

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font against a dark blue background.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

JASSON DE LEON. 2024. *Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling*. New York: Viking, 367 pp., ISBN 978-0-59329-858-9

Key Words: Archaeology, Ethnography, Migration, Immigration Reform, Central America

From the mouths of smugglers known as coyotes or *guías*, De León draws out the cultural underbelly of the “guides” who transport undocumented immigrants from Central America to the U.S. In the form of vaunts and confessionals *Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling* creates a unique ethnography. Over the course of seven years, De León integrated within the ranks of illegal professionals and the indiscriminate desperation that drove the trade in Honduras and Mexico. His innovative method of recording the experiences of the “runners” such as Chino, and higher-ups like Kingston and Flaco, captures the conflictions that they have about their work and the material justifications for doing it. De León delves into the lives of the guides to frame the socio-economic groups created between the cultural spaces of border patrols representing Western power and the migrants who are victims of global poverty.

Through his ethnographic and archeological methods, De León demonstrates that both migration and smuggling often are choices people make out of necessity or desperation. He simultaneously negates the common conflation between human trafficking and smuggling while invoking deeper conversations about immigration and the potential for reform. Utilizing his anthropological training, De León enriches the narratives about human smuggling through ethnographic and archaeological means.

Written for the general public, De León illustrates his research process in the beginning of the book, coupled with photos of his research on guides and their migration patterns and the environment, as well as maps of the areas the guides work in to transfer migrants across the

borders. He takes time in the first chapter to explain anthropological methodologies—such as artifact collection and taphonomy—and terminology for ethnographic and archaeological work while expanding on how he integrated his own background into his research (12). This fusion of archaeological and ethnographic methods is melded into contemporary archaeology to address current cultural events.

De León's research is a call for archaeologists to use their training and skillset to enhance contemporary anthropological works. He uses specific methodologies to uncover the migration patterns of human smuggling and the ways in which the environmental and political landscapes alter these patterns. His methodological choices compliment his ethnographical subjects as they contextualize the people who trekked across the unforgiving terrain. This speaks to his critique of immigration reform as it underscores the West's views of illegal immigrants, the systems that create the social class of illegal immigrants and how smugglers are the in-between.

This pioneering work answers questions that address the origins of smugglers, the motives behind their decision making, and how they handle the moral weight of their occupation that explicitly preys upon the desperation of others. De León uses this approach to invoke the public's sympathy for the migrants who wish to find a better life due to the dire living conditions they come from and to “start a conversation is to accept the fact that humans will forever seek places where they and their loved ones can thrive and feel safe” (329). The conclusions De León draws are not in the form of resolutions but realities of the neocapital system by stating: “It also cannot be stopped. But it is not the problem. The monstrous injustices created by capitalism that drive migration...” (329). His work demonstrates the sociocultural environments that enable smuggling through extreme poverty and violent living conditions and how these issues impact humanity.

Through the formation of trust established by participating in the everyday lives of smugglers, border patrol agents, and migrants, De León applied his childhood aptitude for meshing in various cultural spaces and his anthropological training. While recording oral histories, De León conducted his own form of participant observation which he called “a deep hang out” (6). This consisted of him observing and listening rather than actively participating. Despite his revised

methodology, he was still able to acquire the necessary information that anthropologists need to comprehensively understand their subjects and the cultural spaces they occupy. Mirroring the methods of a traditional cultural ethnography, he recorded conversations, took photographs of and formed relationships with his subjects. To incorporate his archaeological expertise, De León would record the material culture found at sites and analyze their distribution to determine the migration routes of the smugglers and migrants. He also looked at the remains found in the Arizona and Mexican deserts to determine causes of death and would place animal carcasses in the desert to evaluate scavenger patterns (14).

De León's use of archaeological methods in cultural anthropological work speaks to his fluency as not only articulate in ancient cultures but current ones as well. He addresses cultural spaces that were formed generationally and whose potency still remains relevant today. His use of taphonomy, migration patterns, and artifact distribution highlights how archaeological training can support or negate ethnographic accounts. The use of these methods is also a statement that the interlocutors depicted in this ethnography are forgotten individuals in Western societies that require the same anthropological methods as individuals from unrepresented cultures. His work is a seamless transition between cultural and archaeological anthropology that clearly highlights the nuances between survival and morality in the contemporary world.

While his work is groundbreaking, he admits the methodological choices he made distanced his work from traditional ethnographic and archaeological works. He would often choose subjects that didn't "scare" him. He highlighted the limits of cultural relativity within his study, noting that "there were many moments during fieldwork when I had to speak up and express my discomfort about things I heard or observed, even if it potentially put me in danger. I was never a fly on the wall, nor was I ever a wholly 'objective' observer." (10). De León acknowledges his positionality as a researcher and friend of those he interacted with for his research which complicated specific components of the data collection such as his leniency with the smuggler Kingston, who he knew was using him for his money but couldn't resist interacting with because of his personal liking to him (281).

De León's work is a pivotal read for anthropologists and archaeologists specifically as it ties in methods typically used to study the distant past, to answer contemporary questions. His research challenges anthropologists to embrace their varied training and backgrounds to acquire narratives that contextualize historic neopolitical struggles that affect populations today. The research De León conducts challenges the current immigration policies implemented by global powers. His work explicitly addresses the dehumanization of migrants and smugglers in the eyes of Western culture and the socio-political environment of their own. Through the stories and material culture of the *guías*, De León questions the qualifications of humanity and the social, economic, and political bounds in which humans can live safely.

De León's research approach is a call for archaeologists to use their training and skillset to enhance contemporary anthropological works. His specific usage of archaeological methodologies to uncover the migration patterns of human smuggling and the ways in which the environmental and political landscapes alter these patterns complement his ethnographical subjects as they contextualize the people who trek across the unforgiving terrain. Specifically, archaeological patterns deepen the understanding between the migrants and smugglers and the land they migrate across. This speaks to his critique of immigration reform as it underscores the West's views of illegal immigrants, the systems that create the social class of illegal immigrants and how smugglers navigate the in-between.

Author Bio:

Melanie Langgle is an Anthropology PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin studying Maya archaeology in Central America. Her previous studies were conducted at the University of Central Florida where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology. Her current research interests consist of human-environment interactions, material exchange, and spatial analysis.



© 2026 Melanie Langgle