

## Book Review: *Here is Tijuana / Aquí es Tijuana*

by Fiamma Montezemolo, Rene Peralta, and Heriberto Yezpe

*Reviewed by Jason Rebillot*

*Here is Tijuana* presents a graphical and textual analysis of the Mexican city of Tijuana, which sits tightly against the U.S. border and the city of San Diego. This transnational ‘metroplex’, bisected by a 10-ft. high steel wall, has emerged in recent years as an urban research laboratory for many academics and practitioners on both sides of the border; of particular interest to them are the immediate socio-economic, political and ecological tensions and exchanges across the wall. For this reason, a multi-disciplinary triad of co-editors initiated this project as an anthropologist (Montezemolo), an architect (Peralta) and a writer (Yezpe). Although focusing primarily on Tijuana and its morphological and procedural modes of operation, the book never strays far from the discourse surrounding the complexity of economic and cultural exchanges between the city and its neighbor to the north.

Photographs, statistics, artwork, and literary fragments comprise the majority of the book’s content. Organized according to three geographic themes (Avatars, Desires, and Permutations), *Here is Tijuana* attempts to present the city in a light other than that of the predominant view, which has been informed largely by a recent history of drugs, violence, alcoholism, and prostitution. The three co-editors do not, however, ignore or deny this history; rather, it is presented as one of many layers to be read in decoding the mechanisms behind the reality of Tijuana. Intrinsic to this layered system is a focus on the dual role of the city as both a springboard for Latin America’s immigration to the United States and a collection point- and eventual permanent residence- for many who lack either the means or the desire to cross the border.

With the opening chapter, Avatars, the immediate border crossing between Tijuana and San Diego is brought to the forefront, illuminating the particular socio-economic rationale behind the busiest international border crossing in the world. The mythological underpinnings surrounding the pursuit (often times via dangerous and illegal border crossings) of higher wages and better living conditions in the U.S., is placed in parallel to another segment of the immigrant population of Tijuana, many from the interior of the country. These workers seek employment not across the border, but in one of the many foreign-owned maquiladoras, or factories, along the south side of the wall, which offer significantly depressed wages and difficult working parameters to their employees. This duality between transience and permanence defines in many ways the ambiguous character of Tijuana. *Desires* addresses the darker side of Tijuana’s history- and contemporary conditions- by exposing the workings of the city’s red-light district. Again, a certain economic rationale underlies the perpetuation of this not-so-hidden informal trade. Lastly, *Permutations* articulates (in reverse geographic order) the morphological and urbanistic evolution of Tijuana’s formal organization, working from the newer, sprawling areas inland to the historical core closer to the coast of the Pacific Ocean. Specifically, this chapter positions a higher-density core of Tijuana against serial housing deployments to the east that mimic

the organizational logics of American housing developers in Southern California, with the latter conscripted in part to accommodate the tremendous number of recent arrivals to Tijuana.

The structure of *Here is Tijuana*, as the editors point out in their introduction, is ‘analogous to the city’ itself- layered, multifaceted, vibrant, and occasionally elusive. Perhaps herein lies a major strength of the book. With the presence of three disciplinary voices selecting and soliciting material from an even wider angle of perspective, a rather comprehensive analysis of the city emerges. Additionally, the editors make clearly evident the often contradictory and unreliable nature of the data collected- again allying the book’s content with the fragmented identity of the city that it mirrors. Lastly, the book presents a portrait of a transnational urban condition that has received a heightened sense of awareness in the post-September 11th era. The book’s engagement with larger, topical discussions concerning security, identity, nomadism, and tourism recommends *Here is Tijuana* to an audience beyond mere design communities.

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