Y. Laberge on Samuel Trett’s *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the US-Mexico Borderland*.
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2. As all Americanists should know, the ever moving frontier was an essential part of U.S. history during the 19th century: perhaps no country in the modern world had established its power on such an extensive and continuous expansion strategy. But despite its detailed and appropriate title, this overlooked book is much more than just a history of the area surrounding the South-Western border separating the United States and Mexico – an international line which has moved a few times during previous centuries. Most historians will remember that during the 19th century, Mexico’s territory used to be much bigger than it is today.

3. All and all, in *Fugitive Landscapes* we find seven chapters set into three parts: “Frontier legacies”, “Border crossings” and “Contested terrain”. In chapter one, the author presents the U.S.-Mexico Borderland as “the meeting place of two opposing narratives: the history of Spanish and Mexican decline and a prophecy of U.S. expansion” (p. 15). As the title indicates, there are many things which were forgotten about American history, perhaps because most teachers do not mention these elements in their classes or maybe because most of them are not aware of what happened there during 19th century: migrations, alliances, conflicts, wars. Therefore, why does the author refer to memory and to “forgotten history” in the book’s subtitle? In my view, “forgetting” something implies that we once knew it. But here, our “borderland historian” (see p. 6) Samuel Truett argues another interesting hypothesis: maybe most of us consider this portion of the borderland as not wholly belonging to the history of the United States, but rather as a part of colonial Spain or Mexico (p. 9). As the author succinctly puts it: “U.S. history includes Mexican history only before 1848 and 1854, the years that treaties turned the Mexican North into the U.S. West” (p. 5).
Each chapter gives particular emphasis to the Sonora region, one reason being that as late as 1864 it was considered more remote by the journalist J. Ross Browne from San Francisco than was China, Norway, Germany, or even Iceland (p. 44). But even if this place seemed difficult to access it was not a human desert, mainly because of the Apaches presence: “Seen from the inside, this land was anything but vacant” (p. 60). However, the author concentrates more on the U.S. side of the border, even while he claims to be focusing on the transnational perspective through the centuries. Especially after 1854, when many Mexican communities that spoke Spanish (in fact “Castillian”) became citizens of the United States and within one generation switched to English (p. 125).

In the second part of the book, we read about how the Natives, the immigrants, but also the Chinese perceived, appropriated and used this borderland at the end of the 19th century. For some groups, the border was easy to cross; for other communities, it represented almost “the end of the world” as people knew it. This was the case with the Mormons who in 1884 chose New Mexico in order to be left alone by the U.S. authorities, to practice “plural marriage” which was forbidden according to the U.S. bylaws in Utah, Idaho, and Arizona (p. 125). In addition, the author mentions ethnic tensions as in the case of the anti-Chinese sentiments, which culminated in the “Chinese Exclusion Act” of 1882, that allowed only certain types of Chinese candidates to immigrate to the U.S., and in particular those whose profession was related to entrepreneurship, food industry, and commerce (p. 120). Incidentally, conflicts were numerous during this era, but perhaps these issues were even more acute in this borderland area, as is usually the case with borderlands where problematic issues are concentrated in limited spaces. And as the author mentions, in the 1880s, “This fugitive landscape was distinguished not only by isolation and mobility, but also by lawlessness” (p. 64). As a sociologist myself with a strong interest in history, I appreciated the numerous passages referring to the symbolic meanings of the border and the process of nation-building, as for example in Chapter 7 where the author demonstrates how four distinct events (the Apache Wars, the Cananea strike, the Mexican Revolution, and the Bisbee Deportation) contributed to confirming the important role of the U.S. border in geographical, political, and symbolic terms as well as its function in collective identification and nation-building: “the frontier became a useful ideological weapon in the effort to rally border ‘citizens’ behind corporate and state visions of power and control” (p. 176).

The epilogue of Fugitive Landscapes offers some thoughts on what could possibly become a future “theory of borderlands”. For example, the fact that whenever the border changes or moves, not many people will likely remember where the line really was before (p. 182). Or, the fact that we rarely question the significance of the place where the majority of historians are located and exercise their profession: their geographical position or point if view, the historical sources they refer to, the newspapers they consult have a major impact on the way they conceive their historical narrative of nationhood. Permit me also here to add, that it would be useful to apply this illuminating thought to Canadian historiography, as well. As Samuel Truett reminds us: “Border people cannot forget nations, but nation-bound histories often forget border people” (p. 8).

In sum, Fugitive Landscapes is a well written and comprehensive study with many insightful remarks on border issues. In addition, the reader will appreciate the personal
stories, anecdotes, descriptions of everyday life near the border before the 1920s. Undergraduates in history, geography and American studies, but also progressive scholars in international relations will surely find it instructive. Furthermore, scholars doing research on immigration issues and political scientists who study international frontiers will find this thoughtful exploration of the dynamics of borders of particular interesting.

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