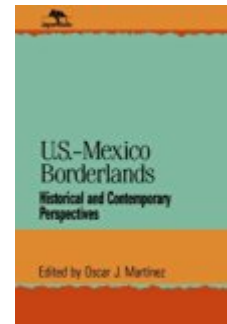


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Oscar J. Martínez. *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Jaguar Books on Latin America). Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996. xix + 264 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2446-4; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2447-1.

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Interdependence and Conflict in la Frontera/the Borderlands

Oscar J. Martínez's compilation of academic essays, primary documents, and newspaper articles proves that the study of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands can be as heterogeneous as the border itself. This book covers the entire border, from the establishment of the boundary in 1848 until today's debates over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the plight of immigrant maids. The breadth of content is matched by a diverse selection of texts, including government treaties, newspaper accounts, and Martínez's concluding poem. This plurality, however, risks leaving half satisfied those readers looking for detailed scholarly analysis or contemporary news-oriented accounts. Nonetheless, as an introduction for new students of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands and as a reference for longtime scholars, the compilation whets the appetite for more and also points in the direction of key primary and secondary sources. The preface to the volume characterizes the historical relationship between Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans as one of "conflict and interdependence," but argues that "good neighborliness" has "prevailed" over the long run (p. xviii). This optimistic attitude carries over in Martínez's assessment of future interaction in the borderlands, leading him to conclude that NAFTA will lead to increased interdependence and thus "to de facto integration in many sectors of society" (p. xix). How increased interdependence will lead to integration is never spelled out; and given the current wave of U.S. xenophobia in the wake of NAFTA, interdependence seems to be leading to just the opposite, de facto segregation. Martínez, however, argues that the media's focus on Proposition

187 and other anti-immigrant measures, distorts "the reality of daily life at the border" which increasingly binds each side together through "tourism," and "legal border crossings" (p. xviii - xix). In the years preceding the 1910 Mexican Revolution, economic ties and tourism between the U.S. and Mexico also grew, as did Mexican immigration to the U.S., but the result can hardly be characterized as increased understanding or ethnic integration in the U.S. One can only hope that Martínez's prediction will come to pass, though the evidence, both historical and contemporary, seems to say otherwise. One silence in this volume, that perhaps has more to do with the lack of scholarship than with editorial choices, is the role of indigenous people on the borderlands. Except for one essay, published as an article in 1961 by Joseph Park, on the impact of "the Apaches in Mexican-American relations" in Arizona and Sonora, there is little mention of the extermination campaigns and persistence of indigenous cultures along the border. And even in this short selection from Park's article, the Apaches figure as an obstacle or a "problem" in the way of good relations between "Sonorans" and Arizonans" (p. 56-57). I was also surprised to find that even Martínez's introduction implies that those who arrived to the border after the 1880's were more "civilized" than earlier inhabitants. He states that "with the advent of the railroads in the 1880s and the subsequent influx of more civilized settlers and influences, marauding and raiding activities declined" (p. xiv). If he had placed the word civilized within quotation marks, the reference could be read as an indication of the way Indians and poorer Mexicans were

viewed in the nineteenth century. As it stands, however, the reader is left to wonder whether Martinez believes that the commercially oriented Anglo and Mexican newcomers were more civilized than earlier Mexican and indigenous inhabitants. While this example is an exception to a generally sensitive writing style, the use of a less value-laden and more descriptive word or greater explanation could have prevented possible misinterpretations. The book is divided chronologically, with each section subdivided into "essays" and "documents." Short 5 to 10 page essays extracted from larger articles and monographs provide an historical context and introduction for the documents. The latter two sections, covering contemporary issues, differ substantially from the earlier ones and, except for the closing poem, the "documents" are entirely drawn from recent newspaper articles. The historical essays either act as detailed introductions to the documents or narrate broader political and economic issues, with scant attention to in-depth analysis. The juxtaposition of documents with differing perspectives, such as essays in favor and against the economic free trade zone (*zona libre*) and reports by both U.S. and Mexican commissions on "frontier troubles" provide for interesting comparisons. As well as compiling these documents, Martinez has translated the ones which were previously unavailable in English. The documents are both well selected and annotated, making the book a useful reference for borderlands historians. The focus on treaties, official government publications, and manifestoes leaves the social history of the region underrepresented, but perhaps that is too much to ask of a book that already does so much. The account by Senora Flores de Andrade of her revolutionary activities with the Magonistas and Maderistas in Chihuahua and the brief selection from Jose Vasconcelos about his experiences in Eagle Pass, Texas, provide a respite from the officialist language of other selections. The later section dealing with contemporary concerns about NAFTA, immigration, and the environment switches from an historical mode of inquiry to more sociological and journalistic accounts. Lawrence Herzog's essay on "Border Commuter Workers and Transfrontier Metropolitan Structure," for example, provides a demographic look at the impact of a globalized economy on the borderlands, tracing the emergence of the phenomenon of "commuter workers." The documents, drawn from newspaper articles, benefit from the suggestive and colloquial writing style of the genre, but lack a broader analysis. These final sections give the

reader more of a journalistic tour through the borderlands than the earlier parts, allowing the images and testimony to tell the story on their own. The distinction between the "essays" and the "documents" subdivisions breaks down slightly in the sections dealing with contemporary issues. Whereas it makes sense to distinguish between a treaty written in the mid-nineteenth century and an article about the treaty written over one hundred years later, such categories lose their utility when dealing with contemporary texts. For instance, a pro-NAFTA treatise published by Bill Lenderking in 1993, is included in the essay section. The article, which does not appear with footnotes, makes vague and dubious assertions such as the following: "common sense and historical experience have established a simple rule of thumb: if the economy in Mexico is good migration slows" (p.193). He includes no evidence to support this "common sensical" assertion and the notion of a "good economy" is left undefined. Wall St. proclaimed Mexico's economy healthy during the Porfiriato and the Salinas administration, and yet migration to the U.S. increased during both of these periods precisely because the "strong economy" dispossessed and impoverished more and more Mexicans. Following this essay, in the document section, we see a more critical perspective on NAFTA with Sandy Tolan's 1989 newspaper article describing the living conditions for maquiladora workers in Nogales, Sonora, including testimony by both workers and bosses. The decision to label one as an "essay" and the other as a "document" left me wondering what criteria was used to establish such distinctions. This volume provides a useful tool for students and scholars of the borderlands at a moment when historical and contemporary interest in the region has grown. While longer analytical essays, particularly in the latter part, would have perhaps been able to tie the various strands of this book together, it already accomplishes a great deal as it stands. Just as Martinez's concept of the border expressed in his poem "La Frontera," the book remains open ended, diverse, and full of contradictions:

"It is the best and it is the worst la frontera, the borderlands, a world of acute contradictions, a place of pungent human drama." -Oscar J Martinez (p. 256)

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