

Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez. 2025. *The rise of necro/narco citizenship: Belonging and dying in the Southwest North American Region*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press. ISBN 9780816554683. \$37.95

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Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez's *The rise of necro/narco citizenship* stands as one of the most important ethnographic contributions to the study of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands in recent memory. Beyond its regional specificity, the book's significance lies in its urgent relevance to national and global political formations—especially in an era when border logics increasingly shape domestic governance. With characteristic clarity and unflinching attention to lived experience, Vélez-Ibáñez extends his decades-long ethnographic engagement into new analytic terrain, providing a framework that speaks directly to the escalating normalization of state-sanctioned abandonment, militarized security, and institutional complicity in organized violence.

The book advances a compelling theoretical synthesis, grounded in Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics—itself a critical extension of Michel Foucault's biopolitics—and articulates it through the specific, embodied realities of those navigating the criminal economies of the border. Yet Vélez-Ibáñez resists abstraction. His concept of "necro/narco-citizenship" is not a rhetorical flourish but an empirically grounded intervention. It names the condition of populations who are neither fully excluded nor protected—those who survive through forms of citizenship that are precarious, contingent, and embedded in systems of both criminal and state power.

Where the book gains particular force is in its insistence that the borderlands are not peripheral. They are central—both materially and symbolically—to the reproduction of U.S. sovereignty and racialized governance. Far from being anomalies, the practices of neglect, punishment, and selective incorporation described here operate as prototypes for broader national policies. What happens in Nogales or Ciudad Juárez does not stay there; it moves upstream, where it is adapted and redeployed in urban policing, immigration enforcement, and the criminalization of poverty across the U.S.

Vélez-Ibáñez's long-standing commitment to the communities he studies lends the book a moral authority that never slips into sentimentality. He documents without spectacle, theorizes without jargon, and critiques without evasion. The chapters draw from both archival and contemporary sources, but it is the ethnographic detail—the slow, steady accumulation of voices and stories—that anchors the work and gives it theoretical scaffolding weight. The result is a narrative of life under siege, not only from organized crime, but from the organized indifference of the state.

This is not simply a book about violence. It is a study of political production under conditions of abandonment. In this sense, Vélez-Ibáñez speaks to a larger anthropological concern: how forms of power once considered exceptional—extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, sovereign neglect—are becoming structural features of governance in both the Global South and North. The border, in his telling, is not only a zone of crossing, but a space of experimentation—where new technologies of rule are tested on the vulnerable before they are normalized elsewhere.

For scholars of political ecology, *The rise of necro/narco citizenship* offers a crucial reminder that territory is not only contested through environmental degradation or land dispossession, but through the manipulation of life itself—who is allowed to live, under what conditions, and with what future. In this regard, the book contributes meaningfully to a growing body of work that links sovereignty, violence, and environmental precarity, not as separate domains, but as co-constitutive processes.

The book is structured in a way that mirrors its theoretical and political commitments. Early chapters trace the historical and institutional forces that shaped contemporary border regimes, drawing from archival records and legal histories to situate the emergence of necro/narco citizenship within a broader genealogy of racialized exclusion. Later chapters deepen the ethnographic focus, offering intimate accounts of families, migrants, and communities negotiating survival in a terrain shaped as much by criminal enterprise as by policy decisions. Vélez-Ibáñez moves fluidly between the structural and the personal, offering a layered narrative in which policy, memory, and embodied risk intersect. This structure reinforces his central claim: that what we call "the border" is not merely a place but a system of governance extending well beyond geopolitical lines.

The impact of this book will be felt across multiple subfields. For border studies, it offers a powerful re-centering of ethnographic practice that neither romanticizes resistance nor flattens the complexity of life under duress. For political anthropologists, it demonstrates the analytical value of tracing how sovereignty is enacted through both visibility and disappearance. And for political ecology, it provides a clear demonstration of how state violence, environmental precarity, and criminal governance are interwoven in the production of territory. *The rise of necro/narco citizenship* is poised to become a touchstone for scholars grappling with the material and symbolic operations of power in contested spaces.

Vélez-Ibáñez has given us a book that is at once precise and panoramic, deeply situated and broadly resonant. It belongs not only in the canon of borderlands ethnography but in the center of contemporary debates on state violence, citizenship, and the politics of life and death. As with his earlier work on cultural capital, migration, and regional autonomy, this book reflects a lifetime of engaged, critical scholarship. It is not simply timely. It is necessary.

Reference

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