



# Problems and Prospects in North American Borderlands History

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## Abstract

Scholars of North American borders have raised fundamental questions about the relationship between the discipline of history and the nation-state. Integrating the histories of the U.S.–Canadian and U.S.–Mexican borders while paying more attention to the limits of national power will allow them to write accounts of modern state-making that address questions important to all historians of the modern world.

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Borders have recently become the sites of deep scholarly interest. Contemporary border regions, particularly the U.S.–Mexico border, are burgeoning economically and demographically, and the movements of goods and people through them are important subjects of political debate and agitation. These developments raise an implicit challenge to the work of historians: although the modern nation-state gave birth to the discipline and continues to structure its specializations and lines of inquiry, the increasing prominence of border crossings of all sorts suggests that nations themselves are shaped by larger dynamics that may be discounted or underestimated by versions of the past tied too firmly to nation-based inquiry. Indeed, the physical edges of nations may reveal the most about the contingency of national histories and provide opportunities for creating accounts of the past that transcend both the geographic and conceptual limits imposed by international boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

“Borderlands,” a term that a generation ago referred to the study of New Spain’s northern frontier, is now shorthand for the study of the U.S.–Mexico border region. The creation of this border from the long history of European colonialism and subsequent national projects, and its shifting meanings and implications, are the central subjects of much of this literature. Recent projects, building on a generation of more regionally oriented histories and engaging the historiographies and archives of both Mexico and the United States, have fleshed out some of the impacts of border-making in both nations. We now know that the new international boundary altered class relations in much of the Mexican north. Regional economic elites and the central state took advantage of the fact that there was no longer a need to assure subaltern men of their land rights in order to rely on them as a military

check to Apache and Comanche raids, while in the Mexican northeast the ease of crossing into Texas for work led to the collapse of debt peonage and generally milder treatment of peasants by hacienda owners. The policing of the new border probably affected native peoples the most, with the Mexican and U.S. governments cooperating in efforts to end the migration and raiding so essential to continued native independence. The long efforts of Hispanic borderlands communities to maintain their autonomy from national centers of power persisted throughout the nineteenth century, often through the continuation of cross-border political and economic ties and sometimes through armed uprisings. The border also became a site where national notions of race and citizenship were forged; by the twentieth century, U.S. immigration restrictions led to the active policing of the border against migrants – not Mexicans, as most would assume today, but rather Asians banned from entry by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1907 so-called Gentleman's Agreement with Japan. Long before the age of NAFTA, then, the U.S.-Mexico border loomed large in the development of both nations.<sup>2</sup>

The proliferation of dissertations and monographs suggests that the new incarnation of borderlands history is coming into its own. In order to more fully realize the ambitious intellectual potential of the field, borderlands historians would benefit from the seeming paradox of both expanding the geographic scope of their studies and rooting them more fully in particular places. Doing so would enable them to fruitfully describe how North American nations and nationalisms built themselves in the midst of larger processes and more specific loyalties.

A quick glance at a map of modern North America will reveal the myopia of referring to the U.S.-Mexico boundary as “the border.” There is another very long border in North America, one with its own history and its own rapidly developing literature. Historians of the U.S.-Canada border – mostly but not exclusively Canadian – investigate similar questions as the scholars of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. They have begun to ask, for example, how indigenous peoples responded to the bisection of their traditional homelands in the nineteenth century, and how regional communities of mixed-race peoples were affected by the arrival of more restrictive racial mores enforced by central governments. They have traced the ways that borders both restricted and fostered migrations, documented the ways that national governments attempted to impede border crossings to serve larger policy goals, and shown that local residents sometimes welcomed and even demanded border enforcement and at other moments actively subverted it. Other accounts have examined the environmental implications of border-making, such as the impact on the hunting of migratory animal populations and the human communities dependent upon them. Even the ways that popular culture, literature, and film have used borders to construct national identities have captured scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup>

Given the deep congruence in northern and southern border scholarship, a comparative approach might well help borderlands scholars to provide

more compelling answers to their fundamental questions. Have Canadians and Mexicans and their governments responded to the looming economic and military power of the United States in parallel ways, or have the great differences between Canada and Mexico sharply differentiated their border-making projects? If some native peoples were able to navigate a bordered world more successfully than others, is that because of the differing nature of the state assimilation projects they confronted, or because of their own resources or decisions? In a more general sense, do the histories of these two borders teach us similar or different lessons about the ability of modern states to enforce their claims to territorial exclusivity on the ground? These are just some of the questions that cry out for a comparative approach – or, in the case of historical actors like Asian migrants who navigated both borders, an integrated account of the impact of the two borders upon one another.<sup>4</sup>

If borderlands scholars would profit by going larger, than at the same time they should pay more attention to the ways that borders have remained local places even in the face of heavy-handed efforts to make them national places where lives and geography would be organized to meet the demands of the nation and its central state. The meaning of a border and the consequences of the enforcement of national policy concerning it differ remarkably from place to place. In locations where local elites want a large and cheap labor force, for example, enforcement of immigration restrictions is likely to be more contested than in places where nativism or fear of labor competition generate local support for restricted borders. Even national agencies like the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service or the U.S. Border Patrol can serve local goals as much as national ones. For some borderlanders, notions of community based on ethnoracial, familial, religious, or economic ties may continue to be more fundamental ways of organizing space and identity than national boundaries. The sense in which particular communities or places on borders are national and international rather than local spaces, then, needs to be interrogated rather than assumed.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of a broader frame and a greater attention to the particularities of place could help create more complicated explications of the relationship between borderlands communities and national states. Contemporary borderlands scholarship portrays the modern state in almost entirely negative terms, as an outside, coercive force whose arrival ends the autonomy and freedom enjoyed by natives and other peoples who once lived beyond its control. This is not without reason: North America's borders (with the exception of much of the eastern U.S.–Canada line) were far removed from the centers of national power and population at the moment of their creation, and the central state was in fact a distant entity controlled by and serving the interest of people far from the border. It projected its power more through violence than by the capture of the imaginations and loyalties of borderlanders themselves, forcibly opening its new peripheries to national markets and its more fixed and hierarchical racial categories.<sup>6</sup>

But this isn't the full picture of the state: borderlanders also used it for their own purposes and sought to forge nations that reflected their own identities. Various groups demanded border enforcement for their own reasons (to control sources of labor, to protect themselves from human and livestock epidemics, to control still-threatening native peoples), and they thus called upon Mexico City and Ottawa to protect them from the military and economic power of the United States. In some cases border ethnic minorities came to insist on the protections of national citizenship against the racial and economic exploitation of other locals. Accounts of borders must tell these tales of adaptation and democracy as well as of conquest and violence. The lure of internationalizing national histories ought not result in a wholesale dismissal of the liberating aspects of nationalism and the state.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it is appropriate that much of modern historical inquiry is structured by nation states, whose territoriality and understandings of their antecedents provide historians with the demarcations of their subjects and time frames. Nation-states are, after all, the dominant form of organizing people and territory in the modern world. But their rise to this ascendancy should not erase other stories, or the ways in which nations have clashed or reinforced other imagined communities and ways of organizing space. The study of borders has become an important way for historians to tell such stories. More comparative approaches, greater grounding in specific places, and a fuller appreciation of the politics of modern states at their borders will help them to go further yet.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See: T. Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) for a variety of proposals for approaching United States history in broader context; S. Truett and E. Young (eds), *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), for a similar approach to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

<sup>2</sup> F. Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); D. Nugent, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution: An Anthropological History of Namiquipa, Chihuahua* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); M. Tinker Salas, *In the Shadow of the Eagles: Sonora and the Transformation of the Border during the Porfiriato* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); J. Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848–1910* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); E. Hu-DeHart, *Yaqui Resistance and Survival: The Struggle for Land and Autonomy, 1821–1910* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); E. Meeks, "Cross-Ethnic Political Mobilization and Yaqui Identity Formation in Guadalupe, Arizona," in N. Foley (ed.), *Reflexiones: New Directions in Mexican American Studies, 1997* (Austin, TX: CMAS Books, 1998), 77–108; E. Young, *Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); B. H. Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern American* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); E. Lee, *At America's Gates:*

*Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> B. LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2001); S. McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); C. Higham and R. Thacker (eds), *One West, Two Myths: A Comparative Reader* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Higham and Thacker (eds), *One West, Two Myths: Essays on Comparison* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006); J. Seltz, "Embodying Nature: Health, Place, and Identity in Nineteenth-Century America," PhD Dissertation (University of Washington, forthcoming); Y. Takai, "Defining and Breaching the Nation-State: The Movements of Japanese and Canadians across the U.S.-Canadian Border" (manuscript under review); J. Lutz, "Work, Sex, and Death on the Great Thoroughfare: Annual Migrations of 'Canadian Indians' to the American Pacific Northwest," in J. M. Findlay and K. S. Coates (ed.), *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2002); D. G. McCrady, *Living with Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); L. Wadewitz, "Fishing the Line: Political Boundaries and Border Fluidity in the U.S.-Canada Borderlands, 1880s–1930s," in S. Evans (ed.), *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on the Regional History of the 49th Parallel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006; Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006); J. E. Taylor III, "The Historical Roots of the Canadian-American Salmon Wars," in Findlay and Coates (ed.), *Parallel Destinies*; D. Brégent-Heald, "Dark Limbo: Film Noir and the North American Borders," *The Journal of American Culture* (forthcoming); S. McManus, "'Their Own Country': Race, Gender, Landscape, and Colonization around the 49th Parallel, 1862–1900," in Evans (ed.), *Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests*.

<sup>4</sup> For territoriality as key attribute of modern world history, see: C. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review*, 105/8 (2000): 807–31. For an effort to integrate emerging scholarship on the Mexico–U.S. and Canada–U.S. borders, see: <http://www.smu.edu/swcenter/bridging%20national%20borders.htm>. For examples of studies that integrate both borders, see: C. Sandowski-Smith (ed.), *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Lee, *At America's Gates*; A. A. E. Geiger, "Cross-Pacific Dimensions of Race, Class, and Identity: Meiji- and Taisho-Era Japanese Emigrants in the North American West, 1885–1928," PhD Dissertation (University of Washington, forthcoming). A wider comparison between North American and other borders could also be fruitful. See: M. Baud and W. Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History*, 8/2 (1997): 211–42. Studies of nation-building in Europe can also be informative to North Americanists. Peter Sahlins's *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) is widely cited. Timothy Snyder's discussion of the emergence of modern states in Eastern Europe engages many of the same themes as recent North American borderlands scholarship. See: T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). On the other hand, there are some signs of reciprocal influence, with concepts and frameworks generated by North American borderlands scholars finding resonance among Europeanists. See: M. von Hagen, "Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era," *American Historical Review*, 109/2 (2004): 445–68, especially p. 447 n8.

<sup>5</sup> R. St. John, "Line in the Sand: The Desert Border between the United States and Mexico, 1848–1934," PhD Dissertation (Stanford University, 2005); S. Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: A Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming); K. Lytle-Hernandez, "Entangling Bodies and Borders: Racial Profiling and the United States Border Patrol, 1924–1955," PhD Dissertation (University of California at Los Angeles, 2002); S. D. Kang, "The Legal Construction of the Borderlands: The INS, Immigration Law, and Immigrant Rights on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1917–1954," PhD Dissertation (University of California at Berkeley, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Leading examples of this treatment of nation-states include Nugent, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution*; J. Adelman and S. Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *American Historical Review*, 104/3 (1999): 814–41;

J. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Sahlins, *Boundaries*; A. Resendez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); O. Valerio-Jimenez, *Rio Grande Borderlands: Identity and Nation Along the Rio Grande, 1849–1880* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming); Seltz, “Embodying Nature”; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*. For trenchant critiques of the enthusiasm of U.S. scholars for decentering the U.S. state and nation and affirmations of the continued political and intellectual project of nation-building in the face of U.S. economic power, see: B. Traister, “Risking Nationalism: NAFTA and the Limits of the New American Studies,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 27/3 (1997): 191–205; Traister, “Border Shopping: American Studies and the Anti-Nation” in Sandowski-Smith (ed.), *Globalization on the Line*.

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