{essays in history}

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Beyond the Borderland: The Hardening of the United States-Mexican Border during the Twentieth Century

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Reviewed Work(s)

Migra!: A History of the U.S Border Patrol. By Kelly Lytle Hernandez (Berkley: University of California Press, 2010). Pp. 328. Paper, $24.95.

Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S-Mexico Border. By Rachel St. John (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Pp. 296. Cloth $39.95. Paper $24.95.

Militarizing the Border: When Mexicans Became the Enemy. By Miguel Antonio Levario (College Park: Texas A & M University, 2013). Pp. 195. Cloth, $38.95.

In an iconoclastic 1999 article, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron argued against what they perceived to be the current trend in Borderlands studies. "New" Western and Frontier historians had reformulated the borderlands as a "zone of intercultural penetration," favoring socio-cultural continuity in the face of structural change. Adelman and Aron readily recognized and welcomed the new historiographic spotlight placed upon the borderlands (however defined), but contended that the new culturally-minded historians had written out a significant portion of the borderlands narrative. "Students of borderlands neglect the power politics of territorial hegemony," the authors noted, while they also "overlook[ed] the essentially competitive nature of European imperialism and the ways in which these rivalries shaped transitions from colonies to nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centur[ies]."[1]

While Adelman and Aron focused on the effects of European imperialism during the colonial and early-national periods, their argument for reconceptualizing the borderlands as a site of national and international contention easily carries forward to the scholarship of US – Mexican border relationships during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Many historians continued the trend that Adelman and Aron identified in 1999, focusing on socio-cultural traditions, racial transitions, and the formation of Mexican-American identity.[2] While

these studies helped fill this long understudied historiographic gap, they often ignored the fundamental reality of the Mexican and Mexican-American immigrant experience during the twentieth century and the difficulties of transversing an increasingly-hardening border. As historian Mae Ngai observed, illegality came to define not just the immigrant experience during the American twentieth century, but the overall American experience, as well.[3] Ignoring the United States-Mexican border seems to disregard the forest for the trees.

Rhetorically, the issue of "border (in)security" has appeared as a common political trope during the twenty-first century. Concurrently, recent demographic and electoral shifts have also allowed immigration reform to reappear as fodder for political debate. In both instances, security and reform, the existence of the border creates racial qualifiers based on language, ethnicity, and ultimately, citizenship status. Much as in the realm of historical debate, one cannot discuss the variance among racial and legal statuses unless they use the present border paradigm as their start point.

Several historians have recently made the border the center-piece of their narratives. Beginning during the early-twentieth century, the United States institutionalized mechanisms of border and immigration enforcement. The three works examined here all deal with the formalization of the border, but mark an interesting transition in light of Adelman and Aron's analysis. This new hardening of the border created varying forms of racial identity inside American society: Mexican, Mexican-American, and Illegal Immigrants. Drawing the border, ending cross-border banditry, and enforcing immigration policies defined the roles of whites, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans in the increasingly race-conscious United States. More importantly, the books analyzed here place the border in a binational perspective, showing the role of Mexico in hardening the border from the southern side. This new perspective shows how border formation creates a nexus of international consensus and explores the ramifications for those in the line's immediate vicinity.

As evident from its title, *Line in the Sand* places the physical border between the United States and Mexico firmly at the center of its historical narrative. "Although located at the periphery of the nation," historian St John states, "this border … was central to state projects of

territorial sovereignty, economic development, and the construction of the body politic"(6). From its 1848 inception, the US-Mexican border marked a site of negotiation. During the border's early years, neither the United States nor Mexico could chart it, let alone enforce it, leaving locals amidst the borderland wagering over local sovereignties. As exhibited by the development of the twin-cities complexes of Nogales and San Diego/Tijuana, during the nineteenth century, the border remained more of an abstraction than a reality.

Not until the twentieth century did the two nations build the requisite internal capabilities and political inertia to make border formalization a priority. St. John maps the expansion of capitalist acquisitiveness into the region during the turn of the century, along with the expectations of government-enforced stability that followed in-tow. The growth of corporate mining and large-scale agriculture along both sides of the border changed the labor dynamic in the region, making population control a priority for the national projects under development in Washington, D.C and Mexico City. The rise of a national boundary changed the local power dynamics along the border, empowering bureaucrats and capitalists from both countries and placing the rest into race- and class-based niches. St. John argues that, minus some minor permutation, this binational border regime exists to the present-day. Although St. John's narrative should be familiar to most scholars of the region, her adept portrayal of the border as a joint-creation of the United States and Mexico provides a counterpoint to the dominant motif of American domination.

Levario charts a different historical track in his *Militarizing the Border*. As opposed to St. John's region of localized negotiation, Levario contends that violence and the lack of governmental control typified the border region during the turn of the twentieth century. Focusing primarily on West Texas, *Militarizing the Border* argues that, although the border around El Paso/Ciudad Juarez appeared more permeable than permanent, increasingly racialized violence during the last decades of the nineteenth century defined the border reality. Levario wades into the dense and oft-contested historiography of the Texas Rangers as he argues that the Rangers, by pursuing localized vengeance as opposed to institutional justice, drove a wedge between the Mexican and Anglo populations in West Texas.[4] The Rangers increasingly sought to foster

a border regime based on racial and geographic differences. Although many locals resented this overt application of outside control, this wedge became the foundation of future perceptions of race and violence along the border.

The Mexican Revolution created two new socio-cultural perceptions among the Anglo community astride the border: anarchy and violence. In the wake of the 1916 St. Ysabel Massacre of white engineers and technicians in Mexico, the white residents of El Paso began a systematic campaign of harassing and beating Mexican and Mexican-American residents of the city. Soldiers called out from near-by Ft. Bliss targeted the Mexican-American neighborhood of Chihuahuita inside El Paso, continuing the punishment initially meted out by the city's white citizens. Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico, possibly in response to the violence being perpetrated on Mexicans in El Paso, exposed the cyclical nature of violence along the border, much of it dictated by race. The Punitive Expedition, the United States' ham-handed attempt to find vengeance by crossing the border in search of Villa, represented the first militarization and institutionalization of border enforcement. In this context, Mexicans became the "enemy," a scourge existing south of the border that the federal government hoped to keep from disturbing the nation's relative tranquility. Violence still typified the border; now, however, prerogative for its use belonged to national institutions.

Following the Mexican Revolution, Prohibition reinforced the popular notions of Mexican violence and illegality within the United States. Policies of immigration and alcohol control grew in tandem. "Enforcing prohibition was less ambiguous [than immigration control]," Levario notes, "although it complicated the job of border patrolmen, many of whom described the 1920s as the most violent years in the history of the Border Patrol" (109). As they struggled to maintain their vigilance along the border, agents found themselves balancing their immigration and prohibition requirements. The lure of large profits increased smugglers' penchant for violence, and the border agents charged with closing the border to the profitable trade felt the sting of violent reprisals. Levario readily admits that bootlegging networks included Anglo civilians and shop-owners. The primary smugglers, however, were Mexican, allowing officials in West Texas to combine their dual missions of immigration

and alcohol control to create the perception of danger from illegal Mexican bootlegger.

As both the United States and Mexico made border enforcement a primary national goal during the twentieth century, the role of national border patrols became increasingly significant. Hernandez' *Migra!* brings the United States Border Patrol sharply into historical focus. Founded in the wake of the xenophobic National Origins Act of 1924, the United States Border Patrol initially lacked clear scope and guidance. Border Patrol officials rushed to fill this institutional vacuum, often relying on local ex-law enforcement types to fill their new ranks. In this regard, *Migra!* helps synthesize the two previous books; border agents, having been reared in the turn-of-the-century violence that came to dominate the border, came from the newly landless class pushed out by expanding capitalist machination. With no formal mission, these border patrolmen reverted to old habits, associating illegality and violence with Mexicans. Although charged with patrolling the entirety of the Canadian border and the Gulf Coast, the Border Patrol's early reliance on racist traditionalism created an institutional inertia that made the policing of Mexicans the Patrol's primary task.

Hernandez' book extends chronologically beyond the other two works here examined, studying the impact of World War II and the Cold War on immigration control. As she contends, "the violence of immigration law enforcement took place in a context of cooperation between United States and Mexican systems of migration control" (126). The advent of the Braceros Program further institutionalized immigration and labor control during the early days of World War II. By formalizing labor agreements and migration, the two nations incentivized legality. This change led to an unforeseen inversion, as Border Patrol agents squared off in the border region against large Anglo agriculturalists that relied on illegal labor. Border agents and federal bureaucrats strove to paint illegal immigrants as twentieth century "slaves" to paternalistic, landed masters. Throughout World War II and the early Cold War-era, international and national forces sought to wrest control of the border from local forces that had risen to prominence during the early period of the border's formalization.

Migra! charts the changing nature of immigration enforcement through the 1970s, although the bulk of the work's argument ends with 1954's

"Operation Wetback," the attempted mass deportation of illegal immigrants. On paper, this operation exhibited the United States' intent to regulate its southern border in the new Cold War security environment. In practice, it served as visible evidence of the changing race-based rhetoric surrounding the border. The inability of the United States to control its national boundary, in light of Cold War paranoia, transitioned from a problem of labor control to one of national defense. Sending agents to the border during 1954 tangibly addressed the "problem" of illegal immigration for the American public, providing political closure to the issue and allowing the Border Patrol to eventually disengage from the overt policing of Mexicans in the border region. No longer viewed as mistreated "slaves," illegal immigrants became "aliens," an ominous distinction in a society looking for anti-communist conformity.

The border region still remains a site of contention. Post-9/11 fears of terrorist infiltration, labor uncertainty after the 2008 recession, and the roiling drug war in northern Mexico have created contentious issues along both sides of the border. Historians have much work to do tracking the border's political and rhetorical significance during the last quarter of the twentieth century, especially in light of the advent of the War on Drugs, the rise of neo-liberalism, and the last fervent gasps of anti-communism. These three works all exhibit the primacy of the border in understanding socio-political relations in the region and, by extension, the continent. Both the United States and Mexico have worked to formalize the border, and an English-language history of Mexico's attempts at border and immigration control is still needed. These works all point to the fact that the border, as a point of contention and shifting power relationships, defines not only the region, but also conceptions of race, class, and legitimacy.

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[1] Jerry Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *The American Historical Review* 104 (June 1999). Quotation, pg. 815. Adelman and Aron speak of an intellectual tradition that

reaches back to Richard White's *The Middle Ground* and Patricia Nelson Limmerick's *The Legacy of Conquest*; see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1659-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Patricia Nelson Limmerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken History of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987). The two historians take Limmerick to task for emphasizing cultural continuity over structural change.

[2] For best works focusing on the formation of Mexican-American identity, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*(New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] Mae N. Hgai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Pinceton University Press, 2005). For another look at immigration, consider David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

[4] The Texas Rangers mythos and historiography is hotly contested. For the best introduction, see the forthcoming essay by Nathan Jennings in *Journal of the West* (author reviewed manuscript). Graybill's recent comparative study of the Rangers and the Mounties provide a unique look at the two institutions that marries up with the works analyzed here; see Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mpunties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

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