

WITH SINCERE GRATITUDE

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE:
Joy Salomon-Corlobe

CHORAL DIRECTION:
Samuel Lang Budin

COSTUME DESIGN:
Liz Altmann

COSTUME ASSISTANCE:
Alma Maria Arias

GRAPHIC DESIGN:
Malavika Srinivasan

CAST:
Aline Saloum, Cassandra DeMarco,
Christine Romulus, Courtnie Alvarado,
Hannah Bailey, Lindsay Mayberry,
Natasha Thweatt, Kate Garfield,
Caroline Burkhardt, Natasha Walfall,
María Renée Lavalle, Allison Gish,
Shanna Iglesias, Nina Dante,
Laura Murphy.

RESEARCH SUPPORT:
Alexandra Déllano Alonso
Benjamin Nienass
Dr. Kate Spradley
Dr. Daniel Wescott
Rachel Daniell
Brooke Holmes
Jeff Dolven
Ella Haselswerdt

CURATORIAL & PRODUCTION
SUPPORT:
Taja Cheek
Chris Masullo
Alex Sloane
Alexandra Rosenberg

FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT:
Bhav Tibrewal
Jane Powell
Hank Powell
Marie Smith
Nancy Rimany
Ken Rimany
Thomas Schell
Fabian Tabibian
Elizabeth White
Shobha Gunnery
Chandra Tibrewal
Jessica Rowe
Jim Rowe
Carmen Sanchis-Sinisterra
Paul Ramirez Jonas
Thalia Forbes
Zachary Powell
Tomomi Imai
Dennis Donahue

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NOTES ON A PERFORMANCE

“Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”
- Anne Carson[1]

I.
The performers are not actors on a stage but instruments in an orchestra, playing the same music but each with their own unique sound.

II.
to lead, to urge
to negotiate
to brag
to warn
to encourage
to admire
to commiserate
to consider
to instill
to incite
to coax
to demand
to regret
to mourn
to embolden

III.
15 voices, 15 women, all part of one collective character. They speak through their intentions as disparate elements of one consciousness. They, together, articulate a social memory. They, together, both mourn the dead and are moved to action. They, together, are driven to speak of the tragedy and recognise their complicity.

IV.
They speak of Polyneices, the migrants. They speak of Antigone, the forensic anthropologists. They speak of Creon, the state and immigration policies. They speak of Ismene, the you and the me. They speak of how we are implicated in this ongoing tragedy.

V.
And, then, there are pauses.

1 . 2 . 3 . 4 .

VI.
From the body this memory is transmitted. It holds ephemeral qualities. The voices waiver. The voices fuse. The voices plead. The voices urge. The voices argue. The voices separate. The voices transform their grief into a public demand.

VII.
There are silences.

1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 .

VIII.
They slowly circle. They wring their hands. They beat their fist to their hearts.

[oy-moy]
[oʰ ta-lie-naʰ]
[feuy feuy]

1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 .

“To see political events tragically is always to accept our complicity in the disaster unfolding.”
- Simon Critchley.[2]

[1] Euripides and Anne Carson. Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides. New York Review of Books, 2006.

[2] Simon Critchley. Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us. Pantheon. 2019

OPERATION IDENTIFICATION, TEXAS STATE

Operation Identification (OpID) is a project based in the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS), founded in 2013 and directed by Dr. Kate Spradley. OpID was built to facilitate the identification and repatriation of human remains that have been found on or near the South Texas border with Mexico. Through community outreach, forensic analysis, and collaboration with both governmental and non-governmental organisations, OpID works to identify the remains of migrants who have died in Texas. Ultimately, this work of exhumation, processing, analysis, and storage of the remains, offers families knowledge and closure in regards to the fate of their loved ones.

This work is costly. OpID is funded through grant money and donations. Please consider making a contribution so they can continue this work.

Only Remains

A PERFORMANCE WRITTEN AND
DIRECTED BY FREYA POWELL

Remain

Excerpt from: Alexandra Délano Alonso and Benjamin Nienass, *Deaths, Visibility, and Responsibility: The Politics of Mourning at the US-Mexico Border*
BORDERS AND THE POLITICS OF MOURNING
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Between the tall grass, the artificial flowers, and the tombstones, aluminum plates lie haphazardly in the Sacred Heart Burial Park in Falfurrias, Texas. Those that are still legible read “Unknown Male #02192005,” “John Doe 404353,” “Unknown Remains, Palo Blanco, 2,15, 2009,” “Unknown Person, 06 02,” “Unknown Female 436663.” Many are bent, broken, and the letters or labels attached to them have fallen off or have been erased. Lawnmowers have run them over, damaging and displacing these markings, intended as temporary placeholders for the location where unidentified migrant bodies and remains are buried until relatives can repatriate them or purchase a gravestone (personal interview with Alonso Rangel, Funeraria del Angel, June 5, 2013). Most of the markings have been there for years. Until recently, few had asked about these graves or visited them, but in 2012, when the number of migrants dying near Falfurrias rose to become one of the highest along the US-Mexico border, the media, forensic anthropologists, human rights organizations, and pro-immigrant activist groups and individuals were drawn to this small town, 82 miles north of the Texas-Mexico border.

They found markings that did not correspond to the location where bodies were supposed to be; multiple bodies buried in the same grave or commingled in body bags, trash bags, shopping bags, or a milk crate; and the absence of any forensic reports or DNA samples that would allow hundreds of unidentified border crossers or UBCs (as they are usually referred to by local officials) to be named (Collette 2014a, Reel 2015). At his office in Falfurrias, the county seat, Deputy Sheriff Benny Martínez argues that the lack of resources, space, and support leaves few options in dealing with the dead in Brooks County. During the past six years, as migrants have been “funneled” to Texas as a result of the stricter enforcement of border controls in California and Arizona, the Sheriff’s office and one of the local funeral homes (Funeraria del Angel in Falfurrias) have been forced to become experts in recovering an overwhelming number of bodies from the desert and ranchlands in the area. ... In contrast to other counties facing this issue, Brooks County does not receive additional funds from the federal government for this purpose because it does not border Mexico.

The so-called “funnel effect” (Jiménez 2009) is the result of the border enforcement policies that have led migrants to seek new routes to get to the United States, avoiding areas that since the mid-1990s have become more actively patrolled with border fences, technology, and personnel... The new routes go through the hot and remote terrain of the desert and mountains as well as dangerous river crossings left unpatrolled because they are considered natural barriers and deterrents by the US government. Designed as a policy of “prevention through deterrence” (United States Border Patrol 1994; see also Andreas 2000), the main result of these border enforcement policies has not been a decrease in undocumented migration but rather an increased loss of human lives—the number of migrants dying from dehydration, heat stroke, hypothermia, and drowning has increased sharply since 1995 (Cornelius 2001).

Estimates vary, but between 200 and 500 people have died every year along the United States-Mexico border since the late 1990s, even during periods where overall migration from Mexico to the US has slowed down. The total number of deaths in the past 20 years is estimated between 5,000 and 8,000, but there is no accurate account of the people who have lost their lives trying to cross the border (Reineke and Martínez 2014; De León 2015, 36). Many remain unidentified due to the quick decomposition of bodies in the desert before they are found, as well as the absence of a comprehensive DNA database to match them with reports of missing persons (Reineke and Martínez 2014, 61–62; interview with Doretti, Délano et al, this issue).

The deaths are acknowledged by the federal government only as “unintended consequences” of United States

immigration control policies (Cornelius 2001), but others consider them to be “predictable and inhumane outcome(s)” (Jiménez, 2009) or even “intentional results of border militarization strategies” (Michalowski 2007, 66). Despite government documents that explicitly recognize that these policies could lead to more deaths, any responsibility for them is deflected to the natural environment; the mountains, the desert, the rough terrain, the temperatures, and the wildlife that help “erase evidence” and provide plausible deniability regarding blame for what happens in these re- mote areas: “The [government’s] goal is to render invisible the innumerable consequences this sociopolitical phenomenon has for the lives and bodies of undocumented people” (De León 2015, 4).

With the slow increase in public awareness about the consequences of policies that have lasted and been expanded over two decades, migrant deaths have increasingly been approached through a frame of humanitarian crisis (Jiménez 2009, Binational Migration Institute 2013). This framing has been partly responsible for a focus on immediate response and support systems (including governments on both sides of the border, NGOs, and volunteer groups), often directed toward the recovery of bodies and the identification of remains (see also Magaña 2011; Martínez et al. 2014) but without real consequences in terms of assigning responsibility for these deaths. While some have argued for a social injury clearly traceable to the state (Michalowski 1997), others (Doretti, this issue) have cautioned that it is difficult to show clearly that specific legislation can produce disappearance or death.

Most conceptual accounts of the migrants’ exposure to lethal forces address the biopolitical implications of these deaths in the des- ert. Modern biopolitical power is based on the formula “to make live and to let die” (Foucault 2003, 241). Stuart Murray (2006, 197) has restated the Foucauldian formula in this way: “Life must be made, death is neither made nor unmade; it just happens as it were.” In part, according to public perception, the deaths at the United States-Mexico border have been deaths exactly in this sense—they simply happened, without evoking questions of collective responsibility north (or south) of the border. Nevins (2003, 179), for example, claimed that border deaths are widely accepted as a “fact of life” across the United States. But the dramatic quantitative shift has created new realities for numerous state and non-state actors. As Magaña (2011, 159) claims, “the intense physicality and sheer volume of the casualties registered along the US-Mexican border makes them too tragic or horrific to ignore altogether.”

What is initially most striking about this “intense physicality” is that these bodies became an acknowledged presence, a material reality in the United States, only at their moment of death. Yet, unsurprisingly, the lack of responsibility for migrant deaths often extends beyond the policies that create these conditions and into the (lack of) care for their bodies or remains during the processes of recovery, identification, and burial. Many of these bodies, mostly those unidentified, are buried in cemeteries, potter’s fields, or even private ranches near the United States-Mexico border, often far removed from the public eye.

The invisibility and inaccessibility of the spaces where migrants are buried, and the burial practices focused mostly on minimizing costs rather than representing these losses and leaving a space for individual or collective mourning, reveal a profound inequality in the presence of death for migrants (Martínez 2010, 175), as well as for the relatives who face the limbo of uncertainty when they cannot find those who have gone missing. This inequality reveals as much about the disregard for migrants as recognized members of a political community or their “precarious political position” (De León 2015, 17) as it does about the denial of state responsibility for these violations of rights, in life and in death...

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