

**Jason De Leon, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on Migrant Trail*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2015, 384 p.**

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“The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on Migrant Trail” by Jason De Leon consists of the introduction, three main parts, twelve chapters, acknowledgments, bibliography, and index sections. First published by the University of California Press in 2015, the book reveals the suffering and death in the Sonoran Desert. The border between Mexico and the United States is one of the regions in the world where mass displacements are experienced the most. It is estimated that more than 16 million Mexicans immigrated from Mexico to the United States between 1965 and 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2015). More than 7000 immigrants have died while crossing the border illegally since 2001, unable to withstand the harsh conditions under the Arizona sun (www.cpb.gov, 2019). Jason De Leon as an anthropologist depicts the brutality of U.S. Immigration policies, the extreme conditions that migrants face, violence, and the way it is built in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona in *The Land of Open Graves*. In his book, Leon brought together different methodological approaches: an archeological and ethnographic study, anthropology, forensic analysis, interviews, stories of migrants, and photography.

De Leon’s main thesis is based on the U.S. Border Patrol’s policy of the Prevention Through Deterrence system, which was adopted in 1993 and designed to discourage migrants while attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. In this system, the U.S. border patrol tightly controls areas of the U.S.-Mexico border that allow walking and crossing for migrants and push those who want to cross the border illegally into the parts of the Sonora deserts’ inhospitable terrain to human life. Leon mentioned this system as a “killing machine.”

De Leon discovered that the undocumented migrants were desperately migrating at the risk of dehydration, extreme conditions, dangers, and even die trying to provide a better life for their families, their sole crime was to enter the United States illegally. De Leon borrows Callon and Law’s Hybrid Collectif concept to refer to all the contributors to this process. Hybrid Collectif consists of the desert, the heat, deportation agents, smugglers, robbers, and scavenging animals as a tool of border enforcement.

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De Leon reflects the grueling journey of two Mexican men, Memo and Lucho, through the Sonora Desert to the United States and their settlement story in the U.S. De Leon also photographs the dead body of Marciela when Jason and hiking students found her. De Leon contacted the relatives of Marciela and learned the story of missing cousin Jose. The use of the Sonoran Desert as a covert tool by the U.S. Border Enforcement is described by De Leon in the unrecognizable body of Jose, from Ecuador. Wild animals and heat slaughtered 15-year-old Jose, and the desert has ruthlessly turned into a trap that camouflages such stories. Since the American public does not witness these stories, they support harsh immigration policies more easily. This policy, defined as “necroviolence”, is used as a warning against those who want to immigrate in the future illegally. The U.S. Migration system utilizes and relies on necroviolence; the harrowing experiences of those who wish to migrate, their bodily destruction as well as their disappearance, and De Leon does his decomposition experiment by leaving the pig corpses to rot in the desert.

De Leon aimed to write his book in a radical way to portray the embedded structural violence and the disturbing realities of the Prevention Through Deterrence system. While some parts of *The Land of Open Graves* have relatively informal language, in some parts, there are long conversations and striking photos. I applaud how the writer highlights the thought-provoking nature of the immigration system and the tragedy of migrants. Moreover, De Leon did not hesitate to engage with the traumatic experiences of migrants, to detail their stories or the deceased body of them. His analysis in this ethnography develops a unique approach to questioning the political economy of developed and developing countries. The impact of economic pain and the cost of structural violence would eventually pose security and border issues to developed countries.

The way De Leon organized the book does not leave any topic that is not addressed, but De Leon could consider covering discussions on the solution of illegal immigration (he states clearly that the book was never about solving the problem of illegal immigration), as well as how effectively the prevention through deterrence program become well known and raise awareness among the migrants. Another aspect that I wish De Leon would not cover in this book is his detailed description of the deaths of dressed pigs and their carcasses to determine the perished and vanished bodies of migrants, which may deepen the sorrow of the migrants’ families. Instead, De Leon could focus on the fact of what could be an alternative solution to stop illegal migrants from crossing the Sonoran Desert. This book reflects reality in a disturbing way, but the content is valuable for researchers from different fields.

## References

- Pew Research Center, (2015). Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to the U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/>.
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