

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 1999

Review of *El Llano Estacado: Exploration and Imagination on the High Plains of Texas and New Mexico, 1536-1860* By John Miller Morris

Valerie M. Mendoza
University of Kansas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Mendoza, Valerie M., "Review of *El Llano Estacado: Exploration and Imagination on the High Plains of Texas and New Mexico, 1536-1860* By John Miller Morris" (1999). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1554.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1554>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

El Llano Estacado: Exploration and Imagination on the High Plains of Texas and New Mexico, 1536-1860. By John Miller Morris. Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997. Illustrations, maps, preface, introduction, bibliography, notes, index. x + 414 pp. \$39.95.

El Llano Estacado is located on the High Plains of eastern New Mexico and western Texas covering over 50,000 square miles of land, and may be, according to Morris, the "largest isolated non-mountainous area in North America." It is the creation of this landscape in the European mind that Morris proposes to study. In his words, "the landscape itself is the hero" of the story.

In this respect Morris succeeds. Through his use of Spanish and American exploration texts (letters, journals, official reports, reminiscences), he conveys the mental representations of this region. In addition to textual analysis, he also uses maps and art work to show how the European image of the landscape changed over time. *El Llano Estacado* makes a fine contribution to borderlands studies by placing the geographic environment of the Llano at the center of the story.

This rather long book is divided into four parts. The first two examine Spanish perceptions of the landscape. Morris seeks to make a linkage among language, culture, and the surrounding environment of the Llano. For example, the Spanish compared the level vastness of the Llano (hence its name—*llano* means level) to an endless sea and feared being lost in an area devoid of landmarks. In order to counter this fear and "civilize" the region, the Spanish punctuated the geography with toponyms related to the environment they encountered, thus creating a cultural landscape in the Spanish mind. It is also during this period that maps become important in depicting and claiming the Llano for the Spanish crown. Maps represented a form of political and geographic power as they continually changed over time to reflect growing Spanish knowledge of the regional environment.

The remainder of the book deals with the Anglo perception of the environment during the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, it is not until the last chapter that Morris makes a connection between the Spanish and the American perception of the Llano and discusses how the Spanish view influenced the American one. The book could in fact be two, since there is no relation or causation established between the Spanish and American colonizing powers. It is also not until the book's last few pages that Morris makes any disclaimer about not including the Native American perception of the environment. Surely their Indian guides influenced how both the Spanish and Americans viewed the Llano as Estacado, for example (referring to the Indian practice of marking their trails in the region with stakes, *estacados*). This Eurocentric focus limits the book, its emphasis on European exploration placing Morris squarely in the Boltonian tradition of border studies rather than carrying border studies a step further. *El Llano Estacado* does make a significant contribution to the study of the borderlands, however, through its focus on the creation of environmental perception.

VALERIE M. MENDOZA
Department of History
University of Kansas