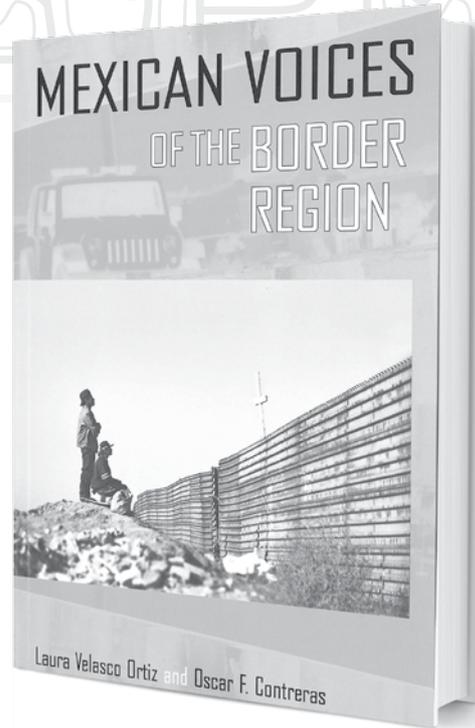


Mexican Voices of the Border Region

Laura Velasco Ortiz and Óscar F. Contreras
 Temple University Press
 Philadelphia, 2011, 238 pp.

In the spring of 2012, while conducting my own ethnographic fieldwork in the border cities of Tijuana and Tecate, Mexico. I began to read Laura Velasco Ortiz and Óscar F. Contreras's book *Mexican Voices of the Border Region*. It gave me excellent examples and a privileged window into the diverse topography of the Mexican borderlands experience. Even though my own U.S. deportee story direction moved into a different arena than their book, their work became an important asset for thinking and writing about the border as a diverse, complex, changing place. The book that Velasco and Contreras write for us depicts the border as one where people both produce and are products of their ability to cross the border wall into the U.S. "The border constitutes a force for differentiation and social hierarchization" (p. 16). For Velasco and Contreras, the ability to cross the border is a source of stratification and differentiation along the lines of the superior Human and the inferior human, theoretically and empirically proving it constitutes a source of social cultural power for those who manage to get into the United States. Furthermore, they contribute greatly to the critical borders studies project by depicting the border as a diverse, non-static, ever-changing unnatural space. They allow subjects the power of enunciation from the bottom up; the voice of the individual is never lost in theory. More importantly the book details cases of internal migration within Mexico, the story that let us step away from the hegemonic idea that everyone in Mexico wants to cross the border into the United States. Furthermore, the book also contributes to the demystification



and deconstruction of the "American Dream" myth, a story that is no longer just an American Dream but part of the Mexican new urban dream, a hybrid of the "American Dream," enmeshed in the United States' mass consumerism cult and the hyper-modernity of Mexican border cities.

The individual stories presented in the *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* provide a critical analysis by offering the reader an insight into the lives and experiences of real, ordinary people who struggle and live in the borderlands of both Mexico and the United States. The multi-thematic, over-190-page book revolves around one main argument: the diversity of experiences of people near the border. It does a good job of representing the experiences of internal immigrants within Mexico given its uneven regional development between the North and South. The first five chapters touch on the Mexican side of the story: the border never crossed. Velasco and Contreras write about the experiences of Mexican internal migrants looking for work and a better future inside the Mexican northern agricultural frontier. Then they delve into a series of thematic chapters that speak to the urban maquiladora

system experience in Tijuana (“Home Sweet Industrial Home”) as female workers struggle to support their families. Chapter Three, “Sex without Kisses, Love with Abuse,” speaks to sexual exploitation and women along the sexual border. Velasco and Contreras let the experiences of individuals speak about the role of the state and institutions by writing from the perspective of people’s everyday life experiences. Chapter Four, “A Straight-Dealing Drug Trafficker,” and Chapter Five, “An Indigenous Woman Street Vendor,” articulate the border as a place of opportunities for individuals who are not successfully integrated into the legal job market. Chapter Six, “A Caregiver Commuter,” Chapter Seven, “A Border Acrobat,” and Chapter Eight, “The Mexican Panther,” show how the border is a source of connectivity and economic interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico. Finally, Chapters Nine and Ten present the story of the border crossed, from the perspective of Mexican-Americans protecting and seeking the “American Dream.” Chapter Nine, “A Young Mexican American,” and Chapter Ten, “Guarding the American Dream,” offer a critical understanding of the hegemonic myths supporting the idea of the United States as the land of opportunities.

Mexican Voices of the Border Region has a few minor shortcomings. First, Chapter Nine, “A Young Mexican American,” is less developed than the other sections of the book, and reads as an appendage somewhat at odds with the rich analytical detail of the rest of it. The internal colonial subject concept would better explain the position of Mexican-Americans inside the U.S. empire. *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* contributes to a more critical cultural, geographic, and economic understanding of the border. Drawing on the power of critical ethnography, Velasco and Contreras produce a good sample of how to conduct and write critical ethnographic case studies. They tell the stories of everyday people without falling into the individual reductionist arguments that lead other researchers into stereotyping.

Velasco and Contreras give the individual the agency to speak that places *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* in a dialogue with a broad, disparate range of contemporary literature dealing with critical border studies and ethnic studies in the United States. The book could be expanded to include related issues, such as Wendy Brown’s 2010 analysis of border securitization in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*,¹ Trevor Paglen’s 2009 research into the undercover sides of the U.S. military-industrial complex in *Blank Spots on the Map*, or, more generally, geographer Derek Gregory’s body of work on urban militarism. Nevertheless, Velasco and Contreras provide

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multiple empirical examples that complement theoretical limitations by connecting the individual story of immigrants and minorities’ marginalization within the urban space of the U.S. and Western Europe. See for instance, Balibar’s 2007 “Uprising in the Banlieues”² or Kipfer and Goonewardena’s 2005 “Colonization and the New Imperialism: On the Meaning of Urbicide Today.”³ Read in tandem with these books and articles, *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* would be extremely useful for someone seeking to put a human face to the effects of global capitalism, migrations, and the military industrial complex. Read alone, the book provides an excellent introduction to everyday life on the border and is a key contemporary depiction dealing with these themes. It is an excellent tool for geographers as well as ethnic studies, area studies, and cultural studies programs. Velasco and Contreras allow the reader to make up his/her own mind and make his/her own assumptions. It is a bottom-up approach to social science and a great addition to anyone looking for an introduction to everyday life in the borderlands. ■■■

Ramón Quintero
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FURTHER READING

Graham, S., and S. Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).

NOTES

¹ W. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Brooklyn, New York: Zone, 2010).

² É. Balibar, “Uprisings in the Banlieues,” *Constellations* vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 47-71.

³ S. Kipfer and K. Goonewardena, “Colonization and the New Imperialism: On the Meaning of Urbicide Today,” *Theory and Event* vol. 10, no. 2, 2005.