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### The Ethnographically Visible and Violence

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## The Ethnographically Visible and Violence

Mapping structural violence against immigrants in the US is much like cleaning a ballroom floor with a toothbrush; there's a lot of surface to cover. Social, political, physical, legal - as De Leon attests when only describing the physical crossing of the Sonoran Desert, "Because of the scale, complexity, and randomness of the crossing milieu, it is impossible to account for or describe every single element or actant involved in this process" (De Leon 2015, 43). If he could not capture the full picture in 295 pages, I doubt I will in four. But I will at least establish that the legal and social designations along legality and documentation results in violence that is exerted through vast social machinery. The US state apparatus stands loyal by the philosophy that migration and migrants only deserve recognition and protection when they are "legal" and "documented." Otherwise, as De Leon describes in *The Land of Open Graves* and as the Hostile Terrain 94 Project physically visualizes, their lives (and deaths) are disregarded by the state on a massive scale. Of the diverse myriad of ways our country enacts violence against migrants coming from Central and South America, one thing can be laid true as a common denominator: when we organize movement and individuals in terms of legality and documentation, structural violence specifically targets the illegal and undocumented. Specifically in the scope of De Leon's book and the HT94 Project, US designations of legal mobility and documented migrants results in widespread violence against the undocumented and illegally mobile through a combination of natural threats, legal bureaucracy, and political denial.

Structural violence itself is a construction beyond the command of individual agents, but its consequences are most poignantly reflected at the individual level; as anthropologist Paul Farmer argues, "Structural violence...will not be understood without a deeply materialist approach to whatever surfaces in the participant-observer's field of vision—the ethnographically

visible” (Farmer 2004, 308). De Leon describes it similarly as, “focusing the ethnographic lens on the migrant experience...to add a graphic reality to federal policy discourse” (De Leon 2015, 43). To grasp the realities set in motion by the federal policy of Prevention through Deterrence, we must go to the US-Mexican border - not Capitol Hill. All that migrants must endure is flattened and sanitized by the misnomer “deterrence” and we must study the tangible effects migrants experience - dehydration, robbery, grief, torn sneakers, exhaustion, death - to comprehend this violence. This understanding of ethnographic evidence is tantamount to discussing structural violence against migrants on the southern border.

The ingenuity of structural violence is its decentralization of blame, especially in the case of PTD. By establishing an immigration approach that manipulates extreme temperatures, landscapes, and wildlife, the state orchestrates systematic and strategically planned deaths and injuries that are *technically* enacted at the hand of abiotic agents. This is not to downplay the agency of human actors in immigration policy, as De Leon shows us throughout *The Land of Open Graves* that individual Border Patrol agents arise to arrest, harass, or sometimes give advice (De Leon 2015, 100) to migrants. What is crucial to remember though insofar as the role of the individual is that the singular Border Patrol agent is a propagator of the social machinery, and does not have the power to defy it; one samaritan piece of advice does not challenge the efficiency with which migrants are deterred, apprehended, and deported. This is all to establish that US immigration policy, in all its bureaucratic convolution and ambiguity, is strategically planned (De Leon 2015, 84) *structural* violence that causes verifiable harm to migrants attempting to cross into the US.

But as policymakers for the morally virtuous “land of the free,” such blatant and flagrant disregard for the safety and lives of human beings could not exist without some corollary to the

natural human rights we supposedly uphold. This is the political function of designations like “legal” and “documented.” We have a system in which movement may be legally subsidized or illegally arranged through clandestine avenues. With an influx of illegal movement, there are two defenses the government may utilize: one, that such chaos requires we adopt a state of exception (De Leon 2015, 68) wherein typical rules of law may be subverted in the sake of reestablishing law and order; two, that we have a societal consensus that illegal behavior ought to be punished, and may the Sonoran Desert in particular be the judge, jury, and executioner of those who attempt to enter the US without going through proper channels. Of course these harsh and cruel underlying philosophies are sponsored by a generous amount of historical amnesia that ignores the US’s legacy of less stringent immigration policy (De Leon 2015, 9), as well as a healthy dollop of white supremacy embedded in a carceral state that devalues nonwhite lives. But with such distinctions created, assigned, and solidified in the cultural consciousness, the violence experienced by migrants attempting to cross the border is a combination of natural, technological, and political warfare.

The keystone feature of Prevention through Deterrence as framed by De Leon and the HT94 Project is the extremes of the Sonoran Desert. In 1994, to address undocumented migration across the southern border, taking after the strategy employed by Silvester Reyes to curb clandestine migration in El Paso, Border Patrol militarized urban gateways to force migrants to cross through the remote and inhospitable desert; they hoped the journey would become so treacherous and difficult as to discourage potential crossers from even trying (De Leon 2015, 30-34), and treacherous it has proven to be. Though border-crossing has not decreased due to manufactured danger, the operation continues full speed ahead. Between October 2000 and September 2014, 2,721 border crossers’ bodies were recovered in southern

Arizona *alone* (Anti-Defamation League 2012) but as De Leon's research has proven, countless more have likely died and disappeared completely through scavenging and the unforgiving elements of the desert (De Leon 2015, 80-81). These deaths, including how many recovered bodies have failed to be positively identified, is visually represented by the Hostile Terrain 94 Project, with physical tags for each body expressing the sheer scale of death and violence. Beyond simply natural elements though, De Leon also establishes the idea of a *hybrid collectif* in which the desert is a harsh landscape where ecological, political, legal, and social actants all converge in a plethora of interactive ways to create the desert's physical reality (De Leon 2015, 39-42).

Furthermore beyond the act of crossing itself, the process of deportation is another distinct way in which undocumented migrants suffer through sanitized federal proceedings. Echoing De Leon and Farmer's theses that ethnographic evidence is key to understanding structural violence, Bridget Anderson adds in reviewing work by Nicholas De Genova that, "Deportation is imagined as the return to the 'right' place, and those who are deported simply disappear. This means the violence of deportation, its ongoing consequences for the deportee and the wider community, are obfuscated" (Anderson 2011, 884). This theme of individuals disappearing - either while crossing through death or disappearance or after reaching the US through deportation - is endemic in discourse about clandestine migration. Going back to previous points about the US state's disregard for migrant lives, the violence migrants experience through federal processes is very real but this pain is often either shipped out of sight as Anderson says, or ignored and erased as De Leon's work corroborates (De Leon 2015, 191-192). Deportation is another way in which suffering is caused and hidden from view thanks to the social orders of citizenship and legal versus illegal migration.

Structural violence against migrants in the US is often disguised through administrative language and hidden from the public's view, whether that in the remote Sonoran Desert or having been sent back to Central America. Despite the vague and intangible nature of the macroscale social systems that cause this suffering, the lived realities of migrants are real and confirmed through ethnographic evidence collected across the US, the southern border, and Central and South America. These structures depend on the designations of "legal" and "undocumented" to justify the political, social, and physical violence designed and enacted by the state and its actants. By creating and endorsing these concepts of citizenship and designations of legality, we finance structures that torture, separate, and kill individuals with an efficiency and on a scale that we cannot begin to imagine, however nobly we may try.

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