

## BOOK REVIEW

# “Close to the skin” Conceptualizing the intimate functioning of the US–Mexico border

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Jusionyte, Ieva. 2018. *Threshold: Emergency responders on the US-Mexico border*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Yeh, Rihan. 2017. *Passing: Two publics in a Mexican border city*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The US–Mexico border has received unending media attention over the past several years, amplified by the anti-immigration rhetoric that current US President Donald Trump has built both his presidential campaign and administration on, as well as by those who are opposed to his politics. However, this focus has tended to promote an image of a border (border as in the geopolitical dividing line, the terrain and physical infrastructure associated with imposing that line, and the administrative processes that occur on this line) that is not only naturalized but also a site of something—a site of an “invasion” or a site of injustices and violence. Shifting this perspective from the border as inactive site to a functioning feature that is materially and psychologically integral to the intimate workings of US neocolonial power on an individual level are Ieva Jusionyte’s *Threshold: Emergency responders on the US-Mexico border* (2018) and Rihan Yeh’s *Passing: Two publics in a Mexican border city* (2017). In their very different ways of tracing how this imperial power functions on a daily

and individual level, these books could not have come at a more necessary time.

Begoña Aretxaga once famously stated that “power is experienced close to the skin” (Aretxaga 2003, cited in Jusionyte 2018: 24). This statement certainly applies to both of these books, but it does so in very different ways. While Jusionyte focuses on the materiality of the US border wall and the urban terrain that both divides and connects Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, and the ways this materiality physically wounds and simultaneously facilitates cooperation and passage between the residents of both cities, Yeh deconstructs the ways in which the border and its processes of passage and prohibition work its way somewhat insidiously into individual and collective subjectivity, emphasizing and exacerbating already engrained social hierarchies and splitting Tijuana into two “publics.” In this review, I draw out resonating themes in both books that help shift this perspective from “border as site”—the inactive marker of a geopolitical boundary, the location of a perfor-



mance—to focus, instead, on the ways that the border and the state violence enacted by such a border (rather than at such a border), work “close to the skin.”

Some of the main arguments of both books may be grouped together into three illuminating themes and intended goals: (1) making visible state violence that is often “invisible” to some (certainly not invisible to undocumented migrants); (2) ethnographically demonstrating the contradictions that live at the heart of the state (its functions of care and promises of possibility, and its simultaneous actions of violence and restriction) and focusing on the border as producing moments of uncertainty and flux that waver between these two poles; and (3) exploring not only divisions but also entanglements, and offering visions of ethical practices of encounter and engagement.

***Threshold: Emergency responders on the US-Mexico border, Ieva Jusionyte (2018)***

Utilizing a theoretical framework that indexes Mbembe’s (2003) concept of necropolitics and employs the notion of “field causality” (Weizman 2014), Jusionyte combines her experience as an anthropologist and an emergency responder along the border in Nogales, Arizona, to focus on the materiality of the border wall/fence and the surrounding urban terrain, demonstrating that the physical design of it is intended to produce very specific injuries to those who attempt to cross it unauthorized (by climbing it, for example). She notes that the design of the earlier fence—constructed out of scraps of sheet metal leftover from the Vietnam War—often caused amputations of fingers and limbs to those who scaled it, while the current wall/fence has been designed with the intention of causing fractures—leading those who fall or jump off the border wall to lay painfully injured alongside it, in an area that emergency responders have taken to calling “ankle alley,” due to the nature of the calls for rescue that they receive from the area. By focusing on the way the terrain is in-

tionally used as a weapon against unauthorized migrants, Jusionyte joins Jason de León (2015) in looking at the way that state violence can be employed so that it is rendered invisible to much of the American public, and by passing it off as unintentional, accidental injury, or even as harm that can be blamed on the migrants themselves, painting fleeing people as reckless or even morally suspect (by taking the “irresponsible risk” to try to climb the fence or cross through the desert, endangering themselves and sometimes their families too). In a collage of short vignettes—a patchwork quilt of different rescue calls she responded to—Jusionyte offers a close-up or a “making visible” of the specific kinds of injuries that the state inflicts on unauthorized migrants.

However, it is in discussing rescue work’s entanglements with law enforcement—for example, by looking at different relationships and interactions between Border Patrol agents and emergency responders during these calls, that Jusionyte clearly outlines the contradiction between the two hands of the state (Bourdieu 2014). The state, she demonstrates, both harms and cares, it injures and then it rescues. Although never delving into the specific circumstances that have led the people Jusionyte encounters on the other ends of the rescue calls to flee their homes, Jusionyte nevertheless argues that the bodies of migrants can be read for layers of criminal political violence committed by multiple states. Unlike asylum seekers who may show their wounds as evidence of past state persecution in their countries of origin (see for example, Ticktin 2011), she argues that the wounds that are gouged or the bones that are cracked by the wall are “injuries that lack legitimacy and political value” (15) and are thus hidden away, rather than exposed as a claim for recognition because they function as markers of criminal activity. The violent hand of the contradictory state, then, is one that wounds somewhat insidiously—a theme that I argue also emerges in Yeh’s (2017) work.

Taking “participant-observation” seriously, Jusionyte herself operates as an emergency re-

sponder throughout her fieldwork, warning readers early on that her voice may, at times, seem detached, and this may run the risk of appearing to lack sufficient empathy for the injured. However, she argues that after seeing so many traumatic injuries, emergency responders, like doctors, often necessarily dampen their emotional reactions in order to carry out their job of effectively dealing with an injured body. She continues this argument throughout the book, noting that multiple of her emergency responder interlocutors often emphasized the necessity of maintaining a somewhat “depoliticized” stance—whether that be to bandage the wounds on the body of someone they felt to be a criminal, or to work with Border Patrol in their calls despite an overall dislike for the institution. For emergency responders, in the tense moments of rescue, the identity and immigration status of a person who needs help remains uncertain for a time, coming second to the treatment of their injured body. The exposed bone fracture of an injured smuggler needs just as much treatment as that of a mother crossing with her two children. Further, Jusionyte notes that for the emergency responders she worked with, it is widely but often only implicitly recognized that this wounding is intentional rather than accidental. However, she also demonstrates that her interlocutors are not overly engaged in political discourse as such, but rather remain focused on the local and the immediate. The detached demeanor of those working in the medical profession, coupled by the “depoliticized” stance necessary in emergency rescue, at times, lives in thought-provoking tension with Jusionyte’s overall project of tracing the violence back to the state, and to an ethical anthropology that is engaged in acknowledging the complex and nuanced stories of migrants and speaking out against perceived injustices. Envisioning the border through the multi-meaning concept of a “threshold”—as a point of entry or a place of separation, an “edge” to something that is nonetheless integral to the substance of the thing itself, and a moment of unending shape-shifting (such as when the state shifts between care and

violence, yet always partaking in both), Jusionyte asks, “what is the threshold of politics in emergency response?” (Jusionyte 2018: 20). We may simultaneously ask, “what is the threshold of politics in anthropological fieldwork?” or, perhaps more specifically, “what is the threshold of anthropology in emergency response?”

It is, however, in a focus on the functioning of “the local” that Jusionyte builds her vision of the possible implications of her work. The greater region of *Ambos Nogales* (“Both Nogales,” referring to Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, formerly one community split in half by the border), are intertwined not only socially but also in their infrastructure—some of the built environment for water and sewage, for example, form subterranean tentacles that binationally (and locally) entangle the two cities. Emergency response and threat containment works best, she argues, when there exists the ability for response teams from both sides of the border to work together. Part of her fieldwork takes places south of the border, with the *bomberos* (firefighters) of Nogales, Sonora, allowing her to outline the top-down bureaucratic obstacles they face in being able to cooperate with the firefighters in Nogales, Sonora, and vice versa. Environmental threats, like wildfires or toxic spills, do not conform to geopolitical territorial boundaries, she points out, so to impose boundaries and obstacles that make the border more rigid and less permeable carries its own, less spoken of, dangers. In the end, the focus on the local, the immediate, and the uncertain, thus provides a commentary on some of the state violence—the “close to the skin” kinds, as well as the broader, vaguer kinds—perpetrated not at the border, but through the very infrastructure and design of the border.

***Passing: Two publics in a Mexican border city*, Rihan Yeh (2017)**

While still involving an intricate dissection of the intimate workings of the imperialistic state violence of the United States as it is perpetrated

by the border, a move from Jusionyte’s (2018) work to Yeh’s (2017) is also a move from the realm of materiality to the realm of subjectivity. Yeh’s *Passing* is an in-depth look at the ways that the border is felt under the skin, how it seeps into a person’s sense of “I” or a public’s sense of collectivity, how it works its way into existing social hierarchies, while simultaneously making its imprint on them.

Using the linguistic anthropological concept of “publics” (Cody 2011), Yeh pays close ethnographic attention to multiple mediums of daily communication, to the “micro-mechanics of interaction through which collective subjectivity comes to life” (Yeh 2017: 5). With such a focus maintained, Yeh encounters a Tijuana that is split in two “publics,” each impacted by the border in different ways. The first public she examines, the *clase media* (middle class), is one that is made up of citizens who cling to notions of liberal publicity (Habermas 1989) and is thus a public that believes in rational debate and consensus to influence politics because it sees “the nation” as corresponding to the “state,” and maintains a sense of particular “moral” civic values, such as believing in the correctness of the law, despite the unraveling of these things (exacerbated, I would add, by neoliberalism and its particular brand of violence, as it takes shape in Mexico in the form of state-cartel violence). Importantly, the *clase media* is thus also a public that excludes those who cross undocumented into the United States. The “I” of the middle class public, Yeh argues, thus corresponds to that of the “legal subject,” and in Tijuana, one’s status as part of this public is impacted by the border through the allocation of border-crossing visas. Members of this public usually have “the right to cross” into the United States, via a border visa. This visa can only be obtained if the applicant has already had a long, documented history with the Mexican state—proved by paper copies of things like leases, electricity bills, employment contracts, and pay stubs. Obtaining a border-crossing visa is thus one’s confirmation of socio-economic status within Mexico. Through discussing the “visa interviews” with

some of her interlocutors, however, Yeh demonstrates that this is a “passing” that is always also filled with uncertainty—the discretionary and thus often arbitrary actions of the state in issues of immigration (in this case, in the ability of immigration officers to refuse a visa or take one away, thus relegating the visa holder to the excluded public) remains an ever-present threat. Poignantly, Yeh states that this is always also a crossing that includes a kind of “renunciation of relation” (Yeh 2017: 34) because it necessarily involves an applicant proving their lack of desire to emigrate to the United States. These are some of the ways that the border functions, invisibly wounding Tijuana’s *clase media*: maintaining the threat of violence—the always shimmering possibility of an arbitrary stripping away of an anchor of social status; requiring deferral and vulnerability and the acceptance of surveillance and scrutiny in visa interviews; and importantly, in the insidious seeping in of its own territorial and citizenship-based requirements for social recognition that denies the possibility of this status to a huge portion of Tijuana’s population. The anchoring of social value and recognition to the US border-crossing visa is also a way in which the contradiction of the state becomes visible: it offers hope and a possibility of mobility for some—both upward social mobility as well as geographical mobility—while imposing restrictions not only on those who are excluded from this public but also on the visa holders themselves, imposing restrictions on that mobility and maintaining a sense of uncertainty and the threat of violence at every crossing. Like Jusionyte’s exposure of physical injury and rescue at the hands of the state, Yeh thus exposes the simultaneous promise of possibility and threat of violence as the border impacts individual and collective subjectivities in Tijuana.

The part of the population that is excluded from this authorized border crossing, Yeh argues, corresponds with a public that often self-identifies as “*el pueblo*”—a term with a long history (see Lomnitz 2001) that came into clear focus as a political subject in the Mexican Revolution (Eiss 2010). The *pueblo* finds its voice in

what Yeh calls a “hearsay public.” Members of the hearsay public, excluded and denied a voice in the public sphere because of a marginalized socio-economic status, a process bolstered and exacerbated by the sorting and hierarchizing function of the border, turns its statements inwards, folding them into the terms “*se dicen*” or “they say.” This public, rather than seeing the state as corresponding with the nation, sees the true “nation” as “*el pueblo*” and “the state” as attempting to dominate and exploit the *pueblo*, which consequently contests this unequal power relationship. This is a public in which the life-threatening perils of unauthorized border crossing are familiar to many, in which stories of loss and death in the deserts of the US Southwest are passed from person to person in the form of “*se dice*,” thus offering the possibility to “dwell in absence” (Yeh 2017: 242), to embody the “presence-absence” that not only constitutes death but is also often at the heart of many aspects of Mexican migration northward. Thus, this public unsettles and deconstructs the notion of liberal publicity that the *clase media* still clings to and offers instead the seeds of what Yeh calls an “ethics of encounter,” where “the pueblo provides a first footing on which strangers approach each other in common terms” (Yeh 2017: 250), without the exclusions and the legal and citizenship requirements that are inherent in the concept of a liberal publicity. While very different in context from what could be also be called the “ethics of encounter” that Jusionyte notices among emergency responders—the first approach of every person in need as an injured human rather than an immigration status—Yeh’s “ethics of encounter” also involves a stripping away of an “I” that relies on citizenship, legal subject-ness, and socio-economic status for social recognition and advocates for a more ethical encounter that moves beyond these.

### **Ethical encounters, radical techniques**

In a global political climate where migrant lives are continuously devalued and made “ungriev-

able” (Butler 2004, 2009), whether these more ethical encounters provide the radical potential necessary to combat this dehumanization is debatable. In both books, the authors’ decisions to move away from a close and detailed focus on the specific complexities of the lives of the undocumented migrants they encounter is a mode of interaction adopted from their interlocutors or engendered by their fieldwork and seems to be at the heart of these kinds of “ethical” encounters—those that take place in the “hearsay public” where the “I” is unmoored and often-anonymously-authored stories are passed along between strangers (Yeh 2017) and the depoliticized encounters of first responders where care comes before identity (Jusionyte 2018). This attempted shift in how we encounter each other resonates with Iván Ramos’ (2015) argument in his analysis of the work of Teresa Margolles, a Mexican artist-activist who works with the material remains of violent crimes in Mexico, such as autopsy string and the dust of abandoned homes. Ramos argues that the anonymity that is involved with this type of physical material pushes us to move beyond the singular in collective mourning. Referring to the uncountable numbers of victims of state-cartel violence in Mexico, Ramos asks if there is a way we can grieve without having to first attempt to fit the person we are mourning into a particular mold that renders that person “grievable.” Similarly, both Yeh and Jusionyte put forth arguments that attempt to shift the way strangers encounter each other, arguing for an encounter with less embedded exclusions. In a particular political moment in which the dehumanization of undocumented migrants runs rampant and has had deleterious and fatal effects, it is clear that there is an urgent need for a shift in the way we encounter each other. Whether or not this is a shift in the right direction remains to be seen. Yeh notes that in Tijuana, the hearsay public has not “borne any recognizable political fruit” (2017: 24), but by the end of the book argues that the anthropological text itself is a kind of “passing on” of the hearsay public, an expansion of the ethical encounter, hinting that this may

hold promise for more ethical commitments to each other.

What Jusionyte’s and Yeh’s books both offer is a look at the nuanced ways that state violence, enacted by the border itself, impacts the physical bodies and the daily lives of those who cross it—with or without documents. Although some of the fieldwork for these books took place before the change in administration in the United States that came with a “thickening” of the border in many ways, both of these books may now be even more methodologically salient. In an era where the “wall” along the US–Mexico border is talked about generally in the media, and rhetorically by the current US president as he attempts to fortify it, perhaps it is focusing on the smaller, cumulative impacts of such an infrastructure (and of the processes associated with crossing it) that constitutes a radical action in itself. We may never understand the full extent of the impacts of the current anti-immigration political climate, however, by looking “close to the skin,” both Jusionyte and Yeh offer techniques for exposing how state violence can operate on an individual level, and in many ways, invisibly. Despite this violence—and in some senses, because of it—communities on both sides of the border remain entangled, and in many ways, inseparable.

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