

## Book Review

– *Deported to Death. How Drug Violence Is Changing Migration on the US–Mexico Border*, by Jeremy Slack, University of California Press, 2019

Deportation is portrayed as a profound act of violence in Jeremy Slack's ethnography of deportee experiences along and across the US-Mexico border, a striking exploration of the intense marginalisation and vulnerability faced by deportees. The book brings their stories to bear on our understanding of the impacts of immigration policy and its relationship to broader questions of insecurity and violence along the US-Mexico border. Slack asks what makes migration so dangerous and why deportees are especially vulnerable to the risks that accompany being a person in movement. For those deported across the US' southern frontier, he finds the answer bound up with the enormity of drug war violence and the power of organised crime in northern Mexico. Slack is unwavering in his pursuit of the cross-border nature of the forces at work in shaping this environment.

Building on his work as a researcher on the Migration Border Crossing Study, Slack draws out the complexity and force of detail that can be missed in surveys by undertaking an ethnographic project, interviewing and accompanying deportees and those who interact with them in their day-to-day existences in northern Mexico. Each chapter traces an aspect of the deportee experience, including the overlap between migration and drug cartels, movement, and stasis for migrants in Mexico, and the relationships deportees develop between themselves and with locals. The book closes on the implications of these stories for academic research and policy engagement through reflection on the author's experiences with the US immigration court system.

For those deported across the US-Mexico border, the threat of violence and death is ever-present. The level of insecurity in the northern Mexico border regions makes it difficult to untangle the deaths of migrants from deaths related to the drug war, but Slack works hard to understand the nature of their imbrication. Crucial to this process of untangling is the concept of social death, a focus that is one of the real strengths of Slack's account. Towards the end of the book, he bolsters this focus by introducing Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics to further understand the political forces at work in shaping death, social

and actual, for deportees – an intervention that feels as though it would have been useful to have more explicitly woven throughout the text from the beginning. However, this does not detract from the weight of the evidence diligently collected and accessibly distilled by Slack. He deftly links the problems caused by romanticised views of migrants as model citizens for those who do not fit into that category: those deported due to conviction for a crime in the US, or as a result of the act of border crossing itself being criminalised. He shows that criminalisation, and the resultant risk of social death, is an enormous driver of violence and actual death for deportees. This leads to a position of marginalisation that allows a plethora of ills to flourish, including the devastation of kidnapping and disappearance, and Slack has collected searing first-hand accounts from survivors of the former and the loved ones of those lost to the latter.

The complex, murky and shifting relationship between the cartels and migrants is thoroughly explored, drawing out the dual nature of this relationship for deportees perceived as both a threat and resource. The perception of threat comes from the fact that many deportees are recently released from prison, that they are assumed to have been involved with gangs in the US, or that they may originally hail from a different part of Mexico or Central America. These conspicuous differences may lead them to be suspected of membership in a rival cartel group, with potentially fatal consequences. Such perceptions are particularly dangerous for deportees already marginalised by their being ‘out of place’, a further driver of social death. This dislocation is exacerbated by the deliberate US policy of ‘lateral deportation’, the removal of deportees to locations far from where they originally crossed the border and to areas where they likely lack any understanding of the local context in a physical, political or social sense – understanding that is often crucial to success or even survival.

Deportees are also seen as a resource due to the perceived wealth of those with ties to the US (making them a target for kidnap and ransom), the profits from control over border crossings, and the value of deportees’ labour. These factors are definitive of the deportee experience in Slack’s account. Deportees are a valuable commodity, offering both an additional revenue stream to profit-hungry organised crime and an ever-replenishing pool of labour to replace those lost in the violence of the drug war. The labour of deportees here exists on a spectrum of coercion from free to unfree, with Slack raising questions as to whether any rank-and-file labour for organised criminal groups can ever really be seen as a choice given the circumstances, particularly for those as vulnerable as deportees.

The closing sections of the book drive home Slack’s belief that academic research can make a difference to the lives of both those who have been deported and those facing the same fate. He relates his experience providing expert testimony within the hostile immigration court system, where criminalisation combines with the administration of policies designed to make the asylum system as foreboding as possible, a pattern that Slack traces across the Bush and Obama presidencies to its intensification under Trump. His counter to this

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is to call for engaged ethnographic scholarship that communicates the full complexity and vulnerability of migrant life and what faces deportees on their removal across the US-Mexico border. His focus on the social death of deportation gets to the heart of harm done to migrants. Slack's book is important because it brings us inside the world of the most marginalised of migrants, whose stories are threatened with being subsumed in a chaotic and dehumanising environment defined by an at-best indifferent US government and the profound lack of security that faces them on the Mexican side of the border.

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