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**Amy Kaplan and Nina Gerassi-Navarro**

**Between Empires:  
Frances Calderón de Barca's  
*Life in Mexico***

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Amy Kaplan and Nina Gerassi-Navarro

## Between Empires: Frances Calderón de Barca's *Life in Mexico*<sup>1</sup>

The project of transatlantic studies has the potential to pry loose the tenacious grip of American exceptionalism by mapping the Atlantic as a space of multiple crossings and cultural exchanges. More than a geographic site, the Atlantic as 'the Great Divide' offers a conceptual framework that overrides the boundaries of the nation as the primary unit of knowledge. For over two centuries exceptionalist discourse has mapped the Atlantic as an absolute barrier that separates Old world from New and distinguishes the United States from European. In the discourse of Manifest Destiny, the Atlantic divided the open space of a unsettled continent from the cramped cities of Europe; the promise of individual freedom and democracy from the rein of tyranny and class conflict; and providential westward expansion from the brutality of imperial conquest. This spatial binary had a temporal dimension, as John O'Sullivan who coined the term in 1845, dubbed the United States the 'nation of futurity,' as opposed to those European cultures weighted down by the past.<sup>2</sup>

Studies such as Paul Gilroy's and Joseph Roach's have amply supplanted this binary division with the concept of the Black Atlantic and Circum-Atlantic, spaces that chart the interconnectedness of Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Yet the Spanish empire and early Spanish American republics have not figured as centrally into these new transnational configurations within

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1. An earlier version of this paper was given by Amy Kaplan as a Keynote Address for 'Across the Great Divide' Edinburgh, 18–21 July 2003.

2. John L. O'Sullivan, 'The Great Nation of Futurity,' in Thomas Paterson, *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1989) 1:241.

3. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.