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Mexican Voices of the Border Region. Laura Velasco Ortiz & Oscar E Contreras (Eds.). Reviewed by Aviva Chomsky.

Aviva Chomsky
Salem State University

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Laura Velasco Ortiz & Oscar F. Contreras, Eds. (2011). *Mexican Voices of the Border Region*. Temple University Press, \$79.50 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback).

Arthur Schmidt's Temple University Press series "Voices of Latin American Life" began with Elena Poniatowska's celebrated *Nothing, Nobody: Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*, published in English in 1995. Since then the series has offered English-speaking readers first-hand accounts from Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* brings together ten short testimonies of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Tijuana and southern California, with brief introductions and a conclusion by the editors that situates the testimonies theoretically and discuss the nature and meaning of the border.

Border studies, as the editors explain, encompass a tension between conceptualizing the border as a region, and emphasizing the national differences and, in this case, walls, that divide it. Their goal is to use the testimonies to approach the "lived experience" of the border from different perspectives. They present the testimonies along a continuum from those who live solely in Tijuana, through those who move back and forth across the national border, to those who reside on the U.S. side. The border in both of its incarnations—as a region and as a division—structures the daily existence and life choices of all of those interviewed in fundamental ways.

The U.S.-Mexico border has emerged as an area of study in recent decades, and numerous monographs have examined different aspects of the borderlands. *Mexican Voices of the Border Region* is unique, however, in its multi-faceted approach. The life stories, or testimonies, begin with the category "the border never crossed"—Mexicans who live in the border region and whose lives are shaped by the border even though they personally have never crossed it. "The border as backdrop" includes narratives of individuals who have crossed the border on occasion, but whose livelihoods are based upon the border economy on the Mexican side. "The everyday border" includes individuals whose work lives include frequent crossings, including a human smuggler or pollero who guides would-be immigrants across. Finally, "the border traversed" looks at

Mexicans who have established their lives on the U.S. side of the border.

A number of themes emerge from these tales. Except for the last two—people of Mexican origin who have successfully found their place in U.S. society, one as a college student and one as a Border Patrol agent—the life stories reveal extraordinary hardship and violence. Most of those interviewed in Tijuana fled there from rural areas, where poverty, minimal education, and lack of opportunity combined with domestic violence and abandonment led them to leave home seeking a better life in the city and, eventually, on the border. Corruption of official institutions is endemic. Marriage and family relations are fragile and often destructive. Contrary to the popular belief in the United States that most Mexicans are eager to cross the border to access the affluence on the other side, most of the Mexicans interviewed in this book are merely struggling, often desperately, to find a niche where they can survive. The border economy provides that niche in multiple ways, from export agriculture to the maquiladoras (export-oriented industries or processing plants) to prostitution, to drug and human trafficking. Those that do cross generally find more continuity than change: poor working and living conditions, discrimination, and the added burden, for many, of illegal status.

The stories are heart-wrenching, and each one implicitly illustrates the three factors that the editors argue characterize the U.S.-Mexico border: adjacency, asymmetry, and interaction. Yet it is striking the extent to which those interviewed interpret and tell their own stories in individual, rather than structural, terms. This disjuncture is illustrated poignantly by the Mexican-American border patrol agent whose testimony closes the book. He notes that his ethnic and linguistic link to those he is pursuing is a disadvantage as well as an advantage in his job. "It sometimes happens that you feel very bad for the people," he comments. "It's really hard when you come across a family, when you see people coming in wanting to work, to improve their lives, and they come with their children. Honorable people struggling to have a better life ... But I have to do my job. The laws apply to them as well as to me" (174). Neither he, nor the others interviewed in the book, raise the political question of how the laws, and the structures of

asymmetry, came to characterize the border and so profoundly shape their lives.

Aviva Chomsky, History Department, Salem State University