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Negotiating North America's New National Borders

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Negotiating North America's New National Borders

The introductory essay of this volume refers to the “diluvial proportions” of the literature on borders and borderlands in North American history, a description that might with equal justice be applied to the entire historiography of the United States and the imperial currents from which it emerged in the late eighteenth century. Like U.S. historiography as a whole, the body of work on North American borderlands simultaneously benefits and suffers from its richness and size: its students have the privilege of joining a scintillating and vibrant conversation, but at the same time its volume can all too easily crowd out the discussions emanating from other rooms in the mansion of history. Borderlands, as the introduction also notes, “were worldwide phenomena during the modern era,” yet North Americanists have rooted their accounts in the distinctive regional, colonial, and national histories most clearly shaping their subjects.¹ We have thereby left largely unexplored the question of whether or not there are important enough dynamics of borders and borderlands *in general* to warrant the kind of broadly comparative approach undertaken in this book, and locked ourselves in too close a conversation to learn from those examining similar developments elsewhere.

The essay uses the early history of the international borders that divided and linked Mexico, the United States, and Canada to argue that greater emphasis on the limits of state power in this period would let North Americanists write accounts of these places that simultaneously reflect their historical specificity and are more open to comparison with similarities elsewhere. The unevenness and paradoxes of the state-building and territorial consolidation that redrew the continent’s map in the mid-nineteenth century not only make it helpful for historians to compare the two international borders to one another (rarely enough done), but also to make their studies part of a worldwide conversation about borderlands and borders.²

Modern maps tell us that borders are international spaces – zones made by the encounter of empires and nation-states. And yet even with the most powerful nation-

¹ Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, eds., *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (Duke University Press, 2004).

² Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew Graybill, eds. *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories* (Duke, 2010).

states, they remained in critical ways contested, open, and permeable, to the frustration of metropolitan dreams of discrete sovereign spaces. In North America as elsewhere, non-national geographies, economies, and identities persisted into the twentieth century, and in some ways up to our own time. This tension is perhaps the great central theme of modern borderlands history.

The Lay of the Historiographic Land

The most influential recent article in North American borderlands studies is Jeremy Adelman and Steven Aron's 1999 piece "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples In Between in North American History." Adelman and Aron argue that the replacement of empires by nation-states was the key turning point in the history of the continent. In places where European empires had competed for control, Indians and other societies could maintain broad autonomy and power. But in the nineteenth century, when European powers gave way to the nation-states of Canada, the United States, and Mexico, natives ended up as conquered people forced to live in the context of national, not borderlands, societies. "Hereafter," they write, "the states of North America enjoyed unrivaled authority to confer or deny rights to peoples within their borders." These new borders divided North American peoples in new ways, but also had ramifications "for internal membership in the political communities of North America." "The rights of citizens – never apportioned equally – were now allocated by the force of law monopolized by ever more consolidated and centralized public authority." "With the consolidation of the state form of political communities," they conclude, "borderland peoples began the long political sojourn of survival within unrivaled polities."³

This depiction of lost autonomy and of settler-states as cages would surely have been familiar to native Americans. How relevant this periodization is outside of the Americas is an open question: is there generally something about nation-state territoriality that is meaningfully different than imperial territoriality? Adelman and

³ Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104 (June 1999), 840.

Aron's argument is congruent with some recent work on territoriality and empires, and thus suggests some ways to relate North American history to global history. Their periodization fits nicely with Charles Maier's argument that the period from roughly the 1850 to the 1960s marked an "enhanced concept of territory" across the globe. Maier defines this "as a bounded geographical space that provides a basis for material resources, political power, and common allegiance" and argues that both empires and newly-consolidated nations envisioned territory "not just as an acquisition or as a security buffer but as a decisive means of power and rule."⁴

In the case of liberal Republics such as the United States, Mexico, and ultimately Canada, modern territoriality meant the holy trinity of state, territory, and identity: as Abraham Lincoln told his Congress in 1862, "A nation may be said to consist of its territory, its people, and its laws. The territory is the only part which is of certain durability. 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever.' . . . That portion of the earth's surface which is owned and inhabited by the people of the United States, is well adapted to be the home of one national family, and it is not well adapted for two, or more. Its vast extent, and its variety of climate and productions, are of advantage . . . for one people, whatever they might have been in former ages."⁵

Aron and Adelman's emphasis on the ethno-racial restrictions that came with the transition from open and contested *borderlands* to bounded and controlled *bordered lands* also strikes me as consistent with recent work on the fluidity and cosmopolitanism of empires made perhaps most prominently by Maya Jasanoff in *Edge of Empire*. Much recent scholarship takes an almost nostalgic look back at imperial toleration of internal heterogeneity – Ottoman diversity gives way to Balkan and Turkish ethnic nationalisms; in the Americas after national independence Indian peoples fight and generally fail to retain the land and cultural autonomy that they had won for themselves under Spanish, French, and even British rule.⁶ Perhaps liberal republics were inherently less tolerant of

⁴ Charles Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review* 105 (June 2000), 816, 818.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (Library of America, 1989)

⁶ Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Live, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850* (Knopf, 2005); Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution*

internal heterogeneity, insistent not just on strategic alliance or loyalty but on the extinguishing of other identities and their replacement with *national* identity: in Lincoln's words, "one people, whatever they might have been in former ages."

Adelman and Aron root their periodization in a detailed look at the Great Lakes, central Mississippi Valley, and Spanish Texas and New Mexico. So the brief description here does not do justice to their argument. A closer examination of the social history of the new international borders, however, suggests that Adelman and Aron's framework is a better description of the *aspirations* of central states than of realities on the ground, at until the twentieth century..

On the Ground

The modern map of North America took shape with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between Mexico and the United States and the extension of the U.S.-Canada border from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific along the 49th parallel after American saber-rattling. But maps are abstractions, and the first efforts to accurately survey the borders suggested just how weak was the grasp of central governments.

The joint U.S.-Mexico survey provided for in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was to begin near the Spanish Mission at San Diego, California. But because the land route across the continent was so grueling and dangerous, the U.S. party opted to sail to Panama, cross the narrow land bridge there, and sail to California. The journey to Central America was uneventful, but once the U.S. commissioners arrived there in March of 1849, the flood of traffic prompted by the California gold rush delayed them for two full months, exhausting much of their funding in the process. Quarreling over finances was joined by a deeper split within the U.S. side of the commission, with the northerners suspicious that Southerners were intent on finding a southwestern route for a transcontinental railroad, and thus ensuring the spread of slavery westward. When the

(Knopf, 2007); Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Indian, 2005); Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union, and the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires* (Westview, 1997); Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 2008); Bernard Lewis and Benjamin Braude, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (Holmes & Meier, 2000)

principal commissioners left the surveyors near the Gila river in Arizona for what was supposed to be a short re-supply trip to Sonora, they became lost, spent several weeks in the desert, and became gravely ill. Pedro García Conde, the Mexican commissioner, died, while his U.S. counterpart spent several months recuperating.⁷

It was not until four years later, in the summer of 1853, that mapping of the Rio Grande section of the border even began. Even this was hard to pull off: Yellow Fever killed the party's doctor—and nearly one of the U.S. head commissioners—while they awaited transport in Florida. Hurricanes turned the journey across the Gulf of Mexico, which usually took five days, into an eighteen-day ordeal. Once on land, the party depended on the protection of the U.S. Army from the Apache, Comanche, and other Indian peoples who seemed not to know or care that their lands were now split between the United States and Mexico. Some of the river proved simply impossible to survey. The rugged terrain of the Big Bend country struck William Emory with its desolate beauty. “No description,” he wrote, “can give an idea of the grandeur of the scenery through these mountains. There is no verdure to soften the bare and rugged view; no overhanging trees or green bushes to vary the scene from one of perfect desolation.” The qualities that made the area visually striking precluded its adequate mapping, however. “Rocks are here piled one above another,” continued Emory, “over which it was with the greatest labor that we could work our way. The long detours necessarily made to gain but a short distance for the pack-train on the river were rapidly exhausting the strength of the animals, and the spirit of the whole party began to flag. The loss of the boats, with provisions and clothing, had reduced the men to the shortest rations, and their scanty wardrobes scarcely afforded enough covering for decency. The sharp rocks of the mountains had cut the shoes from their feet, and blood, in many instances, marked their progress through the day's work.” In the face of such hardship, the Commission headed South deep into Mexico, leaving this stretch of the border unsurveyed.⁸

Similar challenges confronted the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom as they parsed out the northern border. The 1846 treaty between Britain and the United

⁷ Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, 2011), 12-13.

⁸ William H. Emory, *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Cornelius Wendell, Printer, 1857), 14-5, 23, 58, 84-85. More generally, see Paula Rebert, *La Gran Línea: Mapping the United States-Mexico Boundary, 1849-1857* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

States ended conflict – and perhaps a war – by setting the 49th parallel as the land border between the Pacific and the Rockies. (In 1818 they had agreed on the 49th parallel as the border from Lake of the Woods to the Rockies.)⁹ The 1856 Fraser River gold rush prompted colonial authorities to propose a joint survey of the still-unmarked line separating Washington Territory and British Columbia. Like their counterparts to the south, the difficulties of a land crossing required the surveying parties to travel across Panama and head up the Pacific coast by ship, a journey of some three months.¹⁰ The survey of the border between the ocean and the Rockies was completed in 1861. Again conditions on the ground hampered the work and suggested the limits of state power. The governor of British Columbia repeatedly requisitioned the British surveying party to keep the civil peace in his raucous gold-rush territory.¹¹ In the absence of any real infrastructure, the region’s topography posed considerable challenges. The intention was to map the line and to leave occasional markers, particularly where rivers and other notable natural landmarks intersected the parallel. This could require risky and dramatic efforts, as in one instance recalled by the British surveyor Charles Wilson:

We have made a bridge over the Chilukweyuk river here, which caused some trouble, we managed it however by felling two trees each about 150 ft long on opposite sides of the river so that their ends rested on a small island in the middle of the river & over this we can now pack mules. Two of our men nearly lost their lives in the operation, having fallen into the rapids from which they were drawn out almost miraculously . . .¹²

The mosquito – an animal with its own territoriality – became a major player in this survey. At first diarists simply noted their abundance and aggressiveness with some sense of amazement, but things soon became more ominous. “Found poor Buckner in bed,” noted Wilson in July of 1859, “his mind is rather irritable & the mosquitoes have

⁹ George F. G. Stanley, *Mapping the Frontier: Charles Wilson’s Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel, 1858-1862, While Secretary of the British Boundary Commission* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970), 6.

¹⁰ Stanley, *Mapping the Frontier*, 23.

¹¹ See, for instance, Stanley, *Mapping the Frontier*, 27, 32

¹² Stanley, *Mapping the Frontier*, 68.

worked him so that he has scratched into a vein in his neck which bled a good deal & we had to keep bathing it during the day.” The next day, “Buckner was very weak from loss of blood & could hardly stand.” The British party suspended work for a day. Five days later, the axemen hired to blaze a clearing along the border walked off the job in disgust at the mosquitoes. Wilson began to suffer considerably: “My hands, during the last few days, have been so swollen & stiff that I could hardly bend my joints & have had to wrap them in wet towels to be ready for the next day’s work.” The expedition’s pack animals joined him in misery: “two of [our] mules have been blinded & 6 of our horses were so reduced that we had to turn them out on the prairie & let them take their chance of living. I never saw anything like the state of their skins, one mass of sores.” By the end of the month work was suspended and the party split between Vancouver Island, already surveyed, and higher portions of the route where the bugs were not unbearable.¹³

The American Civil War derailed any intention to complete the survey from the Rockies to Lake of the Woods. This effort did not begin until 1872, more than fifty years after Britain and the United States agreed upon that portion of the border. The more easily traversed topography of the Plains and the presence of railroad lines in Minnesota and Dakota Territory made this survey more easily conducted than its western counterpart. But here too it was difficult for governments simply to transport dozens of men and their surveying equipment the length of the line. Much of the Dawson Route, the name for the 480-mile “road” from Winnipeg to the Lake of the Woods, was barely a trace across the land. Travelers heading west on the only overland route in Canada connecting the Great Lakes and Manitoba were put on wagons that traversed corduroy roads that linked “a succession of more than a dozen lakes and rivers.” As a recent account relates, “Baggage would be thrown from the wagons and jammed onto a small, usually overloaded and dangerously under-maintained steamboat or tug. At the far end of the lake, baggage and passengers would again take to wagons for another bone-rattling ride along a collapsing corduroy road, followed by another lake crossing, another wagon ride and so on for up to two weeks.” The stretch of the road from Winnipeg to the Lake of the Woods, where the survey was to begin, horrified Samuel D. Anderson, head of the Canadian commission, as it ran “through a most desolate swamp, a bottomless bog over

¹³ Stanley, *Mapping the Frontier*, 60-63.

which it is dangerous to walk as a man sinks into it to his waist. The road was supported on the branches and stems of trees and on each side there was the brown marshy water with grass and reeds growing in it.”¹⁴

The exhausting labor of surveying these borders resulted in minimal demarcations and control. For decades after the borders had been surveyed, they remained largely unmarked; the physical reality of the borders did not reflect the theoretical claims to territorial sovereignty asserted by Ottawa, Washington, D.C, and Mexico City. The work of the surveys themselves were problematic and led to several re-calculations, moving the line hundreds of yards, with consequent problems to title. One such re-survey in 1870 seemed to place a Hudson Bay Company post built shortly north of what the Company initially thought the border hundreds of yards within U.S. soil. A zealous American customs inspector promptly seized the post and inventoried its contents to assess the customs duties on them.¹⁵

States did go to considerable efforts to mark their territory. But these markings were dwarfed by the landscape, and often collapsed back into it. In the 1870s, after the incident with the trading post, Canadian and American authorities re-marked their shared border between Lake of the Woods and the Continental Divide, leaving 135 iron pillars, 129 stone cairns, 113 earth mounds, three stone and earth mounds, and eight timber poles along a stretch of nearly 1,000 miles.¹⁶ The situation on the southern boundary was similar. An American re-survey of the border with Mexico in the 1890s found that many of the stone markers used two generations before had been moved or simply disappeared.¹⁷ Re-marking the land border aided in the enforcement of customs duties – at the time, still the primary source of state revenue.¹⁸ The first fences demarcating North American borders, to my knowledge, appeared in 1909 to stop livestock movements

¹⁴ Tony Rees, *Arc of the Medicine Line: Mapping the World's Longest undefended Border Across the Western Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007), 44-5.

¹⁵ Rees, *Arc of the Medicine Line*, 35-6.

¹⁶ Rees, *Arc of the Medicine Line*, 343-4.

¹⁷ Thomas Torrans, *Forging the Tortilla Curtain: Cultural Drift and Change Along the United States-Mexico Border From the Spanish Era To the Present* (Ft. Worth: TCU Press, 2000), 33.

¹⁸ Graciela Márquez Colín, “The Political Economy of Mexican Protectionism, 1868-1911,” PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2002; Philip W. Magness, “From Tariffs to the Income Tax: Trade Protection and Revenue in the United States Tax System,” PhD Dissertation, George Mason University, 2009.

across the California-Baja California line.¹⁹ It was in the same decade that the U.S.-Canada border was re-surveyed and enough markers erected to make the longest gap between them 1.5 miles rather than 25.²⁰

The difficulties in conducting these surveys and their limitations did not mean that they did not matter or ultimately happen. But if the modern state seeks to control territory and hold it against other claimants, it must first map it and create some kind of infrastructure for its forces to travel across it. This was no easy task, and one barely completed by the dawn of the twentieth century.

The challenges of mapping the physical terrain of the borderlands became particularly manifest when nation-states sought to extinguish the military power of independent Indian peoples, perhaps the most obvious threat to their exercise of exclusive territorial sovereignty. This is a familiar and morose story: the process was complete by the 1880s, ushering in a period rightly considered to be the nadir of native history in all three nations. In the north, Plains peoples were defeated by the combination of the collapse of the buffalo herds, extended U.S. military campaigns, and Canadian withholding of rations they obligated themselves to provide by treaty. In the south, Apaches proved to be the last holdouts, delaying settlement and economic development of a vast area straddling Sonora and Arizona, and ultimately defeated by a cooperative effort between Mexican and American forces.

The brutality and long term consequences of these conquests can obscure some of what they reveal about national borders in this period. One easily forgotten aspect is the extraordinary difficulty that states had in waging these campaigns, given the enormous advantage in population, economic resources, and political centralization that they enjoyed. Here geography and climate worked to the advantage of natives. Mexican leaders had long been aware of the military might of Comanches, Apaches, and others, and in the Guadalupe-Hidalgo negotiations cleverly insisted that U.S. authorities commit to suppressing “incursions into the territory of Mexico.” Only three years after the

¹⁹ St. John, *Line in the Sand*, 103, 203.

²⁰ Rees, *Arc of the Medicine Line*, 357.

signing of the treaty, the U.S. government abandoned this effort and sought release from this treaty provision. As Secretary of State Daniel Webster wrote,

The hostile acts of the Indians whose homes are in the territory ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, have not been confined to Mexican citizens only, but have probably been as frequent, as destructive and as barbarous on citizens of the United States, especially of North Western Texas, New Mexico, and California . . . It is obvious that along a frontier of such an extent, most of it a rugged wilderness, without roads of any kind and impassable, not only by wheeled vehicles but perhaps even by horses, no means which could have been employed since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo went into operation, would have sufficed to prevent incursions of United States Indians into Mexican territory. The subsistence, forage, and ammunition of the troops must necessarily have been conveyed from one or the other extremity of the line of boundary, and without roads, this would have been impracticable. It is also notorious that that part of the boundary which extends from the Rio Grande to the Gila [roughly modern-day El Paso to central Arizona], and which is not a natural line, such as those rivers afford, has not yet even been marked. This would in any event have rendered it uncertain where a road for the conveyance of our military stores ought to have been constructed or where our troops should have been posted.²¹

The climate and weather challenges of the northern plains posed similar challenges for American authorities. As with the boundary surveys, military commanders confronted the difficulties of moving larger numbers of men, supplies, and equipment across a landscape with little to no modern transportation infrastructure. One enterprising commander charged with pursuing Sioux forces in the early 1870s found repeated frustrations with river crossings, an obstacle that he overcame by improvising pontoon bridges out of empty whiskey kegs roped to upside-down wagon beds.²² Here the frigid winters were the analogue to the desert heat and aridity of the southern borderlands. Ultimately it was winter campaigns that led to the military defeat of the Plains Indian peoples, but winter campaigning could be fatal to the American military

²¹ Daniel Webster to Robert P. Letcher, August 19, 1851, in *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860*, vol. IX, *Mexico, 1848 (mid-year)-1860*, ed. William R. Manning, pp. 89-92 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1937). The United States secured its release from Article 11 in 1853, as part of the Gadsden Purchase, which in 1854 pushed a disputed portion of the boundary line south, delivered much of present-day southern New Mexico and Arizona to the U.S. See Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 303.

²² Samuel J. Barrows, "Crossing the Big Muddy," *Army and Navy Journal* 10: 52 (August 9, 1873): 328-9, reprinted in Peter Cozzens, ed., *Eyewitnesses to the Indian Wars, 1865-1890 v. 4: The Long War for the Northern Plains* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), 150-53.

even in the absence of actual fighting. “The ground was so hard that driving a tent pin, which had to be iron, was almost impossible, and the removal of it was so difficult that we had often to tie our tent ropes to trees or bushes,” recalled a cavalry captain of moving across the landscape in the winter of 1875. “All food was frozen solid and had to be thawed before cooking, bits had to be warmed before being placed in the mouths of the horses, and any teamster who touched a trace chain or iron part with bare hands would quickly drop it or be blistered.” The cold soon became enough of an enemy: “Our trail was lost, or obliterated by the snow; our eyes were absolutely sightless from the constant pelting of the frozen particles. And thus we struggled on. A clump of trees or a hill for shelter from the killing and life-sapping wind would have indeed been a sweet haven. With frozen hands and faces, men becoming weaker and weaker, many bleeding from the nose and the ears, the weakest lying down and refusing to move, a precursor of death; with them the painful stinging bite of the frost had been succeeded by the more solid freezing, which drives the blood rapidly to the center and produces that warm, delightful, dreamy sensation, the forerunner of danger and death. They had to be threatened and strapped to their saddles, for if they were left behind, death would follow . . . Ours now was a struggle for life, to halt was to freeze to death, to advance our only hope . . .”²³

The second easily overlooked point is that in the arena of Indian fighting, the three states of North America came to operate as allies and collaborators as much as antagonists. This was perhaps epitomized in the 1880s campaigns against the Apache, in which nearly a quarter of the American standing army was deployed. U.S. General George Crook determined that the only way to defeat Geronimo and his followers was to pursue them deep into Mexico. In 1882, the United States and Mexico signed an agreement providing “that the regular federal troops of the two republics may reciprocally cross the boundary line of the two countries when they are close pursuit of a band of savage Indians.”²⁴

To the north, the dynamic was more complicated. Canada did not grant the U.S. army similar latitude in its campaigns against the northern Plains people after their

²³ Guy V. Henry, “A Winter March to the Black Hills,” *Harper’s Weekly* 39 (July 27, 1895), reprinted in Cozzens, *Eyewitnesses to the Indian Wars*, 183-7.

²⁴ “Mexico: Reciprocal Right to Pursue Savage Indians across the Boundary Line,” in Peter Cozzens, ed., *Eyewitnesses to the Indian Wars, 1865-1890. Volume I: The Struggle for Apacheria* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 343-5.

shocking defeat of the 7th cavalry in 1876, and the military might of the United Kingdom kept American commanders from simply crossing the border with impunity.²⁵ Nor did it wage its own all-out warfare against natives. Perhaps this relative freedom accounts for the 1880 report of a Canadian officer that Indians “call the boundary the ‘Medicine Line,’ because no matter what they have done upon one side they feel perfectly secure after having arrived upon the other.”²⁶ On the other hand, Canadian authorities were not above the use of hunger or withholding rations to bend native peoples to their will. Their vision of economic development and settlement required a similar pacification of Indians and the conversion of their territory into private property.²⁷

Much of the literature on borders, especially that of a cultural orientation, and especially that of the U.S.-Mexico border, stresses the idea of difference and conflict. And this is true even when the ultimate point is about the cultural hybridity of borderlands, which in these accounts emerges from the meeting of two supposedly very different cultures and peoples.²⁸ The theme of difference and conflict is particularly strong in the case of U.S.-Mexico borderlands, given the two nations’ conflictual histories. But what we see from the vantage of native American history is the deep similarity between Canada, the United States, and Mexico, as settler-states and liberal republics insistent on extinguishing native sovereignties (and at many points, native identities themselves). International borders may be the products and instigators of international conflict, but they are also the reflections of international cooperation to extinguish other sovereignties.

Indians were not the only groups whose assertions of sovereignty and peoplehood conflicted with the central states’ assertions of territorially exclusive sovereignties. Indeed, nineteenth-century North America witnessed numerous political projects whose

²⁵ David McCrady, *Living With Strangers*, 97.

²⁶ Quoted in Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (Routledge, 2001), 41.

²⁷ LaDow, *Medicine Line*, 59, 21; McCrady, *Living Among Strangers*, 112; for a more general treatment of the parallels and differences in the U.S. and Canadian incorporation of the Great Plains, see Andrew J. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

²⁸ The classic and widely influential statement of this idea in a North American context is Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza, La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

survival would have resulted in a very different map than the one that we have today. To name a few: William Augustus Bowles' Creek state of Muskogee, the Lone Star Republic of Texas, the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret, New Mexico's 1837 Chimayó Rebellion, the Canadian revolts of 1837 and 1838, California's Bear Flag Republic, Antonio Canales' Republic of the Rio Grande, the Yucatán peninsula's independence movement, the Fenian "Dominion of the Brotherhood North of the St. Lawrence", and of course, the largest of them all, the Confederate States of America. If today we easily assume that the three states were destined to control all of the continent along more or less the lines that they did, then this incomplete list suggests that people in the nineteenth century assumed otherwise.

The careers of two mid-century rebels at either border, Juan Cortina and Louis Riel, capture some of the contingency of continental nation-building. In 1859, Cortina, the scion of a prominent ranching family near the mouth of the Rio Grande, lead a paramilitary force that captured Brownsville, Texas, and did battle with the Texas Rangers and both U.S. and Mexican troops much of the next two years in a territory about half the size of the state of Connecticut. Cortina and his followers feared for the safety, property, and autonomy of Hispanics under Anglo-American rule.²⁹ Similarly, in 1869, Métis (mixed European and native peoples) residents along the Red River of the North under the leadership of Louis Riel prevented the Canadian Confederation's appointed governor from entering their territory and created their own provisional government.³⁰ For a time, this resistance resulted in the protection of a bilingual society and the preservation of Métis landholding, but many Métis moved further west, where they again joined a rebellion lead by Riel in 1885 after his return from the United States, for essentially the same reasons.³¹

Both Cortina and Riel acted in the name of borderlands peoples with abundant reason to fear their incorporation into the United States and Canada. These peoples had their own homelands, which in both cases straddled the new international borders.

²⁹ Jerry Thompson, *Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas* (Texas A & M Press, 2007).

³⁰ For a comparison of Riel and Cortina, see Andrew J. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 71-90.

³¹ Thomas Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel: Prophet of the New World* (University of Toronto Press, 1978); Joseph Howard Kinsey, *Strange Empire, A Narrative of the Northwest* (Morrow, 1952).

Cortina's can be seen as the old Mexican northeast, whose settlement by Hispanic frontiersmen predated the border by a century and whose trade and cattle-ranching economy continued after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Cross-river commerce in livestock, saddles, blankets, silver, and manufactured goods grew, often to the irritation of officials on both sides, from Texas independence in 1836 through the political tumult and sporadic warfare of Texas Independence and the U.S.-Mexico war. Borderlands merchants could put a break on racial animosity; as Corpus Christi's founder, Henry Kinney, observed, "When Mr. Mexican came, I treated him with a great deal of politeness, particularly if he had me in his power; when Mr. American came, I did the same with him; and when Mr. Indian came, I was also very frequently disposed to make a compromise with him."³² And this was a political community, too: the Northeast was a bastion of liberalism within Mexican politics, and after the U.S. military forced him into Mexico, Cortina remained a key player, running guns to Union partisans in Texas and fighting as part of a politically and militarily coherent northeastern bloc against a French invasion and conservative forces in Mexico later that decade. So I want to suggest that Hispanic South Texas in this period continues to be part of a regional economic and political geography that transcended the new border. Moreover, it could mobilize itself militarily, as much of it would under an 1891 revolt in which a cross-border coalition led by Catarino Garza challenged the rule of the Porfirio Díaz regime, only to be defeated by the Mexican and U.S. armies, Texas rangers, and local militias.³³

Similarly, in these decades, the Métis led a cross-border existence. Their community on the Plains was a creation of these decades rather than a continuation of an earlier society, as in the Mexican northeast. Starting in the 1830s, Métis living in the upper Red River valley began trading with native peoples to their west. In the 1860s and 70s, their trips had become frequent enough to leave distinctive trails west from the Red River, later to be used by British and American surveyors and the North-West Mounted

³² quoted in Miguel Ángel González-Quiroga, "Conflict and Cooperation in the Making of Texas-Mexico Border Society, 1840-1880," in Johnson and Graybill, eds. *Bridging National Borders in North America*, 44.

³³ Elliott Young, *Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Police.³⁴ In these decades, Métis founded numerous communities deep in the northern plains, on either side of the 49th parallel. Here their economy rested on buffalo hunting and trading liquor and weapons with the Sioux, Assiniboine, Gros Ventres and other Indian peoples. Much of this trade was illegal in both nations, conducted in violation of general tariffs and specific provisions limiting trade with natives. As “along the Texas-Mexico border,” notes historian Michel Hogue, “contraband helped stitch borderland populations together across the international boundary.”³⁵ The Métis attempted to use this border to their advantage. When American officials seized trade goods and arrested Métis traders near Frenchman’s Creek in 1874, for example, Métis complained to Canadian authorities that they had been North of the border and thus that the American actions were illegal and a violation of Canadian sovereignty. Canadian authorities ultimately accepted that the raid had taken place in U.S. territory, but the incident “exposed the limits of official knowledge about the Plains borderlands.”³⁶

The rebellions led by Juan Cortina and Louis Riel shared important characteristics. Both invoked liberal principals in defense of their actions. In Cortina’s words: “To defend ourselves, and making use of the sacred right of self-preservation, we have assembled in a popular meeting with a view of discussing a means by which to put an end to our misfortunes.”³⁷ In Riel’s from the first revolt: “a people, when it has no government, is free to adopt one form of government in preference to another, to give or refuse allegiance to that which is proposed.”³⁸ Militarily, both took advantage of their followers’ intimate knowledge of the landscape to fight much larger and better-armed professional armies. Modern technologies marshaled by the states overwhelmed this advantage, as when Canada used its infant transcontinental railroad to mobilize forces against the second revolt.

³⁴ David McCrady, *Living With Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010 [Nebraska, 2006]), 3

³⁵ Michel Hogue, “Between Race and Nation: The Creation of a Métis Borderland on the Northern Plains,” in Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill, eds., *Bridging National Borders in North America*, 60, 63, 67. On smuggling more generally, see Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁶ Hogue, “Between Race and Nation,” 69-70.

³⁷ U.S. Congress, House, *Difficulties on the Southwestern Frontier*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, 1860 H. Exec Doc. 52, p 70.

³⁸ “Declaration of the People of Rupert’s Land and the Northwest,” in *History of the North-West*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, and Company, 1894-5), 416.

Neither Cortina nor Riel absolutely rejected the nation against which he contended: Cortina expressed his admiration for the U.S. constitution, pointed out that he and his followers had not renounced their citizenship rights, and condemned U.S. authorities for allowing Mexican military authorities to cross to the north. The Métis rebels declared themselves willing to negotiate with the young Canadian government. This point is particularly important. It was not simply that the international borders of North America had yet to be solidified, but that other borders had not yet been drawn either in the way that they later would be: the borders between white and Mexican, between white and Indigenous, between Anglophone and Francophone Canada, and the general questions of who would count as citizens of the young nations, and on what terms.³⁹ The United States and Mexico ripped themselves apart over precisely these questions in the 1860s (and Mexico did so again in the 1910s), and the Quebec question endures into the 21st century. So it is no wonder that actors in the nineteenth century thought that so much was up for grabs. It did not necessarily seem that Adelman and Aron's open borderlands were destined to give way to hard borderlines.

Most of the groups discussed in this article had reason to believe that the international borders had taken on heightened importance by the turn of the century. It is easy to overstate this transition (in Adelman and Aron's schema, "from borderlands to bordered lands.") Borders were lightly patrolled by the measure of the later twentieth century, and contraband goods and people routinely crossed both. (Contemporary American political discourse includes calls for re-establishing "control" of borders against sanctioned goods and people, but this is yearning for a past that never was). But there were changes nonetheless: The borders were finally well-mapped and somewhat monitored by customs and immigration agents of the three nation-states. Indian peoples on the northern plains had become largely dependent on rations provided by the Canadian and American governments, and were heavily monitored and their mobility restricted on

³⁹ For works that contrast a later socially bordered world with a previously more open one, see Erich Schlereth, "Privileges of Locomotion: Expatriation and the Politics of Southwestern Border Crossing Before Manifest Destiny," *Journal of American History*, forthcoming; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (University of Texas Press, 1987); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Harvard, 2009); Andrew Graybill, *The Red and the White: A Family Saga of the American West* (Liveright, 2013).

reservations on both side of the line.⁴⁰ After the failure of the second Northwest Uprising and execution of Louis Riel in 1885, the Métis and other Plains indigenous people ceased armed resistance to their incorporation into Canada. In the same decade in Mexico, Juan Cortina languished in federal prison in Mexico City, one of many victims of the Porfirio Díaz regime's subordination of formerly powerful northern leaders. Only one major uprising aimed at re-drawing the border – the 1915-16 Plan de San Diego revolt in South Texas – would occur.

Ironically, however, the consolidation of borders into meaningful demarcations of the territory of different sovereign states created opportunities for uses of these borders that governments had never anticipated.

Even those most disadvantaged by border creation – native peoples – could use them for their own ends. American and Canadian authorities insisted that Indians were political subordinates and properly “belonged” to one nation or another – that they were “American” or “Canadian.” At the same time, they had great difficulty in identifying native bands, distinguishing them from one another, and tracking their whereabouts consistently. Officers and Indian agents were consequently left dependent on the assurances of other Indians, who found that they could reward their indigenous friends and punish their enemies. In the late 1870s, for example, Assiniboine and Gros Ventre residing on a Montana reservation insisted that some Métis residing with them – but not all – be included in their tribal ranks. The American army pursued those for whom they did not vouch.⁴¹

Unfree laborers across North America found much greater freedom from the establishment of meaningful international borders. The different status of chattel slavery in the nineteenth century – outlawed in the British empire in 1834, increasingly restricted in the American North, increasingly entrenched in the American South, and outlawed if still practiced in some regions of Mexico by 1829 – meant that the simple crossing of the border could dramatically change one's legal status and social opportunities. It is well known that there was extensive slave flight from the United States to Canada, where former bondsmen and –women could be free from the long arm of fugitive slave hunters.

⁴⁰ McCrady, *Living With Strangers*, 3.

⁴¹ Hogue, “Between Race and Nation,” 74-5

As William Wells Brown wrote in 1847, “I would dream at night that I was in Canada, a freeman, and on waking in the morning, weep to find myself so sadly mistaken.”⁴²

Contemporaries estimated that from fifteen to seventy-five thousand fugitive slaves found sanctuary in Canada West (later Ontario), with contemporary scholars encountering considerable difficulty in arriving at a more precise measure.⁴³

Less well-known is the story of slave flight from Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) to Michigan Territory. When the Jay Treaty of 1796 turned over control of Detroit to the United States, the hundreds of slaves within striking distance of the easily-crossed Detroit River could find freedom simply by crossing the river, where U.S. law banned the importation of slaves. (Their American counterparts could do the same, because Upper Canada was governed by a similar proscription). By 1807, their flight put at risk the entire institution of slavery on the Canadian side of the river. “[E]nslaved people in the Detroit borderland,” concludes Gregory Wigmore, “acquired their freedom long before those held elsewhere in Upper Canada and Michigan – jurisdictions where slavery persisted until the mid-1830s.”⁴⁴

Unfree laborers in the Rio Grande/Río Bravo borderlands created similar opportunities for themselves. Mexico abolished slavery in 1829, within a decade of gaining its independence, while slaveholders still dominated the highest offices in the United States. If most Americans thought of Mexico as a backwards nation hampered by primitive Catholicism and burdened by the weight of its past, slaves had reason to see it in a different light: they would belong to nobody but themselves if they could get to the other side of the Rio Grande. “In Mexico you could be free,” remembered one former slave decades later. “We would hear about [those who fled] and how they were going to be Mexicans. They brought up their children to speak only Mexican.” This was a much more arduous journey than crossing the Detroit river. Most of Texas’ slaves lived hundreds of miles from the border, in the humid cotton-growing regions of east and central Texas. The open plains, numerous rivers, and chaparral thickets that lay between

⁴² William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: The Anti-slavery Office, 1847), 50.

⁴³ Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (McGill-Queen’s, 1997 [1971]); Michael Wayne, “The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861”, *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 28(56), 1995, 465-485.

⁴⁴ Gregory Wigmore, “Before the Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom in the Canadian-American Borderland,” *Journal of American History* 98:2 (September 2011), 450-1, 453.

plantation districts and the border both hampered slave flight and ensured that they were generally safe from slave-catchers once in Mexico. This promise made slave flight much more common in Texas than in the South as a whole. Texas slave masters understood this threat; a group complained that “something must be done for the protection of slave property in this state. Negroes are running off daily. Let the frontiers of slavery begin to recede and when or where the wave of recession may be arrested God only knows.” Escaped slaves found refuge in Mexico, prompting occasional slave-raiding expeditions by Texas authorities, or on the Texas side of the borderlands, where some settled down and married into local families.⁴⁵

Fleeing north held a similar promise for some Mexicans. At the same time as slaves fled south from Texas, servants exploited or held in debt peonage in the Mexican Northeast found refuge by crossing the border into the United States. This exodus continued for several decades; a Mexican government commission conservatively estimated that more than five thousand fled Nuevo León and Coahuila for Texas in the first fifteen years of the border’s existence (1848-1863). Much as fugitives undermined slavery in South Texas, the peasants of Mexico’s northeast edge forced hacienda owners to abandon debt peonage and offer better wages and working conditions. “Nobody changes nationalities to assume a worse condition,” wrote a Mexican senator of these migrants, “and it is very dangerous to see just beyond the arbitrary line prosperity and wealth, and on this side destitution and poverty.”⁴⁶ Mexican commissioners studying the issue were less charitable, complaining of the “loss of labor to places where the population is sparse” and condemning the fugitive workers in terms that Texas slave masters used for their fled bondsmen: “for the most part criminals, for they always steal before fleeing or have already been prosecuted for other crimes . . . These criminals and

⁴⁵ Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: New York University, 2005), 14, 17; William Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004); Sean Kelley, “Mexico in His Head: Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810-1860,” *Journal of Social History* 37:3 (2004): 709-723, p. 8; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 16. For contemporary estimates of general slave flight, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 279.

⁴⁶ Juan Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848-1910* (Austin: University of Texas, 2001), 28.

others of another class, especially the cattle thieves who have managed to escape, all reside in Texas.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

The frustration of Mexican elites and American slavemasters at the ability of their laborers to take advantage of young national borders suggests the complexity of the emergence of “bordered lands” in North America. By the twentieth century, consolidated states had surveyed and demarcated their borders, extinguished the military power of native peoples and other rival sovereignties, and regulated the crossing of goods and people across the lines. Yet these borders remained contested and “fuzzy” in ways that the term “hardening” obscures: states had trouble “seeing” their borders and border peoples, even as subaltern populations made unexpected uses of hardened borders to serve their own ends. The physical and social reality of borderlands ensured a degree of openness, one that lasts to today and characterizes other places beyond North America.

⁴⁷ *Reports of the Committee of Investigation Sent in 1873 by the Mexican Government to the Frontier of Texas* (New York: Baker and Godwin, 1875), 403.