the frontier was never a simple line. Traders embedded themselves in Indigenous communities; enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbean people built economies and resisted them; Indigenous nations retained sovereignty,

negotiated treaties, and enforced boundaries. The American colonies' eventual revolt would emerge from this layered geography as much as from debates in London or Philadelphia.

Further north, the St. Lawrence Valley and the Great Lakes basin formed the backbone of New France, a vast but thinly populated colony whose survival depended on alliances with Indigenous nations. After Britain's victory in 1763, the Quebec Act of 1774 recognized French civil law, seigneurial landholding, and the Catholic Church, integrating a Catholic, French-speaking populace into an empire that otherwise prized Protestant, English norms. Geography mattered here too: winter and distance constrained British administration, while rivers and lakes facilitated trade and military movement. The result was a colony whose political development avoided the sharper confrontations seen to the south. Inhabitants valued imperial ties that protected land tenure and religious institutions, even as they negotiated for greater representation. This unique context set the stage for a slower, constitutional path to reform rather than abrupt independence.

Spanish New Spain extended from present-day California and New Mexico through Texas and Louisiana to Central America, its northern frontier marked by deserts, mountains, and semi-arid plateaus. Missions, presidios, and towns formed a lattice of authority; silver mines in Zacatecas and Guanajuato anchored imperial revenues. In the Caribbean, Cuba and Puerto Rico resembled southern plantation economies, but Saint-Domingue's mountains and coastal plains made it the empire's most profitable sugar colony. The island's geography was decisive: steep ridges and dense forests offered refuge for maroons, while its ports connected the colony to Atlantic markets and revolutionary ideas. The Haitian Revolution's extraordinary scale—enslaved people organized across plantations and mountains—was inseparable from this terrain, which enabled both labor exploitation and resistance.

Haiti shared the Caribbean's climate cycles: hurricanes, droughts, and earthquakes reshaped economies and politics. Plantation agriculture depended on coerced labor and brutal regimes of extraction. In contrast, the northern provinces of New Spain—like New Mexico and Texas—centered on missions and ranching rather than sugar; land grants, *encomiendas*, and *haciendas* structured property and labor. In the northern Canadas—Upper and Lower Canada—timber, furs, and wheat dominated, with long winters shaping settlement and transport. The varied ecologies influenced social structures: plantation slavery in Saint-Domingue and the southern colonies, mission economies on the Spanish periphery, and mixed subsistence and commercial agriculture in the north. When upheaval came, these economic geographies determined who could mobilize, how they could do so, and what they hoped to defend or overturn.

Indigenous geographies were not merely backdrops. Longhouses, palisaded towns, trade routes, and seasonal camps mapped networks of sovereignty that colonial states

had to accommodate. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy's influence stretched across the Great Lakes, while Anishinaabe, Cree, and Mi'kmaq nations controlled crucial corridors of trade and travel. Along the Mississippi and its tributaries, the Osage, Caddo, and others negotiated with Spanish, French, and American officials. In the Caribbean, Taino and Kalinago legacies persisted in place names and memory, and in the Spanish borderlands, Pueblo, Apache, and Comanche communities defended autonomy. Maps drawn in London, Paris, or Madrid often erased these geographies, but on the ground they remained operative. Revolutions would test those sovereignties, sometimes inviting alliance, sometimes provoking war.

Ports were the nerves of imperial systems. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston linked colonies to the Atlantic economy; Quebec and Halifax connected British North America to wider networks; Veracruz and Acapulco tied New Spain to the metropole; Cap-Français and later Port-au-Prince were windows on the world for Saint-Domingue. News traveled fastest here: newspapers reprinted debates from London and Paris, merchants tracked wars and embargoes, sailors swapped stories from the Caribbean to the St. Lawrence. Customs houses and warehouses measured imperial policy in tariffs and privileges. Blockades and privateering during wars disrupted these flows, revealing the fragility of imperial economies. The geographic concentration of commerce gave merchants and port communities disproportionate influence in political crises; their grievances over taxation and regulation often set the tempo for rebellion.

Maps served both as tools of domination and as instruments of imagination. European cartographers projected boundaries across landscapes they scarcely knew, yet those lines mattered when treaties were signed and armies moved. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 attempted to regulate settlement west of the Appalachians; the Treaty of Paris in 1783 drew borders that ignored Indigenous geographies. In Spanish America, viceroyalty divisions—New Spain, New Granada, Peru—created administrative categories that later became national boundaries. For people living on these frontiers, lines on paper were less real than rivers, trails, and the presence or absence of soldiers. During revolutions, maps were redrawn in declarations, constitutions, and treaties, but the land's contours kept asserting themselves, pushing and pulling the ambitions of states and the resistance of communities.

The fur trade stitched together the northern interior, linking Montreal to the Great Lakes and the prairies. British and French traders depended on Ojibwe, Cree, and Haudenosaunee networks; the trade's geography privileged river routes and seasonal camps over fortified towns. In the southwest deserts, Spanish expeditions and mission circuits tied scattered populations together, while along the Gulf Coast, smuggling networks evaded imperial regulations. Where land was arable, settlers spread out; where it was not, imperial presence relied on garrisons and diplomatic ties. These patterns produced uneven state power. Revolutions did not overturn them overnight; they exposed how geography could limit the reach of central authority and how local

communities could use terrain to negotiate autonomy or defiance.

Climate and disease structured life in ways that politics could not ignore. Winters in the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes closed rivers and isolated towns; summers brought agricultural cycles and military campaigning seasons. Hurricanes devastated Caribbean plantations and could tilt a colony's finances toward crisis.

Epidemics—smallpox, yellow fever—altered demographic balances and forced adaptations in labor and governance. In Saint-Domingue, disease circulated with the slave trade, while in the northern colonies, inoculation campaigns and public health measures shaped urban life. For revolutions, health was strategic: armies staggered under disease; port cities shut down; supply lines broke. These environmental factors meant that rebellion and reform happened within rhythms set by climate and illness, not just by political theory.

Transport technology and infrastructure evolved unevenly. Turnpikes and canals lagged in the north compared to Europe; rivers were still the best highways. Coastal shipping connected New England towns; bateaux moved goods up the Hudson and into the interior; York boats plied the Canadian waters. In Spanish territories, mule trains carried silver and supplies along rugged trails. The Caribbean's winds dictated the sailing calendar and made timing essential for merchants and military expeditions alike. Roads improved in the late eighteenth century, but travel remained arduous. These constraints mattered when rebels sought to coordinate across distances, when imperial governors tried to muster troops, and when communities weighed the risks of rebellion against the difficulties of escape or migration.

Land and property regimes were the bones of colonial societies. In British North America, freehold tenure and survey grids organized much of the countryside, especially in New England and the mid-Atlantic; proprietary grants and quitrents tied land to imperial authority. In French seigneurial systems, habitants held concessions with obligations to lords; after 1763, British administrators adapted but did not eliminate these structures. In Spanish America, ejidos (common lands) supported towns, while haciendas and mission lands anchored rural economies; legal codes protected Indigenous communal property in theory even as encroachment eroded it. In the Caribbean, plantation slavery concentrated land and labor in a few hands, producing stark inequalities. Each regime shaped claims to citizenship and sovereignty: who owned land, who could vote, who owed taxes, and who could call upon neighbors for defense.

Urban settlements grew unevenly across the four regions. New England's towns were relatively compact, with meetinghouses at their hearts and wharves at their edges. The mid-Atlantic saw larger port cities with diverse populations—merchants, artisans, laborers, and enslaved people—whose politics could be volatile. The southern colonies featured smaller towns and dispersed plantations, with political power anchored in county courthouses. In the Canadas, Montreal and Quebec were the main urban

centers, serving as administrative and commercial hubs for a vast hinterland. In New Spain, Mexico City dominated, but provincial towns like Guanajuato and San Antonio mattered in local crises. In the Caribbean, Cap-Français and Port-au-Prince were dense, cosmopolitan nodes. Urban geographies concentrated news, petitioning, and collective action; they also exposed the limits of imperial control when crowds gathered.

Borders were fluid, porous, and often contested. Between British and Spanish territories in the Southeast, Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw nations arbitrated disputes and profited from trade. Louisiana's transfer in 1762 and again in 1803 shifted allegiances and markets overnight. In the north, the boundary between British colonies and the United States after 1783 sliced through Indigenous homelands and disrupted longstanding relationships. The Canada-U.S. border remained a zone of smuggling, refugee movements, and diplomatic wrangling; the Oregon Country later became a joint occupation before settlement and treaty resolved it. In the southwest, the Rio Grande and the deserts marked not just administrative lines but lifeways. Revolutions magnified the significance of borders: refugees fled across them, armies invaded or retreated through them, and new nations sought legitimacy by defining where their sovereignty ended.

Maritime geography tied continental upheavals to global events. Control of sea lanes determined whether troops, supplies, and news moved. British naval supremacy allowed projection of force but also imposed costs; blockades starved colonies of goods and markets. Privateering blurred the line between war and commerce, especially in the Caribbean, where prizes and profits fueled revolutionary finance. In the Atlantic's seasonal currents, ships timed voyages to avoid storms and enemy squadrons. This mattered for the American war, where French naval intervention proved decisive; for Haiti, where sea power protected independence from invasion; and for Mexico, where coastal cities were strategic objectives. The Canadas, less maritime than their neighbors, still relied on the St. Lawrence for lifelines. Sea power thus set the outer limits of continental revolution.

Environmental features shaped the experience of war and rebellion. Marshes and swamps hindered movement; forests offered cover for skirmishers; mountains broke formations and logistics. In the American south, rice swamps and humid summers affected campaigning; in the north, winter snows forced armies into cantonments. In Haiti, the Massif de la Hotte and the ridges around Cap-Français provided natural fortifications for insurgent forces. In the Spanish borderlands, deserts and rivers limited artillery and supply trains. Soldiers adapted to terrain, learning local knowledge from allies. Geography became strategy: controlling passes, securing river crossings, and managing supply lines could determine outcomes as much as drill or doctrine. These conditions made command as much a matter of scouts and guides as of generals and maps.

Religion and settlement patterns intersected in distinctive geographies. New England's Puritan towns clustered around meetinghouses; the mid-Atlantic's diversity included Quakers, Anglicans, and dissenters; the south's Anglican establishment coexisted with evangelical movements. In French Canada, the Catholic Church anchored parishes and schools; after 1763, British authorities tolerated Catholicism while maintaining Protestant dominance elsewhere. Spanish missions sought to convert and settle Indigenous populations, especially along the California coast and the Rio Grande, where religious geography often aligned with imperial administration. In the Caribbean, Catholic and Protestant churches served colonists while enslaved populations maintained African spiritual landscapes influenced how communities organized politically, how they framed loyalty and rebellion, and how clergy participated in revolutions.

Geography also structured slavery and emancipation. In Saint-Domingue, the concentration of plantations along coastal plains and in valleys allowed enslaved majorities to coordinate resistance; mountains offered refuge for maroon communities and revolutionary armies. In the southern United States, slavery was dispersed across plantations and towns; rivers facilitated both the movement of enslaved labor and the spread of rebellion scares. In Mexico, slavery existed but was less central; the north's ranching and mission economies relied on different labor regimes. In the Canadas, slavery existed on a smaller scale and was gradually abolished; the borderlands became destinations for self-liberated people seeking freedom. The terrain of slavery shaped the possibilities of revolt and the geography of refuge, setting patterns that outlasted the revolutionary era.

The map of education and print culture followed urban geographies. Newspapers clustered in port cities; printing houses in Boston, Philadelphia, and Mexico City circulated pamphlets and constitutions; in Quebec, printing was slower to develop under imperial controls. Libraries and coffeehouses in the Caribbean spread news and ideas among colonists; the density of maritime contacts meant that newspapers often arrived with ships, carrying debates from Europe and other colonies. This uneven distribution meant that revolutionary ideologies reached some communities quickly and others slowly. The resulting patchwork influenced the tempo of politics: urban crowds could mobilize around printed arguments, while rural districts often moved more cautiously, relying on local networks and oral communication.

Frontier settlement pushed outward in waves, but these expansions were neither linear nor unopposed. In the American backcountry, speculators and settlers poured over the Appalachians after the Revolution, clashing with Indigenous nations and federal authorities. In the Canadas, Loyalist migrations after 1783 reshaped demographics and politics, particularly in Upper Canada, where English-speaking settlers altered the balance with French-speaking inhabitants. In the Spanish north, Comanche and Apache power constrained colonial expansion; missions and presidios

marked the limits of settlement. In the Caribbean, planters expanded cultivation into new valleys, but the geography of mountains limited that expansion. Each wave redrew de facto boundaries, setting the stage for later political conflicts over representation, land tenure, and sovereignty.

Geography influenced communication times, and thus political coordination. News from London could take weeks to reach the Caribbean and longer to reach the interior of New Spain or the northern lakes. During wars, delays meant that governors acted on outdated instructions and rebels misjudged the metropole's intentions. In revolutions, timing mattered: declarations, treaties, and military orders arrived late or not at all, forcing local improvisation. The American and Haitian revolutions benefited from relatively dense maritime networks, which accelerated the circulation of strategy and ideology; the Canadas and Spanish northern provinces experienced slower communication, contributing to more incremental change. These temporal geographies explain why some revolutions erupted in bursts of synchronized action while others unfolded in fits and starts.

Rivers were arteries of empire and revolt. The St. Lawrence tied the Canadas to the Atlantic; the Hudson, Delaware, and Potomac shaped American campaigns; the Mississippi and its tributaries linked the interior to New Orleans and the Gulf; the Rio Grande marked the edge of Spanish authority. Control of river forts—Ticonderoga, Detroit, Baton Rouge—often determined regional dominance. In the Caribbean, coastal rivers mattered less than harbors, but they still facilitated movement of goods and troops. Revolutionary forces that mastered riverine logistics enjoyed advantages; those that failed to secure crossings saw campaigns stall. Geography made rivers both highways and obstacles, and their strategic value guaranteed they would be contested throughout the period of upheaval.

Mountain ranges and highlands broke up political spaces. The Appalachians divided coastal colonies from the west, creating distinct backcountry cultures and grievances. In Mexico, the Sierra Madre ranges fragmented regions and fostered localism, complicating efforts to coordinate national movements. In Haiti, mountains enabled both the plantation economy's segmentation and the insurgents' capacity to resist. In the Canadian Shield and the Laurentians, rugged terrain limited agricultural settlement but supported forest and fur economies. These features reinforced regional identities that would survive independence, shaping federal structures in the United States and Mexico, and contributing to the distinct political trajectories of Upper and Lower Canada in the imperial framework.

Soils and agricultural potential drew populations and defined wealth. New England's thin soils encouraged maritime industries; the mid-Atlantic's rich valleys supported mixed agriculture; the southern coastal plain fostered plantation monocultures. In the Caribbean, volcanic soils yielded high sugar and coffee profits but demanded brutal labor regimes. In Mexico's Bajío and central valleys, fertile soils supported wheat and

maize; in the north, ranching prevailed. In the Canadas, the St. Lawrence lowlands and the Great Lakes shores offered arable land, but climate restricted growing seasons. These differences mattered for revolution: agricultural surpluses could feed armies; cash crops could finance war; subsistence economies could buffer communities from market shocks. Geography, in this sense, directly shaped the material basis of rebellion.

Maritime geography also shaped refugees and exile. During the American Revolution, Loyalists fled north to the Canadas and south to the Caribbean, altering demographics and politics. After the Haitian Revolution, planters, free people of color, and enslaved evacuees scattered across the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe, carrying stories, capital, and legal claims. In Mexico, insurgents and royalists crossed borders into Louisiana, Texas, and Central America, seeking safe haven or foreign support. In the Canadas, rebellions of 1837–1838 prompted flights to the United States and shaped later constitutional reforms. Ports and coastal routes made these movements possible; geography provided escape hatches and exile networks that transformed the political meaning of revolution, linking local rebellions to diaspora politics.

Geography thus set the stage for the political concepts that will be explored in later chapters. Sovereignty took shape on landscapes where multiple authorities coexisted: imperial governors, colonial assemblies, Indigenous councils, town meetings, and military commanders. Citizenship emerged from the ways people belonged to places—through landholding, parish membership, or participation in local institutions. Race and slavery were organized spatially: plantations on plains, maroon communities in mountains, free towns in borderlands. The economies that fueled independence—tobacco, sugar, furs, silver—were products of terrain and climate. As the book moves from these geographies to the Atlantic crises that ignited revolution, it keeps in view the landscapes that shaped every decision and the networks that carried ideas across them. The chapters that follow show how these physical realities became political destinies.

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