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Farming across Borders: A Transnational History of the North American West

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*Farming Across Borders: Transnational History of the North American West.* Edited by Sterling Evans. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2017. 488 pp., \$65.00, hardback, ISBN 978-1-62349-568-8.

*Farming Across Borders* brings together nineteen chapters about the history of agriculture and society in the mostly arid expanse of what is today Northern Mexico and the Western United States and Canada, over the last one hundred and fifty years. It is as big as the West itself: an impressive effort over almost 500 pages to grapple with the enormous diversity of local environmental and productive systems, within an overarching transnational interpretative framework focused on borderlands, commodities and ecologies. The chapters touch on a wide variety of agricultural products, including wheat, henequen, cattle, flax, citrus, chile, tomato, pecans, cotton, sorghum, sugar beets, and hops. The themes treated by the authors range from environment and landscape, to the organization of labor and gender across borders, and the volume editor, Sterling Evans, has organized the chapters into sections that follow some of these themes – connections; commodities; place; labor; water – and has provided a brief introduction to each of these sections, as well as an Introduction and an Afterword.

The book achieves its principal goal, which is "adding to borderlands studies more on agricultural history, and giving to agricultural and environmental history a much-needed North American Borderlands focus" (xii). A majority of the chapters successfully discuss dynamics of agriculture or ranching that take place on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. or U.S.-Canada borders, and while some of them cover the period since the 1990s of regional integration spurred by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the book is careful to point out that NAFTA was by no means the beginning of transnational agriculture. These lessons about the geographical connectivity of capitalism are not entirely new, and in framing his work Evans leans on anthropological traditions of commodity studies (148-50) and environmental history (xvi-xvii) that have refined this point over many years. Individual chapters rise ably to the challenge and promise of commodity studies. Todd Meyers shows how, for example, New Mexico's famous green chiles are the result of decades, even centuries, of refinement by farmers, scientists and consumers (Meyers). Paige Raibmon's chapter recovers the history of how hop production in Washington State shaped the household economies, labor practices and cultural performances of indigenous people throughout the coastal Pacific Northwest (Raibmon). In her chapter, Alicia Dewey provides a comprehensive overview of two hundred years of ranching and the cattle business in the borderlands of Northern Mexico and the Western United States.

Along with connections and commodities, there is a strong attention in this volume to what might be termed political ecologies: local or regional conformations of environment, production, and politics. The chapters provide a kaleidoscopic survey of very particular settings, a focus that is absent sometimes from monographical treatments of transnational commodities. Joshua Macfayden's excellent study of flax combines a discussion of the political economy of linseed oil and paint, with the specific agricultural qualities of flax cultivation as a buffer between wheat and

unbroken prairie on the northern borderlands of Saskatchewan, Montana and North Dakota. Placing even more detailed attention on the environment, Andrew Dunlop portrays the evolution of cropping patterns in the Northern Great Plains Steppe ecoregion. Taking a constructivist turn, Peter Morris shows that while the foothills of the Rocky Mountains share environmental conditions across the Canada-U.S. border, differing processes of colonization and nation building have led to quite disparate cultural imaginations of, and interactions with, that region. These chapters and others in the book show the analytical strength of melding environmental, economic, and cultural histories of particular places.

Along with its many successes, *Farming across Borders* has a few shortcomings. As is to be expected with such a large volume, there is a bit of unevenness in the quality of the chapters. And while the U.S.-Canada transborder realm is well developed, the literature on Mexico and the Mexico-U.S. borderlands lacks an engagement with the extremely robust scholarship on agrarian history in Mexico, especially that written by Mexican colleagues. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the framing of the volume around themes such as connections, commodities and place has created something of a chronological vacuum that makes it difficult to trace periods, continuities, and evolutions in the political economy of agriculture in the North American West. Evans makes a strong argument in the Afterword for the importance of NAFTA, but does not provide signposts in the Introductions to the volume or the sections that help the reader trace the periods and processes in this grand region. Many tendencies could be highlighted: the shift from ranching to agriculture; the concentration of agricultural landholdings over time in the three countries; the move from manual labor to mechanization and from dry-farming to irrigation; the emergence and expansion of high-value crops such as fruits and vegetables. The rich historical specificity of this collection could be used to great effect to discuss the larger political-economic dynamics that shaped this grand region, its agriculture and people.

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