BOOK REVIEW

*Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La Vida no Vale nada*, by Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Celestino Fernández, Jessie K. Finch, and Araceli Masterson-Algar (eds.), Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2016, 302 pp., $24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8165-3252-0

*Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert*, subtitled *La Vida no Vale nada* (*life has no worth*), is derived from the 2008 conference of the same name, and all contributions in the book were presented at the conference. Although the conference took place a decade ago, the research and narratives conveyed in the articles remain highly relevant. The lack of development concerning migrant deaths in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands makes this book just as relevant to read in 2018, as it was relevant to discuss at the conference in 2008.

The book seeks to bring attention to the tragedy that hundreds of people are dying each year along Arizona’s border with Mexico alone. In doing so, it analyzes a range of sources ranging from newspapers and poetry to data from the Pima County Medical Examiner’s Office. Following the acknowledgments and introduction, the book is divided into five sections, called “stations” in the book, to reflect the different stages the undocumented migrants go through when attempting to cross the border. Each station focuses on an area under the umbrella theme of *death*. The sections, “The Making of History,” “Crossings,” “Found Remains, Missing Graves,” “Metaphors,” and “Expressions from the Living Dead” give a natural flow to the book while linking the articles to each other. Each of the sections contains two to four contributions, except from the last section, which in addition to the four contributions also includes a general conclusion.

The first section, “The Making of History,” contains the keynote speech from the conference, given by Claudio Lomnitz, and sets the tone for the rest of the book, as he encourages us to seek answers to the deaths and disappearance in the desert. Section two, “Crossing,” focuses on the physical, economical, and social risks and costs of crossing the border, not only for those who die but also for those who are caught and sent back. The third section, “Found Remains, Missing Graves,” goes into detail regarding the deaths and disappearances of those who unsuccessfully attempt to cross the desert. It contains both a grim tale of the remains found in the desert and compelling narratives from those who simply disappear and the effects these disappearances have on the ones left behind who never learn the fate of their loved ones. Like several other chapters, it relies on both narratives and statistical data to provide insight regarding those who seek information about family members who have disappeared and the rising death tolls. Section four takes on metaphors and how they are used to both humanize and dehumanize migrants and gives certain traits to the desert by exploring it from the very different perspectives of newspapers, and the Bible. In the final section, “Expressions from the Living Dead,” the exploration of texts continues, but with a focus on the right to live, which is expressed in cultural contributions such as songs and poems, before describing an alternative hip-hop dance performance from the conference. The dance expresses many of the experiences of crossing the border, which are dealt with throughout the book and can be seen as a reenactment of the book’s summary.

Admittedly, I assumed a conference book focusing on undocumented migrants’ deaths in southern Arizona would contain a certain degree of repetitive statements and arguments. However, with the multidisciplinary backgrounds of the authors, including an artist and a forensic pathologist, this book displays an impressive range of methods and topics across the 13
contributions. Therefore, it is necessary to compliment both the authors as well as the editors for compiling such a broad range of contributions providing the reader with a widened perspective and insights on issues that are often overlooked even within a seemingly narrow topic. Several of the contributions do not rely on a heavy theoretical analysis, and only a few of them end with clear-cut conclusions; instead, most end with a discussion encouraging the reader to continue the exploration and discussion beyond the book. Thus, the book both adds to the collective knowledge of borderlands studies and encourages further research. As many of the contributions either rely on narratives or adopt an anthropological approach, the book remains close to the people it studies by conveying their stories rather than theoretical concepts. Furthermore, by including family as well as religious aspects—which play an important role for most of the undocumented migrants and the communities they come from—it reflects the cultural setting of the Arizona-Sonora Desert very well.

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