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Anthropology Book Forum

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Howard Campbell, *Downtown Juárez: Underworlds of Violence and Abuse*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 2021. ISBN 1477323899. \$35 paper.

Howard Campbell knows Ciudad Juárez. For over thirty years he has talked to residents while exploring streets, neighborhoods, bars and businesses. As meticulously presented in *Downtown Juárez*, Campbell's ethnographic labor has yielded insightful perspectives different than other, more generalized and/or sensationalized accounts.

With a population of approximately 1.5 million, more wealthy sections of Juárez can be found in the part of town where urban development appears much like comparable southwestern U.S. cities. To the west lay a vast landscape of working class, crowded *colonias populares* with improvised access to infrastructure, basic amenities and green space. East and southeastern Juárez is similar with only basic provision for city services while at the same time home to several corporate maquiladoras. It is within this notorious landscape that savage killers have enacted the abuse and murder of thousands of women over the past three decades.

Amidst many differing scholarly approaches and interpretations of the border metropolis, Campbell specifically seeks to identify the “conditions that lead to violence in central Juárez” (1). His methodology is largely qualitative, pursuing what he terms a “wandering approach to fieldwork” (17). From this, *Downtown Juárez* features seventeen chapters which detail the history and present environment of the central city--especially its main streets, key bars and particular hotels in which prostitution and drug dealing takes place. From this, the author's intrepid work features detailed ethnographic discussion of human smugglers, dope peddlers and sex workers. Through it all, Campbell maintains that “multiple interconnected forces of synergistic violence...afflict [these largely] poor people in central Juárez to the point at which they become “normalized” and are reproduced in the abuse of others” (18).

Campbell stakes his claim “in some of Juárez's darkest corners” and, like many, finds neoliberalism, criminality, corruption, misogyny, U.S. failed immigration policy, the War on Drugs and maquiladora economic development responsible, in part, for “everyday violence” in Juárez.” Yet he goes further in asserting that “common people” are also to blame for “the madness...not just as mere victims but as perpetrators (22)” Echoing Primo Levi, Campbell writes that “the people guilty of committing vile and sustaining a criminal order are often ‘just poor

devils like ourselves” (22). Elsewhere, Levi is again referenced—this time regarding his concept of the “Gray Zone” where a “dialectical relationship” between those who are both victims and victimizers is often known to exist (116).

Tracing the complex origins of violence and criminality, Campbell proclaims, “I cast the net of responsibility more widely than most scholars and observers of Juárez, while examining the specific social forces, cultural milieus, and circumstances that connect perpetrators and victims” (29). Like many, he also finds that borderland “moral breakdown and normalized violence is aided and abetted by government corruption at the top of the Mexican political system and by the vast social cruelty of uneven, neoliberal economic and political developments largely constructed by US capitalists, US gun smugglers, powerful politicians and bureaucrats” (29). Such abuses of social power then “trickle down” the social ladder in such a powerful way that “the moral depravity and violence that has swept Juárez cut across all lines of class, gender, ethnicity, race, and nationality” (29). Not seeking to “blame the victims yet again, [o]r re-creates a ‘culture of poverty’ theory,” Campbell’s street ethnography effectively analyzes the many “violent human manifestations” conditioned by “inequitable circumstances” in Juárez (30).

For readers wishing to gain a in-depth sense what life is like in central Juárez, Campbell is an intrepid guide. His careful engagement transports us to often foreboding places where we gain intimate access to first-person impressions, conversations and interviews. Over his thirty years exploring the city, Campbell has talked to a lot of people and witnessed significant change. His portraiture detailing raw life experience is typically tragic and sad. Yet there is a persistent resilience present in the people he writes about.

One such character is Paloma who is one of the author’s main contacts and whose life story (so far) is recounted in the last chapter of *Downtown Juárez*. Born to a teenage mother and raised by her grandparents in Parral, Chihuahua, Paloma married young, began raising two boys and soon moved to Juárez with her abusive husband with whom she soon separated. Needing to earn money as now a single mother, she found employment in the clubs and bars of central Juárez. Under the tutelage of older, often unscrupulous businesswomen in the district, Paloma soon turned to sex work. Ruthlessly managed by local bar owner/pimp/gangster “Felina,” Paloma labored as a “bar girl” earning between \$15 and \$20 dollars a night. One thing led to another and before long, Paloma found herself involved in a wide variety of shady activities including smuggling, forgery, various con games and perhaps even child kidnapping and organ theft. Not surprisingly, Paloma’s employer was abusive and often put her life at risk amidst the many shadowy characters that populated the central Juárez lowlife. She also tried employment at a low paying maquiladora job for two years before earning money just across the border as a janitor, a cashier, an elder care facilitator and even as a cook at a Hooters in El Paso (173-190).

In 2009, Paloma was nearly killed when a truck swerved off the road in the industrial park area near Avenida Juan Gabriel (Juárez's iconic native son). Somehow, she survived after many months confined to bed rest. Left with a nearly incapacitated left arm and serious back injuries, she slowly managed to get the medical help she needed—earning from her neighbors a new nickname “The Transformer.” Having recovered, we learn that Paloma's journey is not over--nor are the many challenges and indignities she continues to face as a woman living in Juárez.

In reflecting on Paloma and his other interviewees, Campbell writes, “these stories and the thousands of others told by poor women [and men] exemplify the interlocking social forces contributing to Juárez's high rate of violence against the lower social classes; poverty, low-wage labor, deficient protection from corrupt police, widespread organized criminal groups that act with impunity, and the near impossibility of finding refuge in the United States” (193).

Added to Paloma's story is added the recent history of “more than ten thousand who have been murdered or have “disappeared” in Juárez over the past ten years. Thousands of women have been raped. Thousands more were injured, and their relatives and loved ones irreparably damaged. Thousands of children have been orphaned (195).”

In *Downtown Juárez* we read, “[t]he collective result is a cheapening and coarsening of life, a desensitization of the public toward reports of and the normalization and naturalization of violence by its perpetrators” (195). Clearly revealed and compellingly told in Campbell's engrossing study, “practically...every woman...and many men, have their own personal stories of betrayal, mistreatment and trauma” in Juárez (195).

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