River of Hope makes an important contribution to borderlands history through its richly detailed study of the complex ways in which multiple identities in the Rio Grande Valley subverted efforts by “distant governments” to control and divide peoples. One of the strengths of this work is Valerio’s ability to navigate three periods — the Spanish colonial period (1749-1821), the Mexican national period (1821-1848), and the U.S. national period (1848-1900). Moving through the colonial period to the national period allows him to investigate the ways in which local resistance to state-building projects played out over time, pointing to the fact that “the contentious political situation did not emerge abruptly in the nineteenth century” (p. 5). Valerio-Jiménez writes that over the course of a century and a half, borderland residents went from “privileged Spanish subjects into neglected Mexicans, and ultimately, into unwanted American citizens” (p. 3).

Valerio-Jiménez’s choice of the Nuevo Santander/ Tamaulipas/ Texas region to explore these transformations is one strength of the work. As he points out, it was in the Rio Grande borderlands where Mexican communities were painfully divided by the newly-imposed border in the mid-nineteenth century. It was there that Mexicans and Americans interacted daily with each other, encountering two distinct legal systems, often creatively using the legal system for their own benefit. Arguing that everyday experience, in conjunction with national and transnational processes, “led border residents to construct strategic identities that countered each nation-state’s disciplining efforts,” he goes on to say that the “creative hybrid identities established social and cultural precedents for future generations” (p. 12).

The book begins with the emergence of vecino (community member) society with the arrival of colonists in the 1740s. Vecino society in the villas del norte was complex, shaped by class and gender; constantly changing relationships with Indigenous people, both those they considered allies and those they considered enemies, also helped form their view of themselves. Throughout the period, vecinos lacked a strong allegiance to the nation, maintaining instead a strong regional identity. There was one constant between the colonial period and the national period: on the periphery of the nation, northern communities found themselves neglected, and as Valerio writes, “willing trade partners with the United States” (p. 128). With Mexican independence, the villas del norte became increasingly dependent on trade with the United States. Furthermore, with Mexican independence, the old category of vecino...
disappeared with the creation of the new label of *ciudadano* (citizen), a label that was not necessarily accepted or relevant in the often forgotten periphery of the nation.

Part two of *River of Hope* begins with the U.S.-Mexican War, the second conquest of the border region in a century. The once powerful colonists became a conquered people, losing their political and economic power as they were incorporated into a society that saw them as second-class citizens at best. Their political, social, and economic exclusion from American society laid the foundation for *tejanos’* (Mexican Texans’) future fight for full citizenship. With the Rio Grande serving as the new dividing line between Mexico and the United States, the river remained a “river of hope” as residents from both sides crossed it strategically, particularly for economic reasons. With the creation of the new border came both new opportunities and new challenges for Mexican Texans (*tejanos*) incorporated into the United States. Land loss and a loss of political power, even among the *tejano* elite, shaped the lives of border residents. Despite these losses, Valerio-Jiménez argues that U.S. laws provided workers and women more rights. The ability to divorce and remarry, for example, gave women a new freedom they did not experience in Mexico. *Tejanas*, however, continued to experience unequal treatment, as did members of the working class. Meanwhile, the elite attempted to maintain their power through intermarriage with Americans and by using the legal system, options not available to the lower socioeconomic classes.

In the decades following the imposition of the new border, Mexican Texans, *tejanos*, began to develop a new ethnic identity that drew on commonalities between Mexican-origin people on both sides of the river. Despite the similarities in language, culture, and religion, however, there were differences that emerged in the day-to-day interactions between the two groups. As *tejanos* lost political power, Mexicans across the river retained control of their local government. *Tejanos* began to develop what Valerio-Jiménez calls a “distinct counteridentity; they were not accepted as Americans and were no longer Mexican citizens” (p. 236).

Valerio-Jiménez concludes his multifaceted study of the border by pointing to the legacy of these earlier periods. Mexicans continue to cross the border for economic reasons and the border continues. Mexican-origin people continue to contribute to the economy and culture of the United States, despite the on-going controversies around controlling the border.

The second half of the book, which focuses almost exclusively on the U.S. side of the border and the experiences of *tejanos*, left me wondering about changes on the Mexican side of the river. Although he discusses transnationalism several times, the other side of the border remains mostly
unexplored. How did on-going Mexican state formation following the U.S.-Mexican war shape *tejano* identity and experiences, particularly since both the elite and the poor continued to cross the border as a strategy? Intriguing hints of the ways in which border people supported political causes simultaneously on both sides of the border left me wanting to know more. Despite this critique, *River of Hope* provides a valuable model for other borderlands scholars. Valerio-Jiménez conducts research on both sides of the border, in both national and local archives. *River of Hope* presents a complex history in a well-researched monograph that demonstrates both the continuities and transformations along the border across time but also the lasting legacy of these changes. *River of Hope* will be of interest not only to borderlands scholars, but also those interested in Mexican, Texas, and Chicano histories as well as those interested in state-building, identity formation, and gender studies.

Yolanda Chávez Leyva

The University of Texas at El Paso