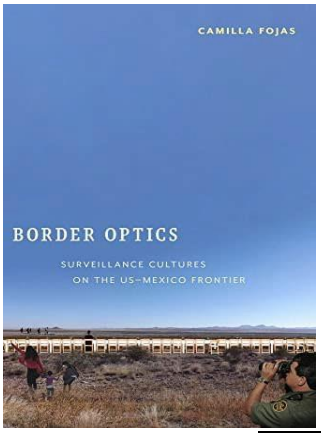
THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INFORMATION, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION



IJIDI: Book Review

Fojas, C. (2021). *Border optics: Surveillance cultures on the US-Mexico frontier*. New York University Press.
ISBN: 978-1479807017. 224 pp. $36.95 US.

Reviewer: Sophia Martinez-Abbud, Rice University, USA

Book Review Editors: Halie Kerns, SUNY Canton, USA
Stephanie Robertson, Brigham Young University—Hawaii, USA

Keywords: border; drones; migration; optics; surveillance

Publication Type: book review

The US-Mexico border has a long history of surveillance and control, which has only extended its reach, scope, and budget in recent years. Neoliberal capitalism exacerbates the need for constant supervision of the border between the Global North and the Global South—one which is porous regarding market needs but insists on the relentless supervision of migration patterns. Since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and in the wake of 9/11, as well as narco-violence, both migration and surveillance methods at the US- Mexico border have intensified contiguously. The discourse prevailing in the U.S. is one which mimics the discourse regarding the frontier in the late- nineteenth century—that is, it establishes the borderlands as a zone in which there is a constant threat of attack or penetration by foreigners, where the stability of the nation is at risk, and where it is imperative to establish security measures against these threats. Alongside discourse and policy informed by an imperialist logic, the image of the borderlands is also influenced by digital technologies and cultural representations, which sometimes continue and sometimes subvert this constructed image.

In *Border Optics*, Camilla Fojas engages with various archives that represent the borderlands as a vulnerable and precarious site that must be defended and traces how this image influences the evolution of border surveillance technologies. The book accomplishes its goal of laying bare the border optic; that is, a way of seeing informed by the multimedia apparatus of cultural productions and policymaking, and "a consequence of the interface of militarism, technology, and the media archive of the region, which all work inextricably together" (p. 8). Analyzing policy, surveillance technology, and cultural productions, Fojas engages the "complete visual apparatus, from recording and representation to the infrastructure and institutions that support the visual regime" (p. 8). The primacy of visual data in the contemporary moment creates a specific image of the border and its different characters, from the border patrol agent to the civilian and their duty to protecting the country, and finally to undocumented migrants. The categorization of bodies at the border is a result of what Fojas calls "borderveillance" or "a combination of vigilance and visual sorting underwritten by a vast political economy of surveillance, one with a long history in colonial practices of social control that expanded at an unprecedented rate during the rise of the 'War on Terror'" (p. 9). In other words, the book explores how the primacy of optics—the constructed images and ways of looking at the border from various perspectives—functions as a technology of neoliberal control.

ISSN 2574-3430, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi/index
DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v6i4.39210

Fojas begins by calling attention to how the increased reliance on borderveillance technology caused an important shift in immigration policy: from instructions to "catch and release" undocumented migrants toward a stance of "prevention through deterrence" (p. 6). With this context in mind, Fojas proceeds to examine different cultural productions that are primarily informed by, and have a stake in, this crafted border optic.

Chapters one and two trace the evolution of surveillance technology since 9/11, especially that which relies on the visual field. Fojas masterfully explores how the insistence on the visual justifies the increased expenditure of surveillance technology along the most precarious and desolated parts of the trail—those through which migrants are forced. Chapter one narrates the evolution of "borderveillant media," in particular, programs such as the Secure Border Initiative Network (SBI*net*). This is the first program that promised to live-stream the border, with the intention to have the space "fully managed, monitored, and defended by a virtual technological barrier" (p. 31). Fojas demonstrates how the insistence on crafting an optic of complete visual surveillance inspires the shift from vigilantism through SBI*net* to the use of military-grade technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), in particular the emblematic Predator Drone. In chapter two, Fojas narrates the history of the development and implementation of drones as a tool for borderveillance—one that opens the field of surveillance both laterally and vertically, extending the reach of US imperialist control over its southern borderlands. The hyper-surveillance of this site continues a frontier ideology that insists on the inherent wilderness of the border in terms of both people and the elements.

Chapter three begins to engage more deeply with the cultural productions that represent exaggerated images of vulnerability at the border, particularly by examining documentaries in outlets like Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel, where the matter of border security must be understood in the context of the natural dangers that border patrol officers must face to perform their task. Similarly, chapter four focuses on more pointed examples, particularly reality TV shows like *Border Wars* and its multinational iterations, including the U.S., Canada, and New Zealand versions. Fojas identifies the anxiety felt in the Global North about the fading border with the Global South and traces this affective policymaking through cultural productions that create a need for increased border surveillance. This chapter demystifies the ways in which ideas of borderveillance become widespread even far away from the borderlands. Although the book centers the US-Mexico border, Fojas contextualizes border security along global lines, and chapter four in particular, demystifies the ways in which ideas of borderveillance become widespread even far away from the borderlands.

Having grown up at the border, I deeply appreciate Fojas' attention to borderlands residents and the particular kind of border consciousness that surveillance creates. Each chapter balances discussion of surveillance technology with the different ways in which borderlands residents subvert these technologies: through short and feature-length films that bring out the dystopic elements of the borderlands, as well as the use of technologies of seeing—such as drones—to locate and aid migrants crossing through the most dangerous parts of the border. Fojas never loses sight of the people and communities affected by such surveillance; indeed, Fojas gestures toward the liberatory possibilities embedded in such border consciousness, one which sees the border as a space of passing rather than following "the restrictive and exclusionary logic based in neoliberal forms of racial capitalism" (p. 150). In the concluding chapter of the book, Fojas gestures toward the different "border futures" available when divesting from visual data as a means of imperialist control and shifting our consideration of the border as a space of passing rather than a space of limitation and boundedness (p. 156).

ISSN 2574-3430, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi/index
DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v6i4.39210

This book will be of interest to scholars of the US-Mexico border in general, as it provides a valuable trajectory regarding the evolution of surveillance policy. Scholars of borders more broadly will also find information about how the US-Mexico border works as "both laboratory and archive" to experiment with border surveillance between the Global North and the Global South (p. 8). Media scholars might find value in the way Fojas traces the evolution of visual technologies in relation to the apparatus of state surveillance. This engagement with multimedia technologies of seeing, cultural productions, and policy change provides a model for scholars seeking to contextualize public attitudes toward migration and the continual crafting of the borderlands as a zone of national vulnerability. *Border Optics* is an excellent companion to recent publications on borderlands histories from below, including but not limited to Harsha Walia's *Border and Rule* and Monica Muñoz Martinez's *The Injustice Never Leaves You*—both of which are referenced in Fojas' work. Like Walia and Muñoz Martinez, Fojas engages with the strategies and counternarratives that emerge from below these systems of oppression. Camilla Fojas' book provides an excellent framework with which to think about the trajectory of border policy in the last thirty years—one that should inspire us to move beyond visual surveillance, deterrence, and bordered worlds.

Sophia Martinez-Abbud (snm7@rice.edu) grew up along the US-Mexico border and has always been affected by surveillance technologies. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at Rice University. She specializes in Chicanx literature, history, and culture and is interested in narratives and genres of anti-colonial resistance throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Sophia's dissertation examines the ways in which Chicanx and Latinx communities make use of punk—as a genre, an effect, and a praxis—to perform sociocultural resistance against systems of oppression through literature and other multimedia outlets of cultural and political commentary.

ISSN 2574-3430, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi/index
DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v6i4.39210