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Anxieties of Soliciting Empire: Transformations of the Petition Across Languages and Peoples in the Saint Lawrence Valley and the Gulf of Maine, 1740-1840

The early nineteenth century witnessed a “petitioning explosion” in North America, one whose scope was unprecedented – not merely in the number of petitions and signatories but also in the range of themes addressed and in the diversity of peoples taking up the petition for their aims. In this paper I begin to examine how a set of highly differentiated peoples living in the Saint Lawrence Valley and the Gulf of Maine made and remade petitioning practices at a time of shifting imperial power and manifold alliances. By the mid nineteenth-century, vibrant petitioning cultures – with the petitions drawn up, written, published and read in (or translated into) English, and according to the parliamentary and congressional models of the Anglo-American political understanding – had opened on both coasts of the Saint Lawrence River and the Gulf of Maine. These petitioning movements had, in the process, reflected and fueled collective political and legal action, activity whose implications were both explicitly and implicitly revolutionary. Yet the colonial and imperial histories of these practices are not easily explained and were far from preordained; there were pervasive misunderstandings, errors in cultural transmission and translation, and resistance to new or old political forms.

This presentation will examine these dynamics in an examination of three intertwined narratives:

1. The rapid transformation in the 1760s and 1770s of French Canadian petitioning from cahiers and pétitions au roi (written in French and according to one set of established colonial practices) to parliamentary and Crown petitions (written in English, or in French with accompanying English translation, and in accordance with a different set of colonial practices).
2. A preliminary review of transformation of Native American petitioning in Quebec and Maine, also involving linguistic and cultural transmissions, from the 1750s to the early 1800s. In this period the Abenaki people of the Northeast began to press claims upon the colonial and later state legislature (Massachusetts) that officially governed their lands.
3. A preliminary review of the utilization by black freedmen in Massachusetts from the period of the American Revolution to the stirrings of the abolition movement.

In all three of these cases, rapidly changing balances of political and economic power left populations searching for new alliances, for guarantees of rights, or for mechanisms with which to stake claims to material, cultural or spiritual resources. In an age before mass electoral democracy was well established in the United States or Canada, the petition served as an institution of representation co-equal with that of elections. In the parliamentary-juridical model that would come to dominate North America, furthermore, these petitions were drawn up explicitly for legislative actors or courts, and according to legislative or court procedures. In all three of these cases, this adaptation to legislative procedures forms a central part of the hypotheses examined as well as the narrative.

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