

BOOK REVIEW

Robert J. Duran, *The Gang Paradox: Inequalities and Miracles on the US-Mexico Border* (Columbia University Press, 2018)

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THE OPENING OF ROBERT J. DURAN'S BOOK *THE GANG PARADOX: Inequalities and Miracles on the US-Mexico Border* immediately takes the reader to a community center in New Mexico, where an audience of nearly 50 individuals (many of whom are elderly) are gathered patiently to listen to a presentation given by David, a middle-aged Latino man who runs a faith-based organization focused on gangs and has asserted himself in the community as a gang expert. His presentation for this gathering is focused on the subject of helping parents and/or caretakers learn how to decipher whether or not their children are involved in "Hispanic youth gangs" (1). However, at the onset of his presentation, David begins with a clarification as to why he is only focusing on Latino gangs. He reminds his audience that it only makes sense because the majority of individuals residing in Chaparral (an unincorporated small community in the Doña Ana and Otero counties in New Mexico) are of Mexican descent. He then goes on to say, "We have a lot of kids who believe that we owe them something. I don't owe them a darn thing" (2). David explains his disappointment in the lack of morals and absent work ethic, focus, and *ganas* (will) among the young people in their community. He insists that if young people involved in gang life had embraced the values and virtues of US meritocracy instead of succumbing to a sense of entitlement, then they would have avoided becoming involved in their local gangs in the first place.

Duran's recounting of his initial dismay at hearing a Latino faith-based gang expert vilify gang-affiliated young people and attribute their involvement to personal failings and bad parenting skills serves as a point of departure for the book's inquiry into how and why borderland communities like those in

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New Mexico have traditionally framed the issue of borderland Latino gangs as a moral panic. More specifically, he offers a close examination of the role of Latino law enforcement officers' perpetuation of the hypercriminalization of individuals involved in gangs and the legacy of settler colonialism in shaping the structural conditions that Latino young people must navigate in their communities. By doing so, he (1) offers a nuanced understanding of why community members like David are not an anomaly in how they approach the issue of gangs, as he represents the attitudes to which the majority of people in borderland communities adhere, and (2) demonstrates how these conservative worldviews ultimately shape punitive institutional responses from the community toward these gangs. Unlike most gang studies that focus solely on highlighting gang activity and violence, Duran underlines the contradictions embedded in what he refers to as the "gang paradox." Duran accomplishes this goal by counterbalancing dominant narratives in Latino borderland communities that suggest high levels of gang activity and violence (in turn justifying the need for zero-tolerance policies and antigang suppression tactics) with empirical evidence (i.e., "miracles") he encounters in the US-Mexico borderlands that contradicts these claims. Here, Duran provides examples of young Latino people attending and graduating college and lower rates of gang involvement, gang violence, and homicide that demonstrate the grit and resilience embodied by the Latino community against the colonial-carceral geopolitical landscape with which they must contend. Duran concludes his book by providing practical solutions to address the environmental and economic disparities deeply entrenched in the US-Mexico borderlands to significantly reduce young people's interest in the gang subculture, encourage a serious investment in the upliftment of these underserved communities of color that have been marginalized to the outskirts, and reshift the public imaginary away from relying solely on moral panic approaches to gangs that often result in further demonization and dehumanization of young people involved in gang life.

One of the biggest strengths of Duran's book lies in his conscientious effort to debunk theoretical framings such as the culture of poverty and the superpredator thesis that have been used to examine the issue of gangs within mainstream sociology and criminology. These traditional frameworks have resulted in reductionist portrayals of gangs and individuals involved in gang life as merely "blood thirsty" and "savage animals" (e.g., Bennet et. al. 1996, Berkman 1995, DiIulio 1995). Duran succeeds in this effort by combining both settler colonialism and critical race theory within a decolonial framework to analyze racialized oppression and explain both the

construction of the gang problem and the social and structural responses to it. As a gang studies scholar myself, who is invested in producing knowledge on the multidimensionality (Vigil 2010) of individuals involved in gangs and exposing how the state specifically subjugates Brown young people as vulnerable “human targets” (Rios 2017) to institutions of colonized social control (e.g., law enforcement), I appreciate Duran’s choice to center the role of settler colonialism. Most gang studies scholarship has failed to examine how legacies of colonialism, in conjunction with the role of the carceral state, are responsible for creating the social and material conditions that result in the emergence of gangs and racialized young peoples’ involvement in them.

To this end, Duran dedicates the first half of his book to providing historical context for the origination of New Mexico, El Paso, Texas, and the US-Mexico border region from 1598 to the early 1900s, which he asserts is the first reporting of gangs in this area. He reminds readers of the history of double colonization experienced by Mexican peoples from the Spanish and later the United States with the purchase of the Southwest through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Duran also provides the early history of *pachuquismo*, or the subculture of Mexican Americans and Chicanos associated with zoot suits and street gangs during the 1940s, and later the development of gang activity in El Paso, Texas, claiming that gangs were not a formal organization until the 1940s and 1950s. Duran notes that whereas community leaders and church organizations quickly responded to these developments by organizing athletic programs to provide positive outlets to steer young people away from the lure of gang life, law enforcement launched a “war on rat packs” (i.e., gang members) and undesirable Latino residents with an increase in their surveillance and law enforcement (17). These shifting structural and social dynamics are important historical pieces of evidence that Duran later uses to explain how the very tactics of colonial social control from the past have evolved and made their way into the early 2000s, when he begins his research on the contemporary developments of gangs in the Southwest borderlands.

It is by taking a revisionist historical approach that Duran is able to contextualize the lived realities for both marginalized young people and other residents in these Latino borderlands who remain greatly affected by the lingering remnants of structural conditions of the past. In this way, Duran follows the call from critical criminologist Jennifer Ortiz (forthcoming) “for a return to critical, ethnographic prison [and gang] studies that center structural variables and individual voices.” In centering the settler colonial history of the Southwest, Duran helps to explain how previous institutions of colonial

social control have dangerously made their way into the present to police communities of color and gangs with more precision. This methodological and analytical commitment demonstrates how imperative it is that scholars and public intellectuals provide accurate and holistic accounts of the social phenomena we study. This is particularly true in the realm of gang studies, so as to avoid complicity in pathologizing gangs and individuals involved in gang life, an analytical choice that has real life-and-death consequences for the communities it purports to understand.

An additional strength of the book lies in Duran's inclusion of empirical evidence to reveal how police officers of color are complicit in both the racial dehumanization of young gang-affiliated people and the colonial-carceral project that ensnares them. Duran's evidence demonstrates how the state strategically uses police officers of color both to maintain and uphold colonial social control and to insulate its institutions from accusations or claims from the community that point to the racist and/or discriminatory practices deployed by law enforcement against vulnerable populations in borderland communities—primarily poor, working-class Latino peoples. I found it compelling how Duran begins his book by allowing us to see a glimpse into the ways working-class community members like David make meaning and sense of the gang problem but also shows us how dangerous these ideologies around gangs are in their ability to influence and shape the way middle-class social actors like police officers of color (who have institutionally backed power) choose to confront and deal with young gang-affiliated individuals. This is a crucial intervention within gang studies, as few studies have analyzed how people of color within marginalized communities are also complicit in executing and cosigning punitive institutional responses to gangs; it is not just racist white cops and/or politicians. Duran attempts to explain the contradictions and complicity embedded in the racialized dehumanization and demonization of Latino gangs by community members and police officers of color as a manifestation of an internalized colonial logic.

Although Duran's empirical research and theoretical analyses offer important insights, I found it difficult to follow his arguments concerning how and why people of color in the community and law enforcement internalize a colonial logic that denigrates those involved in Latino borderland gangs. Granted, there have not been any gang studies (to my knowledge) that have used settler colonialism to help explain the continuing existence of gangs and/or why institutional responses to them have only unforgivingly heightened. Thus, Duran deserves credit for his attempt. However, below, I offer some comments on how a more consistent and capacious decolonial

reading of the gang paradox would have added further explanatory power to Duran's overall arguments.

One of my primary concerns lies with Duran's offering to use internalized colonialism as a way to explain why police officers of color and community members like David engage in perpetuating moral panic rhetoric about borderland Latino gangs. Internal colonialism, a theory first popularized by Gonzalez Casanova (1965), recognizes the insidious cycles of how colonized peoples (once fully integrated in the dominant culture) internalize the spirit of colonial conquest by then subjugating other racial and ethnic groups to the very same forms of oppression forced upon them by their oppressors. My issue here is that Duran did not make clear distinctions between settler colonialism in relation to other forms of colonialism. By not doing so, it would be difficult for readers who are not familiar with the field of postcolonial studies to understand how or why these distinctions matter in terms of their different roles in creating the social and material conditions racialized subjects must contend with—let alone understand how the oppressed undergo processes of self-hatred and recreate the same oppressive conditions for people in their own community. Thus, I wonder why Duran did not include scholar Anibal Quijano's (2000) notion of coloniality to provide a deeper analysis and demonstration of how the intersections of race, class, and gender are connected to the very structures of power that are born out of colonial conquest. Although he provides a historical chapter of the double colonization of New Mexico and El Paso, Texas, Duran does not locate his analysis of the history of Latino borderland gangs in the historical project of coloniality, nor does he lay out how historical practices of racial dehumanization continue to play a defining role in the contemporary social historical experiences of Brown people. This would have ultimately better explained how settler colonialism has evolved and how it manifests in real time as it relates to the public imaginary of Latino gangs in the US-Mexico borderlands community. In addition, if Duran had incorporated Frantz Fanon's (2008) work on the internalization of oppression among racialized peoples, it could have given readers a nuanced insight behind the psychology of internalized oppression. There was room for Duran to interrogate more deeply how community members and officers of color buy into and perpetuate what I call the colonial-carceral gaze. Although he offers the solution of cultural consciousness to ameliorate the legacy of colonization in the Southwest, it is unclear how successful or feasible such a strategy might be, particularly among law enforcement agencies.

Duran also could have devoted additional analysis to examining the processes of racialization of Mexican Americans, which would have allowed for a more acute discussion of how race, in all its constituent parts, is formed, challenged, and reconstituted in relation to “Hispanic” gang members. Although Duran does discuss the shifting politics of including Mexican Americans in the racial category of whiteness, he does not explain the evolution of the ethnic labeling and construction of who is Mexican or why those of Mexican descent in the US-Mexico borderlands identify as Hispanic rather than (perhaps) Chicanx like those on the West Coast. Again, by employing Quijano’s notion of the coloniality of power as a matrix that operates through hegemonic control over subjectivity on a multiplicity of logics, we can take account for the continuities of racial meaning beyond the demise of formal colonialism. The conceptual notion of coloniality could have also explained how colonial logics underpin the mechanisms that are responsible for the production of the other (in this case, gangs and gang members).

Overall, Duran’s empirical research demonstrates that even when and if racialized young people who are involved in gang life want to do well, historical structural processes entrench these young people in systems of inequality and oppression that limit their agency. Duran’s book offers gang studies scholars a new blueprint for critical scholarship on the framing of the issue of gangs and gang violence, and it also pushes us to think about what viable solutions we might offer besides an analysis of the issues at hand. Future gang studies scholarship should address how variations of colonialism have evolved over the years and manifest today in our understandings of and approaches to gangs and gang-involved individuals.

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