Los Angeles is a palimpsest of empire, the ongoing result of competing settler colonial and imperial projects. Empire is physically embedded in the landscape of the city. Some of its most iconic landmarks—the Bradbury Building and Griffith Park and Observatory—possess foundational imperial roots, as do places of learning like Occidental College and Doheny Library at the University of Southern California. Financed and built by a generation of wealthy, Los Angeles-based empire builders during the early-twentieth century, these gilded “documents of civilization,” to borrow from Walter Benjamin, are also “documents of barbarism.” They owe much to the “anonymous toil” of workers interlinked across borders by the geographies and logics of U.S. empire and capitalist development. And, at times, those workers have rebelled.

This dialectic of empire building and the resistance that it generates from the anonymous toilers animates Jessica Kim’s rich study on the rise of Los Angeles as a “city-empire” from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Quite simply, this is a delightful read. Focusing on a small group of wealthy, influential American capitalists and their transnational networks, Kim chronicles how these men helped transform a small borderlands town in the late-nineteenth century to the “capital of the western United States and the Pacific Rim” by the end of World War II. Comprised of six chapters, Imperial Metropolis complicates the geographic nation-state scale understanding of empire by demonstrating how an American city elite created and operated “the machinery of empire on the ground” in Mexico. For this tightly knit group of Angeleno capitalists and their organizations, personal enrichment and urban growth depended on commercial expansion and the creation of a transnational regional economy that bound the Los Angeles core to the Mexican periphery. What was good for Los Angeles (capitalists) was good for the U.S. empire and capitalism. Yet, empire—even the ‘informal’ variety—can generate a backlash, as these men discovered during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Chapter one traces the gradual urban transformation of Los Angeles from “pueblo” to “city-empire.” Growing a town short on water resources and lacking a natural deep-water harbor into a ‘global city’ required land, labor, and markets—requirements that led capitalists like William Rosecrans, Harrison Gray Otis, Lewis Bradbury, Griffith J. Griffith, Harry Chandler, and Edward Doheny to essentially transform the counties surrounding Los Angeles into “tributary territories” via land acquisition and commercial agricultural dominance. By the 1880s and 1890s the expansion of the peripheral hinterlands that fed the burgeoning “imperial metropolis” led south to Mexico. Almost anticipating the famous The Godfather: Part II Cuba scenes, in Porfirian Mexico Los-Angeles-based capitalists found a friendly government and willing local allies.

Mexico is thus central to this Los Angeles story of urban and imperial capitalism. In Chapter two, Kim argues that the massive returns on investments obtained by these capitalists prior to the 1910 Revolution powered urban growth in the southern California city. Indeed, they conceptualized Mexico during the Porfiriato (1876-1910) as the necessary colonial hinterlands of the rapidly-growing “imperial metropolis”—a model of ‘informal’ commercial empire that coexisted with the ‘formal’ U.S. imperial acquisition of colonies before and after the 1898 Spanish-American War. Courted by the business-friendly administration of dictator Porfirio Díaz, connected by local and national Mexican and Mexican-American intermediaries, promoted by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, and cheered on by The Los Angeles Times, they invested millions of dollars in Porfirián Mexico. Windfall returns followed in “extractive and commercial enterprises, such as mining, railroads, and ranching” (13). Los Angeles-based capitalists “invested more money per capita in Mexico than any other region of the United States” (6).

These elite Angelenos did not just send dollars to Mexico. They, as a “class for itself,” offered a broader imperial vision for how societies ought to look and function.2 As Díaz and his científico advisors argued that foreign-led capitalist development helped tutor Mexicans in the ways of bourgeois modernity and democracy, Angeleno capitalists and boosters offered their own resonant vision. Using the personal papers and company records of these investors and city boosters, Kim describes how capitalists and business organizations exported a particular racialized social project forged first locally in Los Angeles to Mexico. “Industrial freedom” in Los Angeles—the strict control over labor and the outlawing of unions—ensured a “productive periphery” in which paternalistic and authoritarian white bosses ruled over a largely nonwhite work force (60). That this racialized labor system could easily be exported to Mexico (because it echoed a similar Porfirián model) “made Mexico appealing for Angeleno investors” (75) who owned and managed the Quimichis Colony in Nayarit, the Colorado River Land Company (CRLC), and the Doheny-owned Mexican Petroleum Company (MPC). The imperial metropolis was thus also a white metropolis.

The first peasant-led revolution of the twentieth century beginning in 1910 radically threatened the Los Angeles capitalists. In Chapter Three, Kim argues that the very system of inequitable and exploitative resource extraction built by these men in Mexico “also helped create the conditions of their own undoing” (79). As peasant revolutionaries overthrew Díaz and fought for years to create a more just and equitable nation, Angeleno capitalists hung on tenaciously to their investments. Quimichis Colony investors suffered heavy losses in the face of repeated attacks carried out by local revolutionaries. Others like Doheny even made money with the MPC during the most violent phases of the revolution by forming alliances with local forces and prominent revolutionaries—as did the cotton-growing CRLC. They all expected to maintain a hold on their Mexican ‘hinterlands’ while also expecting the backing of the U.S. government to help protect their investments and private property.

The U.S. government sorely disappointed the Angeleno capitalists, as Kim chronicles in Chapters four and five. Despite intimate links with the Taft and Wilson administrations and extensive public relations campaigns, their lobbying efforts to have the United States intervene in revolutionary Mexico “like Cuba and the Philippines” failed (111). There would be no Platt Amendment for their Mexican hinterlands; calls for military invasions cloaked in the racialized discourses of ‘civilization’ and ‘uplift’ went unheeded. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Los Angeles oligarchs thus learned to live and negotiate with an economically nationalist post-revolutionary state that operated under the most radical social democratic constitution in the Americas. If the revolution failed to fully sever the Los Angeles-Mexico connection, it nonetheless radically altered the terms of the relationship. By the 1930s, peasant land seizures ended Angeleno-owned investments like the San Isidro Ranch Company, Quimichis Colony, and the CRLC. Peasants, Kim argues, “overturned the imperial geography of urban core and rural hinterland” (145).

Some members of the elite, like Harry Chandler and Henry Workman Keller, learned the lesson and modified their economic approach to Mexico. In the era of the ‘Good Neighbor Policy’ and inter-American hemispheric solidarity, a new form of U.S. empire emerged—and Los Angeles once again played a vanguard role. In a final fascinating chapter on the

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2 Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy (Chicago: Kerr and Co., 1910 [1847]).
building of the International Pacific Highway (IPH) beginning in the late 1920s, Kim describes the leading role played by Angeleno investors and the Automobile Club of Southern California (ACSC) in promoting road building to connect the city to Mexico City. Like Greg Grandin in his history of U.S. empire in Latin America, Kim sees a shift from ‘hard power’ to ‘soft power’ by the early 1930s as Angeleno oligarchs renounced certain strategies of empire but not empire itself (and the economic gain that it generates).3 Resource extraction and military intervention gave way to tourism, infrastructure development, trade treaties and Mexican markets for U.S. goods; the language of “hemispheric friendship” replaced the more explicitly racist “uplift” discourses even as Angeleno tourists drove south searching for Spanish colonial fantasies forged in Southern California (198).

By the time the IPH was completed in the 1950s in the midst of the Cold War, the importance of the road had shifted away from U.S. tourist travel to commercial trucking and the mass, transnational movement of goods. In the epilogue, Kim explores the broader implications of this shift. Indeed, she powerfully argues that transportation networks similar to the IPH facilitated and made possible the neoliberal era of ‘free trade’ and globalization characterized by historian John Mason Hart as the “neo-Porfirian economy” (206).4 American capital once again flowed into Mexico in the last decades of the twentieth century, backed by an American state whose promotion of neoliberal economic policies facilitated and enabled that movement. Los Angeles—with one of the world’s busiest trucking corridors, the third-largest harbor in the world, and a cargo airport globally ranked as fourth largest—is a global “city-empire” (206).

Imperial Metropolis is an ambitious, highly original, and captivating study. Kim’s wide range of U.S. and Mexican archival sources allows her to present a fine-grained contrapuntal history that carefully heeds the making, operating, and unmaking of empire on the ground in both Los Angeles and several Mexican regions. Through her skillful presentation of the various protagonists in this story of empire and resistance—the city of Los Angeles, Angeleno capitalists and boosters, Angeleno companies, Mexican and Mexican-American workers, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands—Kim has produced an impressive history that makes important contributions across various historical fields: history of capitalism, borderlands history, urban history and the history of U.S. empire. Recasting urban oligarchies as innovators of imperial configurations that linked urban growth and prosperity to the cultivation of imperial hinterlands, as Kim does for Los Angeles, encourages more multi-scale approaches to the study of U.S. empire.

Written in a compelling, engaging style, Imperial Metropolis is an outstanding history of Los Angeles that convincingly demonstrates that the “city of quartz” is also a city of empire.5

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