

From borderlands to borders: Empires, nation-states, and the peoples in between in North American history.

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# From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History

[Jeremy Adelman, doctorate](#), [Stephen Aron, PhD](#)

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*Forum Essay*

From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and  
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JEREMY ADELMAN and STEPHEN ARON

THE LAST DECADE HAS WITNESSED a sharp debate about the significance of the “frontier” in North American history. Among some self-proclaimed “new western historians,” the word that Frederick Jackson Turner made synonymous with the study of American expansion has become a shibboleth, denoting a triumphalist and Anglocentric narrative of continental conquest. Even his defenders acknowledge the imperialist suppositions of Turner’s thesis, yet some historians continue to assert the significance of a recast frontier. Reconstructed as a zone of intercultural penetration, the frontier has gained a new historiographic lease on life.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, this reformulation revives the notion of “borderlands” that was closely associated with Turner’s protégé, Herbert Eugene Bolton. For Bolton, a historian of New Spain’s northern territories, Turner’s east-to-west model of American development shortchanged the divergent sources of European expansion. More so than Turner’s Anglo-American frontier in which pioneer progress

We are grateful to many friends and colleagues who have commented on this essay. Previous versions were delivered at Princeton University, the University of California at Los Angeles, Claremont Graduate School, University of California Inter-American History Seminar, the meetings of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, and the American Studies Association. We thank David Arnold, Michael Jiménez, Robert Johnston, John Mack Faragher, William Jordan, Tom Mertes, John Murrin, David Myers, Sam Truett, the participants at the “Business of Borderlands” conference sponsored by the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, and the anonymous readers of the *AHR* for their suggestions. Patricia Nelson Limerick generously commented on two versions of this essay. Although we have stubbornly clung to our own interpretation, her pointed criticism forced us to refine and clarify our disagreements with her.

<sup>1</sup> Among “new western historians,” none has been as vigorous a critic of the frontier construct as Patricia Nelson Limerick. See *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987), 17–32; “What on Earth Is the New Western History,” in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kan., 1991), 81–88; and “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” in James R. Grossman, ed., *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), 66–102. For attempts to reconstruct (and rescue) the significance of the frontier, see Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, “Comparative Frontier History,” in Lamar and Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, Conn., 1981), 3–13; William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, “Becoming West: Toward a New Meaning for Western History,” in Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past* (New York, 1992), 3–27; Stephen Aron, “Lessons in Conquest: Towards a New Western History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 63 (May 1994): 125–47; John Mack Faragher, “Afterword: The Significance of the Frontier in American Historiography,” in Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History and Other Essays* (New York, 1994), 237–41; Kerwin Lee Klein, “Reclaiming the ‘F’ Word, Or Being and Becoming Postwestern,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (May 1996): 179–215.

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