

BOOK REVIEW

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The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail.

Jason De Leon

University of California Press

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In *The Land of Open Graves*, Jason De Leon engages in a multidisciplinary study of the lives and deaths of Latinx migrants who cross the Mexico-U.S. border to enter the United States. Grounded in an ethnographic approach that combines anthropology, archaeology, and forensic science, De Leon's multifaceted perspective presents the migration experience in its complex and unforgiving totality.

In Part One, "This Hard Land," De Leon describes how the American state became a lethal apparatus in terms of migration through the adoption of the Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) policy. As De Leon explains, PTD was premised on the understanding that pushing migrants off population centers and into remote areas along the border that would be difficult to traverse would make apprehending those migrants easier for law enforcement while shielding their trials and tribulations from the American public. He also expands upon the notion of the state-deployed "hybrid collectif," which combines the human force of border patrol agents with the lethal force of nonhuman elements to annihilate migrants and erase all signs of their existence.

Part Two, "El Camino," focuses on the perilous journeys of immigrants who De Leon encounters through the unforgiving terrain of the Sonoran Desert. The account predominantly centers around two migrants known as Memo and Lucho, who are initially apprehended by Border Patrol, but on their second attempt cross the border successfully and settle in Arizona. Memo and Lucho's journey exemplifies the trials and tribulations border-crossing migrants experience, but also puts on display migrants' agency, ingenuity, and unrelenting hope even in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

In Part Three, "Perilous Terrain," De Leon examines the effect of border crossing on the lives and psyche of immigrants who remain scarred by the dangerous journeys they have undertaken even if successful. De Leon also describes discovering the body of a migrant, Marcela,

and how this encounter forces him into self-reflection and developing a sense of inadequacy and guilt for looking helplessly on as migrants' worlds fall apart around him.

State-sponsored violence is a recurring theme in this book. The American state is exposed as a violent "state of exception" (Agamben, 2005, p. 27) manufacturing protracted emergency crises to prey on the vulnerable and solidify its power. The most shocking and heart-wrenching part of the book focuses on the violence visited on migrant bodies post mortem, what De Leon (2015) terms "necroviolence" (p. 68). Through the use of forensics, which De Leon employs to complement his anthropological approach, the book exposes how the punishing terrain enables the state to not only annihilate migrants but to also erase any physical proof that they ever existed. Accompanying the physical violence is a dehumanization rhetoric manifesting in discourses of illegality (De Genova, 2002) which convert human beings into unclassifiable entities, or 'aliens.' The border zone represents this no man's land, a space where humans cease being human and become the prey of the hybrid collectif. The state operates as a killing machine exercising the "right to kill or let live" (p. 66)

De Leon does not just relate the stories of the migrants he encounters; he takes the reader on these journeys and strips them to their raw reality. The stories of the immigrants who perished in the Sonoran Desert are a reminder of the fragility of human life, particularly of the lives of those who do not matter to the state and whose deaths, according to immigration officials referenced in the book, are just collateral damage. De Leon's use of forensics, in particular, sheds light on the material reality of the dangers, human and nonhuman, that immigrants face, a part that is often left out of accounts detailing the immigrant experience.

Yet De Leon's book is not without optimism; even in the hardest moments, the migrants display an unrelenting faith in the future and deploy agency ingeniously. De Leon describes how Memo and Lucho meticulously prepare for their journeys, equipping themselves with food containing high quantities of salt to help them survive the trail, as well as vitamins and electrolytes. Crucially, after their initial apprehension, the two decide to cross again by following an obscure mountainous terrain where they know Border Patrol agents will have a hard time locating them and where water is accessible.

What really sets this book apart is how the author immerses himself in the narrative instead of assuming the role of a detached social scientist. De Leon oscillates between the role of ethnographer and that of friend and human being rendered vulnerable and torn by occupying the role of insider and outsider both at once (Anzaldúa, 1987). The author is an insider by virtue of his Mexicanness and playful masculinity that allows him to establish close relationships with migrants. However, he soon realizes that his position as a university researcher and, more importantly, as a citizen, renders him a figure apart from the world he is trying to insert himself into. This ability to detach engenders feelings of guilt as some of his subjects are confronted with extraordinarily difficult circumstances:

I listen to my own voice stumble out of my mouth. It sounds hollow and empty.

It's like the moment when I watched Lucho and Memo enter the tunnel. I was with them as much as I could be, but I wasn't really there. I saw them leave from behind the safety of some invisible glass window (De Leon, 2015, p. 258).

In contrast to other accounts, De Leon does not embellish or shy away from the ugly reality of a merciless immigration apparatus intent on dehumanizing and annihilating the "strangers at the gate" (Bauman, 2016, p.106)—*The Land of Open Graves* points toward our failings as a society. In providing a holistic account of the migrant crossing experience, De Leon includes some disturbing photographic evidence depicting animals being ravaged and annihilated by vultures to

demonstrate the concept of necroviolence. While the photographs are evocative and match the intensity of an ethnographic account that refuses to sanitize reality, they also seem to reduce the immigrant experience to a sensationalistic series of images designed to shock rather than cause the reader to reflect.

The Land of Open Graves provides an account of the migration experience that is refreshing in its honesty and in its ability to generate hope amidst all the tragedy and chaos it depicts. Through the stories of Memo and Lucho and his other migrant companions, De Leon captures the human aspiration for a life beyond mere survival, an aspiration we all share yet few experience with the kind of intensity, raw emotion and passion for living that these migrants exhibit. By exposing their humanity, De Leon forces us to confront our own at a time when a shared sense and belief in humanity is profoundly lacking.

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