

## BOOK REVIEW

Gibler, John. *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 218 pp.

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**I**N a gripping first-person narrative, John Gibler offers his second book of nonfiction from within a politically, socially and economically fractured Mexico. Continuing the tradition of his *Mexico Unconquered: Chronicles of Power and Revolt* (City Lights, 2009), the “dispatches” that he sends from within the metaphorical bunkers of the still-free press in Mexico’s most fraught northern cities are both narratively compelling and terrifyingly clear in their focus on all that is *not* being reported about the dual-national war-on-drugs. *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War* is first, and foremost, a chronicle of what it looks like to attempt to exercise free-speech, to report an objective “truth” about incidents surrounding terrific murders, massacres and public extortion by example, in an atmosphere ruled by warring drug cartels that are at times aligned with and, at times, at odds with state power.

Gibler’s book is written in clear, declarative prose, and it outlines not only the realities of many of Mexico’s dwindling population of journalists—people whose lives are threatened regularly because they continue to exercise their profession—but the realities of all those living daily in the crosshairs of military and organized crime simply because they reside in the borderland states. With Gibler as a sure-footed guide, one need not be a specialist in Mexican history—or U.S. history for that matter—nor a linguistic expert to appreciate the harsh reality that faces many Mexicans at the centennial of their Revolution, the bicentennial of their Independence from Spanish rule. Gibler delineates social, political and economic policies on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border that have led to the current state of crisis that everyday Mexicans are experiencing not only in the fraught border region, but throughout the sovereign territory. He takes the reader on an open-eyed tour of places that very few people dare access, he interacts with journalists who have gone from exercising the practice of standard investigative journalism, to simply writing

tantalizing, gore-laden pieces for the sensationalist press, in order to eke out a living, or simply because there is, as he reports, so much death, that the death itself becomes the spectacle. Gibler unmasks the spectacle, he demystifies the practices of the cartel leaders, he draws direct lines between state actors and agencies, and the bloody havoc that has been wreaked on Mexico comes into sharp, critical focus.

The book's title is drawn from an editorial cartoon by Antonio Helguera which appeared in *La Jornada*, a left-leaning newspaper published by the National Autonomous University (UNAM) on March 15, 2010. The cartoon is titled: "Morir en México" and shows a variety of gravestones with etchings that blame the victim for his or her own victimhood. The cartoon, and Gibler's subsequent reference to this practice of claiming that all victims of violent crime "must have been into something," is especially relevant now when the same sound bites and sayings continue to be used to justify the extrajudicial murder and disappearance of protesting students, journalists, citizen-bloggers, etc. and result in the general silencing of political and social dissidence. As Gibler writes:

Silence does not often seek as its prey the murmurs of rumor and small talk. Silence—this special breed of paramilitarized narco-silence—takes aim at a particular type of speaking that has, typically, two characteristics: it may be heard by many and it enunciates facts that are bad for business. (23)

Chapter one elucidates major contradictions of the drug war, noting the ways in which media spectacle at once sexualizes and sensationalizes violence, and erases the humanity and individuality of its victims. We are ushered into a world of narco-blogs where videos of heinous acts are uploaded to YouTube, as much for entertainment as for their exercise of social pressure through fear-mongering. We discover that federal and local police forces have been fully penetrated by members of drug cartels and that the spectacle of arrests and redistribution of "plazas," or sectors of trafficking control, are merely for show, enriching those who can get in on the business at the highest levels. Gibler pulls no punches in his portrayal of U.S. involvement in this dynamic process, noting the entrenched interests of U.S. officials and agencies who look the other way because:

[T]he U.S. economy is also buoyed by the influx of drug money. The defense industries profit handsomely from arms

sales to armies, police, and the drug gangs themselves; the police are addicted to asset forfeiture laws; prison guard unions are addicted to budget increases; and the criminalization of drugs has proven a durable excuse to lock people of color in prison in a country still shackled by racism.  
(26)

We learn that there have been over 22,000 drugland executions during the first four years of the six-year Calderón mandate, December 2006 to March 2010 (13) and that this rising body count has been used to justify the impunity and lack of rule of law that permeates all aspects of Mexican society. Most notably he states that Calderón’s self-proclaimed war on drugs and the sheer enormity of the task of documenting and detailing so much death and destruction makes it possible to sweep other sorts of violence under the rug, allowing for state-sponsored violence against: “indigenous rights leaders, human rights advocates, anti-mining activists, guerrilla insurgents” (29) and others to go not only unpunished but altogether uninvestigated. In this chapter Gibler makes the argument that the criminalization of drug use is, in fact, what drives the profitability of the “shipping” business that shot el Chapo Guzmán to the top of Forbes’ list of billionaires. He examines the history of the U.S. war on drugs and their policies of intervention into Latin America and its markets, since the 1980s in Colombia, to the present day machinations in Mexico, while always pointing to the global flows of goods and ideas that drive the markets that, in turn, are churning out the tens of thousands of dead, disappeared and sexually exploited bodies.

Chapter two takes us inside the belly of the beast, to the tabloid *Primera Hora*, based in Culiacán, Sinaloa. We are invited inside the section of the “nota roja”: the sensationalist journalistic practice that profits from exploiting the miserable and abject by offering others the pleasure of consuming their misfortune. Gibler ruminates on the pain of others, while exploring the notion that such a journalistic practice is one of the few that remain viable in the drug war-zone, and this, only because it serves the spectacular needs of the cartels whose messages are emitted via dead and mutilated bodies. As we travel alongside the journalists, scanning the police-coded airwaves for news of killings, we are privy to death tableaux before even the “first-responders” arrive on scene. The descriptions are chilling and painful, underscoring the anonymity of the victims and the

impotence of the onlookers, who are left to justify such horror by blaming the dead for their own terrifying fate, in what seems like a hollow attempt to distance themselves from the violence to which they bear daily witness. Gibler makes it clear that even the authorities are unable to stem the flow of blood. He notes: “a central fact of the drug war [is] the trade’s death squads are more heavily armed and better trained than the on-duty state and local police, and most often the police are on their payroll anyway” (80-81). Gibler follows a few brave activists, including Salomón Monárrez, a human rights organizer who was riddled with bullets—but miraculously escaped death—due to his civic engagement and the simple act of documenting the violations and massacres carried out by state agents. He explores the experiences of Alma Trinidad, a bereaved mother who decided not to go away quietly, and instead clamored for justice in the face of impunity, defying the silencing, mutilating weapons of fear. Gibler offers first-person accounts and holds them up against official press releases so that we, the readers, can draw our own conclusions about discrepancies between the lived experiences of truth-seekers and the claims made by the state that are publicized internationally. These story-dispatches lay bare the dangers of and desperate need for truth-speaking, they fill in gaps in the silence of white-noise, and bring a harsh and painful reality to an English-speaking audience that would otherwise be unable to see or hear across linguistic, geographic or ideological divides.

Chapter three takes the reader to Reynosa, Coahuila, a town that borders McAllen, Texas, where the Zetas reign and the Gulf Cartel retaliates, and almost no one dares make public the terror of living between a rock and a hard place. We are immersed in the heart-thumping drama of trying to uncover secrets whose owners prefer to control the narrative, we experience a kidnapping from the inside and are reminded again of the peril that is faced by journalists in Mexico on a daily basis. How can one report, follow, unearth, access forbidden spaces, in order to understand the inner workings of an illicit institution that keeps legitimate business in the free world afloat? How can one persist in the face of enemies of the truth on all sides? Luis Petersen, the director of the nationally syndicated local paper, *Multimedia*, speaks this disheartening truth:

We can’t do journalism here anymore . . . when you have to take sides from the outset. It seems that we have to do that

here, and the side to take is that of an institution in danger, the Mexican state. It is in the hands of people without broad popular support; the only thing they have is firepower. The twenty years of Mexican struggles for a democratic opening . . . That doesn't exist anymore. Who exercises sovereignty? Where is the power located? It is in the hands of *those* people. And the police? Infiltrated. (162)

These are the sobering facts that Gibler offers. In short bursts, at great personal risk, he is making a space for an alternate chronicle of neoliberal Mexican and global history.

Chapter four drives us across desert highways and into Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, a site of decades-long violence against women, economic violence of labor suppression waged by maquiladora owners, and now, also, a hotbed of *narco-violencia*. Gibler speaks to journalists who mourn the loss of their own, noting that the government doesn't respond to actual violence, but rather to international public opinion. We learn that by October 2010, there have been roughly 30,000 murders under Calderón, and that in Juárez alone in that month, its bloodiest of the year, there were 352 murders (171). Pedro Torres Estrada, the general editor of *El diario de Juárez*, the newspaper whose journalists were murdered, notes of the government:

[A]ll their efforts [are] against a perception, not against a reality. They want to win over the media with campaigns in the media. So they take action against what gets published, not what happens. This is the main problem. The government's interest is political, to win or lose sympathies amongst voters.

This is a serious part of what is sustaining this mess. (170-71) Gibler introduces us to another "nota roja" writer, Luz del Carmen Sosa, a woman who takes her duty to document atrocity seriously. Not impervious to the pain of those who are left behind, she notes: "[Mexican society] is a wounded society, a scared society that is more and more distant from this pain. And this is what makes me look for other things, other angles for information" (183). She documents violence against women and notes that 446 women were killed in the first 10 months of 2010, which is close to the total of women murdered in the period most noted for femicide (1993-2003), but no longer makes news. Sosa's commentary highlights the

humanity of the victims, she reminds us that even if they were “involved in something” they still have a right to life (185). Gibler brings us back to the initial problem, to the images of graves with justifications for the killings, reminding us that each victim’s story should not, cannot be taken away from them, erased, reframed to fit the politically advantageous narrative.

Chapter five circles back, intent on naming names and placing the blame back on the systems of exploitation, lifting the burden from the shoulders of the fallen. Gibler restates his argument: “Let us be clear, absolute prohibition is legislated death. [ . . . ] U.S. policy has not stopped the flow of drugs, but it has outsourced most of the killing” (203). He goes on to state: “The drug war is a proxy war for racism, militarization, social control, and access to the truckloads of cash that illegality makes possible” (206). The book’s final dispatch is one that outlines the extrajudicial killing of a group of middle-class teenagers in Cuernavaca, Morelos, examining both the government’s spin on the events—who called it a “settling of accounts”—and the personal response of one of the fathers of the victims, a well-respected writer and public figure, Javier Sicilia. This brief anecdote serves to underscore the vast helplessness of the victims’ families who seek justice through the judicial system, or even in the court of public opinion. It is precisely because of Sicilia’s privileged position that he is able to talk back. His son was a victim, but his own notoriety allowed him to step into the spotlight and act as a mouthpiece for the millions of lives touched, in such a short time, by rampant bloodshed and unchecked narco-greed. He spoke to the crowd, and Gibler is hopeful that this marks the beginning of a movement: “Our dead are not statistics[;] they are not numbers. They are human beings with names” (210). Gibler’s dispatches from inside the drug war act as a testament to the naming of the nameless dead. His work is solitary, but it does not stand alone, and the power of this chronicle is the human contour that it gives to what would otherwise be a piling high of numbers too large and abstract to elicit our empathy.

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