

BOOK REVIEWS

JONES, REECE. *White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the United States from Chinese Exclusion to the Border Wall*. Beacon Press. 2021. 239 pp. ISBN: 9780807054062 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780807007266 (softcover), ISBN: 9780807054123 (ebook).

Geographer Reece Jones has explored state borders, border enforcement, and the political alternatives to both in several of his works. In *White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the United States from Chinese Exclusion to the Border Wall*, Jones charts the history of US migration legislation, as well as its political and intellectual foundations. If the question is ‘How did we get here?’, the answer Jones provides is ‘Not by chance.’ His argument is simple enough: that ‘immigration laws are about racial exclusion’ (p. 5), although the journey to that conclusion is anything but simple. Starting from the Gold Rush and ending with Donald Trump’s presidency, the book feels far larger than its 239 pages and 16 chapters. Jones brings to the fore an astonishing array of characters, politicians, journalists, academics, economic and cultural elites, and grassroots organisers, all who have, over time, shaped the exclusionary and violent border and immigration regime of the country. The voyage Jones takes readers on is enlightening and sometimes breathtaking. By meticulously cataloguing life histories, correspondence, archives, speeches, and court documents, amongst others, he carefully crafts a story of interconnections and interdependencies, intellectual genealogies, and political continuities. Moreover, Jones is an expert storyteller. Written in a lively, accessible, and jargon-free style, the book not only makes a convincing case for dismantling the current US border regime, but does so in a way that makes crystal clear why this dismantling is required:

‘[B]ecause immigration restrictions are a tool of white supremacy, then free movement must be the position of anyone opposed to it’ (p. 198).

Jones is essentially arguing that border and immigration policies in the US have, in one way or another, always rested on the notion and fear of a ‘great replacement’. That is, migrants threaten not just the lifestyle—however one defines it—or the financial security of white Americans, but their very existence. White supremacists chanting ‘You. Will not. Replace us’ as they marched through the University of Virginia grounds in 2017 is only the latest expression of that fear. Rooted in colonial imagination and eugenic ideas justifying the notion of superiority of white Northern European ‘stock’, the position remains conflicted. On the one hand, a belief in unquestionable superiority also justifies hierarchy and domination; yet, this superiority is, on the other hand, so fragile that it is constantly endangered by the mere presence of those deemed inferior. Curtailing, and ultimately stopping, migration has become one of the major ways to protect that superiority and the purity of the ‘white race’. One of the key merits of *White Borders* is demonstrating how prevalent this thinking has persisted over the past two centuries, how it has shaped discussions and debates, and how it has found its way into various fora, from the obvious like the House of Representatives and the Senate to less obvious fora such as environmental movements. We are also witnesses to how white supremacist thinking

has travelled from the salons of intellectual and cultural elites in Boston and New York to the average resident in Michigan or Wisconsin.

This book is structured so that each chapter begins with a scene or the introduction to a new person before moving on to the broader context. For example, we learn about Chy Lung, who boarded the SS Japan in Hong Kong in 1874; Albert Johnson, the journalist turned politician who became the chair of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalisation in 1919; and Cordelia Scaife May (1928–2005), an ultra-wealthy heiress who became a crucial funder of various white supremacist endeavours, especially those centred around the network set up by white nationalist, environmentalist, and anti-immigration activist John Tanton. Through these individuals, a broader picture emerges, pieces fall into place, and the laws, memos, policy documents, and correspondence come alive. This structural choice is one of the clear strengths of *White Borders*. It allows for a natural back-and-forth movement between the particular and the general, weaving together a narrative, which is both instructive and terrifying. At the same time, however, the sheer number of individuals and the speed at which they are introduced to the reader makes one sometimes stop to catch their breath. The breadth of knowledge and the depth of the material presented, whilst transmitted in a compelling and accessible form, require focus, at least from a non-American reader for whom the vast majority of individuals were previously unknown.

As a European reader, one who himself has worked on borders, bordering, and their racist roots, it is obvious that *White Borders* is the product of a quite specific moment in history in a rather specific political context. Without the ascension of highly specific forms of white supremacy, now branded the 'alt-right', culminating in the inauguration of Donald

Trump as the 45th President of the United States, this book would have looked rather different. The specific historical moment, and the need for the critical scholarship it engenders, are also rather obvious from the details and time periods granted primary importance. The two World Wars, as well as the Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights movement all receive sufficient attention, but nowhere near as much as the early twentieth century or the growth of contemporary white supremacist movements from the 1970s onwards. This by no means suggests that this book is limited in its scope, but it is worth noting that the book presents a specific narrative—during another historical moment, that narrative could have prioritised other people and other stories. Another thing which a European reader notes is the absence of any discussion of fascism. Despite the interconnections and the shared colonial history, this represents a clear difference between Europe and the United States in terms of how white supremacy and, indeed, resistance to it, are constructed—through antifascism or through antiracism. *White Borders* does examine European thoughts at the time, from Francis Galton to Adolf Hitler, and how such thinking made its way across the Atlantic (and back). However, as the book moves further towards the present moment, the specifically American version of 'great replacement' theories and racism stand on their own. In fact, between the lines, one can appreciate a reversal of sorts: how American racist and anti-immigration thought came to not just influence, but define the political context elsewhere, especially in Europe. What happened next could be the theme for another work.

White Borders represents an important contribution not just to critical scholarship on migration, borders, race, and racism, but also to the political struggles around the same issues. It offers a chance to recognise and historicise

developments at a particular moment—some might argue a watershed moment—when far-right talking points have not only made their way into everyday politics, but, instead, have come to define it. It is simultaneously an interrogation of and a call to think differently. Jones does not delve too deeply into historical resistance to the policies and debates it catalogues, but simultaneously urges us to look

for alternatives. Despite its North American focus, this book also offers a partial answer to the question of ‘How we got here?’ in other contexts as well, especially in Europe.

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