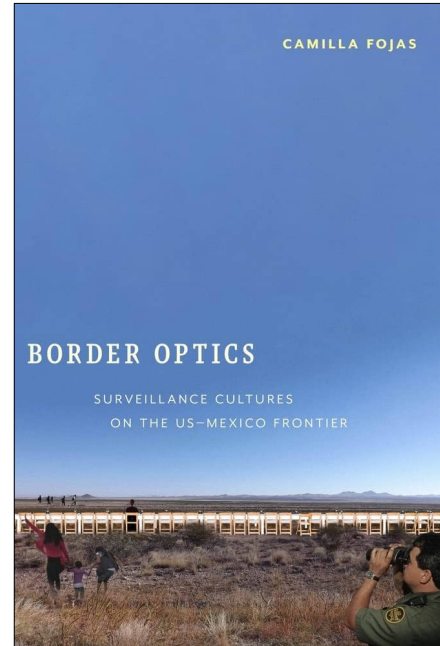


Camilla Fojas, **Border Optics: Surveillance Cultures on the US–Mexico Frontier**, New York: New York University Press, 2021, 197 pp., \$28.00 (paperback).

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International borders are remarkably consequential spaces. These are vital sites for the construction, negotiation, and enactment of collective identities and alterities—often through violently racist methods. As such, borderlands might function as the raw horizons of social orders: areas in which control is both paramount and distinctively frail, where the politics of territoriality is purported to always justify any moral violation. Unsurprisingly, borders maintain co-constitutive relations with another major meaning-making structure—the media. There is, first, the issue of how media have represented these spaces. Consider, for instance, the foundational role that Western films have played in shaping both the cinematic landscape and the mythos of the American national character. At the same time, media technologies are now crucial to borders’ material control regimes, especially through surveillance. A rich literature examines how borders have become testing grounds for the development of datafied systems of categorization and segmentation, which amplify and entrench older prejudices (see, e.g., Amoore, 2013).



In **Border Optics: Surveillance Cultures on the US–Mexico Frontier**, Camilla Fojas, a professor at Arizona State University, investigates these two broad aspects of the mediated frontier and develops an intriguing in-depth account of how these mediations intersect, that is, how popular media representations normalize the abusive surveillance apparatus employed by Western states—especially, the U.S. government’s efforts to govern its southern frontier.

The “integration of these structures of signification and material effects” (p. 3) marks what she calls *borderveillance*, a sprawling visibility regime deeply rooted in colonial imaginaries and powerfully strengthened after 9/11 and the so-called War on Terror. A central thesis of the book seems to be that borders might be materially controlled through agents, watchtowers, cameras, and drones—but the legitimacy of this control apparatus hinges on how it is normalized in what might appear benign TV shows on frontier policing. In advancing this idea, the book dialogues with at least two different fields: critical security studies and the branch of surveillance studies that looks into the symbolic construction of monitoring practices. However, *Border Optics* can appeal to a much broader audience: indeed, anyone interested in the nature of current geopolitical power.

The book is organized into essay-like chapters, the topics of which compose a rich—if somewhat unsystematic—mosaic of the multiple mediations of the borders. It would be impossible to do justice here

to the kaleidoscopic style of this book, which touches on themes as diverse as Heidegger's philosophy of technology and wildlife filmmaking's anthropomorphism. Instead of that, I offer, first, a summary of each chapter and then a short critical comment.

Chapter 1—the book's strongest, in my view—concerns "borderveillant media," the term Fojas uses to describe not only "strategic studies, policy recommendations, news reports, and congressional hearings" (p. 29) but, first and foremost, several reality shows about the U.S.–Mexico border. TV programs like National Geographic Channel's *Border Security* and *Border Wars* "glorify surveillance cultures . . . and recruit the public into supporting the practices and principles of borderveillance" (p. 25), the book proposes. Fojas argues that the development and popularity of these shows are closely associated with shifts in border security policy in the United States. From the 1990s to the 2000s, this policy focused on deterrence, with a strong emphasis on surveillance. Expensive and fraught with delays and issues, that plan was replaced in 2011 with a preemptive approach that required a further expansion of surveillance systems, now toward the "entirety of the nation" (p. 31). It is precisely in the late 2000s and early 2010s that those reality TV shows proliferated. In Fojas's view, the ever-increasing centrality of those systems "amplified the televisuality" of the border, making the "spectacle" of security "more dramatic"—in a way, surveillance capacity begets surveillance culture, she contends (pp. 31–32). Yet these televised real-life dramas concern not such technologies per se but, mostly, the stories of the border agents, who are cast as fierce but humane neo-cowboys guarding the nation, all-powerful officers who might also be put at risk by the same security system they enact (p. 51). The depiction of migrants seems to fully align with the sort of racism underpinning U.S. borders' security. They appear as muted yet dangerous and cunning bodies, often characterized as "mice" escaping from the "cats" (i.e., the agents). It is not that they have no agency but that their agency, when expressed, is consistently criminalized by the shows.

Chapter 2 turns to the topic of drones, which the author considers to be the "master symbol" of preemptive surveillance at the border (p. 66). Moving between official discourse, philosophy, and comments on multiple forms of media, this chapter argues that drones represent, in material and symbolic terms, a continuation between post-9/11 foreign wars and domestic conflicts, which creates parallels between the "terrorist" and the "migrant" and renders social control into a supposedly surgical, efficient, and automated endeavor. In reality, we learn, these drones are used to shepherd migrants to "dangerous and inhospitable terrain," exposing them to "death and injury" (p. 65), and in the future might be equipped with guns.

Chapter 3 tackles a rather different aspect of the narratives about the U.S.–Mexico border: the discrepant tropes around the wilderness of that region, and how they connect with the U.S. government's goals of securitizing it. Fojas reminds us that the cultural history of the border is suffused with and tensioned by its characterizations as both a natural space (pristine and in need of preservation) and social space (lawless and in need of security). These ideas are conceptually linked with Wild West mythologies, which "delimit national identity through an exclusionary and nativist logic" (p. 98). Empirically, this chapter centers on another media product, an episode of Discovery Channel's docuseries *Discovery Presents* named "Wild Border," on the animals living in the American southern frontier. Fojas explores the analogies between this show and the programs commented on in chapter 1, suggesting that "Wild

Borders,” “at times,” grants “animals more agency and entitlement to the land, sometimes in a manner that obviates human-rights issues related to migrant travel” (p. 104).

In chapter 4, the book returns to reality shows about border security. It zooms out of the United States to discuss “global borderveillant media”: a host of similar programs produced in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—the countries that make up the so-called Five Eyes intelligence alliance. These shows “underscore the global industrial and state collaboration to standardize . . . practices, technologies, and political processes” (p. 124), constituting the extremely popular—and sometimes politically divisive—“entertainment arm” of the Five Eyes’ border security (p. 125). While local peculiarities are respected, all these shows converge in promoting “border security” as “premised on the affective dynamics between border agents and travelers and shaped by the logic of the surveillant sort” (p. 131), representations that can train audiences to “discern” who should be allowed or not in those countries (p. 139).

At this point, the reader will be forgiven for assuming that borderveillance is both supremely oppressive and profoundly entertaining and, as such, also impervious to reform and substantial resistance. However, in its final chapter, *Border Optics* does point to critiques and alternatives—not simplistic prepackaged solutions but other ways of conceiving the border “beyond the surveillant imaginary” (p. 149). Fojas turns to proposals on how to abolish or supplant borders, futuristic fiction that envisions the possibility of collective opposition, and design plans and provocations on how to remake the frontier into spaces of proper socialization.

*Border Optics* is a pleasant read that offers a thorough panorama of the links between Western border security and media. However, a case can be made on the extent to which the book’s central message is particularly original. Surely, there is a lot to learn from the analysis of said TV shows, the multiple forays into the history of the border, and Fojas’s rather inventive associations and insights—especially in chapter 3. At the same time, the notion that contemporary borders produce profound injustices along racial and national lines is—despite its political accuracy—hardly novel. In this sense, the book’s unwavering point on how media representations work merely and only as propaganda for governments’ security goals may be understood as a missed opportunity to nuance and complexify that message. No reader would reasonably question on which side of the dispute these shows are. But the book does suggest (without unpacking) tensions between the programs and the control structure they are supposed to support (e.g., the mention of border agents as “martyrs” of the system in chapter 1). Furthermore, what audiences make of these programs—whether they are truly “trained” to accept the symbolic othering of “migrants”—is a crucial question that *Border Optics* leaves unanswered. Doing so would be essential to understanding which cracks exist in these historically significant regimes of power.

### Reference

Amoore, L. (2013). *The politics of possibility: Risk and security beyond probability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.