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Zavala, Oswaldo. *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist: Narco-Trafficking and Culture in the US and Mexico*, translated by William Savinar. Vanderbilt University Press, 2022. 206 pp.

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A former journalist for *El Diario de Juárez*, scholar Oswaldo Zavala has first-hand experience with the drug wars within Mexico and the United States. Moreover, he is an expert on Mexican drug literature and the chronicles that the drug wars have inspired. His book challenges the myths of cartels and the creation of formidable (and convenient) enemies that are routinely used by politicians on both sides of the border to justify state-sponsored terror. Zavala focuses on contemporary Mexican and United States history and literature, but his analysis applies to the past as well as the present. His work is a profound contribution to the growing body of literature, history, and social science analysis of the numerous drug wars.

He opens his analysis by highlighting Felipe Calderón's final speech to celebrate the founding of the Mexican Air Force and Army. Yet, that day, a group of soldiers showcased how they check cars for drugs. During the farcical exercise, one of the soldiers dressed as a drug trafficker with a Versace shirt, crocodile-skinned boots, and a sombrero. The stereotypical image of a drug trafficker drew giggles from the president and his wife and outright laughter from the Secretaries of National Defense and the Navy. Even they recognized the ridiculousness of the caricature that was an echo of the past, but continues to ripple across four decades, despite the fact that those in the drug business look like international bankers. Zavala writes that "cartels are a symbolic device whose main function is to hide the real networks of official power that determined the flow of drug trafficking (4)." The pursuit to hide and obscure the role of politicians, police, and elites in the trade is a historic continuity that scholars, journalists, and writers continued to grapple with in times of increasing violence. Zavala builds on the work of Mexican sociologist Luis Astorga, Canadian scholar Dawn Paley, and Italian journalist Federico Mastrogiovanni, who has argued that the drug violence coincided with the energy crisis in Mexico and the privatization of the sector. Thus, Mexican and other journalists have addressed how the displacement of people during the drug war has facilitated the expansion of certain industries, from manufacturing, transportation, mining, hydrocarbon, and new Walmart stores. I would also add illicit economies that work in tandem with these sectors.

Since the early 1900s, the US and Mexican governments have created enemies to inspire fear and use methods of control and state-sponsored terror. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, xenophobia and the drug trade created the Mexican "anti-chino" movement in which Chinese immigrants who were brought to the "hotlands" by Mexican government officials who worked with the triads to move people from China to Mexico to work. Once their communities grew and their successes became envious, Mexicans of Chinese descent were characterized as criminals, drug pushers and traffickers, addicts, and sexual deviants. After creating an "other," the Mexican government began to raid Chinese businesses and establishments, confiscating property that was allegedly used in narcotics production, trafficking, or illegal gambling. The creation of enemies among the Mexican immigrant communities repeated, like in the US, to focus on Jewish and Muslim Mexicans, who too were allegedly associated with the drug trade.

As Zavala demonstrates, the Mexican government continued to craft and create enemies of its own citizens, such as student protesters who were also associated with the drug trade in the 1970s. Yet, former police joined with the drug traffickers, something that replayed with Los Zetas, which emerged from Mexico's special forces. Later, members joined the Gulf organization, first as enforcers and would later form their own organized crime group with military prowess, skilled in warfare and counter-insurgency methods. Yet, the models embraced in the 1970s emerged in the 1920s, when Mexican governors and politicians, particularly from northern Mexico, took over drug trafficking operations. Zavala's analysis suggests that the connection to past violence is particularly important to understand the current drug war. Of which, Mexico, like the United States, is one century old drug war that has different chapters in this long history of drug wars. The roles of politicians and police and their tools of repression look remarkably similar except when the term cartel is introduced. For many years, the United States could not fathom that Mexicans could build organized crime networks that were global, vertical, and horizontal, with overlapping alliances across the globe. Cartels remain tied to an emblematic image of the Mexican drug trafficker that does not look like a polished politician or businessperson on both sides of the border.

Zavala argues that some novelists furthered these images through their fictional interpretation that captured the realities of life in Sinaloa and along the border, but these crime noir novels also repeated some of the narratives manufactured by the state and its allies. He also confronts his journalist colleagues who have embraced journalistic chronicling which, he argues, uses a radical practice of cultural interpretation that diminishes our understanding of the historical transformations of the official discourse of violence that depoliticizes the most urgent discussions related to social

inequality, the criminalization of poverty, and the advent of police discipline that manifests itself as in a permanent state of exception unprecedented in the history of modern Mexico (24). Thus, terms have been crafted with a sole purpose, such as cartel, drug trafficker, and hitman (sicario), and those terms have been embraced in literary works, journalistic chronicles, movies, and television and streaming series.

Zavala's book is a must-read for any scholar working on the drug trade, organized crime, and transnational policing. He challenges us to ever question our assumptions, our sources and methods, and our understanding of contemporary analysis of other scholars, journalists, and writers who, on the surface, appear to be experts but sometimes serve as the mouthpiece for governments that continue wars on drugs at a tremendous expense.