

Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Celestino Fernández, Jessie K. Finch, and Aracelia Masterson-Algar, eds., *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. 302 pages. US\$24.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-0816532520.

*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.*  
-Desmond Tutu

As I write this article, there is a caravan of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador seeking refuge in the United States of America from persecution, poverty, and violence.<sup>1</sup> According to the latest reports, the caravan has reached an estimated 7,200 migrants; and with the midterm election past, and preparations are made for 2020, both sides have voiced their opinions on the “right” course of action for them. Having myself grown up in the non-border states of Mississippi and Tennessee, immigrant and refugee issues were something to which I paid very little attention while growing up, as they often seemed distant, and infrequent. However, once I began my undergraduate education a couple of notable events began to change that perspective. One of the key events was the ongoing conflicts in Syria, which eventually led to the Syrian refugee crisis. This conflict developed over the course of my undergraduate experience and greatly impacted how I viewed the world and refugees in general. When the war officially broke out in March 2011, I was in my last year of high school.<sup>2</sup> By the time I graduated in 2016 the number of refugees had ballooned to an estimated 12 million people.<sup>3</sup> I was also lucky enough to attend The University of Tennessee located in Knoxville, TN, where one of the most popular restaurant’s owner is a Syrian refugee named Yassin Terou.<sup>4</sup> Throughout my time in Knoxville and even now, his restaurant, his face, and story have had a widespread impact in the conversation regarding the status of Syrian refugees in America.

In light of the experience I had with the Syrian refugee crisis, I began to pay attention to other refugee crises--including the ones taking place in my own backyard. One crisis that quickly stood out to me was the plight of the refugees occurring at the US-Mexico border. As a person who likes to consider herself a humanitarian and an advocate for the vulnerable, -- especially in light of the recent political climate and the rising anti-immigration sentiment, -- I feel that it is my duty to, at the bare minimum, be aware of what is taken place at the southern border. *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert* is set against the backdrop of the Arizona-Sonora Desert. This is arguably the most famous desert in Arizona, if only because Phoenix, AZ, is found in the middle of it. Unfortunately, this desert is also where a copious number of people seeking refuge die each year while making the journey up north from Mexico and, according to the contributors to this book, that is no coincidence.

The history of *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada* and its subsequent publication is quite interesting. Almost a decade before this book was published, a multidisciplinary conference took place with the goal of raising awareness for the rising level of deaths and violence taking place along the southern border. However, after some time the conference participants

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<sup>1</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/trump-asserts-migrant-caravan-headed-us-includes-middle/story?id=58660279>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/entertainment/dining/2018/10/11/yassins-falafel-house-knoxville-tn-restaurant-wins-nicest-place-america/1266419002/>

noticed the same problems and overall lack of awareness, rendering this book both a follow-up and a continuation of the original conference. The authors attempt to answer a seemingly straightforward question of “Why are so many people dying along the Southern border?” and several questions associated with it through a multidisciplinary lens. In its introduction, the book notes that the purpose of this multidisciplinary lens is to “[t]hese multiple approaches speak to the complexity of this tragedy (the number of deaths in the desert) as well as to the accompanying disaster: the plight of the missing” (4).

While the authors of the different works found within the book approach it through multidisciplinary lenses, they have a connection with the Arizona-Sonora desert either through a personal relationship or through work. In turn, *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada* is divided up into five sections that are described as “stations”, in homage to the “successive markings of the pilgrim’s journey” (11). Each station also begins with a small prayer performed by Father Ricardo Elford who also has a personal connection to the region. The prayers, themselves are also connected to the region, as they were collected at vigils honoring those who have either died or disappeared in this desert (11-12).

Station I is entitled “The Markings of History” and it attempts to develop the atmosphere and tone of the book. It begins on a personal note, with the keynote speech by Claudio Lomnitz, a Professor of Anthropology. “The death of an individual is always an occasion in which social ties are made evident” (21). Although Mr. Lomnitz, is not from the region, his speech is emotionally charged, as he focuses on the broader political implications of border control, forming his opinion based off the substantive work he has performed in Mexico (21). More than anything, his speech serves as a reminder for the reader to consider things from the viewpoint of those on the other side of the border-i.e., Mexico. His speech is followed up with a reflection essay by Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith entitled “A daughter of the Border” and is situated at La Mesilla, the area of demarcation found within the Arizona-Sonora border. Her essay attempts to give a condensed historical timeline of the plight Mexican-Americans face along the United States border. Stressing the importance of oral history, she mainly accomplishes this plight through interviews that detail five events that have taken place within, or around, her border community. In her opinion, the oral retelling of these stories, as their passed down from generation to generation, “. . .is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning [to a particular community]” (33). One of the five stories that she recounts in her reflection essay is the story of Dario Miranda Valenzuel, a young man killed by border patrol agents in 1992 (45). The agent was later found not guilty at no surprise to the community(46). True to her emphasizes on the importance of oral history, the facts about Dario Miranda Valenzuel’s murder were not given in detail during the retelling of the story. Instead, Rubio-Goldsmith offers the details and the proceedings in her comments after the interview. Nevertheless, we do find out the impact the murder had on the members of this community and how the verdict reached served as no surprise to its members given past interactions and injustices. This allows for the perspective of an oft-overlooked ethnic community, that often finds themselves at the center of the southern border “war”, adding to the political charge of the piece.

The second station is called “Crossings” and it’s driven less by pathos, and instead focuses on reports and studies that *migrancy* and quantify the preceding and subsequent costs and benefits a migrant may consider. For example, one of the articles note that the 1980s to contract a coyote, a human smuggler, the cost was \$50-\$200; however, by 2004, the cost had risen to approximately \$3,000 (85). Similar statistics shock the reader for the remainder of this section, reinforcing the expensive price migrants pay as they seek refuge in the United States. One of the reasons for the dramatic increased costs, emphasized throughout the section, is the militarizing of the border. I

wanted to see if this point made by the author still held true today. Since the book's publication in 2016, the cost for migrants hoping to cross the southern border have increased continuously lending evidence to the author's claim that increased militarization leads to increased costs as the coyotes take migrants on more remote and dangerous pathways (107-108). In 2017, for example, the Department of Homeland Security estimated an average cost of \$9,200.<sup>6</sup> This came after a slew of policies enacted under the current administration in an effort to enforce a border crackdown.<sup>7</sup> It stands to reason then that because of the "crackdown" coyotes would seek out more remote and dangerous pathways causing the death toll to increase. This in fact did happen, and in 2017 the death toll of migrants seeking to cross the southern dramatically increased despite the number of actual crossing going down.<sup>8</sup> Another, particular focus is the "Found Remains, Missing Graves" (Station III) continues this theme of using fact-based reasoning, providing more vivid examples of the price migrants seeking refuge often pay, including disappearance into the hot desert. Southern Arizona is indeed hot, with temperatures often reaching over 100 degrees. As such, it should come to no surprise that the most common cause of death is due to heat either through a heat stroke or hyperthermia (122). One of the distinguishing pieces in this section is its use of graphic pictures of some of the skeletonized, mummified, and partially decomposed bodies from migrants who perished while attempting to cross the boarder.

While the pictures are devastating, the focus in this part is to highlight the various ways people perish along the border and the processes used to identify their cause of death. This section then turns to the telling of a woman named Mayra, a Peruvian migrant who went missing while attempting to cross the border Since her disappearance, her family has encountered several obstacles from various governmental entities when trying to get information. Surprisingly, Border Patrol does not have a protocol in place for managing missing-person cases; as such families, like Mayra's, are left in limbo. Mayra's story is used to highlight the difficulties families often face when trying to locate information about a loved one (135-137).

"Metaphors" (Station IV), as the name implies, focuses on the language and symbolism that the media and other sources employ when referencing migrants. This section starts off with an essay which gives a theological perspective and the desert's importance in that context. In the Bible, the desert and its unforgiving nature often underlie the stories taking place. The author points out Exodus which consistently used the desert to symbolize "exile and often wears the mask of death (155). The author goes on to further draw attention to the unforgiving nature of the desert by noting the wavering faith of Moses during his time in the environment and how it would later claim his life before reaching the "promise land" (155). The next piece in this Station, deals with metaphoric imagery in the news, which according to the author's calculation occurred about 60% of the time (170). Preliminarily, the author identified several causes that the metaphors typically attempt to address and how employing the different categories could invoke a certain line of reasoning. To illustrate this point, the author turns to the conversation of humanizing versus dehumanizing metaphors, and how its utilized by both activists and opponents of the mass immigration occurring at the southern border. One example of a dehumanizing metaphor is those that liken migrants to animals overwhelming by framing them as being hunted (181). Activists will

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/why-travel-with-the-caravan-to-avoid-one-of-the-worlds-most-dangerous-smuggling-routes/2018/10/25/868b5efe-d7c4-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3c306bbf35f8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/why-travel-with-the-caravan-to-avoid-one-of-the-worlds-most-dangerous-smuggling-routes/2018/10/25/868b5efe-d7c4-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49_story.html?utm_term=.3c306bbf35f8)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/usa-mexico-trumps-border-crackdown-pushes-refugees-into-dangerous-limbo/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/06/us-mexico-border-migrant-deaths-rose-2017>

often depict the migrants as being “hunted” by “hunters. On other hand, those who want to humanize the boarder patrol agents will call them “trackers” (181). On the humanizing side, the author acknowledges how media tries to invoke a connection between migrants and their humanity. For example, the author points out that religious activists often carry crosses to emphasize the humanity and holiness of dead migrants, emphasizing the godliness of the Samaritan and the migrant (184). This section goes over a plethora of examples to showcase the modes used by both liberals and conservatives to highlight the importance of language and how metaphors can sway the opinion.

Station V, “Expressions from the Living Dead,” presents the reader with memorials that showcase the cultural expressions found throughout literature, and other forms of cultural artifacts that express the looming cultural presence from those who died while seeking refuge. This section starts off by looking at a “traditional” means of honoring the dead with crosses and other religious symbols placed where a death occurred. The author points out how there are large clusters of crosses heading to and away from the border on major roads (245). Additionally, this section is focused heavily on the intersection of Catholicism and Mexican folk culture. Along the border are numerous shrines dedicated to numerous deceased figures. One of the figures is La Santa Muert, the goddess of death. There are numerous chapels dedicated to her west of the border, and for reasons unknown the number is increasing. This cultural analyses, looking at the intersection of Catholicism and folklore, gives perspective on how the migrants may view death. In the author’s opinion, given the context, unlike Anglo-American culture, death in Mexican culture is more of a continuum (252). This section also looks at nontraditional expressions citizens use to reflect their experience with migrations, namely through a play and recommending songs that reflect the migrant experience. In general, songs can often be used to show a political expression and that can be seen through numerous movements. Here, there was no exception. Reading the lyrics of the song common things emerge that were brought up throughout the book causing one to reflect on the impacts migrants face when trying to cross the border. To show the broad impact of the migrant experience, the author does not solely focus on songs derived from the southern border experience, instead, he incorporates migrant songs from a range of periods within the USA. And despite the difference in time, the themes reflected in the songs (assimilation, pursuing the American Dream, and discrimination) are still relevant today. Including the playlists and lyrics to the songs was unusual, albeit in this context it works. This is mainly due to the title of the conference, and by consequence of the book, being derived from a popular song entitled “Camino De Guanajuato” by famous Mexican composer José Alfredo Jiménez (252).

In short, *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada* is an excellent read for anyone looking to form a basic understanding of the issues surrounding the southern border. However, because the book seeks to cover a wide array of topics from several perspectives, it can sometimes feel a little disjointed. A pervasive theme is the value placed on a migrant’s life versus his/her death. This is found even in “la vida no vale nada”, which suggests that “...the value of migrants’ lives is overtly measured by the cost of their deaths, disappearances, and “deportability,”” (264). To return to the quote from Desmond Tutu, the human tragedies at the border ARE happening, regardless of whether we pay attention or not, an these deaths ARE predictable and preventable. There is no neutrality in situations like this, only an obligation to speak up and bring awareness.