

Anthropology Book Forum

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STEPHEN PAUL MUMME, 2023, *Border Water: The Politics of U.S.-Mexico Transboundary Water Management, 1945-2015*, New York: The University of Arizona Press, 414 pp., ISBN 978-0-8165-4830-9

Instantly, one feels how *Border Water: The Politics of U.S.-Mexico Transboundary Water Management* fulfills the most elusive of all scholarly intents – finding a lacuna in the literature. Mumme begins his expansive and exhaustive monograph by signaling that the reader would find it difficult to come across such a holistic historical account of water governance on the U.S.-Mexico border from 1945 to 2015, though his latter chapters move beyond that period. The three main waterways stretching from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico – the Tijuana, Colorado, and Rio Grande – required binational cooperation to supply the regions along the border with useful water. Following the creation of the 1944 Water Treaty, which would manage these sources and establish institutional control of the national boundaries, binational cooperation was crucial in spurring development on both sides of the border. The result was a treaty, though modified over the decades, that drew in governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, and which Mumme claims was negotiated on more equitable grounds than the divisive border treaties of the 19th century.

Border Water is a work of political science and frames the recounting of history using paradigms of international change, public policy, and social movements. Mumme organizes the monograph chronologically, most chapters beginning with an outline of the metapolitics affecting Mexico and U.S. relations broadly. The first section, which encompasses chapters 1 and 2, centers on the 1944 Water Treaty between the two nations, and administration by the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC). Chapter 1 looks at the genesis of the 1944 treaty in a potentially tense political environment into and directly after WWII. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy approached Mexico and other Latin American nations as strategic post-war partners. Chapter 2 follows the IBWC's management after the war, including irrigation, sanitation, and boundary disputes. Chapters 3 and 4 outline the salinity conflict on water sourced from the Colorado and later the Rio Grande.

Chapters 5 through 8 constitute the second section's focus on environmental challenges after 1973. Chapters 5 and 6 explore changes in transboundary riparian management after the salinity conflict. The border region saw exponential population growth and industrial development through the 1980s. Following the devaluation of the peso, the Mexican side of the border became increasingly industrialized through *maquiladoras*, foreign owned factories in the border region that make largely tariff-free, export-bound products. Chapter 7 explores the impacts of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. Mexicans moved at increasing rates into the border region, further producing environmental and industrial waste, which drew in environmentalists to address a variety of negative ecological impacts. Chapter 8 moves on to the post-9/11 era.

Changes in the political environment on both sides of the border led to decreased funding for environmental institutions and increasing public-private development.

The final sections comprising chapters 9 and 10 review what readers can learn from the history of binational water management. Chapter 9 looks at the ebb and flow of water management as well as the impact of the broader political climate. Chapter 10 considers the current moment and future challenges. Mumme reflects on the legacy of the 1944 Water Treaty and characterizes the binational agreement as a “quasi-constitutional treaty,” an international joint-venture that has become an unalterable cornerstone of political and infrastructural logic.

Reading through Mumme’s extensive book was thoroughly enlightening. The juxtaposition of broader political concerns and the enactment and evolution of the treaty vividly depicted the complexities of managing resources on such a massive scale. The slow evolution and encounters of governmental and nongovernmental organizations and actors demonstrates the myriad factors involved in producing and maintaining infrastructural projects crucial to agricultural, industrial, and urban development. As a scholar of immigration in Texas, I was struck by my lack of consideration for the physical border as a potentially fluid boundary, as a river left unmanipulated by humans will continue to change shape. Moreover, the history of Mexico and the U.S. borderlands is magnified by an understanding of binational resource management and its resulting conflicts. My family is from northern Mexico, and I spent my summers knowing that potable water was limited to a few hours in the morning. Water management touches the lives of millions on both sides, but the experience of scarcity remains concentrated in Mexico.

This leads me to a potential limitation, or at least a question arising from the author’s analysis of equitable negotiations. Mumme absolutely acknowledges the factors contributing to unequal standards of living on the Mexican side with an analysis of NAFTA and a conversation on the *maquiladora* industry. However, there remains a tone of reverence on the decades-long evolution of resource management that I would like to see problematized, though I understand that is beyond the scope of the work. Perhaps this is the point where this work becomes exciting for scholars that concentrate on the borderlands in general. The macro lens employed by Mumme is just one piece that can be used by qualitative researchers that study border communities. *Border Water* helps clarify issues of resource scarcity and uneven economic remuneration for those working in a relatively new urban region. For scholars of the U.S. borderlands and those who lean on the works of Anzaldua among others will find the banality of resource management unsettling, I contend it is a necessary inclusion for framing the Mexico-U.S. relationship. Finally, the narrative of political action stemming from a treaty will inform how researchers can frame institutional actors and their aims working within the confines of infrastructural development.

Border Water was truly an engaging read that motivated me to think about the broader political landscape of binational cooperation. Researchers on immigration tend to view the border as a space that produces clear adversarial encounters when undocumented immigrants attempt to cross. Yet, the role of Mexico tends to be left out in favor for villainizing the U.S. role in managing the region. This work shows that there are many players involved in enacting legislation and binational agreements. As such, Mumme’s book is a worthwhile read for any scholar of the border regions or of immigration. Furthermore, scholars of environmental

anthropology will find this resource important for contextualizing different types of actors and their roles in border dynamics.

Biography: I recently defended my dissertation in Education Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Previously, I completed a Masters in Anthropology at Iowa State University. My research explored students participating in a college-readiness program from a Latino immigrant community in Dallas, Texas, as they transitioned out of high school.



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