

Foreword

In the last decades of the twentieth century, American historians discovered America. Students of colonial English America, who had seldom looked across the Appalachians, began to gaze westward. In the great expanse that stretched to the Pacific they found other colonial powers—France, Spain, and Russia—and a multitude of Native American peoples with their own stories to tell. At the century's end, historian Alan Taylor summed up this new, more expansive colonial history in his magisterial *American Colonies*. Meanwhile, as historians of English colonial America looked westward, a new generation of historians of the American West looked to the east and began to apply the concerns of “mainstream” American historians to their region. With probing studies of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and the environment, the new western historians blurred the boundaries between regional and national history and moved the locus of American history westward. By the end of the twentieth century, then, American history had caught up with American manifest destiny. It had become transcontinental.

The scholars represented in this collection of essays suggest that American history should not stop at the nation's edges. They make a case that American history should be transnational as well as transcontinental. In the largest sense, they suggest that any nation's borderlands cannot be understood solely within the framework of national history because forces from both sides of a border shape the lives of borderlands residents.

Continental Crossroads focuses on the modern U.S.-Mexico borderlands, where a boundary line seems to separate two dissimilar cultures and economies. Created in 1848 and modified in 1854, the international bound-

ary ran initially through sparsely populated country, its coordinates clearer on the map than on the ground. In the twentieth century, however, the physical line became more clearly defined and defended, particularly by the United States. Mexicans who crossed the line illegally in search of new opportunities in *el norte* risked arrest, deportation, and, in the worst of cases, death from exposure to the elements or from the inhumane and criminal negligence of smugglers.

Yet, if the international boundary came to be a serious barrier, it did not become an insurmountable obstacle. Radio and television transmissions ignore it completely, as do air and water, some of it polluted. Capital, commodities, and people—black, brown, red, and white—all find ways across, legally or illegally. Like boundaries elsewhere in the world, the U.S.-Mexico border has not so much separated people as drawn them to it—and beyond. In human terms, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands extend northward to places like Chicago and Milwaukee, home to substantial numbers of Mexican nationals and ethnic Mexicans by the end of the twentieth century. At the same time, the borderlands also extend southward to San Miguel de Allende and Guadalajara, with their long-standing colonies of Anglo-American expatriates and retirees.

Some of the forces that have pushed and pulled people across the U.S.-Mexico border lie beyond the control of a single nation state. In the post-NAFTA era, for example, some Mexican farmers cannot make a living because their market is flooded with low-priced corn imported from the United States and subsidized by its government. Unable to find remunerative work at home, displaced rural workers make the risky crossing into the United States, where they provide a source of cheap labor that some Anglo-Americans regard as essential. Other Mexicans stop short of crossing the border, but move north to work in assembly plants, or *maquiladoras*, south of the line. There, higher wages in the *maquiladoras* are matched by a higher cost of living, forcing these new borderlands residents to move into squalid, dangerous slums. As the companies who built the *maquiladoras* find cheaper labor in other parts of the world, they close the assembly plants and move on, leaving behind unemployed and displaced workers, some of whom cross into the United States in search of the opportunities that eluded them south of the border. In these, and many other ways, transnational forces deeply affect Mexicans and Anglo-Americans on both sides of the border—as they have peoples everywhere. These forces have been unusually unsettling in the U.S.-Mexico border-

lands, however, where the economy of a developing nation meets the economy of the richest country on the planet.

In their brilliant introduction to *Continental Crossroads*, editors Samuel Truett and Elliott Young review historians' debates about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. They ask how we might construct new narratives that take transnational as well as national forces into account for the history of Mexico as well as the United States. Neither they nor the historians they have invited to contribute to this innovative volume offer glib answers. They do ask provocative questions and tell stories about a remarkable range of borderlands topics and peoples. Some, like the U.S. Border Patrol, are familiar historical actors, but others, like blacks fleeing the post-Reconstruction South for northern Mexico or Chinese immigrants moving into Sonora and Baja California, are little known. At the hands of these skilled researchers, writers, and thinkers, the "remapping" of the history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands takes us into new and interesting terrain toward a destination yet to be determined.

