

*Threshold: Emergency Responders on the US-Mexico Border* Ethnography Analysis

*Threshold* by Ieva Jusionyte reveals the harsh reality of life along the United States-Mexico border and the many ways in which the area incites violence. Through captivating descriptions and detailed first hand accounts, Jusionyte tells the story of a region which is plagued by peril and human suffering. Emergency responders along the border are experienced with handling gruesome injuries and are therefore one of the most reliable sources to comment on the menacing nature of immigration prevention. Fundamentally, the border is rooted in political hostility with outside forces pushing to militarize and disassociate the binational communities that exist there. It is evident that the tactical infrastructure employed is meant to cause harm for border crossers. Likewise, the surrounding landscape is flush with hazards and unexpected pitfalls that make passing through the desert terrain nearly impossible. As a result, the United States-Mexico border appears less like a threshold of entry, and more like an expanding mousetrap. The allure of better opportunities acts as a bait for illegal immigration. However, in order to reach the goal one must risk their life against the overwhelming danger and hope they are careful enough to not get caught. The reality of the United States-Mexico border is that it serves as a mechanism for violence that continues to be refitted and wielded without consequences.

The United States-Mexico border is heavily politicized and marked by heated tensions between United States and Mexican authorities. Regulation over the region is clearly one sided, with the United States imposing immigration policy without discretion. However, there remains a legal gray area surrounding the border that serves as a no-man's land outside either country's customs and immigration control. This location is

the site of numerous standoffs where violence could spark at any moment. Jusionyte shares a prime example of this concern during an emergency response just outside the U.S. port of entry, “We show up there and there’s people pointing guns at each other...You have everybody- customs police, DPS - pointing guns that way and Mexican law is out there...it took almost an hour before everybody put their guns away and started talking to each other” (Jusionyte 75). The discrepancy over this land and the lack of mediation between the two sides displays the risk of the border itself. Moreover, many proponents of a more intensive border wall speak hypocritically by asking for a stronger barrier, but one without so much visual violence. The truth is that you can’t have one without the other, yet many don’t realize this actuality. Jusionyte comments on the ignorance of such people when she writes, “they sought a structure that would not rely on razor wire or electric shocks to deter people from crossing: it would be too embarrassing to see wounded bodies on the evening news...it had to be a ‘humane obstruction’” (Jusionyte 211). Most politicians who speak on the necessity for a stronger border have never actually visited the area in person. This type of outsider decision making is one of the main reasons that it is incredibly difficult to be a first responder on the United States-Mexico border; firefighters are forced to respond to emergencies that could have been prevented with better government planning. Binational cooperation is forced aside due to politics which ultimately causes more dangerous emergencies. Thus, the politics of the border are never-ending and the outsider understanding is clouded by the need for positive appearances. Summarized perfectly by Jusionyte, “A barrier that appears innocuous even though it is intended to harm” (Jusionyte 211).

The United States-Mexico border is designed in such a way that human suffering is inevitable. Attempting to cross the border wall is like running the gauntlet of possible injuries; danger looms in every spike, coiled wire, and bloodied rock across the boundary. To many, the border wall is comparable to a steel curtain, which according to Jusionyte, “Cleaves communities and mutilates bodies” (Jusionyte 210). The prevention strategies along the border are what is known as “tactical infrastructure”. In theory, it aims to both impede and facilitate movement, however, it chiefly serves as a catalyst for violence, “Tactical infrastructure implicates those who commission and design the barrier in the act of wounding. Traumatic falls, like structure fires, car rollovers, or toxic spills, are programmed into the built environment” (Jusionyte 85). As can be seen, the implications of such a system greatly impact the lives of border crossovers and can even be life threatening. One of the most appalling examples of such a structure is a strip of asphalt with rocks along the border fence in Nogales, Arizona. It is the location of many dramatic injuries and according to the local firefighters, has no purpose other than to harm. Jusionyte shares a quote from one of the firefighters, JLo, who says, “That’s probably about a 4 to 5 foot area, like a sidewalk, but with rocks sticking out from it...’What other reason are these there for?’...’They are there to injure people so that they couldn’t run from the Border Patrol,’ (Jusionyte 63). The security implemented along the United States-Mexico is calculated policy, and all the injuries that occur there are certainly not accidental.

The natural terrain is the most feared and also the most deadly aspect of the United States-Mexico border. Border crossers who choose this path are met with long expanses of barren land and practically no places of refuge. The threat of death is so

great that many will simply take the guaranteed injury that accompanies jumping the border fence. The land of the desert even has infamous nicknames such as 'killing fields,' 'a neoliberal oven,' and 'a massive open grave' (Jusionyte 6). Human suffering is embedded in the region and is expected from emergency responders. These medical personnel are accustomed to finding people in dreadful human conditions, as noted by Jusionyte in Part 3 of the ethnography, "They are usually tachycardic and confused, and may have seizures...It's death by slow roasting...Chances of survival in the desert are measured by degrees Fahrenheit" (Jusionyte 164). Altogether, the desert is a place that is known to be unforgiving and those who try to cross are especially vulnerable. Border patrol uses this environment to their advantage as a means of prevention through deterrence. It strengthens their ability to restrict immigration and capture illegal crossers. Jusionyte affirms this notion when she writes, "Instead of a wall, tactical infrastructure in the area consists of checkpoints and roving patrols that intercept migrants already battered by the desert ecosystem. The mechanism of injury does not produce immediate trauma: wounding here takes time. So does rescue." (Jusionyte 146). All things considered, the means of violence along this region is merciless, and the desert is surely a ruthless tool to produce suffering.

Just like how a mousetrap can clamp down on an unsuspecting rodent, the United States-Mexico border can capture the lives of immigrants through intentional violent means. *Threshold* uncovers the bloody truth of life along the United States-Mexico border and the many ways that it is used as a tool to inflict harm. Outside political factors force local actors to work against each other. Meanwhile, architects of the border wall continue to entertain a twisted notion of an "aesthetically pleasing"

mechanism of harm. The truth lies within the tactical infrastructure of the border which purposefully injures and mutilates the bodies of immigrants. If that wasn't enough, the hostile desert terrain reinforces the idea that this land is unfit for human life and a threat to any who traverse it. The gravity of Ieva Justionyte's ethnography can not be further stressed, this is a substantial issue that grows larger everyday. Unfortunately, the message of this narrative is not a cheerful one, it speaks to a gruesome reality that first responders along the United States-Mexico have to accept: emergency aid and violence are interconnected, and where there is one the other is certainly not far away.