Border Optics: Surveillance Cultures on the US–Mexico Frontier

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On June 4, 2025, US President Donald Trump announced a travel ban targeting individuals from twelve countries, including Haiti, Sudan, and Iran, and new restrictions on visas for Venezuelans, Cubans, and people of other nationalities. In May 2025, the Trump administration offered refugee status to a small group of white Afrikaners who claimed that the South African government was orchestrating a "genocide" against them, despite widespread debunking of this claim by experts.

Though the rhetoric and policies of the second Trump administration undoubtedly represent a shift in scale—especially with their brazen embrace of inaccurate interpretations of "genocide"—Camilla Fojas's 2021 book, *Border Optics: Surveillance Cultures on the US–Mexico Frontier*, published in the years following the first Trump administration, remind us that, in fact, "the history of the borderlands is…one of genocide, of migrants' death by US policy and institutions and ongoing White-supremacist vigilante and Border Patrol and police violence" (2). Using a visual studies-informed optical approach—who sees, how we see, from where we see—Fojas makes the argument that the US–Mexico border is rooted in a "deeply historical visual regime" that deploys "surveillant infrastructure" as a means of controlling perception and thus mobility (3). *Border Optics* offers the neologism "borderveillance" as "a way of seeing and surveying that is freighted with national security concerns and colonial histories in which seeing is sorting and migrants are visually apprehended as a prelude to arrest and detention," (2) leading to death and structural abandonment. Furthermore, Fojas illuminates how the "smart border" tactics (sensors, drones, indirect apprehension) heralded as more "humane" by the rhetorically less jingoistic Obama and Biden administrations do not represent a categorical break from the more bellicose rhetoric of the Bush and Trump administrations. The "border optic," in

both its "smart" and "hard" forms, is intimately connected to the "interface of militarism, technology and the media archive of the region" (8).

Fojas's expansive primary sources include government reports, Border Patrol recruitment videos, specific border technologies such as SBINet and Predator Drones, popular "borderveillant" entertainment television shows, film, and art installations. Most of these materials show how "borderveillant media" produced in the private sector often enhance Border Patrol's capacity and soft power, though Fojas also attends to artists and creators, like the filmmaker Alex Rivera and the urban planner Fernando Romero, who gesture critically towards different futures along what Gloria Anzaldúa famously referred to as the "open scar" of the US–Mexico borderlands. Borderveillant television shows from the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, prominently featured in the book, graft the libidinal economy of policing reality television shows and Westerns onto migration enforcement: the build-up, suspense, and (almost invariable) vanquishing of the "enemy" in these shows causes the audience to feel a sense of relief when the migrant, "seen" as dangerous by the show's narration and cinematography, is arrested. Fojas' choice to adopt a "low culture" approach is much needed, urging academics and cultural critics to examine mass media that we may find low-brow or unfashionable.

The book's first chapter makes the argument that borderveillant TV series "train audiences in security protocols," leading to the material deployment of platforms like Texas Virtual Border Watch, which allows citizen spectators to watch 24/7 live streams of the borderlands and report possible migrations (35). At the end of the chapter, Fojas introduces us to countersurveillance initiatives that resist the seeing-eye of the state, such as the ACLU's "Migracam," which trains migrants to record their interactions with Border Patrol. The book's second chapter focuses on the optical power of the drone, showing how repurposed military equipment from the United States' disastrous War on Terror was transplanted to the rapidly militarizing US–Mexico border. Here, the book could have engaged more forcefully with the scholarship on Orientalism and what Jodi Byrd calls the "transit of empire," which shows how the colonizing logics of the US Western frontier have expanded beyond the borders of the settler state. The book's third chapter is a fascinating consideration of how bordering not only disrupts ecologies, but also how "the creation of boundaries, walls, and divisions is inextricable from the designation of the wild" (100), a separation between the human and non-human that ignores Indigenous ontologies based on the inseparability of the human and non-human. Though the chapter gets a bit dense with its foray into the merits of species management practices, it makes a strong case for how environmental activist organizations like the Sierra Club and TV networks like National Geographic fail to consider the possibility of a borderless world. The fourth chapter transitions back to media cultures in its focus on the widely-viewed show *Border Wars* and considers the airport—where this show is filmed in its US, British, and New Zealand variations—as a "pedagogy of American empire" (136). The seeing-eye of the camera operates in a way that forces audiences to "take pleasure in witnessing the human assertion of rules" (146). Finally, the fifth and arguably most interesting chapter theorizes the "futures" promised by the security state alongside and against the borderless futures proposed by renegade artists and activists. If the US–Mexico border is the "final technological frontier for state power" (148), then futuristic shows like *Westworld* or the

architectural book *Hyperborder* offer a forum to consider and reimagine a new configuration of space and bodies.

 Border Optics' conclusions can and should be considered in the context of other contentious borders: Europe, Asia and Africa; India and Kashmir; Israel and Palestine; Mexico and Guatemala; Colombia and Venezuela; Haiti and the Dominican Republic; and many others. However, as recent travel bans have made clear, and as David Fitzgerald has argued recently through his work on the "remote control border," the vast majority of people experience US immigration policy not at "the final technological frontier" of the physical border, but before even attempting to move: through visa restrictions. *Border Optics* nevertheless provides a way of theorizing this racialized delineation of space: a state like the US does not merely "see" along its own border, but imposes its optics outernationally, an insight that will be even more urgent with the Trump administration's proposed "spy machine" with tech company collaborator Palantir. The horror and utility of *Border Optics* is that it is an enduring and prescient text with valuable insights for Science and Technology Studies, Latino/a Studies, border and migration studies, media and visual studies, and virtually anyone, regardless of immigration status, subjected to the "seeing and sorting" apparatus of empire.