The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail by Jason De León (Photography by Michael Wells).

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In *The Land of Open Graves*, Jason de León explores illegal migration along the Sonoran desert in Arizona, on the border between Mexico and the US, through the use of ethnographic, archaeological, linguistic, forensic, and photographic methods. De León’s main argument is that U.S. immigration policy purposely utilizes the desert as a form of violence that kills and erases migrant bodies. De León’s mixed-method approach renders visible the role of the desert to create a critical ethnography.

Chapter 1 introduces the Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) strategy, which was created as a response to high migration levels following the Mexican corn crisis. PTD proposes high policing of urban points of entry, channeling migrants towards the desert. In Chapter 2, we see the desert as a “space of exception” (Agamben 2005) where human rights are suspended in the name of security. Furthermore, this deserted space has its own logic. De León appropriates Callon and Law’s (1995) concept of the “hybrid collectif” to argue that nature and animals are agents that contribute to violence as much as deportation agents. Drawing inspiration from actor-network theory, he calls those agents actants, or “sources of action that might be human or non-human” (De León 2015, 39). His goal is to show the role that the non-human, that is, the desert, plays in the migrant process. A combination of burning temperatures, vultures, ruthless smugglers, and patrol officers are assembled together to form that hybrid *collectif*. “Border Patrol draws on the agency of animals […] while simultaneously absolving itself of any blame connected to loss of life” (43). Other ethnographies of the border have reported stories of crossing (Spener 2009) or have focused on the role of economic flows in shaping migration and structural inequalities (Bacon, 2004; Gomberg-Muñoz 2011; Holmes 2013). To add nature as an actant complements those accounts. In Chapter 3, De León moves on to
define the violence of the desert. He coins the concept “necroviolence” to describe the violence that is outsourced to the burning sand and heat to make corpses disappear. In order to evidence the violence that occurs in the desert, De León uses pigs to replicate the decomposition of bodies in the desert.

To begin Part 2 ‘El Camino’, Chapter 4 tells the story of Memo and Lucho, two immigrants who have repeatedly been deported back to Mexico as a result of several DUI charges in the US. Like many other deportees, Memo and Lucho have built lives in the US and find themselves trapped in a circle of deportations and desert crossings to return to their families. Chapter 5 shows them working temporarily in the migrant shelter Juan Bosco, earning money to purchase the backpacks and water gallons needed to survive the desert. In Chapters 6 and 7, De León’s team follows those objects and employs excavation and use-wear analysis to examine this material record left behind on the trail. Use-wear analysis is an archaeological technique that documents the modifications people make to objects by wearing or repairing them. A pair of shoes “kept together with a bar strap” (181) offers an insight into the harsh conditions that crossers endure. Given that the desert can erase all evidence, forensic science and the “archaeology of the contemporary” (170) are used to render visible what nature makes invisible. De León uses archaeological methods to “provide a different and perhaps safer approach to the excavation of these hidden narratives” and undoubtedly succeeds in showing the ongoing relevance of archaeological approaches in contemporary social anthropology (170).

In Part 3 ‘Perilous Terrain’, Chapters 9 and 10 focus on rendering visible the deadly effects of Prevention Through Deterrence. During fieldwork, De León’s team finds the body of Maricela, a deceased Ecuadorian crosser. Her story is brought into the book to illustrate the brutality of necroviolence on those who do not survive. In Chapter 11, José, a relative of Maricela disappears in the desert. The theme of visibility and invisibility continues to be explored through the consequences of his death on his family. “The absence of physical evidence […] prevents them from mourning. Necroviolence is eternal and inescapable” (275). These three chapters also shift the focus towards Central American crossers, an under-explored but vulnerable group that faces further exploitation during their journey in the hands of Mexican smugglers.

Both Parts 2 and 3 demonstrate that De León’s methods are underpinned by his desire to
place migrant voices at the center. Most interviews are transcribed as dialogues, so that his informants’ experiences remain central. Visual methods are generated in a participatory fashion, including pictures Memo took of his own crossing. Unfortunately, the female dimension of migration is only partially developed in this book, but the author himself recognizes this. De León attributes the uneven representation of male and females crossing experiences to his lack of access to female crossers, and reconstructs accounts of gendered abuse and violence through conversations with other informants.

De León’s mixed-methods approach, which combines ethnographic vignettes and forensic-archaeological analysis, serves to fully illuminate his argument: the use of the desert and all its elements (animals, Border Patrols, temperature) as a weapon. Archaeology is used to uncover the devastating effects of the hybrid *collectif* on crossers. De León’s team collects abandoned water bottles, photos, shoes, and creates a typology of sites and camps across the desert (190-1). Archaeology has always sought to understand past cultures by reference to their material culture. Now those artifacts and sites tell us about the current evolving strategies migrants use to survive excruciating natural conditions. For example, archaeological research points towards the use of black water bottles; and then interviews reveal that crossers paint plastic bottles to conceal them, while in fact darker surfaces attract more sunlight, warming up what little water they carry in the desert. This particular blending of social anthropology and archaeology provides a new perspective on the border.

One traditional concern with equating non-humans with humans is that one might alleviate the burden of responsibility that lies with humans (Callon and Law 1995). However, De León’s ethnography succeeds in making a clear distinction between a theoretical discussion about agency and political responsibility. De León states that “although [he is] sympathetic to the ontological turn towards nonhumans as key political actors, [he is] not ready to disconnect human agency from the brutal boundary enforcement strategies” (61). He does not allow the ontology of the desert as an actant to stop him from adhering responsibility to the US administration for mass deportation, remaining critical of its policies. De León’s achievement is to fully exploit the explanatory power of Callon and Law’s concepts while retaining a critical angle.

The book also raises questions about how to best depict violent realities in ethnography. His
description of decomposition is graphic, accompanied by photos of the half-eaten pigs and vultures. He also includes a shocking picture of Maricela upon discovery. De León uses this forensic evidence to denounce the brutality of US policy (213-214) while at the same time remaining mindful of the possibility of immigration pornography (5) and the use of senseless violence for its dramatic effects, which evokes Bourgois’s concept of pornography of violence (2001). While those graphic images are powerful, mundane objects receive less attention. Readers looking to find out more about routine objects such as everyday water bottles or bag packs should read about the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP), the wider project on which De León has worked. The UMP aims at documenting routine archaeological evidence left behind by the crossers to better understand this process.

The Land of Open Graves skillfully makes aspects of migration across the Mexico-US border visible, despite the erasure that occurs in the Arizona desert. The desert as hybrid collectif challenges our conventional understanding of agency by moving beyond the human/non-human binary. Archaeology complements narrative accounts of human experiences with the Mexico-US the border. Both undergraduate and graduate students will benefit from reading De León’s work – it is engaging, while methodologically ambitious. The Land of Open Graves is an innovative ethnography exploring not only Mexico-US migration, but also what archaeology can reveal about contemporary issues.

References Cited
Homes, Seth. 2013. Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies. Berkeley, California: California University Press.