Stories that need to be told about the edges of the US-Mexico borderlands

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Porous Borders by Julian Lim,
2019 winner of the Institute for Humanities Research Book Award.

Porous Borders is a book that tells a new story—or rather, stories—about the U.S./Mexican border. It engages a scholarly discourse about the borderlands that has treated them, at least since Gloria Anzuldua's influential and lyrical treatment in her 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera*, as places that limn nation-states even as they unsettle them, even as they disrupt the monolithic illusions—illusions of language, of ethnicity, of identity—that undergird so much nationalist experience. So often, according to practitioners of borderlands studies, mestizo consciousness pits itself against nationalism, because the experience of the nation is an experience of categories and of division. But borderlands also eschew the logic of either/or in favor of both/and in the process—some of the most important historians and cultural critics have taught us—undermines almost everything the very notion of a border represents.

So as I began Julian's book I also assumed I more or less knew the story it would tell. How unprepared I was for the effect this book would have upon my sense for the history of the U.S./Mexican border. *Porous Borders* both engages the discussion I describe and complicates it so richly. "The erasure of a multiethnic past" is her subject, she explains. And yet the multiethnic past she illuminates is so much more variegated than many other treatments, configuring the border within a constellation including indigenous people, Anglo settlers, Mexican nationals, and Mexican-American denizens of the borderlands, but also Chinese laborers, post-reconstruction African Americans, and European immigrants, all flooding to the border in search of various prospects for economic or social betterment.

Porous Borders takes up takes up about fifty years of history: from about 1880, which witnessed a diverse influx to the borderlands, and 1930, when the United States census suddenly omitted from its questionnaire items that had previously permitted respondents to claim identities defined by racial admixture—the category "mulatto," for instance, disappeared from the census form. The story she tells about this significant chunk of U.S. history is a story that would behoove American citizens to take in—it is a story of how the border factored in a process by which North Americans began to codify further the relations between national belonging and racial/ethnic skein. *Porous Borders* also points up the extent to which not only U.S., but also Mexican immigration policy has contributed to the outlaw status of some Mestiza identities. "In sheer numbers," she points out, "Mexico never came close to the immigration that the United States experienced, but that doesn't mean Mexico never tried." The borderlands she identifies is not the residuum of a top-down state policy, for it was shaped by the movements and volition of people subsisting within the interstices of those policies; nor was it the product of a North imposing its will unilaterally upon a less exclusionary South. For instance, Julian cites by way of example a 1955 letter by Langston Hughes, who descries the difficulties African Americans were experiencing at midcentury crossing the border into Mexico, which had during the 1920s and 30s enacted a series of policies designed to discourage or restrict both Chinese and African American movement into Mexico.

This is to say that *Porous Borders* maps out a set of what Julian calls "crosscurrents" that shaped both the experience of traversing the border and the variegated border cultures that edge that topographical line. And so here I'm going to say some final things that can sometimes make historians uncomfortable, because they might seem too determined to draw the coordinates of historical inquiry from their proper spheres—archival, contextual, historically specific—and into our own contemporary welter which can only really stand in relation to that prior set of circumstances analogically, by means of admittedly rough resemblances, though I suppose I hope that in saying so I indicate that I have no wish to remove myself from the deep historical immersion Julian permits me as her reader. But that said, Julian's work is so timely and necessary and urgent. It does not simply offer aperture to the current predicaments of this city, this state, this nation as it negotiates both the logistics and the cultural ramifications of Trump's wall, though it does that. It is also the kind of book that reminds us how triumphal Americans often prefer their history, how silent that triumphalist desire can sometimes leave public historians where the border is concerned; how confused and alas reactionary this silence can leave so many citizens of the U.S. as they mull the language of U.S. nationalism; and lastly, that indicates what the alternatives might look like, what stories are yet to be told about the edges of the United States and Mexico.