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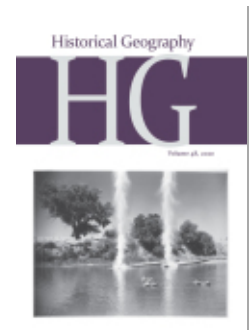
*The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the  
Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border* by James David Nichols (review)

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critiques and likely beyond the geographic scope of this book. As the author noted, “this story of plantations and cities is a Chesapeake story” (4).

In the introduction the author argues that the intense rurality of the historic Chesapeake Bay region was not some preordained system, inevitable as a product of slave-based plantation agriculture or Tidewater river geography. While Thomas Jefferson had proclaimed that nature was the guiding hand for the rural Chesapeake, Paul Musselwhite has definitively answered with a broader view of history in *Urban Dreams, Rural Commonwealth*. In the end it was the historic Chesapeake Bay region’s “persistent self-conscious debates about cities” that made the region stand apart (8). This book is an inspired addition to the field of historical geography.

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*The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border*. James David Nichols. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Pp. xv+287, photographs, maps, notes, index. \$60.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-4962-0579-7.

Opposition to licit and illicit flows of people and commodities from Mexico has been a long-standing feature of American political discourse. The most recent addition to this discourse is the idea of building a wall across the entire US-Mexico border to visibly distinguish “them” from “us.” Despite its literal and figurative divisiveness, the idea of a wall displays considerable continuity with two centuries of US-Mexico relations. These have been characterized by near-constant coercive attempts to make a border, and subversive attempts to cross it. James David Nichols, historian at the City University of New York at Queensborough, skillfully outlines the early part of this process in *The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border*.

Long before a wall was even a discursive possibility, the area bounded by the Gulf of Mexico, the Nueces River, the Rio Grande’s Big Bend, and the Mexican cities of Monclova, Monterrey, and Ciudad Victoria was a

shrinking borderland. It was occupied primarily by Tejano/as (Latino/a-descended Texans) and Native American tribes, at least until the Mexican and Texan governments expanded into the area. The former established military colonies as visible indicators of a controlled frontier, while the latter sought to expand chattel slavery from the Deep South.

As the space between these competing groups shrank, violence increasingly flared. One common trigger was the theft of property and resources. For instance, Native American tribes frequently raided exposed and lightly defended Texan or Mexican settlements, kidnapping and/or killing inhabitants and stealing resources to sell on the opposite side of the Rio Grande. These raids led to counter-raids and counter-counter raids, until eventually killing members of the opposing faction became a culturally important indicator of masculinity and a rite of passage. In addition to perpetuating a cycle of violence, these raids established cross-border smuggling routes that still exist today.

A socioeconomic rift loomed over these small-scale conflicts. Many of the prominent Anglos who colonized Texas were slaveholders. Mexico was intractably opposed to slavery, though it did have a system of indentured servitude from which “peons” were unlikely to graduate. As these two systems drew closer, liberty and a better life beckoned slave and peon alike. Many sought to, and did, escape their masters, illegally migrating across the river in both directions. Often they escaped along the same routes and were assisted by, or even assimilated into, the same Native American tribes who raided Mexican and Texan outposts.

By migrating, these people implicitly repudiated their old homeland’s values and endorsed those of their new homeland. Just as importantly, though, in this sparsely populated and labor-short region, migrants improved the economic prospects of their new homeland and solidified the territorial claims of the central governments. The border thus came to symbolize the political, cultural, and economic limits of each system.

With the act of escaping, slaves and peons subverted the systems from which they escaped and thus drew official scrutiny to the border. To restore order, Mexican officials offered land to Native American tribes in exchange for promises to end raiding and become “civilized”—that is, sedentary, Catholic, Spanish-speaking farmers. Texan officials, and to a lesser extent American federal officials, officially and unofficially supported raids into Mexico to re-enslave escapees. One of these, the

Callahan Raid in 1855, involved a running battle between two hundred Mexicans and a hundred invading Texans, the latter of whom escaped across the Rio Grande under cover of federal cannons at Fort Duncan in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Such large-scale violence was exceptional since people on both sides of the river had incentive to coexist with their neighbors. For instance, both Texans and Mexicans crossed the Rio Grande to negotiate for the return of slaves and peons. They were frequently successful despite the professed positions of their governments.

*The Limits of Liberty* is a well-researched and written volume, thoroughly mining both English and Spanish-language sources. Two small critiques and one large one stand out, though. First, there is a shortage of sources specific to Native American tribes. These tribes may not have left any written sources, but the result is that the motives for their actions and the effects of American and Mexican policies can only be speculated.

Second, it is often difficult to identify places. The author frequently refers to cities, but the book has only one map, and it does not include all the locations mentioned in the text. Further, it sometimes uses anachronistic names for places that have been subsumed by a century and a half of urbanization. Having a digital map nearby pays enormous dividends.

Most significantly, however, the book sometimes reaches too far in assigning meaning. The best example is a discussion about runaways “investing the quotidian with subversive meaning” and “pressing their [the slaveholders’] property into rebellion against them” (135). Runaway slaves did indeed steal horses and guns, but then used them in exactly the way they were intended to be used—to ride, hunt, and defend themselves. The book never discusses attempts to use stolen property in new or unintended ways or to change the slaveholding system. If this “invests the quotidian with subversive meaning,” then everything a runaway used was subversive simply because the act of running away was subversive. If everything is subversive, then the term is too broad to have any real meaning.

The modern parallels to *The Limits of Liberty* are striking. Despite nearly two centuries of attempts to harden the US-Mexico border, it remains a sieve rather than a gate (189). Drug cartels have replaced Native Americans as the dominant transnational threat, but they use the same smuggling routes and border crossings. Geographically

distant national governments rail against licit and illicit migration, but hundreds of thousands of border dwellers from San Diego/Tijuana to El Paso/Ciudad Juárez to Brownsville/Matamoros cross each day for work and recreation. *The Limits of Liberty* provides an excellent outline of the historical roots of today's US-Mexico border conflict. Anyone interested in replacing rhetoric with research would benefit from reading it.

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*Cartographic Humanism: The Making of Early Modern Europe.*

Katharina N. Piechocki. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. 311, maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-226-64118-8.

Continents are commonly defined as large continuous landmasses. Conventional wisdom holds that the Earth's surface is composed of seven continents—Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America—divided by oceans and smaller bodies of water. This basic geography is learned at such a young age, often before the beginning of any formal education, that it is generally taken for granted, but even a cursory review leads to some questions. There is no standard threshold for what qualifies as a “large” landmass, for example, except that Australia is regarded as big enough to be a continent while Greenland is not. The criteria of continuous is also problematic. North and South America are continuous through the isthmus of Panama, but that land bridge is narrow enough to be commonly disregarded to allow the Americas to count as two separate continents. The same is clearly not the case for the connection between Europe and Asia, where a broad swath of territory joins the two no matter where the boundary is set. In terms of physical geography, Europe seems more like a collection of peninsulas appended to the western edge of Asia, or perhaps Eurasia, rather than a distinct continent. Yet Europe's status as a continent seems firmly entrenched in conventional wisdom, not to mention textbooks used across disciplines from elementary school through postsecondary education.

Katharina N. Piechocki's *Cartographic Humanism: The Making of Early Modern Europe* explores the contexts, motivations, and processes