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The Shadow of El Centro: A History of Migrant Incarceration and Solidarity

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The Shadow of El Centro excavates an otherwise forgotten account of immigrant detention in southern California. By leveraging source material from Mexico City and Washington, DC, Jessica Ordaz supplements what would have been a less complete picture contained in records across the US Southwest. The book argues that El Centro Immigration Detention Camp – which opened in 1945 in Imperial Valley and lasted, in one form or another, until 2014 – represents a lasting and influential source of legal violence.

The metaphor of hauntings ties together the book's narrative. Readers learn about the troubled roots of a detention center built far enough away from prying eyes. Functioning largely in the dark and with limited oversight, El Centro staff routinely tested the limits of power over detainees' lives and labor, especially through violence and abuse carried out in liminal spaces within its walls. Ordaz deliberately uses the language of imprisonment to describe detention conditions because, although immigrant detention formally falls outside of the criminal justice system, El Centro bore many unmistakable hallmarks of a prison and a site of punishment. Ordaz details its origins in wartime logics at the end of World War II and as a conduit for the exploitation of Mexican detainees' labor. As immigrant detention became increasingly common, El Centro functioned as an early and longstanding site where immigration authorities figured out what they could (and could not) do to detainees. An in-depth account of the 1985 hunger strike is a standout chapter and details flashpoints of resistance between detainees and immigration officials at a time when detention was well on its way to becoming routine.

The main contributions of this place-based study are two-fold. Its long-term view of El Centro guides readers through 69 years where detention authorities and detainees shaped (and were shaped) by changing contexts. Crucially, Ordaz also centers detainees' experiences and acts of defiance (e.g., escapes, hunger strikes) as an organizing principle of El Centro.

The book also raises a number of questions worth further study. Although we learn about efforts by Mexican immigrants fleeing both employers and El Centro, future work could examine when the interests of employers and detention officials overlap and when they conflict – and why. The book also weighs in on whether the immigration system is broken or working as intended, and Ordaz favors the latter interpretation. But the evidence presented is instead consistent with a tension between immigration authorities' best-laid plans followed by halting, posthoc changes in practices and policies. Finally, the book begins to demonstrate how El Centro shaped later detention practices at other detention facilities. A complete account of the reach (and limits) of any one site's influence over later enforcement trends could precisely detail the sequence of events and decisions that ran through a place like Imperial Valley and then diffused across an expanding, tentacled network of detention facilities.

Scholars, policymakers, advocates, and students looking for insights into how we arrived at today's epoch of mass immigrant detention and deportation have much to gain from this important account.