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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 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.¹

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

¹ 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 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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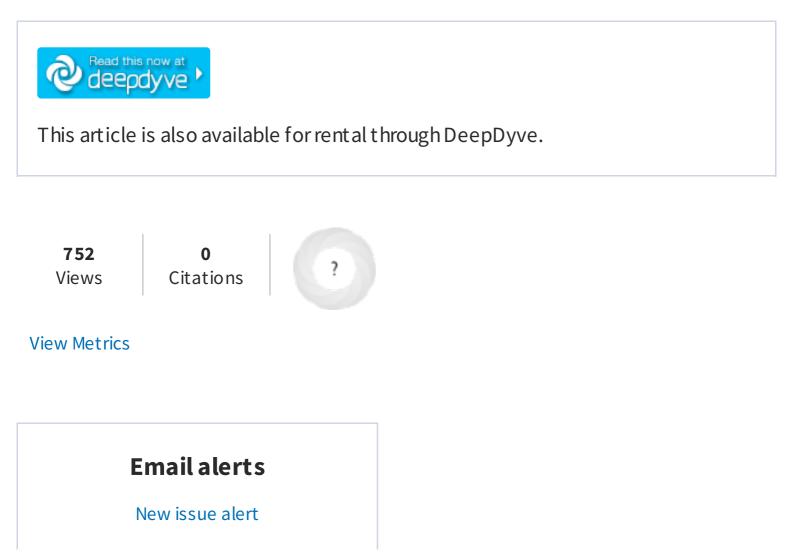
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