

# US-MEXICO BORDERLANDS STUDIES AT THE MILLENNIUM

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## INTRODUCTION

A quarter century has passed since sociologist Elwynn Stoddard argued with some prescience that the US-Mexican border region was a rich scholarly laboratory. At the time, few serious scholars concentrated attention on the US-Mexican border and many that did were discouraged by their professional colleagues and took up the chore at some professional risk. Now, some 25 years on, it is evident, perhaps obvious, that Stoddard's characterisation has been taken to heart. Scholarly commitment to understanding the US-Mexican borderlands is now well institutionalised at the level of professional associations, academic faculty in tenured positions, and a proliferation of scholarly publications addressed to borderlands topics (newsletters, journals, books).

The emergence of US-Mexican borderlands studies as an accepted and legitimate field of scholarly endeavour has not come easy, however, nor has it developed evenly across disciplinary areas or in subject-linear fashion. That this is so will come as no surprise to borderlands scholars, who all too often feel marginalised by their home disciplines and chaff at the trends in soft-money scholarship. In this respect scholarly commitment to the US-Mexican borderlands mirrors common perceptions of the border itself: asymmetrical, dissonant, opportunistic, and uncertain.

Any analysis of progress and prospect in US-Mexican borderlands scholarship should proceed from an acknowledgement of the remarkable development of the border region itself in the second half of the twentieth century. The field of US-Mexican borderlands studies is fairly described as artifactual to prevailing social and economic trends in the border region, particularly those trends affecting the region's economic development.

In the past half century, border cities have morphed from a population of under a million mostly situated in half a dozen small to middling sized agricultural and commercial centres on both sides of the frontier, to a population pushing 16 million situated in more than a dozen pairs of cities, driven by an economic that is increasingly industrialised and binational.<sup>1</sup> Bloated by some of the highest urban growth rates in North America, border cities find themselves stressed for infrastructure, services, and resources and coping with some of the most remarkable disparities in economy and culture to be found anywhere.<sup>2</sup> The dynamic growth of the maquiladora industry alone, which surged from 700 plants to 3,700 in less than two decades, from 400,000 to 1.1 million employees in the same period, is a striking phenomenon replete with social and economic problems that are at once fascinating and perplexing.<sup>3</sup>

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In macrocosm, the border's functions have been fundamentally transformed in this period. No longer can it be adequately described as an administrative-political barrier or a critical point of surveillance between the two countries, though a quick pass through any border gate remind the observer it remains such. It is today a regional locale within North America that is linking up the complex processes of regional economic and cultural integration and may thus properly be taken as a barometer of transformations well underway deep in the interiors of the contiguous polities and their societies. As such, the border region now has acquired a symbolic and emblematic role in the cultural politics and policy debates of the two nations whether the topic be immigration, housing, employment, or the arts.

US-Mexico borderlands studies has followed these remarkable trends and taken advantage of the opportunities these changes have given, but has done so

imperfectly, proceeding all too frequently in an ad hoc fashion, loading on certain themes and neglecting many others. Some evidence for this assertion may be found by taking a backwards look at a baseline volume of bibliographic essays, entitled the *Borderlands Sourcebook*,<sup>4</sup> edited by Ellywn Stoddard, Richard Nostrand, and Jonathan West and published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1983. While hardly pretending to be exhaustive, the editors assembled 59 subject essays across five main subject areas including history and archaeology, geography and environment, economy, politics-law-demography, and society and culture. Since the volume appeared, a number of these subject areas have received a good deal of scholarly attention. Others have not.

Evidence for this scholarly imbalance may be found in the pages of the leading scholarly journal devoted to coverage of the US-Mexican border. Though the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* is an outlet for just a small percentage of the articles and publications appearing on borderlands topics, it is nevertheless suggestive, particularly as its articles are driven strictly by independent submissions subject to the approval of its scholarly referees and editors.

Since publishing its first issue in 1986, the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* has published nearly 150 articles. The themes that dominated its pages are immigration and economic development with an emphasis on aspects of the maquiladora industry, and in the past decade, increasingly, the border environment and various North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) topics. These absorbed more than a third of *JBS*'s output. Other topics like health care, education, media, politics, public administration, conflict management, urbanisation, crime and law enforcement, drugs, fiscal affairs, ethnicity and indigenous peoples, and cultural themes have been scantily covered.

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If scholarly coverage of borderlands issues slants towards coverage of a small set of issue-areas, one of the positive developments of the past decade is the emergence of a number of competing journals and publications that taken together amplify coverage of the border region and provide additional resources for scholars. Since 1990 half a dozen new journals – and this is probably an undercount at the present writing – have emerged with border specific identities, the majority associated with Mexican research institutions and universities. Among the better known are: *Rio Bravo*, the journal of the Rio Bravo Association, which published its first issue in the autumn of 1993; *Frontera Norte*, associated with the well known Mexican graduate research institution, El Colegio de la Frontera in Tijuana, Baja California (COLEF); *Region y Sociedad*, the journal of El Colegio de Sonora in Hermosillo, Sonora; and *Estudios Fronterizos*, associated with the Universidad de Baja California, in Mexicali. Such publications are evidence of the greater commitment of border area higher education institutions to borderlands scholarship and research.

Yet other welcome developments are a small explosion in the numbers of general and specialised newsletters, databases, and programs dedicated to border studies. A complete list would task the reader's patience but several of the more noteworthy examples deserve mention.

Prominent among the regular newsletters, in fact better described as a leading news-magazine, is the monthly publication *Borderlines*, a product of the Resources Center, a self-defined progressive advocacy centre devoted to borderlands issues as well as Mexico and Central America.<sup>5</sup> Begun in 1991 with the support of the Ford and Mott foundations, *Borderlines* has blossomed into an indispensable resource, focusing on a particular issue each month with in-depth articles and a very valuable compilation of bibliographic and contact information included. In 1997 *Borderlines* was paired with another Ford project, now known as the Border Information and Outreach Service (BIOS), resulting in an amplified focus on networks, contacts, website and

bibliographic information that has placed *Borderlines* in the forefront of resource provision for those issues within its purview. Its main limitation remains its emphasis on social and economic issues of interest to social activists in border communities.

Other useful newsletters published monthly focus on regional or topical concerns. A short list of some of the more useful such media would include: the *San Diego Dialogue Report*, produced by the San Diego Dialogue, a binational research and advocacy centre at the University of California, San Diego; *Perspectivas*, the house publication of the University of Arizona's Udall Centre for Studies in Public Policy; the *NAMI News*, produced by the North American Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico; and *La Corriente*, a publication of the binational Rio Bravo Coalition, located at the University of Texas, El Paso. A good many more such newsletters exist and many of these may be accessed by internet.<sup>6</sup>

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The border has also seen the emergence of a number of new research institutes and programmes dedicated to applied scholarly research as well as the expansion of older, well established programmes. Notable developments here include: the previously mentioned Resource Centre located in Albuquerque and Silver City, New Mexico; the recently established Border Information Institute in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua focused on the provision of socio-economic data concerning the border community; and the Udall Centre for Studies in Public Policy at the University of Arizona with a current programme emphasis on environment and Native American issues. This decade has also seen programme expansion at established institutions like COLEF, the Universidad Tecnológico de Monterrey's border programmes, and the Centre for US-Mexican Studies at UCSD and other border area universities.

There is little doubt that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has given a boost to border studies since 1994. While NAFTA's effects are uneven as they influence scholarship, it has generated a range of government programs in the realms of trade, labour, and the environment that have directly benefited border area scholars. The new Border Environment Cooperation Commission, BECC, with a mandate to build new infrastructure for water, sanitation, and environment has engaged an increasing number of academic researchers in planning and analytical work related to the border's infrastructure development. The US Environmental Protection Agency's Southwest Centre for Environmental Research and Policy (SCERP), has likewise provided funded research opportunities for scholars associated with this consortium.

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The NAFTA-related Commission of Environmental Cooperation in Montreal, Canada, and the Commission for Labor Cooperation in San Antonio have each elaborated programmes that direct attention to the US-Mexico border, engaging and financing a growing number of scholars in policy related research linking the border to the larger regional agendas of these institutions. Many other university specific programmes – the University of Arizona's National Law Centre for Inter-American Free Trade and the University of California, Los Angeles' North American Integration and Development Centre are two such examples – have benefited from NAFTA-related federal funding.

Taken as a set these trends show that scholarly analysis and attention to the US-Mexican border is now well institutionalised, with substantial resources available to scholars in a number of important issue-areas. The dynamics of border development and North American economic integration will almost surely deepen and extend this base. That's the good news. The rapid transformation of the border region will, however, will continue to challenge borderlands scholars as they struggle to keep pace with new developments and extend their reach to the wide range of topics that still beg for attention. As US-Mexican scholars pause to measure their achievements

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at the end of the century, the need to broaden the scope of their efforts remains the most obvious challenge in the next.

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1. Canales, A., (1999) 'Industrialization, Urbanization, and Population Growth on the Border', *Borderlines*, 7, 7 (August): 4.
  2. Lorey, D., (1999) *The US-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century*, Wilmington: Scholarly Resources:124-134.
  3. Canales, (1999): 2-3; see also, Tello E. S., and Chavez, O. E., (1996) *Profile of the United States-Mexico Border*, Ciudad Juarez: FEMAP.
  4. Stoddard, E. R., Nostrand, R. L., and West J. P., (1983) (eds.) *Borderlands Sourcebook: A Guide to the Literature on Northern Mexico and the American Southwest*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
  5. *Borderlines* is available online at: [www.irc-online.org/bordline](http://www.irc-online.org/bordline)
  6. An exceptional list of internet resources for borderlands studies is provided by the New Mexico State University librarian, Molly Malloy. She may be contacted via email at [mmolloy@lib.nmsu.edu](mailto:mmolloy@lib.nmsu.edu) or through her NMSU website: <http://library.nmsu.edu/staff/mmolloy/searchstrat.html>