If anyone doubts the impact of borderlands and transnational methodologies on the historical profession, they should turn their attention to the September 2011 volume of the *Journal of American History*. In that volume, Pekka Hamalainen and Samuel Truett have collected some of the most insightful pieces of scholarship in Borderlands and transnational history, with topics ranging from—but not limited to—the creation of space along the Arizona-Sonora-Tohono O’odham borderlands; transnational migrations of Chinese and Native Hawaiians; racial politics and white supremacy in Texas; and the stories of African Americans fleeing slavery and crossing the U.S.-Canada border. The presence of such essays in a premier journal surely signals the shift of Borderlands scholarship “from the margins to the mainstream” of the historical profession.

Pekka Hamalainen and Brian DeLay have contributed to this shift with their award winning books. Both published by Yale University under the Lamar Series in Western History and in conjunction with the William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies at Southern Methodist University, *The Comanche Empire* and *War of a Thousand Deserts* break new ground in Borderlands, Southern, and American Indian history, as well as the histories of American foreign relations, race, and empire. Both focus on the relationships between the peoples, bands, tribes, states, nations, empires, and nation-states within the vast and geographically diverse
region of the present-day Texas-Mexico borderlands. Both situate Indigenous Peoples such as the Comanche, Kiowa, Apache, and others as central actors with a larger narrative that destabilizes nation-oriented histories and histories rooted in cosmopolitan centers and economic cores. And finally, rather than reading borders and boundaries back into the past, the authors write as if the present-day “lines in the sand” were anything but a pre-ordained destiny.

Pekka Hamalainen’s *The Comanche Empire* exhibits a breadth and scope worthy of the books that have also won the Bancroft Prize, the Merle Curti Award, and the Caughey Prize. *Comanche Empire* began as a dissertation at the University of Helsinki, which Hamalainen completed in 2001; and with its publication in 2008 by Yale University Press, *Comanche Empire* has truly broken new ground in the scholarship on empires, borderlands, and Native Americans in North America. The goal of book is to tell the story about an unconventional empire that American history has not acknowledged, in part because mainstream historiography has generally interpreted Indians as obstacles to American expansion that were doomed to extinction. Hamalainen argues that Comanches created an extensive commercial network and controlled a vast expanse of long-distance trade and border markets, based on a historically dynamic internal political development. Taking advantage of Spain’s weak control of its northern frontier, the more dominant Comanche created “…an interregional power with imperial presence….” (2) Indeed, Hamalainen claims that “…they built an imperial organization that subdued, exploited, marginalized, co-opted, and profoundly transformed near and distant colonial outposts, thereby reversing the conventional imperial trajectory in vast segments of North and Central America.” (3) In short, the Comanche empire crippled Spain and Mexico, and because of that weakness, especially as Americans perceived, the U.S. invaded Mexico in 1846. After that invasion, the Comanche maintained functional control of the Texas-Mexico borderlands for another
generation, until post-Civil War changes in technology—especially the expansion of the railroad—enabled massive troop movement and immigration across the Southern Great Plains. Demography and disease also helped consign Comanches to reservations in the 1870s.

This astounding rise in power grew out of the internal political, cultural, environmental, and social characteristics of Comanche bands that were simultaneously fluid yet structured, flexible yet shaped by kinship and gender; and the evolving interplay between Spanish, French, British, and American imperial designs. As bands of Comanches expanded southward from the Rocky Mountains and had established themselves throughout the Southern Plains by the mid-1700s, they incorporated towns and rancherias between northern New Mexico and central Texas into a trade network that integrated bison hunting, horse trading, human trafficking, and military domination. With their astounding ability to produce commodities through the gendered division of labor and a political economy of imperial commodity extraction, Comancheria had become central to the emerging trans-Atlantic web, economically, diplomatically, and politically, long before it had hardened into a full world system. “Seen from this angle, the eighteenth and nineteenth century Southwest and Mexican North emerge as a small-scale world-system that existed outside the controlling grip of Europe’s overseas empires.” (5) This Comanche-centric world was undoubtedly tied to European global expansion, but it was not simply peripheral to that process of expansion: it fueled it, stalled it, and shaped it.

Brian DeLay’s equally penetrating War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War, recasts a pivotal era in Borderlands history with its nuanced rendering of the origins, course, and legacy of the war between the United States and Mexico, and the influence of “Independent Indians” such as the Comanche, Apache, and Kiowa. The comparisons with Hamalainen’s Comanche Empire begin with the book’s origins and evolution. DeLay began
work on *War of a Thousand Deserts* as a graduate student at Harvard, developed it during a post-doc at the Clements Center at SMU, published with Yale University Press, and won a series of accolades: the Bryce Wood Book Award, the W. Turrentine Jackson Prize, and the James Broussard Best First Book Prize. And although the chronological scope of DeLay’s contribution is more squarely focused on the mid-nineteenth century, the implications of this book are similarly significant. Like Hamalainen, DeLay places Indigenous Peoples squarely in the center of North American history to help us understand how the complex interplay between Indian nations and European states not only remade the international border, it set the United States on a long trajectory as a global hegemon.

Written with a novelist’s eye for drama and narrative, Brian DeLay begins this book with a basic observation about the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Article 11 stipulated that as part of its new responsibility of controlling the recently acquired northern third of Mexico, the U.S. must stop “incursions” by the “savage tribes” southward into Mexico, return Indian and Mexican slaves to Mexico, and criminalize the further traffic in Mexicans captured in Mexico and brought over the border by Comanches, Kiowas and Apaches. This observation launched a broader investigation into “the international alarms over Indians” along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, a region which he, like Hamalainen, began to see as an Indigenous domain much more than a space controlled by either nation-state. To that end, DeLay argues in *War of a Thousand Deserts* that “the bloody interethnic violence that preceded and continued throughout the U.S.-Mexican War influenced the course and, by extension, helped precipitate its manifold long-term consequences for all the continent’s people.” (xv) In short, the cumulative effect of removing Indians from the east to Oklahoma and thereby exacerbating tensions between Indians and Indians, and Indians and Whites; accelerating competition for scarce resources such as bison...
on the southern Plains; and a racialized doctrine of Manifest Destiny led not only to the war between the U.S. and Mexico, it catapulted the U.S. across the continent and around the world.

Central to this complex course of events were the thousands of raids by Indians of the Plains and Southwest deep into the heart of Mexico. The long reach of Comanches, Kiowas, and Apaches during the 1830s through 1850s astonished onlookers in both countries because neither could combat Indigenous control of the borderlands region. Their supreme equestrianism, decentralized social structure, military prowess, knowledge of the land, and leverage in a commodity exchange network that spanned the middle of the continent enabled Native groups to exploit a vast region populated by dispersed towns, ranches, and settlements. It was this control of the borderlands by Indigenous peoples, DeLay argues, that played a role in the U.S. decision to wage war upon Mexico. As scholars such as Juliana Barr and Ned Blackhawk have noted, Indigenous peoples did more than simply react to policies and actions of European-Americans; they crafted their own agendas based on their own goals and objectives. This historical agency enabled them to raze towns and villages across the Mexican north and west Texas, as they managed to control the transportation and trading channels connecting the region to the economic centers of Mexico and the U.S. DeLay observes that the Mexican Republic failed to understand the power of these groups and dismissed the pleas of northerners and blamed the incursions on assistance from the U.S. In contrast, Americans saw the decline of the Mexican north as evidence of Mexicans’ “unfitness” and racial inferiority. The power of Comanches, Apaches, and Kiowas to control most of the borderlands seemed to turn back the arc of history away from progress and towards the past. Americans believed they could do better than a “mixed race people” who had been repeatedly defeated by “savage Indians.” This contrasting set
of misperceptions, misunderstandings, and preconceptions stood at the center of mid-nineteenth century violence and conquest.

*Comanche Empire* and *War of a Thousand Deserts* reflect the best of borderlands history. Their use of Spanish language sources culled from archives throughout Mexico, the U.S., and Spain; their attention to historical detail; and their artful eye for narrative will make them the gold standard for work in the field. Importantly, Hamalainen and DeLay have both skillfully interwoven the historiographies of the colonial Spanish frontier, Mexico, the borderlands, southern history, and the broader history of the United States. Placing these literatures into conversation with each other offers an important contribution to a continental history that transcends national boundaries and narratives tied to the nation-state. Their transnational analysis of race relations, Indian empires, colonialism and conquest, is set within the larger context of an expanding Atlantic trade economy based on resource extraction and nascent industrialization. The contestation over the borderland region, as narrated by these books, helps situate that highly volatile space within the larger tapestry of North American history.

Jeffrey P. Shepherd, Ph.D.

University of Texas at El Paso