

Rachel St. John. *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 304pp.

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Since the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico boundary in the mid-nineteenth century, the border region has gone through recurring cycles where periods of national cooperation and economic prosperity drain unceremoniously into eras of incessant violence and financial duress, and vice versa. The thrusts behind these social and economic vicissitudes have typically emanated out of Washington and Mexico City. And yet, as Rachel St. John has shown, their nature and character have almost always been most deeply felt at the local level, such that border residents have been forced to grow adept at negotiating the often violent cyclical patterns of boom and bust. The current circumstances along the U.S.-Mexico border are no less uncertain. Since September 2001, and especially since the downturn in the global economy in 2008, U.S. political rhetoric on issues related to the problem of immigration, drugs, and terrorism along the border has at times reached a fevered pitch, making the U.S.-Mexico boundary a volatile topic amongst politicians and social critics—a marked distinction from the early 1990s when it was thought by these same pundits that NAFTA would help usher in a new era of economic cooperation between the two nations.

Line in the Sand presents a concise and engaging history of how and why the U.S.-Mexico boundary went from an unimposing “line in the sand” in 1848 to a heavily regulated

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zone where the Third and First Worlds abut, and often collide, and where Mexicans who once belonged to a bi-national community ended up becoming foreigners in their own land. Her methodological purpose in this book is to deviate from earlier scholarship that has focused exclusively on the borderlands as a zone of interaction and exchange to the exclusion of the boundary itself, treating it as an “irrelevant or an incidental part of the borderland” (6). This book challenges this perception by looking at how the boundary was actively molded by both the powerful forces of capitalism and the very people who lived in its environs, and how border residents were in turn shaped by this geographical space. As St. Johns puts it, the border was a “space where categories were blurred and power was compromised;” thus, the line had a significant influence on how people lived their lives, on how industries operated their businesses, and on how people formed and performed their identities (5). This geopolitical interpretation is pervasive throughout her book and represents her chief contribution to the scholarship on the U.S.-Mexico border.

St. John’s scholarship in this book is solid and consistent. In a field where state-centered histories have too readily lent themselves to narratives of national exceptionalism, her book analyzes the U.S.-Mexico border through a bi-national lens, taking into consideration developments on both sides of the border by using a wide range of sources from both nations. St. John uses this unique perspective to construct a narrative of how the western portion of the border—namely the Arizona and California section and its Mexican counterpart—was transformed by market forces and oriented by the political machinations of both countries. As the title suggests, this book does not address the entire 2000-mile long border. Instead, St. John focuses on the western section of the boundary, which she sees as a product of the “political imaginary” stating that “with a stroke of the pen” Mexican and U.S. surveyors began to

transform the western boundary “into sites of national significance and contested power” (3). She leaves out a discussion of the eastern portion of the border because it was delineated by a physical barrier: the Rio Grande. The absence of this discussion was necessary since the eastern portion of the border represented a distinctive set of economic, social, and political issues that dated back to the early nineteenth century, and would have taken her astray from her central argument. The initial mapping of the western line is the emphasis of the first chapter, which is also her most original.

The remainder of the book, while elegantly written and at times provocative, contains only bits of new information. Chapter Two, for instance, analyzes the harsh environment, the constant Indian deprivations, and the ruthless filibusters who sought to take advantage of Mexico’s weakness in order to carve out their own mini-republics. Only when these obstacles were tamed was the way opened for the capitalist formation of the borderlands, the content of Chapter Three. St. John shows how with the arrival of the railroad in the late nineteenth century transformed the borderlands, creating an economic link between the U.S. and Mexico and in the process building a transnational community best exemplified by the twin city complexes of Nogales/Nogales (*Ambos Nogales*) and San Diego/Tijuana. As this first half of the book shows, during the first forty or so years after its establishment the border was merely an abstraction, which did not curtail the movement of capital, people, and ideas from one side to the other; border residents largely tended to disregard this line in the sand, challenging the limits of state authority and identity. However, by the late nineteenth century, as the border became commercially significant, making it strategically imperative to determine the precise location of the boundary, the era of free movement came to a halt.

Chapters four through seven focus on explaining the how and why of border policing and eventual militarization. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 and WWI represented seminal markers in this development. As millions of Mexicans fled across the boundary from the violence in Mexico, and as the fear of German rivals entering the U.S. through Mexico made inroads into American imagination, policing the boundary gained ever increasing importance. The morality campaigns during Prohibition and the economically troubled Depression years increased the impetus to militarize the border. It was during these tumultuous years that what had been a bi-national population was transformed into a divided community. Mexican nationals, once at home along the U.S. side of the border, became foreigners subject to brutal interrogations, arrests, and deportations. For St. John, the border is a critical site for understanding the evolution of these government priorities and the negotiation of state power.

In all, St. John's book offers a general and nicely articulated history of this area, incorporating a bi-national perspective which is not tainted by narratives of U.S. exceptionalism. For these reasons this book offers a valuable contribution to the extant scholarship on the border.