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Research Services, Library Addition, 1st Floor

The Other Side of the Wall:
Photographs of the Central American Migrant Experience Crossing Mexico

Photos and curation by Jason De León and Michael Wells
Photographs based on research conducted by the Undocumented Migration Project
The Other Side of the Wall: Photographs of the Central American Migrant Experience Crossing Mexico

With logistical and economic support from the U.S. federal government, Mexico announced its Plan Frontera Sur in July 2014, an immigration enforcement plan whose stated objectives are to bring control and order to the undocumented migration of Central Americans entering Mexico and to ensure the protection of their human rights while in transit to the U.S. This program has led to a tremendous increase in the number of deportations carried out by the Mexican government and arise in reports of human rights violations against migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In many ways, Plan Frontera Sur has created a mobile U.S./Mexico border that is now policed by the Mexican government. This photography exhibition explores what life is like crossing Mexico for both Central American migrants and the smugglers who profit from their movement.

Jason De León is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan and Director of the Undocumented Migration Project, a long-term anthropological study of clandestine border crossings between Latin America and the United States that draws on ethnography, archaeology, forensic science, and visual anthropology to examine this violent and routinized social process. His recent book “The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail” (featuring photos by Michael Wells) was awarded the 2016 Margaret Mead Award. De León is a National Geographic Emerging Explorer and his academic work has been featured in numerous media outlets, including National Public Radio, the New York Times Magazine, Al Jazeera magazine, The Huffington Post, and Vice.

Michael Wells has served as primary photographer for the Undocumented Migration Project since its inception in 2009 and has photographed that project’s ethnographic and archaeological fieldwork in Arizona, New York, Mexico, and Ecuador. A Los Angeles-based photographer, his work focuses on how people engage with built and natural environments with a unique eye for the materiality of these spaces. He has created photography projects on post-Katrina New Orleans, the physicality of the US-Mexico border in Southern Arizona and California, amateur Latino soccer leagues in Los Angeles, and Latino Communities in the American South. His diverse body of work has been featured in a wide range of media outlets including Architectural Digest, Archaeology Magazine, Domus, Dwell, Cabinet, National Geographic, National Public Radio, and Textfield. His book publications include Municipal De Futbol (2008) Denim Legends (2008), The Legendary Estates of Beverly Hills (2009), and Windsor Smith Homefront (2015).