



PROJECT MUSE®

Postcards from the Rio Bravo Border by Daniel D. Arreola (review)

Lawrence A. Herzog

Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 14, Number 1, March 2015,
pp. 175-178 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: 10.1353/lag.2015.0000

Journal of
Latin American
Geography

Volume 14 Number 1 March 2015



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578761>

mere “yellow slavery” (p. 55), “exploded into the worst epidemic of this sort in Peru’s history” (p. 57) after the first cases were recorded in the port of Callao. Nonetheless, the lives of “Peru’s guano plutocrats” and “guano age elite” unfolded comfortably, “the latest fashions from Paris and London” arriving to be enjoyed along with “the best French wines, brandies, and Havana cigars” (p. 56). The good times for a lucky few, however, eventually drew to a close. Boom begot bust with the outbreak of the War of the Pacific (1879–84).

Cushman describes this little-known war as “one of the largest armed conflicts ever fought in the Americas,” a confrontation that prefigured “the massive wars fought over phosphate, petroleum, *Lebensraum*, and other resources during the twentieth century.” Its origins stemmed from Bolivia’s decision, in January 1879, to seize the assets of the British and Chilean-owned Antofagasta Nitrate and Railway Company to compensate for what the cash-strapped Bolivian government claimed were unpaid taxes. War was effectively declared on February 14, 1879, when “Chilean marines invaded coastal Bolivia to protect the interests of the Antofagasta Company,” which operated in the Atacama Desert, nominally Bolivian and Peruvian territory but over which Chile harbored “a natural right” on account of Chilean businessmen having invested in the region and Chileans having worked and settled there. Well aware that Bolivia and Peru “had signed a mutual defense pact in 1873 for just this sort of situation,” Chile unleashed an attack that saw its troops thrust north beyond the Atacama as far as Lima itself. A long and bloody conflict ensued, halted only by the Treaty of Ancón in 1884, the terms of which saw Chile appropriate the entire coastline of Bolivia and the Peruvian province Tarapacá, culminating in it gaining “sole control over the world’s most valuable source of nitrogen compounds” in addition to “half of Peru’s guano proceeds during the 1880s” (p. 73). The guano age in Peru was over. For Chile, the aggressive invader, a golden age (of sorts) lay ahead. Bolivia has been landlocked and struggling to find itself since.

“The guano age truly deserves its reputation as an ‘age of shit,’” Cushman concludes. Rather than “improving the world’s food supply during an era of profound environmental instability,” he laments, “Peruvian guano mainly served northern consumers of meat and sugar.” Instead of ushering in “an epoch of peace and prosperity,” one that Humboldt and his ilk believed possible, “guano and nitrates inspired wars and fueled the growth of inequalities between classes and nations” (p. 74). A “Pacific world” may have been opened up, but a more pacific world remains elusive.

W. George Lovell
Queen’s University

Postcards from the Rio Bravo Border, Daniel D. Arreola. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2013. Xix and 258 pp., maps, photos, notes, appendix, bibliography and index. \$40.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-292-75280-1).

This book is a labor of love from one of the hemisphere’s leading U.S.-Mexico border scholars, Arizona State University geographer Daniel Arreola. In the Preface, Arreola recounts his twenty-plus year passion for collecting Mexican postcards, and subsequent transcontinental pilgrimages to postcard shows and dealers around the continent, from small towns to major cities.

Along the way, he amassed some 7000 postcards of Mexican border towns, 1800 from the Texas-Mexico border alone. The latter became the visual data set central to the book.

Arreola writes, in the Introduction, that his goal was to produce “a visual narrative about Rio Bravo border towns between the 1900’s and the 1950’s” (p.1). He believes photographic images are part of our “visual culture,” bringing together past places, landscapes and the photographs that connect them. Since Mexico’s border towns were one of many tourist destinations being portrayed in “view cards” during the first half of the twentieth century, these postcards, he argues, represent a form of popular imagery that defined Americans’ engagement with place. Understanding these places, as captured in thousands of postcard images, would, in essence, offer an important representation of the changing landscapes of Mexican border towns at a critical time in their formation.

Arreola builds his case using a 1957 essay by well-known cultural landscape writer J.B. Jackson, describing a fictitious journey for visitors entering a decaying U.S. inner city in the late 1950s, at a time when prosperity was moving toward the suburbs, leaving behind seedy-looking downtowns. Jackson termed it “the stranger’s path.” Arreola employs this as a guiding construct for thinking about Americans crossing the border into Mexico in the early twentieth century, taking another kind of “stranger’s path” into an equally unfamiliar place. What, asks the author, might that path look like in Mexican border towns, given their “peculiar anatomy?” The answer lies vividly catalogued in thousands of postcard images taken by dozens of professional photographers working along the border between 1900 and 1960.

The book is organized around “stranger’s path” elements choreographing the movement of American tourists across the Rio Bravo from the Texas side, and into Mexican frontier towns. Part I, Places and Postcards, includes an introductory chapter on the border towns studied (Chapter 1, “Rio Bravo Border Towns”) and a short essay about postcards as forms of visual culture (Chapter 2, “Postcards”). The heart of the book is Part II, “Postcard Views,” which surveys specific border town “stranger’s path” elements that include: Gateways (Chapter 3), Streets (Chapter 4), Plazas (Chapter 5), Attractions (Chapter 6), Business & Landmarks (Chapter 7) and Everyday Life (Chapter 8). Finally, in Part III, Sight into Site, chapter 9, “View of the Place, Place of the View,” the author offers a few concluding comments. An appendix outlines critical sources, research and publications on postcards.

This book will be of interest to Latin American geographers, especially those concerned with cultural and historic landscapes; it will also attract the growing legions of “border scholars.” The level of detail is impressive. More importantly, the book is a refreshing departure from the cacophony of “digital, electronic fast life” that is gradually creeping into mainstream western culture, from the world of social media, texting, smart phones and the Internet, to the everyday, instantaneous nature of our lives, even in academia. *Postcards from the Rio Bravo Border*, by contrast, is an exercise in what I would term “the culture of slowness”, that is, not only slowing down to actually read this fine work, but decelerating to appreciate the visual details and their meanings. Arreola invites the reader in, and to truly appreciate this work, you should have a magnifying glass at hand, to literally get a closer look at the postcard images. The very act of contemplating the details of these historic postcard images serves to slow the

reader down, briefly transporting you to landscapes and streetscapes of border towns past.

Chapter 1 serves up an easy-to-digest, basic urban geography of five Mexican border towns. The sub-section "A Sense of Place: Geographic Snapshots of Towns" gives the reader just the right mix of physical geography, site and morphology for the five case-study towns—Matamoros, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras and Villa Acuña. The clear, legible maps also help. Chapter 2 offers a synopsis of the evolution of postcards in popular visual culture, and is important to Arreola's contention that postcard images can be used to understand landscape and place. Postcards may have started in Europe in the late nineteenth century, but they certainly exploded in popularity in North America early in the twentieth. In this context, since American tourism along the Mexican border began to thrive around the same time, its not surprising U.S.-Mexico border postcards represent an important subset within the larger genre.

In Section II, "Postcard Views," (Chapters 3-8), Arreola lays out the main narrative in the book -- a portrait of Texas/Mexican border place and landscape via images on postcards. The itinerary opens with "Gateways" (Chapter 3), marked by the various bridges (wooden, iron, suspension) or transit lines that crossed the Rio Bravo from the U.S. side into the Mexican border towns. Chapter 4 ("Streets") then continues the visual narrative, moving off the bridges and onto the main commercial corridors of towns. We watch as, over time, streets are cluttered with the hulking parade of new American automobiles. We also learn that pedestrians on the main streets in these border towns, like Calle Sexta in Matamoros, were "mostly men and boys" (p. 97). The author does not mention why; I thought he should have.

Still, this book is a *tour de force* for cultural geographers, Latin Americanists, and border scholars. Its value and charm lies in what I will call the "armchair *flâneur*" approach. Readers will recall the 19th century French street artist/poet or *flâneur*, who painted, shot photographs, wrote, and otherwise wandered, capturing the spirit of place in Paris and other cities. Similarly, Arreola's book inspires the reader to make sense of all the snippets of visual information about border towns, from the architecture of bridges, customs houses or municipal palaces, to the way people dressed in the 1940s. This approach is amply illustrated in Chapter 5, "Plazas," where the reader is guided around one of the iconic realms of all Mexican cities, the *zócalo* or main plaza. A heightened sense of place unfolds, with border town plaza details ranging from puestos (stands), casitas (little houses that sell food), and sitios (taxi stands), to trees, clock towers, or men and women strolling against the backdrop of churches, curios shops and cantinas. The last three chapters embrace landscape elements not covered earlier. Chapter 6 handles "Attractions" (markets, rail stations or bullfighting arenas), Chapter 7 "Businesses and Landmarks" (shops, bars), and Chapter 8, "Everyday Life" (oxcarts, theaters, homes, restaurants).

This is masterful cultural geography with rich visual materials, delivered in a unique and compelling fashion. Some additional interpretation would have been welcome in just a few places where it seemed missing. For example, if as Arreola suggests (and I would agree), postcard photos are coded into the landscape as a way of framing the exotic and unknown slices of Mexican border town life, then why not offer some reflections about the components of environmental cognition at play when Americans negotiate these foreign spaces?

What imagery specifically feeds American stereotypes of Mexico? What photographs might have been used to challenge those preconceived notions? What aspects of Mexican life were never shown; for example, the role of women in border society, or the impact of urban poverty? What is the psycho-geographic landscape of the Mexican border that looms as a backdrop to this book?

These are not so much criticisms as they are questions raised by this very stimulating and well-written volume. The point made in the concluding Chapter 9, "View of the Place, Place of the View" is that the American preconceived assumption that border towns were somehow less significant than Mexico's interior is belied by a more detailed exploration of the border towns themselves. As such, the postcards become vehicles for the power of place-based story telling through visual culture, cast beautifully here. A burning question remains, however; it echoes the spirit of J.B. Jackson's essay cited by the author, in which the "lopsided view of urban culture" in the U.S is lamented. We can, therefore, ask: does the *frontera* "view card" narrative so brilliantly assembled by Arreola deliver a complete portrait of place, or were a few hidden layers of border town life yet left unrevealed? The mystique of the Mexican border lives on.

Lawrence A. Herzog
School of Public Affairs
San Diego State University

The Case of the Green Turtle: An Uncensored History of a Conservation Icon. Alison Rieser. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. xii and 338 pp., map, photos, notes, bibliog., index., \$23.50 (ISBN 1-4214-0579-2).

The green turtle – *Chelonia mydas* – has been classified as endangered on IUCN's Red List of endangered and threatened wild species of plants and animals since the late 1960s. Over the last three generations, the global population has declined by more than 60 percent and the turtle faces a considerable risk of extinction. It is difficult to identify all the causes for this tragic development. In *The Case of the Green Turtle*, Alison Rieser stresses the local consumption of turtle eggs in the Caribbean, together with an international demand for green turtle meat and cartilage used for soup, which peaked during the 1960s.

Rieser's book tells the story of how the green turtle came to be classified legally as an endangered species and why it is still so today. The book is very much a story about some of the first scientists who devised important laws and treaties during the 1970s and used these to prevent the turtle going extinct. Rieser shares with us an exhaustive, rich and mind-blowing historical narrative supported by crucial evidence and resources. The book is an extremely valuable contribution to understanding Latin America's wildlife conservation and an important story for all those concerned with saving our natural world.

Alison Rieser is the Dai Ho Chun Professor of Ocean Governance at Geography at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, and Professor Emerita at the University of Maine School of Law. Through Rieser's expertise in ocean and environmental ecology, policy, and law, the book reveals how the