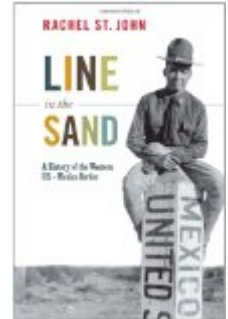


Rachel St. John. *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border.* America in the World Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. x + 284 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14154-1.



Reviewed by Sterling Evans

Published on H-Borderlands (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Benjamin H. Johnson (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)

Fifth in Princeton University Press's America in the World series--and a very fitting one, indeed--Rachel St. John's *Line in the Sand* is an extremely welcome addition to the historical literature on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. As such, it adds to our knowledge about the history of the *border* itself, and the many events surrounding it that have helped to shape borderlands history. This makes great sense to do, especially since it is indeed that boundary that separates two nations and two worlds, and yet in so many ways also draws them together. A few years ago, Oscar Martínez raised this point very well when he wrote that "the location of the boundary truly helped shape the destiny of each nation." [1] St. John explores this border location and how it was formed.

She also demarcates her own borders in this book, wisely choosing to concentrate on the "land border" between the two countries, that is, the western, non-Rio Grande border (between New Mexico/Chihuahua, Arizona/Sonora, and California/Baja California) (p. 1). East of this region are

the Texas borderlands (with eastern Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas)--an area with its own distinct history and historiography, differing from the western border in many historical and cultural ways. A differentiating case in point here is St. John's analysis of border towns. Along the Texas-Mexico border, cities like Laredo and El Paso had long been established before the Rio Grande became the border. Not so in the western region. There, cities like Nogales and Tijuana, and smaller towns like Douglas/Agua Prieta, developed *as* border towns, rising from the desert based on the mining industry, commerce, vice, and tourism, becoming "home to border people" (p. 83).

It is this western border that St. John concentrates on. It has its own history, she writes, and *The Line in the Sand* aims to show "how and why the border has changed," how it "shifted from a line on the map to a clearly marked and policed boundary" (pp. 1, 2). This became for both the United States and Mexico a many-layered story of how "the border evolved, often into forms and

meanings that neither nation-state could predict or fully control” (p. 4-5). Or more specifically, as she concludes in her introduction that sets up the book so eloquently, it became a story of “how two nation-states, their citizens, and a host of historical forces transformed an undistinguished strip of land into a site of capitalist production and a meaningful marker of state power and national identities... how a line in the sand became a conditional barrier between two nations and their people” (pp. 4-5, 11).

To tell this story, then, St. John divides her book into seven thematic chapters that tell different stand-alone stories but fuse together as a whole by the end of the book. Chapter 1 explores the history of the surveying and creation of the border itself. The second chapter discusses how the line was “held” against Indian and “land pirate” (filibuster) incursions. Chapter 3 explores the development of capitalist initiatives along the border, such as ranching, railroads, and businesses. Protecting and “policing” those enterprises had to come next, which St. John discusses in chapter 4. The border area became a locus of violence during the Mexican Revolution (discussed in chapter 5), but later, during the 1920s and 1930s, a place for vice and tourism (chapter 6). St. John then ends the book with chapter 7 on immigration, and its history of conflict and political maneuvering, and a short conclusion that ties these historical concepts into the present-day realities of the Secure Fence Act and other twenty-first-century U.S.-Mexico border dimensions.

On a first sweep of these contents, it would seem that there are other books on this topic (one especially notes the high degree of similarity of themes in Martínez’s *Troublesome Border*), or that the topics in each chapter have their own specific literature. And they do. In fact, St. John draws very heavily on the historiography of Apache, Yaqui, and other Indians whose lives and histories have straddled the U.S.-Mexico border. She relies on the literature already out there on

the filibusters; railroads; the Mexican Revolution in northern Mexico; the development of border tourism (responses to the Volstead Act, beginnings of border prostitution, etc.); and Mexican immigration to the United States. So, some readers will logically wonder what is new here.

A starting point to answer that question is the fact that *Line in the Sand* is a rich synthetic source. It is one of the most comprehensive books that I have seen to date that covers so much geographic and historiographical territory under one cover, making it a fantastic resource for borderlands scholars and students. There is no stone left unturned in the desert sand here, as illustrated in the footnotes and bibliographic entries (which can be of great benefit themselves to students). Second, synthesizing much of this material from other published sources, St. John offers some much deeper concluding analyses on many of the topics in the book. One example that springs quickly to mind is her conclusions on the filibustering episodes along the U.S.-Mexican border in the late nineteenth century (a topic of considerable historiography). Useful for scholars and especially students reading this material is her more nuanced approach to understanding the significance of these incidents. Instead of the filibusters succeeding in their efforts to “move the line,” she shows how “their efforts helped foster a burgeoning sense of Mexican identity among the people of Sonora, and cemented the boundary line as sovereign space that demanded defense.” In the end, the filibustering “had more of an effect on the psyches of border people than the boundaries of border spaces” (p. 50). The same is true of St. John’s research and analysis of railroads in the western borderlands. On this, she minces no words on how railroad development began the border region’s entrance into a larger capitalist economy (such as making mining and agricultural exports possible), or in other words, they “made possible new uses of borderlands space and resources” (p. 65). This welcome focus on capitalist development is stronger here than in such works as Daniel

Lewis's *Iron Horse: The Southern Pacific in Mexico, 1880-1951* (2007) or Richard J. Orsi's brief allusions to transboundary railroads in *Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific and the Development of the American West, 1850-1930* (2005). She elaborates on this in her discussion of the creation of a free-trade zone along the border to advance commercial trade between Mexico and the United States. Scholars and students interested in historical aspects of "free trade" between these two countries should be advised to read St. John's discussion of trade zones, tariffs, and other trade policies in chapter 4.

But St. John's book is replete with plenty of primary sources and archival material, too, unearthing many archival sources untouched by other historians. These primary materials add to the rich interweaving of ideas and conclusions that she draws, and pepper the prose with new anecdotes not seen in other related works. One such example is found in chapter 4, where she relates the story of a bar brawl--seemingly unimportant in the larger scope of U.S.-Mexican relations--but for the fact that the victim of this one brawl fell precisely on the borderline (with his head and shoulders in Mexico and the rest of him in the United States), making for something of an international affair. Likewise, St. John's research on borderline ranching is new to the literature and is highly useful for those studying grazing and agricultural history for the greater Southwest, and with fascinating borderlands implications.

And with that point in mind, *Line in the Sand* is not just a history of the *line*; it very much is a U.S.-Mexico borderlands history, but with the border being central to the topics she explores. As such, St. John was good to frame her study within the borderlands scholarship. As such, St. John successfully frames her study within borderlands scholarship, especially in the introduction. This work should be classified with and read alongside other important theoretical works on this topic. It belongs in the same discussion as Benjamin H.

Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill's "Introduction: Borders and Their Historians in North America" in *Bridging National Borders*, Sam Truett and Elliott Young's "Making Transnational History: Nations, Regions, and Borderlands" in *Continental Crossroads*, and José David Saldívar's "Cultural Theory in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands" in *Border Matters*, and I think it could surely be used to test some of the theoretical implications in Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron's "From Borderlands to Borders" published in the *American Historical Review*.^[2] Equally important is St. John's informative, and I would argue, passionate conclusion. The goal of her concluding remarks is not only to tie all the themes presented in the book together, but also to show their relevance for today's U.S.-Mexico border issues, such as immigration, the Secure Fence Act, free trade, and the border patrol. These are political issues, but St. John is wise to cast them in historical context here--a point that should and will stimulate excellent discussion around the seminar table or in a larger classroom. And again, the conclusion could and should be used in tandem with Martínez's conclusion in *Troublesome Border* or the afterword in my "Comparing Western Borderlands and Their Future Study" in *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian West*s.^[3]

A word or two on production and presentation is also in order here. Overall *Line in the Sand* is a remarkably handsome book, complete with a number of appropriate photographs and illustrations, although more visual reinforcement of many of the events that St. John explores would have been helpful. The maps in the book are excellent and very useful. Princeton University Press also did a fine job producing the book, but like with all publications, there are a few errors that slipped by the author and/or copyeditors. For example, in her discussion of the Apache Indians along the Arizona-Sonora border, I was surprised that St. John calls the Apache chief "Geronimo" (a name hoisted onto him by Mexicans) instead of by the name he used, and that is more in the vogue

these days, “Goyathlay.” An odd error also occurs on page 89 when St. John discusses Mexican holidays celebrated along the border in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and she includes “Cinco de Mayo” (a holiday that did not really develop until the 1960s, and even then was more celebrated north of the border than south). But these minor quibbles take nothing away from a quality book—one that I will use in my borderlands classes and seminars for many years, and one that all borderlands scholars and students will need to have. They will enjoy it immensely!

Notes

[1]. Oscar Martínez, *Troublesome Border* rev. ed. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 28.

[2]. Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill, “Introduction: Borders and Their Historians in North America,” in *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories*, ed. Johnson and Graybill (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-32; Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, “Making Transnational History: Nations, Regions, and Borderlands,” in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. Truett and Young (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1-34; José David Saldívar, “Cultural Theory in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands,” in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 17-35; and Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 814-841.

[3]. Martínez, “Conclusion,” *Troublesome Border*, 148-152; and Sterling Evans, “Afterword: Comparing Western Borderlands and Their Future Study,” in *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel*, ed. Evans (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 334-344.

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Citation: Sterling Evans. Review of St. John, Rachel. *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border*. H-Borderlands, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

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