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*Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the
U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* by Julian Lim (review)

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Book Reviews – Reseñas de libro

Julian Lim. *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 320 pp.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the U.S.–Mexico borderland regions were filled with movements of migrants searching for refuge, work, and money. As Julian Lim discusses in *Porous Borders*, these groups included Indigenous people, Chinese, African Americans, and Mexicans (16–20). Lim shows that although these migrants were constantly subjected to hostile immigration policies created in both the United States and Mexico, they nonetheless found ways to elude these discriminatory policies, rendering the border porous (11). Though previous historiography has largely examined each group of migrants individually, few have viewed the migratory dynamics of Chinese, African Americans, and the Indigenous people holistically. Lim’s work offers a new conceptualization of borderland history in which, as she argues, “people of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds forged dynamic relations—both cooperative and contentious” (8). Applying this notion throughout her study, Lim shows that “Mexican, Chinese, and black migrations in the borderlands were not always so easily compartmentalized, and they intersected and mixed in ways that confounded and challenged elite sensibilities on both sides of the border” (9–10). Furthermore, through providing detailed accounts of these diverse migrants’ interactions with immigration laws in both the United States and Mexico, Lim shows that both U.S. and Mexican immigration policies converged, even though they were developed independently, and that “the ideologies of racial purification through policies of differentiation and segregation had become transnational themselves” (14).

Lim opens the book with an overview of the U.S.–Mexico borderland history, focusing mainly on the development of the border region of El Paso–Ciudad Juárez. She shows that the El Paso–Ciudad

Juárez region attracted Mexicans, Chinese, and African Americans who transgressed racial lines drawn by white supremacists and nationalists through interracial marriages, collaborative labor activities, and sharing the same living spaces. Lim then turns to the border-crossing movements of Chinese peoples. Unable to legally enter the United States due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese in the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez region often dressed up as Mexicans wearing traditional Mexican garbs such as sombreros to enter the United States from Mexico. The presence of Chinese people, Lim argues, challenged the conventional racial divisions, making it difficult for immigration officials to distinguish Chinese people from Mexican people (106–107). Pershing’s Punitive Expedition provided another opportunity for Indigenous, Chinese, Mexican, and African American peoples of the U.S.–Mexico regions to transgress border and racial lines. Lim aptly shows that these peoples, who were marginalized in the United States, aided Pershing’s expedition “to redefine their relationship to the American nation and state” (126), which, ironically, “reinforced the legitimacy of the U.S. government to continue to exclude others like them” (127).

Ending the book on a somber note, Lim shows that during the 1920s and 1930s, the discriminatory immigration policies on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border became more draconian, making the once porous border more impervious. Chinese, Mexican, and African American peoples who once enjoyed the benefit provided by borderlands found themselves stuck between two nations that increasingly restricted their movements (161–164). Eventually, the Chinese migrants, who did not fit into either the racial binary construct of the United States or the homogenous notion of *mestizaje* in Mexico, were rendered invisible in the U.S.–Mexico borderland histories (196).

One of Lim’s major contributions to the historiography is that she incorporates many fascinating accounts documenting interactions among Chinese, African American, and Mexican groups. Lim shows that these migrants worked alongside each other in places such as railroad construction sites and Chinese restaurants. They also intermarried each other and shared recreational activities such as gambling. Through these discussions, Lim provides a new perspective for viewing U.S.–Mexico borderland histories and reconceptualizes the borderland region as a greater hotspot of diversity than some historians have imagined. Using sources on both sides of the border, Lim’s transnational approach also deserves praise. Constantly taking the readers back and forth between the United States and Mexico, Lim provides a comprehensive view of the region.

Still, there is one major shortcoming to this study. Heavily relying upon U.S.-produced archival, newspaper, and other types of primary sources, *Porous Borders* privileges Western-centric, if not U.S.-centric perspectives in examining histories of such diverse groups of people. The danger of this approach is that, by portraying migrants' experiences largely through the perspectives of U.S. government officials and journalists, *Porous Borders* silences the voices of these migrants, especially those of Chinese, and at times neglects the agency that these migrants exerted, leading to biased conclusions. For example, in examining the history of anti-Chinese movements in Mexico, Lim concluded that the *antichinistas* were the actors that coerced the Chinese to illegally enter the United States, and thus “forced *antichinismo* onto the United States, requiring the United States to use its own resources to detain and deport the Chinese to China” (195).¹ By coming to such a conclusion, Lim portrays Chinese peoples as helpless weaklings who were constantly at the mercy of two powerful governments. However, she neglects to note the fact that many Chinese themselves were also choice-makers of such decisions—according to some Chinese sources many deliberately entered the United States to return to China for free.

Despite this shortcoming, *Porous Borders* is an excellent borderland history book that gives historians an insightful and inspirational approach to examining histories of U.S.–Mexico borderlands. It should enable readers to appreciate the diversity exhibited in the borderlands and it also effectively contextualizes and incorporates migrants into several broad themes central to both the United States and Mexico, namely, questions of race and nationality, and the rise of nationalism. Overall, *Porous Borders* should be a great addition to any U.S. West or Mexican history classes.

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1. Editor's note: See “Jason Oliver Chang. *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico 1880–1940*, reviewed by Elliott Young” in *MS/EM* 34.2 (2018): 253–54.