Book Review: Brooke Mantei

“Migrants are perfect prey because they’re invisible, always hiding from authorities” (14). This quote from *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, a compilation of dispatches published online by journalist Óscar Martínez, encapsulates the undocumented migrant experience in Mexico and how control and protection of the informal market associated with migrants is essentially non-existent. Óscar Martínez is an El Salvadorian journalist following the trails of migrants from Mexico’s southern to northern border to show the pervasiveness of conflict surrounding those crossing borders “illegally”. Originally published in 2010 in Spanish as *Los migrantes que no importan* (“the migrants who don’t matter”), Martínez’s account is based on primary research consisting of direct accounts from migrants, coyotes, government organization workers, police officials, locals, and many others associated with these trails. Martínez’s credentials rise from the fact that he has directly put himself in the position of migrants, allowing him to create close and trusted relationships and receive insight into honest and comprehensive accounts of these people’s experiences. He also has a unique positionality in that he is Central American, therefore able to relate to these migrants, but is also a journalist ‘legally’ in Mexico. The focus of the book is primarily on migrants who travel through Mexico from Central American countries, such as Honduras and El Salvador, on their way to the United States and those who come into contact with the trails. Martínez’s work is extremely valuable because it provides firsthand accounts of the struggles faced by many on the migrant trails and shares stories which contextualize and personalize the large numbers which are often discussed in academia. Martínez’s book is an effective and comprehensive account of the migrant experience in Mexico due to its extensive primary research. However, there is a lack of critical evaluation of his sources, which should be considered by the reader.

The direct accounts about how the race and “illegality” of Central American migrants makes them vulnerable to exploitation by local Mexicans and national cartels allows for theories about race and migration and deportation regimes to be effectively demonstrated in reality. In Martinez’s interviews with undocumented migrant women working as prostitutes, often against their will, many explain that “Salvadoran and Honduran women are particularly sought after for this business because, unlike Mexicans […] they tend to have lighter skin”. Often, migrants “wear the border on their bodies”, making them targets for exploitation. These Central American women look different than indigenous Mexicans, as they have lighter skin which is considered to be more desirable, therefore making them vulnerable to sexual exploitation because their undocumented status leaves them without formal rights, therefore without the ability to report abuse to officials without fear of being deported. The trafficking system of which these women are a part of is a “complex system of everyday lies and coercion” and rape is

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid, xvi.
described as a “tax that must be paid”. The threat of being sent back to their home countries or not making it to the United States is what can be described as an effective mechanism of controlling the behaviour and exploitation of these women in a country where their rights are not protected. Altogether, Martínez’s account of the migrant experience in Mexico, specifically of those working in prostitution rings, directly demonstrates how racialization and deportation regimes relate to the exploitation of migrants.

However, a weakness of Martínez’s research is that the evaluation of his sources is unclear. The first accounts of those involved in the migrant trails are told in informal settings and Martínez often needed to work hard to get certain people to talk to him. For example, when Martínez did his interviews with prostitutes along the Mexican-Guatemalan border, he was only able to gain access to one bar, as others have threatened to “lynch journalists” and when he did talk to these women, several were very guarded and hesitant. Despite this, there was no critical evaluation of what these women told him and their stories are told as if they are facts. In addition, the story he tells of a coyote he met near a migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca can be called into question because Martínez describes the coyote as “crazy” as he displays very erratic behaviour. Martínez adds that the coyote says he will trade his story for coffee and cigarettes and goes missing immediately after their conversation is done. Again, Martínez does not provide a consideration of the possibility of stories being embezzled or partially untrue, he just narrates them uncritically as they are told to him. However, this could have been a conscious choice on Martínez’s behalf. There is the possibility that he simply wanted to share the stories of the migrant trails, and not provide a critical evaluation of what he witnessed. Overall, I found that the lack of critical evaluation of his interviewees left doubt about the truthfulness of some of the accounts, therefore making them less impactful.

Altogether, Martínez provides a very detailed and eye-opening account of how the danger of the migrant trails is felt by everyone in Mexico. The book is extremely useful in contextualizing and personalizing the migrant experience as well as providing insight as to how mass migration can affect the lives of locals as well. Rather than simply providing academic considerations, the book has a very personal note which allows it to be more impactful to readers than academic writing. It is extremely relevant to the modern political climate in the United States, with the rapid rise of anti-immigration rhetoric, specifically about Mexican migrants, kick-started by President Donald Trump. Historians should consider the significance of this book because it is an important piece of primary research from a journalist with a unique positionality who was able to gain the trust of those in his surroundings and tell their stories in a respectful and effective manner.

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9 Ibid, 130.
10 Ibid.