

NONFICTION

Down by the border

By Gregory Leon Miller

The gap could hardly be wider between national media representations of the American Southwest and life as it's actually lived there. Mostly we hear stories about immigration or the hot spot of the moment: Joshua Tree or Marfa, Texas (and maybe even one day, if daft development plans go through, a brand-new town in Riverside County alongside the shrinking Salton Sea). Such accounts typically ignore the working-class presence and the towns that don't draw tourists.

In his new book, "Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old West," Rubén Martínez, a journalist and poet with a middle-class Los Angeles background — one generation removed from Latin American poverty — covers a broad range of territory, both geographically and thematically.

When Martínez is on, it's hard to imagine a more engaging and illuminating chronicle of the contemporary West. Last decade's "Crossing Over," his account of a Mexican family's experiences as U.S. migrant laborers, is already regarded as a classic.

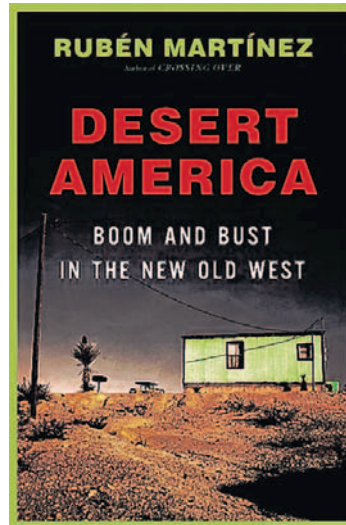
The best parts of "Desert America" reinforce its author's well-deserved reputation.

Ranging between reportage, memoir, political commentary and cultural criticism, Martínez intersperses three chapters on Verlarde, N.M. (where he lived for a number of years), and other parts of the state,

past and present with chapters set in Texas, Arizona and San Bernardino County's Morongo Basin, where he lived in the early '90s.

The New Mexico chapters constitute by far the most cohesive treatment of the author's themes — economic shifts, tensions between competing ethnic and racial mythologies, inventions and reinventions of "the West." I can't help feeling "Desert America" would have been a stronger book had Martínez expanded these chapters rather than try to encompass the entire Southwest. Then again, with a narrower approach we might have lost lively vignettes such as this:

"There were a few encounters [in the Morongo Basin]. The Marine who lived kitty-corner left a pit bull abandoned for days at a time in the summer without food or water. Tired of watching the animal



Desert America
Boom and Bust
in the New Old West
By Rubén Martínez
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suffer, I went over and picked him up and brought him to my yard, where [my dog] Bear and I looked after him. I returned home one day to find my front door knocked off its hinges and the pit bull back in his owner's yard. Maybe there was something about the vastness of the desert space that made everyone guard their little piece of it all the more jealously."

This "vastness of the desert" invites infinite interpretation. Martínez explores the "boom



Angela Garcia

Rubén Martínez

and bust" cycle in the West with an eye on the land's particular history of self-renewal. He struggles to experience the "real" West and finds so many layers of myth and prefabrication that the quest for the authentic is beside the point.

Other highlights of "Desert America" deal with less familiar aspects of the border wars, including a portrait of a man who flaunts both reservation and county laws by maintaining water stations for immigrants across a brutal stretch of Arizona desert.

Martínez writes, "Over the years, the political economy of the weather in the desert became clear to me. A perennial spring or a wash running for just a few hours could make the difference between a migrant surviving or not. It is no longer possible for me to walk in the desert today without imagining the bodies in it."

The book's vague and shifting chronology can be confusing, and Martínez treats too many topics, however related, to develop them all sufficiently. He wonders how our experience of American history would be different if the borderlands were more prominent in the telling than Plymouth Rock, but instead of going further with this provocative thought, he moves to Mabel Dodge Luhan and D.H. Lawrence in Taos.

He speaks of the correlation between race and poverty in New Mexico, but how is this

unique to the West? And when he describes how the boom cycles affect the real estate markets in the desert West, driving out the natives and pricing out all but the rich, he could just as well be describing New York or San Francisco.

In the book's last chapter, Martínez contrasts gentrified Marfa — where he spent some time on a writing fellowship — with Presidio, the impoverished border town in the same county.

Martínez may have thought, reasonably, that his thesis couldn't afford to ignore Texas, but the chapter lacks the lived-in feel of the rest of the book. Whole passages feel hastily composed, from repetitious attacks on lard-free beans or tortillas to stock descriptive phrases of everyone from a gourmet chef "imported straight from Manhattan" to Emiliano Zapata, "the sad-eyed Mexican revolutionary."

Still, the highlights of Martínez's nuanced, conflicted, poetic meditation on an endlessly elusive subject will remain with patient readers. "The sense of mourning," he writes, "is the desert West's eternal refrain. Every subdivision invokes an elegy, and there is still plenty of open space on the horizon to mourn in the future."

Gregory Leon Miller is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. E-mail: books@sfgate.com

SPECIAL EDITION

Bay Area Readers on Their Most Treasured Books

Kenneth Foster, executive director of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts:

My most treasured book is a compilation of the sonnets of Shakespeare. These poems are, for me, one of the highest artistic achievements in human history. Each sonnet adheres

to the rigid structure: 14 lines of rhymed iambic pentameter, including a final rhymed couplet. Within those severe restrictions, he creates profound insights into love, passion, desire and life with language that thrills even to this day. Plus, I love that they are (apparently) addressed to a man.

