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Liminal Criminality in the US-Mexican Borderlands: Cops, Gangs, and Immigrants between Violence and Vigilance

The US-Mexican borderlands have long been a contested space of violence and vigilance, constantly watched over by law enforcement officers, gang members, ordinary citizens, vigilantes, and new immigrants, anticipating the next attack against themselves. Due to a unique constellation of cataclysmic circumstances—the pandemic, unemployment, closed borders, mass deportations, the killing of George Floyd, and the elections—2020 was marked by heightened struggle and vigilance. In the resultant context of uncertainty, the lines between different gang territories in San Diego, California, are being redrawn. Accordingly, certain members of the media and the public are calling for increased “law and order” against gang violence, while the Black Lives Matter movement and other organizers continue to protest police violence and push for the defunding of law enforcement.

Challenging these simplistic but politically potent narratives, this paper shows that the boundaries between law enforcement, gang members, and civil society in the Chicanx (Mexican American) neighborhood of Barrio Logan are in fact porous. Recent interviews with men who have a personal history of brutality and a heightened sense of alertness provide insights into the ways in which local people’s relationship to criminality and law enforcement is often ambiguous and varies considerably from individual to individual. Criminality emerges as a liminal concept that describes both gangsters and cops. Complicating claims that police violence and citizens’ vigilance is needed in order to contain the threat of “criminal aliens” (an increasingly common concept that conflates immigration and criminality), I argue that these divergently racialized categories of people—citizens, immigrants, gangsters—are constructed and maintained through vigilance and violence.

This work-in-progress paper is part of a larger DFG-funded research project at the Collaborative Research Center (SFB 1369) “Cultures of Vigilance”, LMU Munich (PI: Eveline Dürr).

Catherine Whittaker is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, and a Visiting Scholar in Anthropology at the University of California San Diego, USA. She is currently working on two book manuscripts, one on vigilant subjectivities among Latinos in the US-Mexican borderlands (with Eveline Dürr and Jonathan Alderman) and another on the interconnectedness of love and violence in Central Mexico (based on her 2019 PhD thesis at the University of Edinburgh). Her research specializes on structures of violence, gender and racialization in Mexico and the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, and her next project is looking at transnational flows of militarized masculinity.

Institutskolloquium Wintersemester 2021/22 (Leitung: Markus Verne)

Wann? Dienstag, 30. November 2021, 18:15–19:45 Uhr

Wo? HS 13 (in Präsenz, 3G)

Weitere Informationen: www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de