

Carlos G. Velez-Ibanez and Josiah Heyman, eds. *The U.S.- Mexico Transborder Region: Cultural Dynamics and Historical Interactions*. The University of Arizona Press, 2017. 402 pp. (Paperback), ISBN 13: 978-0-8165-3515-6. & Hilary Parsons Dick, *Words of Passage: National Longing and the Imagined Lives of Mexican Migrants*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 283 pp. (Paperback), ISBN 978-1-4773-1402-9.

*The U.S.- Mexico Transborder Region: Cultural Dynamics and Historical Interactions* is a collection of essays that explores the constantly changing nature of the region, and how groups in this region face political, economic, and social challenges. It is broken up into 4 parts that address: (1) Innovations in transborder processes and sites; (2) Language dynamics and the creation of bordering; (3) Peoples, political policies, and their contradictions; and (4) Economic, ecological, and health processes. The authors argue that thousands of years of complex history has fashioned an area with unequal power relations, and a border that represents human division and marginalization. The essays address a wide range of topics, like environmental resources, language, border infrastructure, agriculture, political policies, and human rights. While it may seem like there is a lot of information in the book, acknowledging these intersectional factors is crucial to understanding the transborder region because they all play a role in shaping the area.

The essays recognize the importance that a state's sovereignty will play in its border region, and underline that the effect that these state borders have on those who migrate through it, or live inside the various regions of the southwest. It rejects the notion of border bifurcation, however, and recognizes that the areas around both the U.S. and Mexico sides of the southwest border create a single region, rather than two countries, sharing interactions, exchanges, and culture. Some contributors note that border bifurcation creates uneven development within the states of the region and along the U.S.-Mexico line. This is due in part to the continuous process of conflict and cooperation that vacillate from region to region in the southwest. The authors do not adopt an argument for a "borderless" region, however, because they don't envision that the political will to undertake such a project exists on either side of the divide. This is because the power of the state will never become irrelevant, and erasing borders is probably not a political possibility, despite the benefits it could bring to a region like the transborder area. This seems like a conservative stance to me and like the editors are concerned about being written off by more right-wing politicians or readers. Also, despite these bold assertions that they are not arguing for a borderless region, the editors dedicate an entire chapter by Luis Plascencia discussing the challenges in "locating the border" (244-80).

One essay I found particularly insightful was Chapter 3 by Margaret Dorsey and Miguel Díaz-Barriga, who adopt an anthropological approach in order to examine ways in which a state's border architecture reflect the United States' agenda for development and governance. In Arizona, there is already border walls and fences in place, reinforcing inequality and marginalization. South Texas uses "tactical infrastructure" like homes, universities, and parks as a way to create barriers, which the authors describe as "productive infrastructure" (66). This region provides us with an example in which the role of the state does make a difference for the social, political, and economic environment of peoples either living in or migrating through the transborder region. Most analyses of the border are U.S. centric, and discuss federal issues that apply to border crossing, but this anthology examines select portions of the US-Mexico border to explore different facets of the area. For example, in Chapter 15, Kathleen Staudt examines how faith-based institutions put pressure on "maquiladora" plants in Juarez to reduce pollution. Staudt recognizes that pollution issues go relatively overlooked in these border regions due to what she calls "policy neglect" where binational approaches to health risks are lacking (319). Therefore, religious groups attempt to fill the gaps that

the US government will not recognize. She notes that environmental health problems will continue and probably grow without systemic attention to the dirty industries and pollution emissions in the border region as a whole (319).

A critique I would have of the book is that while it rejects border bifurcation, some narrative is U.S. dominant. The essays are in English, many of the authors are U.S. citizens, and the perspective is clearly from that of the United States. For example, in Chapter 5 Jane Hill argues that the Uto-Aztecs are the group most likely to have been the migrants that brought cultivated maize north to California, New Mexico, and Arizona (93). She advocates for a Southern Origin model of migration in the anthropological community and rejects the more widely recognized Northern Origin model, which was created by US anthropologists and asserts that our ancestors migrated from the north (123). While this certainly has many implications for how we think about our shared ancestral traits, the assertion still operates within US-centric academia. In fact, the essay was originally published in the journal *American Anthropologist* 103(4): 913-34, 2001.

In *Words of Passage*, Dick paints a picture of how Mexican identity is shaped by migration, even for those who never migrate. She conducts a dual-sited ethnography in Chester County, Pennsylvania and Uriangato, Mexico, and while a large part of the book doesn't explicitly discuss migration, Dick recognizes that a discussion about migration also much include aspects of the cultural dynamics in one's home. Essentially, migration and discourse about it are a part of everyday life for most Mexican people, and the author focuses on understanding the broader politics of mobility, and how people like the Uriangatenese link their present world to lives they envision beyond Uriangato. These social imaginaries are salient to nation building and the cultivation of national identity. For example, women rarely drive in Uriangato even when they own a scooter or car, but would rather be driven by their male relations to publicly signal that they are respectable and are connected to family (109). This aspect of the present world informs how the Uriangatenese view women who migrate—they assume that a wife or daughter's abandonment is the result of a moral failing on the part of the woman.

A reoccurring theme in the book is the concept of moral mobility, which is essentially the way in which ethico-moral life is a measuring stick in which people evaluate their immediate world (6). With moral mobility, individuals use competing norms of ethico-moral life to make themselves right in the face of moral conflict. This gives shape to notions of national belonging, which in turn shapes the geopolitics of nation-states (7). As such, migration both helps to create boundaries, and affects the ways in which people perceive crossing these boundaries. She also uses the narrative of those she has interviewed to depict not only the struggles of migrants, but how those struggles also affect the broader community as a whole.

This book was a compelling read in part because Dick focuses heavily on interdiscursivity: the practices through which people create relationships between talk or writing produced at different times and places and hence between the people who produced that discourse. She chronicles her own experiences with this through her interviewing process and how she adopted cultural norms to gain trust in the community. Specifically, she recounts her experiences proving that she was a "good girl" to the community by recognizing and engaging in expected gender roles for Uriangato. For example, even when the author had a busy day, she was expected to chat with neighbors in the evening and tell them she has been at home, as the other woman did (93). This is because the culture valued women being at home, morally if not physically. Dick even noted that the very act of "sidewalk sociality" is an assertion of adherence to home life, "for there they are, with family, in front of their house quite evidently doing nothing immoral" (93). As someone interested in gender issues, this was one of the most interesting parts of the book for me. She recounts having to follow a strict self-imposed curfew, wearing makeup, heels, and feminine but modest clothing every day,

and allowing for people to define her as an individual “protected” and “cared-for” by both her friend’s fiancé and the male head of household of her host family (94). By defining herself in accordance with these gender norms, the community felt that they could accept her even though she was a white, unmarried American woman far from home. She notes that the Uriangatenese thought her father must not love her to allow her to be so far from home, whereas she came from a culture where her father showed he loved her by allowing her to develop independence and engage in activities like conducting research in Mexico for a year (92). Although it was never expressly mentioned in the book, it seemed that Dick discussed the importance of these gender roles to show how social norms can limit or affect how a person migrates. A woman from Uriangato might be less likely to migrate or be accepted back into the community if she defies her “allegiance” to the family and proves herself to be “mal criada,” meaning she was badly raised.

One of the brilliant points of the book was the distinction between “national belonging” and “citizenship.” She notes the importance of understanding how and why people form attachments to and make sacrifices for social formations like the nation-state. These understandings shape the national belonging of working-class people and migrants in Mexico. National belonging is “rendered through the discursive production of what does not count as being properly Mexican across and between multiple interactional arenas” (17), whereas citizenship is simply about where someone was born.

One thing I would have liked to hear about more in this book is the distinction between those who migrate temporarily between Mexico and the United States and those who move permanently. While Dick does touch on permanent migration, most of the narrative focuses on how families are affected by temporary migration. Even so, I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in migration issues because it does an excellent job of focusing on the actual experience of peoples affected by migration.

There are some important similarities between these two books, in that they explore how the social, political, and cultural aspects of border-crossing shape the human experience. In *Words of Passage*, Dick primarily uses the narrative of a select group of Mexican peoples to show examples of how a group may be affected by migration. In *The U.S.-Mexico Transborder Region*, the authors explore infrastructure and other legal-political aspects that shape the life of a migrant. There is minimal narrative, and instead the stories are told through formal essays evaluating different characteristics of the region. In the end, both books have the ultimate goal of accurately depicting the environment in which migrants and those affected by migration live.

One benefit of *The U.S.-Mexico Transborder Region* is that it is broad and the information the authors present can be used by people from all backgrounds. While the writing is formal, the information is very practical, and it accurately depicts the constantly-changing landscape of the border region. It also gives clear guidance on ways to solve certain issues linked with migration. In *Words of Passage*, Dick does not provide the same sort of sweeping information that can be widely used; instead, her research is limited to two small areas and to a very specific group of people. She does not offer any clear-cut solutions to the issues connected with migration, but rather gives us an understanding of Mexican identity. While this is certainly useful to Anthropologists interested in ethnography, politicians and lawmakers might ignore this book because they fail to understand the importance of it. Furthermore, Dick concluded her research in 2005. In a note on her methodology, she recognizes that her research reflects a window of time from before George W. Bush began mass deportations in 2006, a practice that is continued today. She also notes that there has been a wave of anti-immigration laws and an intensification of the Drug War in Mexico since 2005. The conflict has specifically affected Uriangato and she even comments that she has not returned in over ten years due to concerns for her safety. While I think the book is still a worthwhile

Jane Steffens, book reviews, *The US-Mexico Transborder Region & Words of Passage*, *AmeriQuests* 14.2 (2018)

read, I have concerns that some of the information is stale and no longer applicable to our rapidly changing environment on the border.

*The U.S.-Mexico Transborder Region* does a much better job of offering an analysis that can account for this active environment and captures more recent data. It also does a better job of depicting some of the harsh realities of the transborder region, particularly when speaking about unreasonable searches and seizures, racism, and impoverishment. Perhaps this is because such injustices have increased dramatically since 2005, or because the Uriangatenese did not experience them as acutely, but nonetheless it is important to acknowledge that they exist.

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