

## RESERVA BIBLIOGRÁFICA/BOOK REVIEW

*Mexican Voices of the Border Region*, of Laura Velasco Ortiz and Oscar F. Contreras, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2011

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*Mexican Voices of the Border Region* is an important contribution to U.S.-Mexico border studies. It consists of ten extended life histories, bracketed by an analytical introduction and conclusion. To understand its value, it is useful to compare it to a classic book that undertakes a similar mission, Oscar Martínez's *Border People* (1994). The interviews in *Border People* were largely done in the 1970s and early 1980s, and though they cover both Mexico and the United States, they come disproportionately from the United States. The life histories in *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* are recent, and thus inform us about how people are experiencing new or intensified developments in the border region, such as massive U.S. immigration law enforcement, criminal violence in Mexico, and so forth. Martínez's book gives the impression of a much more open and fluid border than

the actual reality. Likewise, *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* balances the U.S.-centered quality of *Border People* with interviews mainly (but not entirely) from the Mexican side. This publication, in English, makes available to a U.S. audience a rich portrait of urban northern border Mexico, a region poorly understood in human terms in the United States (as opposed to U.S. views of Mexico as a source of dehumanized social problems, such as unauthorized migration or drugs). *Border People* remains important, of course, for its abstract conceptual frameworks; while *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* is less schematic and abstract, its conceptual passages connect more clearly to major social theories. Overall, *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* now joins *Border People* as the two main documents of the human experience of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Each of the ten life histories starts with a useful introduction, providing context and guidance on key themes. The brief summaries here cannot do justice to them, since there are so many fascinating details and related themes, but they give some sense of the book. “Living on the Agricultural Frontier” addresses internal migration of indigenous people to the new agricultural region of San Quintin, B. C., complex and conflictual gender relations, and challenging and exploitative housing and working conditions. A particularly interesting aspect of this chapter is that it provides two generations of life history, a mother and a son, in which we see loss of the Mixtec language and a changed identification with place, from the borderlands as sojourn to the borderlands as home identity. “Home, Sweet Industrial Home” also addresses internal Mexican migration, of a mestiza, and difficult relations with the woman’s mother and various men. This life story shows interesting connections between personal (emotional and household) relations and work life, including service labor and maquiladoras, and it finishes with Elena becoming a labor rights promoter.

“Sex without Kisses, Love with Abuse” again links interpersonal relations of generation and gender with work, in this case commercial sex. The chapter provides a clear-eyed view of

prostitution, without either stigma or defensiveness. The next chapter, “A Straight-Dealing Drug Trafficker,” also addresses a stigmatized—but important—border phenomenon in an honest and thoughtful way. Juan starts his career in the business by growing marijuana in rural Nayarit, and follow the commodity chain of drugs to the border, where he organizes shipments to this border “plaza” and sales there. The chapter provides an unflinching portrait of the drug trade as a highly rational business, including the use of terrible violence, and at the same time Juan’s own self-destructive fall into meth addiction.

Ofelia, “An Indigenous Woman Street Vendor,” adds to the earlier chapter (“Living on an Agricultural Frontier”) on indigenous migrants to the northern border region. Indeed, the stable urban indigenous population of Tijuana, as depicted here, is the sedimentation of agricultural labor migration northwards within Mexico and also to the United States. In the border city, indigenous women (especially) and men have developed a niche in street vending in the informal economy, which requires coordinated political action to secure space. Meanwhile, as with the previous chapter, we hear about the generational shift away from indigenous language, in this case within the context of legal migration

to the United States. The following chapter, “A Caregiver Commuter,” also addresses the life course decision to live in the United States or Mexico, for those persons for whom it is an option. Eloísa, born in the United States, at the time of the interview balanced the two sides by living in Tijuana and working on both sides (making more money in the United States as a home health care aide, but advancing her educational and social position as a research assistant in Mexico).

But not all border crossers have legal rights for this activity, and yet it persists. In “A Border Acrobat,” we hear from a man who has repeatedly entered and exited the United States, without authorization (at times, his legal status was more ambiguous, however). Among many interesting qualities in this life story is the increasing risk and difficulty in recent years of undocumented border crossing, which updates previous life history accounts derived from eras when such entry was inexpensive and relatively low risk. The “Mexicali Panther” addresses the flip side of this process, one actor within the networked business of migrant smuggling across the border. The description of the various components of the business is rich and distinctive, and it is again highly valuable to have an account of smuggling in this era of massively intensified U.S. border enforcement.

The book’s life histories finish with two from the United States. One, “A Young Mexican American,” a U.S. college student who is gradually solidifying his commitment to the U.S. side, after a zig-zagging binational upbringing. This chapter works well as a comparison with the parallel choice in favor of Mexico, at least at the early stage of adulthood, in “A Caregiver Commuter.” And the life histories close with “Guarding the American Dream,” a telling story of a U.S. Border Patrol officer who is the son of Mexican immigrants. The complex mixture of Mexican culture and kinship bonds with with U.S. Nationalism and related security ideology is well depicted in this chapter. Only a brief caution is needed, because while this version of U.S. nationalism is widespread among Mexican Americans, so is an alternative position that is also U.S.-identified but critical of current border policy. The subtle but constant debate among Mexican American over how to be “American” remains in need of sensitive and detailed study.

The life histories are framed by an intelligent introduction and conclusion. The introduction, besides providing a capable overview of the border, offers the valuable distinction and relation between the structural border and the lived or experienced border. The life histories center on large aspects of the

borderlands, but they are highly personal and specific. The authors identify three key aspects of inequality as central to making these connections, class, ethnicity, and gender. We should view gender (as they do) as a larger frame to understand various patterned aspects of interpersonal relations, so including generation and kinship relations; one of the strongest patterns in the book is the interplay between complicated, conflictive interpersonal relations and wider dynamics of migration, nationality, and class. There is much room to build analytical insights here.

After covering the well-known, but still important concepts of adjacency, asymmetry, and interaction at borders, the authors again provide in the introduction an original and informative conceptual discussion of how the border matters in people's lives even when they do not cross it themselves. That topic is crucial to understanding the Mexican northern border cities especially, which have grown immensely in the context of border-driven internal migration, yet where many people never directly go to or even interact

with the United States. The conclusion picks up these themes, but reworks them in terms suited especially to personal life trajectories, in which the border acts in part as a means of personal opportunity, a site and set of resources for change, but also as a source of uncertainty and risk, as seen most dramatically in the expansion of U.S. border enforcement.

There is little to fault in Mexican *Voices of the Border Region*. Life histories of elites and middle classes could have been provided. In particular, given U.S. stereotypes, a better understanding of educated professional-technical and small to medium business-owning strata in urban Mexico is desirable. There are hints of such people in several life history chapters, but those items focus on the life trajectories of young people deciding among nations more than the distinct experience of Mexican middle classes. The book as a whole, however, excels in its diversity and its conceptual approaches, and constitutes a valuable updating of *Border People*. It is highly recommended.

## REFERENCE

- Martínez, Oscar J. 1994, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press.