

**Jessica Ordaz**, *The Shadow of El Centro: A History of Migrant Incarceration and Solidarity*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6247-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4696-6246-6 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4696-6248-0 (ebook)

Jessica Ordaz’s book, *The Shadow of El Centro: A History of Migrant Incarceration and Solidarity*, is one of few works that fulfills its promise to tell a desire-based narrative of “transnational migrant solidarity” without losing the analytical power necessary to confront immigrant incarceration in the US. By naming immigrant detention as migrant *incarceration* beginning with the book title, Ordaz signals an abolitionist argument against immigrant detention, one that she painstakingly details throughout the book by contrasting the non-punitive claims for civil detention with the immigration authorities’ (US Immigration and Naturalization Service; INS)<sup>1</sup> punitive words and deeds. One of the central claims of the book is that immigration enforcement practices are used as a political tool of repression against those imprisoned and under threat of imprisonment – from Emma Goldman and W.E.B. Du Bois to Jose Jacques Medina (p.69-71).

In tracing the history of a border camp into a federal detention center amidst the Southern California desert in a city named El Centro, Ordaz shows the history of racialization through immigrant detention. Beginning with an open-air camp during World War II, she details how immigration authorities allowed Germans to post photos of Hitler and swastikas in their living spaces, build a library, swimming pool, and even a culturally appropriate sausage smokehouse. Not only did the camp not have walls, the INS regularly allowed the Germans to hike outside the camp for leisure, trusting that they would return on their own (p.14). This precedent stands in stark contrast to the dehumanization that Mexicans experienced at the same camp just a few

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<sup>1</sup> In 2003, the newly created US Department of Homeland Security reorganized immigration under three agencies: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS).

years later. Not only did state agents spray DDT on Mexican bodies and clothes (common to both regular border crossers and those detained), but authorities also sprinkled potassium nitrate in their food to repress their supposedly dangerous sexual appetites. In contrast to the deference immigration authorities gave to German leisure, Mexicans had to go on hunger strike in the 1980s to demand access to legal information and a library.

This short book packs a powerful punch, divided into three sections: “Hauntings”; “Ghosts”; and “Liminal Punishments”. The first section, “Hauntings”, explains why learning the past of immigrant detention can help us understand future threats and possibilities. Emphasizing the agency of incarcerated migrants, Ordaz completes the section with a chapter on incarcerated migrant fugitivity, where the decision to escape is itself a statement on the punitive nature of detention. Likewise, the second section, “Ghosts”, begins with a powerful interpretation of why labor is such a focal point for immigrant detention narratives – people are more willing to talk about the Bracero program than they are to dive into the harms of the El Centro detention center itself. The section ends with the most powerful chapter, where Ordaz traces the ways that politically active migrants from El Salvador to Togo transform the traumas that forced them from their homelands into a transnational migrant politics that critiques the US failure to adhere to basic human rights standards and that builds transnational solidarities with racialized immigrants across language, color, and nation. Finally, to underscore what is at stake in the historical memory of immigrant incarceration, the “Liminal Punishments” section ends on migrant deaths and unmarked graves. Rather than telling us the humanizing story of the migrant who is identified, named, and remembered, Ordaz brings our attention to the US state’s dehumanizing practice of cremation which contravenes the religious beliefs of many of those people it cremated. In doing so, the book reminds us that the stark reality of premature death at a now-closed detention center prefigures the threat of contemporary immigration politics in the US and

other xenophobic countries. The book is underscored in these arguments by an incredible photo series from Robert Gumpert held at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library.<sup>2</sup>

*The Shadow of El Centro* highlights two key points in the abolitionist fight against all prisons and detention centers. First, labor exploitation is a key feature of all immigrant detention, whether the facility is publicly or privately run. Second, transnational migration politics that center those who are most oppressed facilities the strongest political analysis. Ordaz defines transnational migrant politics as a “set of strategies and solidarities used by migrants and immigration advocates to resist and protest state power within the detention and deportation regime” (p.66). In line with other analyses of abolitionist organizing, Ordaz notes that those people who are most oppressed have the least to lose and therefore take a radical stance that demands the abolition of all immigrant detention. In addition to the fact that working with the people who are most marginalized makes sense in principle, Ordaz's research shares the heartfelt language of solidarity across those who have nothing left to lose: “We are not just fighting for Medina. We are also fighting for thousands of Haitians, Africans and other third world people fleeing fascist, US supported regimes, who have the courage to seek asylum here in the heart of imperialism” (Peter Schey, quoted on p.72). Rather than appeal to the benevolence of the US, detained immigrants questioned the authority of the US to decide who is a deserving immigrant (Cacho 2012; Nguyen 2012).

While the framing of transnational migrant solidarity is a powerful counter to the racial state's violence, there are also hints of cracks in the coalition. For example, a few people monopolized the laundromat and exploited others, who eventually protested and were sent to solitary confinement. The person who protested and went to solidarity confinement, as with most of the histories of the book, is from Latin America. We have access to these stories in no small part because the organizations that supported activists in detention were exclusively focused on Mexico and/or Central America: the Interfaith Task Force on Central America, the US

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Figure 2 at <https://flexpub.com/preview/the-shadow-of-el-centro> (last accessed 10 June 2021).

Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the National Council of La Raza, the Central American Refugee Center, and occasionally the consulate of Mexico. To the extent that the archive does not share the voices of Indigenous and Black immigrants from Mexico and Central America, this may well reflect the racism that people face both at home and as migrants. As we know that Black immigrants continue to be disproportionately affected by detention and deportation in the US, it is urgent that scholars and activists alike grapple with the anti-Blackness echoed in these silences.

Labor exploitation figures into immigrant detention through both the use of the INS to control the workforce and in the ways that INS detention relied heavily on detained labor. Rather than tell a national history of immigrant detention to pair with Kelly Lytle Hernández's history of the US Border Patrol, *Migra!* (2010), Ordaz centers her story on the El Centro Immigration Detention Camp (later Detention Center, and later Processing Center). While this vantage point misses the linkages between local carceral systems and immigration enforcement (crucial in understanding the role of anti-Blackness in the prison-to-deportation pipeline), it hones in on the ways that immigrant detention ramped up as a form of labor control during Operation Wetback in the 1950s, during which fully half of INS apprehensions used the El Centro camp as a focal point (p.55). During the decades that El Centro was open, using migrant prisoners as an exploitable labor force was a constant. Indeed, Ordaz reveals that the Detention Center was actually built by unpaid migrant workers in 1954. Further, her research reminds us that youth under 18 were also forced to work with the promise of food that could also be taken away as punishment (this ceased when children under the age of 18 were moved out of the authority of the INS).

In May 1985, 84 prisoners announced that they decided to go on hunger strike at the El Centro Immigration Detention Center – they refused to eat or work until INS officials met their demands for better food, housing, healthcare, and clothing. The INS paid prisoners one dollar per day to do custodial and kitchen work, and protestors believed that their labor stoppage would halt

detention center operations (p.80). Hunger strikers won key concessions including: the ability to remain indoors with air conditioning during the day, which was crucial in the desert heat that regularly rose above 100 degrees Fahrenheit; a library; the ability to contact lawyers; and better food. (As is often the case, the food quality fluctuated following the immediate win.) Hunger strikers did not win wages higher than \$1 per day. Wages of either food or \$1 per day have been stagnant for over 50 years.

The political activism of workers at El Centro Immigration Detention Center is echoed across the US. In 2014, the El Centro Detention Center shut down, making way for a bigger private detention center (Imperial Regional Detention Center). This reflects a national trend – over 80% of detained immigrants are held in facilities that are owned and/or operated by for-profit companies. Three decades after the hunger strike at El Centro, detained workers filed a class action lawsuit against one of these companies (GEO Group) for failing to pay minimum wage and coercing people to work with threats of solitary confinement. In 2017, Washington State joined the lawsuit against GEO Group for failing to abide by state minimum wage laws.<sup>3</sup> While federal statutes require that detained immigrants must be paid at least \$1 per shift, they do not state a maximum hourly wage. In contrast, Washington has mandated at hourly wage of at least \$12 per hour for all workers who are not in State Department of Corrections custody. Here is what is at stake: if immigrants are not being punished and are in civil detention, they cannot be forced to work under laws that are supposedly to rehabilitate incarcerated workers. These lawsuits seek to topple the economic model that props up US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) through the uncompensated labor of detained workers and shifting sands of immigration status. Today, the Department of Homeland Security has one of the largest budgets in the US government, and ICE regularly overspends its annual budget and demands that US Congress backfill. Moreover, ICE has more employees than the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives combined (Vitale

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<sup>3</sup> On 18 June 2021, the court declared a mistrial. On this, see <https://tinyurl.com/unjustenrichment>



2017). As with the fight to defund policing and prisons, the fight to defund ICE seeks to defund immigrant detention as a step (non-reformist reform) towards its abolition (Mijente 2018).

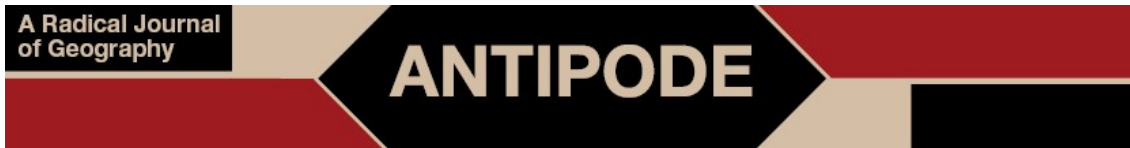
*The Shadow of El Centro* looms large over questions of immigration, incarceration, and solidarity. Ordaz's short book explains the rise of the immigrant punishment system without attributing a complex issue solely to race, capitalism, or xenophobia. More importantly, Ordaz reminds us of what is at stake in centering the solidarity work across oppressed peoples in our praxis in the years to come. While prison abolitionists and immigrant justice organizers have built alliances for years (Lloyd et al. 2013; Walia 2013), the fight against private prison too often facilitates the narrative that a state-run prison is a kinder, gentler, cage (see Gilmore 2015). In illuminating the shadow of El Centro, Ordaz demonstrates the need for place-based historical analyses of carceral regimes. The analytical power of this book, when paired with the organizing by the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), Detention Watch Network,<sup>4</sup> and many others, allows us to imagine a future without cages.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://baji.org/> and <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/immigrant-justice-movement-should-embrace-abolition>



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