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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Violence Across the US-Mexico Border

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This essay reviews the following works:

The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America. By Greg Grandin. New York: Metropolitan, 2019. Pp. xii + 369. $30.00. ISBN: 9781250179821.

The Trump Paradox: Migration, Trade, and Racial Politics in US-Mexico Integration. By Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda and Edward Telles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021. Pp. xvii + 374. $34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520302570.

City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965. By Kelly Lytle Hernández. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp. 312. $37.50 paperback. ISBN: 9781469631196.

The Shadow of the Wall: Violence and Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border. Edited by Jeremy Slack, Daniel E. Martínez, and Scott Whiteford. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018. Pp. xxviii + 242. $35.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780816535590.

Drug Cartels Do Not Exist: Narcotrafficking in U.S. and Mexican Culture. By Oswaldo Zavala, translated by William Savinar. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. Pp. 206. $34.95. ISBN: 9780826504661.

Violence is endemic to borders. This is true not only in the strict, political sense that states, by definition, claim for themselves a right to enforce their territorial boundaries with the coercive authority that is traditionally taken to define them. In the case of what is now the US-Mexico border, this is also true in the sense that that boundary, as it was created in the US's westward expansion, has continuously been a site of social violence from both state and nonstate actors, the latter of which could count on the former's explicit or implicit sanction. This violece, as Greg Grandin observes in one of the books under review here, has always been coupled with a peculiar existential meaning of "the frontier" as a space where "Americanness" is born and liberty realized specifically through the targeting of racialized out-groups. But there is one last sense in which the theme of violence and borderlands intersect: borders attract illicit economic activity that then particularly harms already marginalized populations. For these reasons, it can be suggested that violence on the US-Mexico border is distinctive, even definitional, of that geographical space. This review considers recent books that, either directly or indirectly, defend this suggestion.

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The border and the frontier

In *The End of the Myth*, Greg Grandin argues that the US is a society that has "lived past the end of its [own] myth" (270). The myth at issue, the frontier, in Grandin's view, has given way to a new myth: the border wall. The book covers a broad sweep of American—and some Latin American—history. Synthesizing different sections of the book, I here highlight only what I take to be some of its central claims.

First, Grandin argues that expansion was part of the framing of the republic since even before its inception. A key driver of independence among the nascent American aristocracy was precisely a rejection of the British Crown's restriction on settlement west of the Alleghenies. The founders, who had begun speculating on Indigenous lands before the war started, dreamed of expanding not only beyond the partition line. After independence, Thomas Jefferson fantasized about expanding across the whole continent, even the hemisphere. The promise of limitlessness, the refusal to countenance limits, is thus built into the framing of the American political ethos.

Second, Grandin identifies expansion as a contradictory source both of the extremities of racist and genocidal violence in American empire and of the limited social advancements that the poor have obtained in the US. These two have, in US history, tended to go together. Expansion was used to dilute conflicts internal to the democratic experiment between competing factions and antagonistic social classes. Using war—and thus foreign policy—as a method of domestic social control, American elites were able to expand freedoms for poor whites precisely at the expense, first, of Indigenous people and enslaved Africans, then later of Mexican people, and finally of people of color in the Third World. This cycle, now expanded somewhat to include nonwhite citizens as at least partial beneficiaries, has continued into the present era, the military still being one of the main institutional vehicles of social mobility. At the same time, foreign wars intensify preexisting racial hatreds that are then injected back into domestic affairs.

Third, the foregoing has resulted in a practical and ideological conflict between competing conceptions of liberty in the republic that continue to this day. This idea is a little hard to parse, but as I understand it, it corresponds roughly to something like the distinction in political theory between negative liberty ("freedom from") and positive liberty ("freedom to"). The former accompanies a minimalist conception of government, and the latter a more capacious conception that requires social rights. The founders, unwilling to countenance social rights, instead opted to use expansion as a "safety valve" to release the social pressures of economic and racial inequality, thereby indefinitely and continuously deferring a reckoning with these founding social problems. It was only later that an ideal of positive liberty or social rights emerged. But it emerged only as a federal response to the social requirements of empire after the Civil War. This history of positive liberty, as a response to racial injustice during Reconstruction, explains why conservatives, spiritual heirs of the Confederacy, decry welfare programs and champion states' rights. Social rights are a racialized reminder that the benefits white Americans enjoy are ill-gotten.[1]

The reason why positive liberty is racialized in this way pertains to the counterpart racialization of negative liberty. Negative liberty, ostensibly an abstract, universal right not to be interfered with, developed through expansion as an ideal that in practice really meant "freedom from restraint" (58, 96), referring to the right of whites, qua "individuals," to enslave people of color and steal Indigenous land. The paradigmatic representative of this ideal is Andrew Jackson, who approached this racialized right as an

[1] Thanks to Greg Grandin for reminding me of this dimension of the argument as well as the below point about interdependence. Greg Grandin, email message, May 19, 2026.

implicit premise of the Constitution (see chapter 3). At the same time, the other interpretation of negative liberty, developed in this case by the founders' coalition and represented by James Madison, still relied on expansion as a means by which to avoid dealing with those racialized inequalities that had birthed the US (see chapter 1). In this way, Grandin's account of American notions of liberty explains the bipartisan consensus on expansion and the attachment in this country to a particular form of individualism: Ceasing to be an empire but remaining a democracy would require social rights. But the very idea of a social right is an implicit acknowledgement that we are vulnerable and fundamentally interdependent social beings, thereby repudiating the cultural and economic logic of American capitalism. Since this would uncouple American freedom from empire—an unthinkable proposition in American life—the individualist delusion of freedom as limitlessness has to be maintained.

Fourth, Grandin identifies two important American approaches to international relations that emerge from these competing interpretations of freedom. The Jacksonian interpretation of liberty, Grandin argues, produces a racialized form of realism—the idea that the United States should pursue a form of global white hegemony in which Anglo Americans have access to and control of the world's best land and resources, and the freedom to exploit cheap labor. The other, no less racialized, is a form of imperialism derived from the Madisonian ideal—what the Republican base now calls "globalism" (though by this term, of couse, they do not repudiate imperialism, but rather aim to disparage a postwar ideal of liberal multilateralism and international cooperation which never fully materialized). While the latter approach won the ideological debate in the twentieth century, race realism turned out to be a closer description of how the US operated in practice, independent of the political party in power. There is an implicit suggestion—confirmed, one might think, by current events—that, with the resurgence of nativism, Donald Trump's presidency is a return to this more naked form of imperialism.

Fifth, Grandin argues that the postindependence period established a dynamic of simultaneous distance and dependence between the new "genteel" white elite and the more vulgar rank-and-file settlers who would do the dirty work of indigenous dispossession and frontier murder. Within this dynamic, it is clear that these genteel elites, while holding themselves aloof from settler rampages, nevertheless materially benefited from them and did little to stop them, when they didn't enable them. Thus, Grandin registers how more "enlightened" elites relied on—needed—figures like Andrew Jackson to build out the state. This is a recurring theme in the book: Expansionist liberals enable reactionaries because, at the end of the day, the latter are willing to get their hands dirty in pursuit of shared aims. (There is a lesson here for today, perhaps, about the Democratic Party's complicity in matters like immigration enforcement and foreign intervention.)

Finally, Grandin argues that a number of historical developments, including the War on Iraq, the 2008 financial crash, increasing economic austerity, and climate change, have now brought about the closing of the frontier. This, in turn, has interrupted the pattern by which domestic extremism could be vented through continual expansion. At the same time, Republicans, realizing that they could not court the Latino vote in sufficient numbers, have shifted their position on immigration in favor of the demands of their nativist wing. Recent Democratic administrations, furthermore, have only continued the militarization of the border in acquiescence to (or complicity with) Republican extremists. Thus, Grandin suggests, the violence that in the past could be dissipated at the frontier began to accumulate at the border. The frontier has become the border, and violence that

was previously vented outward can now only turn inward as the choice, deferred hitherto, between empire and democracy, approaches its critical point.

This last point is not to suggest, however, that border violence is recent. Vigilante and state violence against Mexicans emerged in the wake of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and did not abate until the 1930s. It thereafter goes through cycles of renewal and abeyance. Extreme forms of racialized violence and terror, including rape, murder, human trafficking, child endangerment, and torture, were already a part of the repertoire of border enforcement agents and vigilante groups. In the case of immigrants, as Grandin observes, such violations were again intensifying in the 1990s and were interrupted only by 9/11 and the new war on terror. The American Border Patrol, in its various manifestations, has always been a racial project that drew in radicalized veterans and other racists. Although Grandin does not here put it in these terms, the Border Patrol can be thought of as a kind of concession to, and institutionalization of, nativist extremism.[2]

Drawing an analogy from Freud's claim that a phobia is to an anxiety (about self-control) what a fortress is to a frontier, Grandin suggests that the American obsession with the border reflects problems in the subject that are being avoided. Turning his attention toward the future, he looks to the legacy of those American experiments in social rights, however limited and short-lived. Reconstruction and the New Deal, Grandin argues, were the only two political moments in the US that opened the door to a possible future, still unrealized, of a pluralist social democracy. These were opportunities, squandered in their time, for the US to reckon with its own history, in which its people might have—to borrow from Richard Rorty (who in turn borrows from James Baldwin)—"achieved [their] country." Given the collapse of the frontier, Grandin contends that it is unlikely that a center will be reestablished after Trump. Future generations will thus face a choice deferred, he writes, invoking Emma Goldman, between socialism and barbarism.

The End of the Myth is an invaluable contribution to understanding the present political moment. Grandin's concern with the racialized origins of US opposition to social rights highlights a motive force of American empire. Since Grandin's focus is on the border, however, there is a vital piece of this story that takes a backseat, but which is of some significance.[3] In *The Jakarta Method*, Vincent Bevins documents the US's global anticommunist extermination program during the Cold War.[4] Complementing Grandin's argument in *Empire's Workshop*—that Latin America has been a US laboratory for counterinsurgency strategies—Bevins suggests that the repertoire of repressive and genocidal methods used in regime change operations traveled from one context to another, depending on what was deemed necessary or useful. Targeting democratically elected governments, the methods of terror, mass murder, torture, and economic destabilization deployed against the anticolonial Third World fundamentally shaped the distinctive ways that the postwar world order turned out. Yet despite this, as Grandin emphasizes (in chapter 11)—and other authors under review also argue (see the discussion of *The Trump Paradox* below)—many Latin Americans, and their descendants who live in the US, simply do not have the same cultural hang-ups about social rights as white Americans. Given that the border has been conceived in militarized terms, given that the strategies deployed to enforce that line are themselves conceived in terms of counterinsurgency, there is a closer linkage, crying out to be made explicit, between the genocidal logics of US anticommunism, counterinsurgency (foreign and domestic), and border enforcement.

[2] See Greg Grandin, "The Border Patrol Has Been a Cult of Brutality Since 1924," *The Intercept*, January 12, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/01/12/border-patrol-history/.

[3] This is not to say that Grandin is unaware of this issue. See Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2010).

[4] Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method* (PublicAffairs, 2020).

Border enforcement and deportation

The Shadow of the Wall, edited by Jeremy Slack, Daniel E. Martinez, and Scott Whiteford, aims to provide answers to questions that have rarely been raised in the public and for which there is not much empirical research. What's it like to be deported? What do undocumented immigrants experience when crossing the border or when they encounter border agents? What is their experience in encounters with clandestine actors in these processes?[5]

The essays analyze data gathered between 2007 and 2012, encompassing two waves of quantitative and qualitative research, in the Migrant Cross Border Study I and II (MCBS I and II). The studies exclude—because they partially predate—the study of more recent migratory flows from Central America, which began to increase in the early 2010s, leading up to the "crisis" of 2014. Focusing on the material outcomes of deportation, the book aims "to disentangle the different mechanisms of removal that make up the deportation process" to highlight "the specific mechanisms of criminalization and violence that underlie our immigration enforcement apparatus" (40).

The volume is informally divided into three sections, the first of which concerns the study of violence. Chapter 1 discusses what the authors call their "postdeportation methodology." It will be of interest to those who wish to gain a better insight into the limitations of existing work, as well as the major components, contributions, and the limitations of MCBS I and II. Chapter 2 examines "poststructural violence." By this term, the authors refer to "the various ways people navigate [structurally] violent contexts, moving from one (usually oppressive) social structure to another (generally also oppressive but qualitatively different) structure" (11). This concept is meant to account for individual agency in structurally violent contexts, though in a way that highlights how formal systems of structural violence (such as immigration enforcement and international economic exploitation) generate or sustain informal systems of structural violence (such as border banditry and drug trafficking). The claim is that the former generate the forms of vulnerability that partially incentivize involvement in criminal activity (56). (Oswaldo Zavala, in a book reviewed here, however, implicitly challenges the very idea of such a distinction.) Chapter 3 discusses how the context of violence has an impact on the process of research itself. It will be of interest to scholars thinking about the ethical dimensions of research.

The following three chapters focus on the practices of immigration enforcement and the migrant experience within these punitive structures. These chapters aim to make good on a suggestion in the book's introduction, that the lens of "deterrence" (referring here to the "prevention through deterrence" era of enforcement) "is no longer appropriate to understand the immense, complex apparatus of enforcement" (6) and instead propose a shift to a focus on "consequence" (i.e., punishment). According to the authors, since the implementation of the Consequence Delivery System (CDS) in 2011, immigration enforcement has become increasingly punitive, as CDS is "designed to guide agents into delivering punishment based on the level of offenses committed by migrants" (6).

Chapter 4 shows that CDS does not deter crossings (77–78). Instead, the escalating punishments it creates result in the manufacture of criminality for those immigrants who have the greatest emotional investment in returning to the US (75, 81). Thus, this chapter shows that, while punitive enforcement measures are often rationalized under the guise of preventing crime, they instead target ordinary people who have deep relational attachments in the US, turning them into a criminalized group (87).

[5] For the sake of space and ease of reading, my discussion of this collection and of *The Trump Paradox* largely omits identification of the authors for each chapter.

Chapter 5 considers the heterogeneity of the physical border as a set of militarized zones and practices. A key idea that emerges is of a perverse disconnect between the day-to-day practices of enforcement officials and their stated policies and mission to—in its own words—protect "the [American] public from dangerous people and materials . . . [,] terrorists and the instruments of terror" (Customs and Border Protection quoted at 100). Thus, the authors suggest that "violence, not security objectives, guides border patrol sectors" (95).

Chapter 6 is a highlight of the compilation. The authors give empirical weight to the claim that the enforcement sector contributes to "the (re)production and perpetuation of another criminalized, subordinate class" (120). Drawing on interviews with deportees, the authors note "the striking parallels between the mass incarceration of African Americans and the criminalization of largely brown mestizo and indigenous undocumented migrants from Latin America" (137).

The following three chapters concern the "unintended consequences" of enforcement, focusing specifically on the dynamics of *coyotaje*, or the enterprise of facilitating migrant crossing from Mexico into the US. Chapter 7 discusses the ways that the illicit structures that enable this practice have become more sophisticated as a response to increased enforcement in the CDS era. Chapter 8 then analyzes how the hierarchical relationship between drug traffickers and coyotes has an impact on the experience of crossing. The argument is that there is a shared "space" outside of state power in which multiple clandestine enterprises operate, but in which the power of drug traffickers takes precedence, creating an "illicit regime of narco-governmentality" that, while acting in opposition to the state, also generates similar structures of repression (168). The chapter is especially interesting for its use of interviews to obtain insight into the ways diverse illegal activities interact and self-govern.

The last chapter on the subject of human smuggling examines the experience of kidnapping, especially by drug-trafficking gangs. It is perhaps one of the most important chapters in this volume, documenting the experience of torture and organ harvesting, particularly of children, by drug traffickers. The chapter emphasizes that this vulnerability is elevated by US immigration enforcement practices.

There is a final chapter on migrant perceptions of nonstate actors such as anti-immigrant groups and militias. Highlighting the importance of media outlets and social networks, it is an examination of how immigrants acquire information about such informal actors who may be obstacles to or dangers in their crossing. Of course, since the publication of this book, social media has become especially important. One comes away wondering how a new version of this study would engage with that source of information, not only with regard to the forces of irregular racist actors but also, now, on the internal enforcement of agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

For empirically oriented researchers, *Shadow of the Wall* overcomes limitations of existing research into the border-crossing experience that have had issues with generalizability to contemporary conditions, or with retrospective bias due to the time frame of sampling (19–23). The central achievement of this book thus lies, as Josiah Heyman notes in its foreword, in its use of empirical data to expose the perversity of immigration enforcement, which both intentionally and accidentally harms migrants in the practice of its directives while claiming to uphold the public good in its discourse (viii). This also aligns with the researchers' aim of producing high-quality data on the impact of immigration enforcement that cannot be "dismissed as 'anecdotal' or 'biased'" (xv–xvi). This data is vital for understanding the evils of the enforcement system: to support groups struggling against it and to anticipate its trajectory.

One of the book's framing arguments, however, that immigration enforcement shifted from deterrence to punishment only recently, might be challenged, as "prevention through deterrence," as is well known, deliberately used mass death on the border to

establish deterrence. Risk of death in the desert aside, throughout that period, militiamen were allowed to patrol the border freely, and border agents killed (and continue to kill) immigrants with impunity.[6] Deterrence, itself an approach to immigration that brings migrants into consciousness as enemy combatants, has already had a punitive function. Rather than distinguishing between eras of deterrence and punishment, then, it may be more useful to think of this period as one continuous era—specifically, an era of assymetrical, low-intensity (but escalating) para-militaristic operations directed against immigrants, that is, civilians of foreign nations. Following the venerable tradition of white settler violence on the frontier, and the posse comitatus logic of the slave patrol, it has involved both state and nonstate actors engaged in practices of racialized regime maintenance. The emergence of CDS could then be seen as a further articulation of the social sadism already embedded in the deterrence era, on which Mexican, then later, Central American, immigrants were to be punished for merely trespassing the global color line.

Settler colonialism and carceral logics of elimination

In *City of Inmates*, Kelly Lytle Hernández retells the history of mass incarceration by situating its origins farther back in time than standard periodizations that situate its beginnings in the late twentieth century. This history, she argues, points us to the inevitable conclusion that "mass incarceration is mass elimination" (1). More precisely, "incarceration operates as a means of purging, removing, caging, containing, disappearing, and eliminating targeted populations from land, life, and society in the United States" (1).

City of Inmates has two complementary aims. First, Hernández wishes to demonstrate how the contemporary system of mass incarceration, in its various manifestations (from the criminal justice system to immigration detention), is connected to deeper tendencies and social structures in American history—specifically, to colonial conquest and settler colonization. The historically recurring and expanding structures of incarceration can thereby be understood as tendencies within a larger process of eliminating racialized outsiders from the social body to "resolve social tensions and reach political objectives" (3). Second, Hernández highlights the disperse "rebel archive" that emerges from this history, that is, the archive of "the incarcerated [themselves] as well as journalists, musicians, migrants, mothers, and many others" (4).

The book covers six cases, spanning two hundred years, in just under 175 pages. This comprises the body of the book, each case representing an important phase in the development of modern mass incarceration. Individually, the chapters build a larger, roughly chronological narrative, with each telling the particular stories of the actors and social groups under analysis. Each is a story of what Hernández calls *experiments in human caging*, as well as the ways in which the targets of these experiments have resisted.

According to Hernández, these experiments begin with the colonial encounter between the Indigenous peoples of the Los Angeles Basin and the Spanish conquistadors. This is the subject of chapter 1. Imprisonment was not practiced in the region before the arrival of the Spaniards. Yet while jailing was introduced by the Spanish colonial order, incarceration "did not become a social institution in the city until the end of the Spanish colonial era" (29). During the Mexican period, criminalization of various cultural and socioeconomic features of Indigenous and *casta* life was used as a social instrument to withhold the promise of equal citizenship to racialized outgroups. When the US finally annexed what is now the Southwest, Anglo settlers established a full-fledged carceral system that

[6] To cite just one source, see Southern Border Communities Coalition, "Fatal Encounters with CBP Since 2010, Southern Border Communities Coalition" (May 5, 2026), https://www.southernborder.org/deaths_by_border_patrol.

linked the enforcement of public order with practices of racial slavery. Incarceration thus functioned as an "eliminatory option" for dealing with and managing racialized outsiders (35, 42).

Chapter 2 turns to an understudied moment in the development of mass incarceration, in which the targets of imprisonment, and thus of forced labor, expand from racialized groups to impoverished white men. Labeled "hobos" and "tramps," this group was criminalized and forced into convict labor on chain gangs, fulfilling civic works and acting as a kind of supplement to Mexican labor. According to Hernández, they were criminalized in part because they defied the ideal of the settler as *the* civilizing force that establishes the nuclear family and engages in the civic virtue of trade so necessary, under Manifest Destiny, to bring white bourgeois life to the frontier.

Chapter 3 then considers the era of Chinese exclusion and the dawn of mass deportations. It focuses on events surrounding the passage of the Geary Act of 1892. The act was a federal law that "required all Chinese laborers in the United States to register with the federal government [i.e., to prove legal residence] or be subject to arrest, up to one-year imprisonment at hard labor, and then deportation" (64). According to Hernández, this moment marks the invention of the social form of immigrant detention as we now understand it, revealing that it and the doctrine of plenary power are inherently racialized. Of particular interest for contemporary activist-scholars will be Hernández's excavation of the Supreme Court argument against the constitutionality of the Geary Act as advanced by Joseph Choate (77).

Chapter 4 tells the story that Hernández would go on to develop more extensively in *Bad Mexicans* (2022).[7] This is the story of the brothers Ricardo, Enrique, and Jesús Flores Magón—key intellectual contributors to the Mexican Revolution. Led to the US in their struggle against the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship, their time in exile would inevitably shape the borderlands in the American government's counterinsurgency campaign to root out *magonista* organizing and capture Ricardo in particular. This history, in turn, provides important context for Hernández's discussion of the targeting of Mexicans and Mexican Americans for incarceration in chapter 5. This chapter highlights the nexus of incarceration and deportation that has become such a dominant feature of carceral practices today. Chapter 6 then considers the targeting of Black Americans for incarceration and brutalization, especially as their population rose in California across the twentieth century. Finally, the appendix, "The Rebel Archive," will be of interest to scholars seeking insight into the sentiments and thoughts of historical actors at the grassroots level.

Hernández's book demonstrates the explanatory power of the settler colonial frame for understanding a range of social issues on the US-Mexico borderlands. But once we are in this discursive territory, the question of genocide, as distinct from elimination, is not so distant.[8] The book does not hesitate to use the term to describe Native elimination, and it does highlight the Civil Rights Congress's campaign to charge the US with anti-Black genocide in 1951. However, Hernández stops short of stating that the US has committed (or is committing) genocide against Mexicans and other immigrants in the US, even though this is the natural next question to raise, and it is worth raising in this context. In the 1980s, Robert Staples argued that anti-Indigenous genocide is a "prototype" that travels to other populations once these become—as Patrick Wolfe later put it—"surplus to some requirements and, to that extent, more like Indians."[9] *City of Inmates*, thus, implicitly

[7] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* (Norton, 2022).

[8] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

[9] Robert Staples, "Black Male Genocide: A Final Solution to the Race Problem in America," *Black Scholar* 18, no. 3 (1987): 2–11; Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 404.

raises an important question, that it then leaves unanswered, of whether genocide—the actual phenomenon as opposed to its legal international definition—can look other than we have imagined or defined. Can strategies of containment or sequestration that do not directly seek extermination be genocidal? As we wade deeper into "the Trump era"—as this period of resurgent white nationalism is called—this question may increasingly come to the fore.[10]

Paradoxes of trade, migration, and racial politics

Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda and Edward Telles's edited volume *The Trump Paradox* addresses misinformation about migration and trade that has taken hold since the political rise of Donald Trump in 2016. The book is divided into four main parts. The first part establishes the thematic frame of the book: the "paradoxes" of Trump's rise and of the US-Mexico migration and trade system. The second part then focuses on Mexico-US migration; the third on US-Mexico trade integration dynamics; and the fourth on the racial politics of the US-Mexico relationship. As the opening section establishes the key issues of the book, I discuss these in some detail before summarizing the remainder of the chapters.

In chapter 1, the editors address misguided explanations of Trump's electoral victory that link it to the alleged negative impact of trade and immigration. As they observe, "Journalists, political leaders, and academics have sought to explain Trump's political rise, initially, accepting at face value Trump's claim that immigration and the global economy threaten American workers" (17). None of these narratives considers actual impact, and they deal only with perceived impact. But while there is a positive correlation between support for Trump and poorer socioeconomic conditions, the latter is not actually caused by either the presence of immigrants from or the presence of trade with Mexico. To the contrary, places where immigrants settle and where trade with Mexico occurs tend to benefit economically. Thus, paradoxically, among white voters, Trump supporters live in areas least likely to see Mexican migrants and, similarly, least likely to have been negatively affected by trade with Mexico. Because actual trade and actual immigration are negatively correlated with Trump support, racial politics (i.e., attitudes about trade and migration) make up the explanatory difference. Trump's rise can thus be explained not by the actual impact of Mexican trade or migration, but by a sense of group threat among whites, about both domestic demographic changes and the international standing of the United States. Although the authors do not put it this way, it is, in other words, a concern for the standing of a particular image of American whiteness on the world stage.

Chapter 2 summarizes the body of research Douglas S. Massey, alongside various collaborators, has produced on the failures of border policies since the 1980s, concluding that these have been a "train wreck" (32, 44). In the 1960s, the existing labor system under the Bracero Program was allowed to expire, leaving labor supply and demand unaffected and turning the portion of immigrants who would formerly have been braceros into "illegals." Thus, the end of the bracero regime coincides with a change in the public discourse on migration from a question of labor into one about cultural alien-ness, invasion, and criminality—what Leo Chavez calls the Latino threat narrative.[11] This then generated a feedback loop that continuously intensified border militarization. Although the real number of immigrants remained the same, they increasingly chose to settle in the US due to border militarization, ending the status quo pattern of circular migration. But since unauthorized entry "increased," leading to more apprehensions, this became the

[10] I am currently developing a project relating to this topic.

[11] Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

basis of calls to further increase border enforcement. Over time, "more apprehensions pushed popular opinion in a more conservative direction, which increased public demands for restrictive legislation, which generated more Border Patrol agents working with larger budgets, which yielded more hours spent looking for undocumented migrants, which ultimately produced more apprehensions, whereupon the cycle repeated itself" (37).

At the same time, due to demographic factors within Mexico itself, migratory inflows effectively ended in 2008. In fact, without border militarization, the undocumented population would have been one-third lower than the twelve million now estimated. Thus, "in a very real way, the rising number of apprehensions became the visible manifestation of the ongoing 'invasion of illegal aliens'" (36). Like the conclusion of chapter 1, then, we find that the rhetoric and policies around immigration and border enforcement represent an underlying perversity, racism rather than any practical or economic justification.

Continuing the theme of paradox, chapter 3 focuses on the mismatch between projected migration trends and restrictive policies. As the authors explain, demographic transitions across all countries in the North American - Central American migration system suggest that migration will continue to decrease over time, even as the demand for labor roles that migrants might fill increases simultaneously in both receiving and sending countries as a result of aging populations. Chapter 4 considers explanations of the decline in Mexican migration. The argument is that there are two overriding factors. The first is the Great Recession, which significantly curtailed labor demand in sectors traditionally filled by immigrants. The second is the demographic transition in Mexico, resulting in a lower supply of labor, which also opened up job opportunities in Mexico itself. Finally, challenging a long-standing finding to the contrary, the authors conclude that increased border militarization does have a nontrivial, if small, deterring effect.

Chapter 5 focuses on the health of the Mexican-origin population across the border. This chapter is particularly interesting because its target of analysis encompasses both Mexican immigrants in the US as well as the populations they come from in Mexico. The discussion revolves around the so-called immigrant health advantage: the fact that newly arriving Mexican immigrants tend to be in better health than native populations of comparable socioeconomic levels. The authors analyze the erosion of this advantage over time, resulting in the irony that the populations who sought a better life in the US end up bequeathing worse health outcomes to their children.

Chapter 6 considers educational challenges that students across California and Baja California share. The authors suggest that one of the greatest resources of the border region, its human capital, in the form of young bilingual and binational people, is being squandered because of its inability to capture the educational potential of this group. Chapter 7 then analyzes the policy implications of depleted immigration inflows from Mexico, arguing that these inflows are highly unlikely to rebound from the numbers seen before the Great Recession. Chapter 8 argues against the conservative talking point that immigrants are an economic drain, showing that immigrants make an exceptional contribution to the US economy. Given that job growth over the past several decades has outpaced the demographic supply, immigrants not only do not "take jobs"; their economic activity creates more opportunities for nonimmigrants.

The next four chapters consider the structural transformations represented by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Chapter 9 develops an empirical framework to interpret the long-term evolution of trade and migration policies leading to the expansion of border militarization. It also models possible trade and migration scenarios. The authors find that, contrary to anti-immigrant discourse in the United States, Mexican migration has had "a much larger positive impact on the US labor market and has contributed much more to US GDP than have US-Mexico trade or financial flows" (139). They emphasize that, due to demographic changes and economic growth, Trump's border policies "address a problem that is already largely being

resolved" (142). Finally, among one of the most interesting results of the models employed, the authors found that "comprehensive immigration reform would increase GDP by 1.5 trillion over ten years," while a "mass deportation scenario amounts to a policy induced severe recession" (143).

Chapter 10, perhaps controversially, argues against an academic common sense about neoliberalism in Mexico, that "American-corn imports made net losers out of corn farmers in Mexico, pushing them and their workers out of rural areas" (151). Contrary to the claim that the neoliberalization of corn increased migration, the authors propose that the picture is less simple, because the corn sector in Mexico did not shrink in terms of production, and in fact, it expanded under NAFTA if measured in metric tons of domestic output. Of course, it could be pointed out that the key point which NAFTA critics insist on is not so narrow a matter as the metric tonnage of production: an increase in production without a rise in wages would also suggest an intensification of extractive and exploitative processes.[12]

This latter point seems to be demonstrated in other areas. Focusing on the Mexican automotive sector, chapter 11 highlights the disconnect between benefits and burdens that divides the level of exchange from the realm of production: In a line that Marx himself might have written, it is observed that "as Mexican workers increase their production, their incomes decrease ... workers are increasingly more qualified and better trained and able to deal with new technologies and have better organizational practices and international certifications but are experiencing a process of increasing labor precarity" (169). Chapter 12 takes stock of the goals, failures, and accomplishments of NAFTA, suggesting that the rebranded United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement is inadequate to address the two problems NAFTA leaves in its wake: economic inequality in all three partner countries and wage disparities in Mexico vis-à-vis Canada and the US.

The last four chapters address the racial politics of the Trump phenomenon. Chapter 13 historically contextualizes the rise of Trump's nativist politics. Contrary to the anti-intellectual framings of Trump's positions, it is argued that Trump's message taps into the persistent messaging of conservative intellectuals who, since at least the 1980s, have identified Mexico and Mexicans not only as a source of alleged American decline but also as national security threats to US sovereignty, potentially requiring intervention into Mexico itself (196–197). Chapter 14 focuses on how social media posts, particularly on Twitter (now X), have come to have a form of political authority as speech acts with real effects. Chapter 15 then explores the question of whether politicians who use anti-immigrant rhetoric cause or merely reflect public opinion. The argument is that an increasing presence of Latino immigrants demonstrably drives up anti-immigrant activism and rhetoric from local politicians, thereby resulting in an increase in anti-immigrant ordinances and policies in the short term. However, in the long term, and as an unintended consequence, as the Latino population reaches a certain threshold, such contexts can then see a reversal of anti-immigrant policies. Chapter 16 homes in on the response of Latinos to anti-immigrant politics, arguing that a pan-ethnic identity, alongside a sense of "linked fate," correlates to higher levels of political anger and political participation among Latinos.

Finally, chapter 17 examines the dynamics of anti-immigrant backlash at the state level. The general trend is neatly summarized as follows: "States with more Latinos tend to redistribute less and punish more" (247). In other words, policy explicitly and implicitly penalizes Latino populations across issues such as health care, education, corrections, and taxation. By contrast, Latino majorities tend to push for redistribution that helps the worst off, pushing for public spending in areas like education and corrections in more

[12] Furthermore, the sector could have grown in terms of output even as small farmers were losing land to larger or corporate farms, an issue the authors do not address. Thanks to Kevin Young for this point.

progressive directions. Dovetailing with the initial discussion in this review of Grandin's history of social rights, it might thus be said, although the author does not say it, that Latino populations tend to socialize an antisocial political system.

This book serves as an important corrective to narratives that normalize border militarization. But one important limitation of the book is its absence of any real analysis of power. This is especially evident in the optimism of the policy recommendations made across the volume, many of which reflect a normative assumption that political actors and elites, in the US in particular, might care about the well-being of their own citizens, let alone immigrants and their descendants. It also seems clear, from the broader phenomena that the book analyzes, that whites in America experience even the smallest social benefit that nonwhites might receive (even merely symbolic ones) as a decline in *their own* rights and privileges—that this is so *even when* they themselves would economically benefit from the same policies. This issue, a matter of racialized power, did not receive direct attention. In fairness, such an analysis is not one of the aims of the book, although some readers may come away feeling that this is a lacuna in the project because its essential theme directly concerns it .

State violence and the drug war

As the provocative title of *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist* suggests, Oswaldo Zavala argues that the image of the narco as an imminent threat to Mexican sovereignty is a myth. The reality is that the sovereignty of Mexico is not under threat and that there is, in one sense, no narco as popularly imagined. The image of the narco—"Versace shirt, crocodile skin boots, and that ever present-sombrero ... gold-plated, diamond-encrusted weapons" (2)—is an ideological construct with diverse obscuring functions. Among these, it obscures the identities of the real victims and victimizers, the direction of influence between state and drug traffickers, the nature of the drug trade itself, the causal etiology of violence, and many other dimensions of the *problématique* of violence that it encompasses. Crucially, it also hides what is actually at stake in the drug war. The result is that we actually know "little to nothing about the phenomenon of drug trafficking," and yet imagine we know everything (5).

Zavala's argument is spread across detailed discussions of Mexican and US media, literature, and journalism on the drug trade. I thus aim to reconstruct only what I take his core argument to be. At the outset, it is important to register that, while Zavala draws on work in Mexican national security studies, histories of drug trafficking, and investigative journalism on the drug trade, much of his argument is advanced within analyses of literary sources in a piecemeal way. This means that readers who expect a more direct analysis or history of the phenomenon at issue may be disappointed.[13] Still, I take the primary contribution of this book to be theoretical, recommending a perspectival shift in our appraisal of the data on these issues. Zavala does not fill in all of the details for us but rather provides a kind of lens by which we might figure that out ourselves.

Fundamental to understanding Zavala's argument is Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty not as a monopoly on legitimate violence but as the prerogative power to decide: the capacity of the state to set aside existing law and *act on that exception*. Applying this idea to Mexico, Zavala argues that the Mexican state has never lost sovereignty in this sense, even during crises of legitimacy. Instead, in response to US national security directives, it has enhanced its repressive and disciplinary powers over time, especially since the drug war began. To mask this, so as to mask the underlying economic rationality

[13] Zavala expands the argument of this book in his follow up, as yet untranslated, *La guerra en las palabras: Una historia intelectual del "narco" en México (1975–2020)* (DEBATE, 2022).

of the drug violence, the narco had to be invented as the enemy for the sake of which the Mexican state could justify the state's buildup of repressive powers—all the while, in reality, it used these powers to secure resources for foreign interests.

What this ends up meaning is that, strictly speaking, there is no war on the narco and there is no struggle over the "plaza," a word used to describe territories ostensibly under narco control. The notion of a cartel is likewise a myth, because, the argument goes, drug traffickers do not coordinate as a singular entity to fix prices, control distribution and production, or to reduce competition (the formal meaning of "cartel"). "Cartel" is therefore a construct that hides "the real networks of official power that determined the flow of drug trafficking" (4).

To demonstrate this, Zavala refers us to Mexican national security history. The notion of the plaza, he points out, emerged during the reign of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as concessions to local gangs who were tasked with the management of illegal activity. As a part of Cold War counterinsurgency strategy, the Federal Security Directorate (DFS) was tasked with regulating the drug trade and directing drug violence against guerrilla movements, student organizations, and trade unions. Following neoliberalization, there was a dissolution of the hegemony that the one-party state exerted over the drug trade. Because the DFS was dissolved in the 1980s, multiple drug gangs emerged to challenge the status quo between state and drug traffickers, creating a situation in which police, military, and independent actors had greater autonomy with respect to the trade. Therefore, the drug war launched by President Felipe Calderón in this aftermath was in reality an operation aimed at regaining prerogative power over the drug trade. It can, that is, be understood as a kind of refederalization of the drug trade after the state's reins had slacked. Its end result was a reconfiguration of the clandestine structures of illegal profit, but not a change in the underlying fact of sovereign control; the plazas have never truly escaped informal state regulation.

What's really at stake in the drug war, I take it, is the capacity of the Mexican state to act in the interests of elite national and multinational economic concerns—not its sovereignty as a political entity accountable to the Mexican people (i.e., its monopoly on legitimate violence), but its sovereignty as in the capacity to act both outside of and within the legal order in the service of transnational capital (i.e., its monopoly to decide on the exception at any and all times and in any domain, especially profit-generating domains). The real prize of the drug war is natural resources; the narrative of the narco threat to sovereignty is a justification for obtaining access to them. The real actors, those elites who vie for control of the apparatus of state that enables extraction under the pretext of the drug war. As Zavala concludes, the drug war is "a cipher for large-scale community displacement for the appropriation and exploitation of natural resources that, if not for the War on Drugs, would remain unattainable for national and transnational capital" (10). The state has pursued this policy by submitting both the drug trade and the Mexican public to a state of exception that, simultaneously, enables legal and illegal resource extraction in coordination with—at the behest of—the US government. Mexican citizens are being killed en masse, in short, as a kind of sacrificial victim to the Mexican state and the domestic and international economic interests it enforces.

Zavala draws a direct causal relationship from the Mexican adoption of US national security agendas in the late 1980s to "the daily horrors of Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey, or Tampico, and all the crimes against humanity committed during Felipe Calderón's presidency and onward" (8). The narco archetype emerges in this moment, at the end of the Cold War, to replace the figure of the communist subversive. Both figures are articulations of a mythological bogeyman, an enemy to social order, whose existence justifies legal and extralegal violence. Like Cold War anticommunism, the narco myth is a geopolitical gambit to justify intervention in Mexico's domestic affairs and militarization

of its civic life. The difference is that drug trafficking, unlike communism, can be conceived as a permanent, ongoing threat to social solvency.

The true face of the narco, Zavala concludes, is unknowable, by which we can take him to mean that the distorting effects of narco mythology obscure how what's called narcoviolence really functions. The public is told that the state's sovereignty has failed in the face of organized crime even as its militarization steadily expands and its assertions of emergency powers are normalized. Members of the public, journalists, cultural producers, and intellectuals internalize these narratives, and then cannot imagine a reality beyond its limits, continually deferring to its stereotypes and clichés as social explanations. The myth of the narco thereby provides cover for the Mexican state's historic abandonment of ordinary Mexicans to capital, to crime and corruption, and masks its own predations on the Mexican people—even as complex networks of state and nonstate actors vie for control of the clandestine lucre. In this way, the narco narrative depoliticizes not only the causal origins of drug violence but also the broader landscape of social problems that contribute to the violence.

The reality, Zavala suggests, is that neoliberalism in Mexico has facilitated the misery and death of the most marginal sectors of Mexican society—especially, once the drug war began, at the hands of the state.[14] The "secret of the world," Zavala observes, citing Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, is hidden in the murders no one pays attention to (98). As in Bolaño's clinical reconstruction of the crimes against women in Ciudad Juárez, we, too, are left to infer what group this might point to as the primary beneficiaries within Mexico of this social violence, with Zavala's hint being that it is less likely to be the campesino-turned-poppy farmer, say, than those aristocratic members of more "respectable" social classes, those who are amenable to, and have connections with, foreign economic concerns. For this reason, if Zavala is right, nationalist projects, like that which is represented in the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, will inevitably come to be seen as a threat by this stratum of elites.[15] Thus, unsurprisingly, the opposition wields the narco narrative itself against Obrador and his successor, president Claudia Sheinbaum, to advocate for US intervention.

Clearly, Zavala's thesis is of great interest because—if he is right—it is not only the public who has the drug violence wrong but also the vast majority of academic and journalistic work on the topic. Still, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of his study. Zavala's aim in this book is to dissect incoherent or inconsistent narratives in literary and journalistic works and to highlight sources that *do* break with narco mythology and help us peer beneath the veil of obfuscation. He does not provide a full-fledged account of the real power structures that link the drug trade and the Mexican state or make direct claims about who the actual agents in control of drug trafficking are and how they operate, though it seems clear that US interests and covert action, especially in the neoliberal period, will figure importantly in an approximation (3, 25–28, 144–147). Yet if Zavala is right, the fact that such a full account of this phenomenon is wanting may itself be a function of the narco myth, which renders the reality not only difficult to perceive, but more complex and dangerous, even fatal, to put down in writing.

Concluding remarks

The books reviewed here make important contributions to the field and will also serve as valuable pedagogical instruments for instructors (e.g., *Trump Paradox* and *Shadow of the Wall* include useful glossaries). One important development that these books reflect is the

[14] The suggestion is made that the military has taken advantage of the fog of violence to wage a campaign of social cleansing to eliminate "undesirables" (135).

[15] Zavala discusses Obrador's break with the status quo policy on drug trafficking in the epilogue of the book.

increasing purchase of the settler colonial frame. As books like Grandin's and Hernández's demonstrate, this frame serves as a fruitful lens for understanding not only US history and social problems but also the history of the US's behavior in the international arena. Although none of the books on the Mexican context engages an anticolonial frame, I would suggest that a return to such perspectives would be profitable for understanding the nature of racialized violence across the border. Especially with regard to the issue of migration—and as internal enforcement intensifies in the US—the counterinsurgency lens that an anticolonial approach invites, I think, will be especially productive.

This is also true of topics such as the clandestine or illicit forms of power analyzed in *Shadow of the Wall* and *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist*. In 1997, for example, Subcomandante Marcos pointed to the "mirror" of state power and organized crime in his famous critique of globalization. As Marcos indicates, under neoliberalism, "legality and illegality exchange reflections. On which side of the mirror is the criminal? On which side the pursuer?"[16] Looking back from 2026, such remarks seem especially prescient.

At the same time, the transnational and historically perduring character of both formal (state) and informal (nonstate) violence reveals an implicit limit to our understanding and conceptualization of the violence. My purpose in selecting these specific books for review, in fact, lies in the value they seemed to me to serve as data points for students and researchers of the current political moment. With the US-Mexico border as the focus of analysis, these contributions, together with other recent works, can be thought of as important loose "pieces" to what Marcos once called the "global [jigsaw] puzzle" of globalization.[17] The picture of reality they point to, obscured by official narratives and even academic theories and frameworks, calls out to be brought into focus and clarified, snapped into place. In *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist*, Zavala continually insists on the duty (and need) of the Mexican intellectual class to struggle against the hegemonic narratives of the drug war and confront with a critical imagination the global articulation of violence that assaults Mexico (160). So it is, I conclude, for the general struggle to grasp the present—and perhaps especially for academics living and working within the key engine of that violence: the US.

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[16] Subcomandante Marcos, "The Fourth World War Has Begun," trans. Nathalie de Broglio, *Nepantla: Views from South* 2, no. 3 (2001), 566.

[17] Marcos, "Fourth World War Has Begun," 562.

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