
Book Review: Bessie Hodder Olivera

In the novel *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on The Migrant Trail* author and anthropologist researcher Jason De Leon examines the violence and deaths of Mexican and Central Latin American migrants crossing into the United States; which were unauthorized through the Sonoran Desert in the Southern part of Arizona (page 3). This compelling academic literature dives into the human consequences of the United States’ prolonged immigration policy, that targets “illegality” as a disciplinary system that instills fear and dehumanizes migrants to eliminate border crossings from Mexico to the United States. The literature exhibit how “illegality” has risen to unprecedented prominence as a “problem” in policy debates and as an object of border policing strategies to control and exclude “uncivilized” citizens (page 28). Using an anthropological lens in their fieldwork research, Jason alongside photographer and colleague Michael Wells combine archeology, biology, ethnography and forensic science to illustrate the violence and suffering that border crossers face in life as well as in death.

Through the constraining stories of border crossers, their hopes and dreams of obtaining a better life, Jason De Leon reflects on the strategic plan of the American Government utilizing the system “Prevention Through Deterrence,” (PTD) launched in 1993 under the presidency of George H. W. Bush to eliminate border crossing overall. Prevention Through Deterrence is the book’s general framing that continues to illustrate the theme of violence presented by the United States. The author’s main argument is that the Sonoran Desert in Southern Arizona is currently and has always been a tool used for border enforcement by the American government. Border Patrol disguises this mechanism by shifting blame to human and non-human actors involved in the border crossing journey.

Jason De Leon is a male researcher from a working-class Latino background who created the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP) in 2009 to collect robust data, data that can be reused and updated accordingly that is needed to identify the scale and regression of the migration process. Jason’s positionality as a Latin American male with privileges in class and education, gave him the opportunity to form relationships with border crossers. He acknowledged that being Latino did not give him a privileged insight but did state that those who he interviewed felt comfortable enough to participate due to the comprehensiveness of linguistic formalities and cultural competency (page 93). This novel drew on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, policy analysis, focus groups and secondary literature from 2000 to 2014, to illustrate the author’s viewpoint that due to the implementation of PTD, there has been a significant rise in border crossings through the ‘killing fields’ of Arizona and with it an increase of deaths.

This three-part novel begins by describing the border control policies such as PTD, which was first developed in El Paso in 1993. In this first section “This Hard Land” the author highlights significant evidence to support his thesis. Reflecting on the works of Timothy Dunn’s *Blockading the Border and Human Rights* the author identifies how the state created PTD to deter migrants away from rural area and force them to cross in isolated zones. He describes the desert as a “death site,” where migrants are made less visible in urban areas allowing for the

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The desert to be “a weapon” (page 31-36). In addition, the author draws inspiration from Callon and Law’s theory of the hybrid collectif to explain the human and non-human actors incorporated in the Prevention Through Deterrence. He explains that “Border Patrol has intentionally set the stage so that other actants can do most of the brutal work,” (page 61) the forms of deterrence have emerged from the actions of the environmental conditions, terrain, animals and humans.

The second part of the novel “El Camino” reflects on experiences and interaction Jason had with border crossers throughout his field work research. The stories told illustrate an astonishing journey filled with sorrowful experiences such as those from Javier, a brave man who after a failed attempt at crossing over, has spent a week restlessly sleeping under bridges trying to cross back to the life he once had. Lupes a 27-year-old woman physically and sexually abused throughout her journey fighting to be reunited with her kids after she faced deportation. The intense dedication of Memo a man who physically reflects someone who has faced a life of economic hardships and rough living but with his compelling humour, manages to continue crossing over. Lucho seven years older than Memo will not stop crossing until they are reunited into their old lives even if he too faced economic hardship, the United States was their new home. All sharing different purposes for crossing yet sharing similar reasons to the population of border crossers as a whole. The severe temperature of the desert, lack of food and water, dangerous animals, smugglers and the Border Patrol themselves, are part of the hybrid collective that demonstrates how US border defense policy were strategically enforced to allow for the death of thousands of migrants and they’re disappearances.

Part three “Perilous Terrain” concludes this novel by examining the impacts of border crossing. This novel is important because it sheds-light on real suffering and the strategical policy placed that contributes to the inequality of racialized Latin American bodies. Jason De Leon unveils the invisible position the US government puts on to hide the evil results of the usage of Prevention Through Deterrence. The raw images portrayed throughout the novel alongside the testimonies of many men, women and children that have crossed the Sonoran Desert act as an important academic piece that awakens the audience on the dehumanizing effects of Border Patrol policy. “We spent like five nights in the desert. Garcia couldn’t walk anymore, so we turned ourselves in. We weren’t going to leave him behind (page 91),” states Lucho. “Sometimes on the trail you will see pieces of skin or pieces of human bone. I think its people who stayed behind. Its coyotes or I don’t know what kind of animal [eats them]. People get left behind. People who get cramps get left behind and then they get eaten. All that’s left is bone (page 81).” Jason De Leon continues the conversation on the political issue of migration.

Using his archeological background and different methodological approaches not only does Jason share the testimonies of undocumented migrants but through his research he reveals the stories of the bodies and objects left behind in the desert such as old worn-out backpacks, black dingy clothing and shoes alongside the fragmented and skeletonized remains of border crossers. Part of an articulated arm wedged between two rocks or splinters of human bone, mostly sun-bleached rib fragments that have been cracked and gnawed by some long-gone animal. The smell of rotting flesh of those left behind while laughing vultures rip and tear, gnawing away at the remains, all part of a migrant’s journey. Students across all social sciences would benefit from this scholarly piece, as it opens the readers eye to a sensitive, morally important topic, one in which needed to be discussed globally.