This remarkable volume marks a decisive stage in the broad historiography of the Triple Frontier region. Where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet, a transnational story can now be told across scales of time and space. The authors of these essays attend to the full scope of the Triple Frontier region by writing its history in diverse temporal and spatial registers. Throughout the volume, this means an engagement with local, regional, national, and transnational scales. The unit of the nation-state is not wished away, but it is put in proper perspective and related to other dimensions of historical experience. This alone makes Big Water a critical intervention in a literature that has for too long tended to take the nation as a primary unit of analysis even when the space and time in question manifestly fail to conform to the borders and laws of particular states (or empires). Yet the frame is not merely situated around a relentless emphasis on the transnational or transimperial. This, too, would have been a limitation.

If the national circumscribes and distorts through the narrative of nations and stories of the origins and development of sovereignties and national political cultures, the transnational can occlude the provincial, the local, and the idiosyncratic and autonomous modes of operating and structures of feeling in the borderlands. Everything is not explained by an abstract “Atlantic World.” Between nations and worlds, then, we come to see the region of the Triple Frontier as borderlands. Even this frame, which we can take as the state of the art in the North American historiography, has limits. Thus, Big Water: a cohesive

FOREWORD

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volume of essays that seeks to balance these historical scales and explore the processes and conflicts that made and remade the Triple Frontier.

There is no doubting the importance of the Triple Frontier region. As a site of major interimperial and international conflict and, more recently, of integration and collaboration, it is a nexus for critical events and processes in the history of South America. Before the arrival of European colonizers, it was home to one of the densest populations of native peoples in South America. Despite the depredations of empires and nations, these peoples abide and continue to play a significant role in the culture of the Triple Frontier. Their story is told in the essays collected in this volume. The colonial era is explored in two essays that emphasize indigenous actors in relation to imperial projects of territorial expansion in the borderlands. These opening essays draw attention to the mobility of native and colonial people and the complex economic and political networks that emerged through their interaction. The theme of movement and interaction is picked up and developed in further essays covering the national era, indicating the deep and abiding consequences of this early period in structuring the modes of life and struggle in the borderlands.

A few essays in this volume also tap into local histories to show the limits of central state sovereignty in a postcolonial context. In these chapters, we come to see how nations sought to consolidate territorial control through local agents and private colonization schemes. By the end of the nineteenth century, they added conservation to their repertoire, beginning to designate natural reserves and map out, if not implement, the idea of national parks. These national projects, at scale, changed the landscape by introducing new settlers, building new towns, and initiating more intensive resource extraction that led to changes in relations of production and a significant degree of deforestation. The borderlands thereby became imbued with a new set of institutions and actors, such as colonization companies and interior ministries, that nonetheless engaged with and overlaid older structures and practices. In this sense, the borderlands exhibited a fractured chronotope. Neither time nor space was dominated by the nation. Power remained dispersed, violence was endemic, and local actors opted in and out of national systems and continued to cross borders and knit together the Triple Frontier as a borderland.

The story is carried forward into the era of massive state-sponsored infrastructure projects. In this new era of mega hydroelectric installations and concrete bridges and highways, the Triple Frontier moved decisively from a peripheral to a central place in the national and transnational projects of the
1970s and beyond. In this volume, we learn about the origins and development of the Itaipu hydroelectric complex and how echoes of the Paraguayan War reverberated in conflicts over contested border regions in the planning stages of the dam. We also learn about Paraguay’s pivot toward Brazil as a key economic and political partner in the 1970s and 1980s. Bridges across rivers transformed the Triple Frontier and with it the older patterns of economic life in places like Asunción, where fluvial ties to Argentina weakened and terrestrial connections to Brazil flourished. In this sense, infrastructure not only integrated actors in the Triple Frontier through projects such as dam building but also reoriented the whole space of the region through highways, trucks, and buses.

The late postcolonial era also witnessed the persistence of colonial themes such as mobility and border crossing in the lives of native peoples. Moreover, the twentieth century brought about the return of the Jesuit–Guarani Missions as a locus of cultural activity under the auspices of national patrimony and World Heritage sites. Here, then, the past and present continue their unending conversation. The Triple Frontier now—peopled with settlers, largely deforested, its rivers behind high dams, part of a transnational economic zone (Mercosul/sur), home to national parks, and crisscrossed by highways and bridges—remains also a place of historical memory and contemporary alterity in the wandering paths of the Guarani.

Common themes and concepts weave these essays together into a broader argument about the Triple Frontier. To begin with, the subject of indigenous history is treated throughout the volume without the declensionist sentimentality that sometimes colors studies of native peoples. Great losses are tallied, to be sure, but the agency and adaptability of the region’s original inhabitants remain at the forefront of the analysis. This sensibility also shapes the volume’s treatment of environmental history. Understanding changes in the landscape and human–environment interaction over the long run as a series of struggles, adaptations, misunderstandings, and appropriations rather than as a linear process of domination and decline helps move the literature forward into promising new pathways for analysis. The temporal and spatial scope of the essays helps illuminate the ways in which historical patterns shift and complicate the kinds of stories that are too often told in isolation. This attention to time and space also brings to the surface themes of interconnection and movement in the borderlands. Histories based on post hoc national boundaries begin to dissolve in this approach, bringing the best tendencies of the broader international literature on borderlands to bear on the unique circumstances of the Triple Frontier.
Taken as a whole, *Big Water* asks readers to rethink relationships between the distant past and the contemporary world, to consider the space of the border-lands as defined more by movement and exchange than lines drawn on maps, and to see a region holistically, embedded in a system of empires and then nation-states but possessed of its own distinctive patterns and logics.