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James David Nichols. *The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border.* Borderlands and Transcultural Studies Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 312 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4962-0579-7.

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The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border by James David Nichols explores a "great system of roaming" between the United States and Mexico in the first half of the nineteenth century (p. 8). The book's often dramatic and heart-wrenching stories of highly mobile people, such as Lipan Apaches, Caddos, Tejanos, black Seminoles, and Mexican militia, illustrate what an imaginary line looked like as lived, real experiences. As Nichols concludes, "Once enough people invested in the fiction of borders, they began to see major differences on either side of the divide. This was creative work, the result of a synergy produced between the people who made borders and the people who lived by them" (p. 229).

Nichols positions the nineteenth-century eastern US-Mexico border as a site of multidirectional movement. Nine roughly chronological and well-organized chapters highlight both the duration and the adaptability of that movement. A single group of mobile people drives each chapter. For example, chapter 2, "Racial Fault Lines: Immigrant Indians in Mexico," follows immigrant tribes who left the United States for Mexico. Chapter 3, "'Impatient for the Promised Freedom': Runaway Slaves in the Age of the Texan Revolution," examines Mexican officials' different responses to enslaved people who fled Texas. Chapter 4, "A 'Great System of Roaming': Runaway Debt Peons and the Making of the International Border," traces runaway debt peons who escaped Mexico and traveled to Texas. Nichols considers this wide range of people often not found all together in one monograph to successfully argue that "this border actually had the contradictory effect of encouraging movement across it" (p. 228).

Nichols effectively engages scholarly works on the plethora of themes that run throughout *The Limits of Liberty*. Chapter 6, "The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves after the Treaty of Guadalupe," illustrates especially well his ability to navigate historiography and understandings of borders. Within a mere twenty-one pages, he considers such heady subjects as expansion, citizenship, race, nationalism, regional identities, and family. He draws on concepts from other scholars, including Sarah Cornell's "citizens of nowhere" and Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall's "Black Mexico," to conclude about runaway slaves who left the US South for Mexico: "Still, they were free, and this fact contradicted assumptions about race on which American slave codes were based. Mexican legal territory disentangled blackness and servility, proving to Texans that an entire race of human beings could

not be reduced to slavery and white property by mere fiat" (p. 145).[1]

Meticulous analysis renders the breadth of this volume's primary research one of its main strengths. Nichols employs difficult Mexican and US primary sources well, and with occasional rhetorical flourish, throughout his work. Mobile people, such as Ben Kinchelow who interviewed with the Works Progress Admistration (WPA) Slave Narratives Project and Ignacio Sertuche Ramires who left a debt record, occasionally created primary sources that have been preserved, but examples like these are rare. Sources that exist about mobile people—for example, runaway slaves, debt peons, and horse thieves—were typically created by others, not by mobile people themselves. As Nichols acknowledges, many of his sources also contain extreme bias, exaggeration, or conscious lies. To make research even more difficult, some of his sources have been filtered through three or four different people, as in the case of a vecino militiaman's story of Lipan Apache mothers who killed their own children (p. 208). This dearth of reliable sources leaves Nichols to read against the grain of available sources, a practice he employs particularly well with various newspapers, such as the *Southwestern American* and the *San Antonio Ledger*.

The Limits of Liberty meshes borderlands studies and transcultural studies with studies of nationalism and state history. Nichols conceptualizes the eastern US-Mexico border, in both its ideological and experiential iterations, as a line that brought people together over ideas about liberty, refuge, and opportunity. He writes, "Once this border gained traction, it did not effectively barricade one space from the other. It did the opposite" (p. 228). Nichols builds on this conclusion about the border to argue that scholars should study borderlands and national states in tandem rather than study borderlands as somehow distinct from national histories, a practice he employs throughout but most strongly in chapter 9, "Sacrificed on the Altar of Liberty: Regionalism and Cooperation in the Age of Vidaurri." Nichols concludes, "In tracing the history of transnational movement along this stretch of frontier, I have sought to bridge the gap between borderlands and 'bordered lands' histories. Instead of closure, I found continuity" (p. 227). His observation is worth noting for future projects.

The Limits of Liberty stands as a well-researched and deeply informative study of borderlands and transcultural studies. Throughout the nine chapters, it weaves together poignant, human stories in original, compelling, and accessible ways. Students new to borderlands history as well as seasoned readers will find much to consider in this work.

Note

[1]. Sarah Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and African Americans in Mexico, 1833-1857," *Journal of American History* 100 (2013): 351-74; and Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall, eds., *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

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