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Steven W. Bender. *Run for the Border: Vice and Virtue in U.S.-Mexico Border Crossings.* Citizenship and Migration in the Americas Series. New York: New York University Press, 2012. ix + 223 pp. $39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8952-0.

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Imaginary Lines Have Real Consequences

Rather than ârun for the border,â the old Taco Bell advertising slogan, the more appropriate title for Steven W. Benderâs work might be ârun through the borderâ or ârun across the border,â for the border itself is not the central site of this text. What matters to Bender is the crossingâthe leaving of one side for the other.

Border studies come in multiple varieties, from the old frontier thesis approach that defined a border as an obstacle or a meeting place for âusâ and âthem,â a region of contact and usually conflict. From Frederick Jackson Turner through Ray Billington and generations of westward facing eastern historians writing through the 1970s, the border was a meeting place, commonly of civilization and some sort of savagery. But borders can also be places of mingling, of one culture and another coming together to form something not quite one or the other but new and different. This approach also requires that the focus be on a region. Recent studies of the border wall between the United States and Mexico emphasize people as active subjects and cultural exchange, whether aboveground in Robert Lee Marilâs *The Fence: National Security, Public Safety, and Illegal Immigration along the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2011) or in the sewers of Gilberto Rosasâs *Barrio Libre: Criminalizing States and Delinquent Refusals of the New Frontier* (2012). Whatever the approach, the border is the focus.

In *Run for the Border: Vice and Virtue in U.S.-Mexico Border Crossings*, Bender takes a different approach. Rather than discussing the border itselfâthe official line between one and the otherâBender argues that the border is the place of transformation, a permeable barrier that allows those seeking something unavailable on their side to move through the border to the other side, the side where the desired objects are available. Thus, this study is not necessarily border studies as much as an examination of a variety of social issues, namely, the vice in the title, with international dimensions. For Bender the border itself means little. It is a mythical construct that poses a myriad of political ramifications. What matters is not the physical or even imaginary line but the markedly distinct societies on each side of it and the impacts of border crossers to each society.

Ignoring the border as region enables Bender to minimize the people, the countryside, and the socioeconomic elements, rendering his understanding of the border to merely a line that separates the two nations, one that once crossed, translates the crosser to a new reality and a new existence. Perhaps most well known are the now infamous âillegal aliensâ whose crossing of the border has led to an uproar across the southern United States, causing armed and aggressive citizens of points north who call themselves Minutemen to come south and take on the job of enforcing the invisible line.

But, as Bender notes, the U.S.-Mexico border works both ways, allowing movement in both directions. In chapter 1, âEl Fugitivo,â Bender examines the incursions

by the Texas Rangers and U.S. Army (reciprocal to crossings into the United States of the forces of Mexico) as well as the economic imperialistsâfrom oil companies to maquiladorasâof the twentieth century. This chapter also introduces an element largely ignored in other works on migration between the two states: the flow of American retirees to gated Americanized communities in Mexico. With their only contact with Mexico mediated by their servants, the retirees are insulated from the violence and poverty around them.

In chapter 2, âGringos in Paradise,â Bender continues his discussion of these gated retirement communities in the context of the vices that Americans have long enjoyed more freely on the Mexican side of the border. He also examines the prohibition-exiled bars and distilleries of the 1920s that helped draw U.S. citizens to Mexican vice centers and the continuing vice trade that drew (and continues to draw) U.S. men to brothels and underage drinking due to tightening morality at home. Here, he also explores the growing drug industry that is responsible for 60 percent of the world supply.

In chapters 9-14, after ably describing the negative consequences of having attractive temptations so readily available just across the border, Bender next prescribes solutions. In my opinion, any competent author can put together a description of a social problem but it is an exceptional one who can move from defining problems to solving them. Thus, this section is critical for distinguishing Benderâs work as a meritorious contribution to the literature rather than another volume on the overcrowded bookshelf. He argues that the problems of the border are not problems at the border but instead problems that the artificial line makes possible, and he concludes that the solutions to problems are to be found away from the physical boundary. Fences and guards and vigilantes and surveillance systems are border-fixed, and thus they are largely irrelevantâthe wrong solutions to the wrong problem.

In chapter 9, âComing to America,â Bender strongly objects to the militarized border concept, noting that âevery time Congress debates immigration reform, or states consider localized immigration regulation, the debate turns ugly and border crossings transform into the image of a sombrero-wearing Mexican immigrant crafty enough to traffic illicit drugs but otherwise a lazy charge on the public benefits systemâ (p. 142). In chapter 10, âLessons from 150 Years of Border Crossings,â Bender notes that opponents of Mexican immigrants often define border crossing workers as committed to stealing American jobs and planning the Reconquesta, the return of the Southwest to Mexico. Thus, the first order of business is to rehabilitate the image of the border crosser from the South by differentiating the good from the bad and debunking those who perpetuate this false image of border crossers as criminals. According to Bender, we must acknowledge that there is a magnet hereâone of opportunityâand we should open the borders so that those seeking that opportunity are not sidetracked by lying, cheating employers and their agents. He calls for America to clean up its act by examining drug use, stopping the exploitation of undocumented workers, and ending child pornography and child prostitutes on either side of the border. After we clean up our house, we can invite the other in as a partner and an asset.

Bender unpacks the old and somewhat oversimplified âblame Americans firstâ argument that has circulated since *The Ugly American*, first labeled by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer (1958), but concludes that people and problems cross the border in both directions. He argues that most of the problems originate on the U.S. side of the border; that is where the bad habits, the bad behavior, and the economic imperialism call home. Bender stresses that the Mexican side of the border has been extremely generous despite negative American influencesâdrunken spring breakers, gun runners, and exploitative American companies, to name a few. Americans have been soft-pedaling on their âbad guyâ impact on Mexico, denying responsibility for the export of vice to Mexico, the smuggling of underage and coerced sex workers, child pornography, and all the nastiness that we blame on âdirty greasersâ and like derogatory terms long in use in the U.S. Southwest.

Furthermore, after decades of exploiting Mexico by dumping our excesses, killing Mexican industry and agriculture, and creating a massive unemployment problem, perhaps we can start rebuilding Mexico. By constructing roads and schools and contributing to other infrastructure, Mexico could be a place where people are not risking death and exploitation to feed their families. If Mexico had a strong enough economy with sufficient work and opportunity, then the American-defined âproblemâ of migrant workers would solve itself.

But open borders should not mean unlimited access. The government of the United States, whether dominated by Republicans or Democrats, has for decades been fortifying the border, creating walls and security checks and all sorts of obstacles that merely make the trip more risky and almost ensure that those who survive are the best of

the seekers. The focus of the United States has been on the desirables (cheap labor) to the neglect of the undesirables (the smugglers of drugs, the would-be terrorists, the bad guys of all sorts). According to Bender, we have to work together, Mexico and the United States, to make our relationship equitable. We must share the blame and the credit to make the border a line one crosses for improvement rather than for escape.

Is the author optimistic that his solutions, or others, will correct the flaws of the current system? Not exactly. He recognizes that this is a problem 150 years in the making and thus it will not resolve itself overnight. The problem of the border fades in and out of awareness, but with immigration reform now in fashion, perhaps some of what this work suggests will materialize in present legislation.

But that is not Benderâs goal. Beyond specific prescriptions and political remedies are the social realities that the border is more than a line. The border is a site of exchange and change. On both sides the presence of the border, the differences of one side from the other, brings about change. Where the melding of one culture takes place, the food and music and attitudes and values all converge, becoming less Mexican or American and more âborder,â and that aspect of the border is not amenable to political action. That is where the potential for resolving border issues liesâthrough the broadening of the border to encompass a significant portion of North America.