“The Migratory Corpse as Counterpoint to Transnational Commodification”

David Francis
Harvard University, Mexico
dfrancis@fas.harvard.edu

Teresa Margolles’s award-winning installation, "¿De qué otra cosa podriamos hablar? (What Else Could We Talk About), exhibited at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009), makes art with the blood left from the deceased victims of narco warfare in the Mexico-U.S. border state of Sinaloa. Similarly, Chus Gutiérrez’s Spanish film "Retorno a Hansala" (2008) circles around the dead (fictional) body of a young Moroccan boy found washed ashore on the coast of Rota, Spain. The film’s narrative hinges around the encounter of this body (among 10 others) and its costly return, by a Spanish mortician and the boy’s sister (currently working in Spain), to his hometown in Hansala, Morocco. The film’s script is in Spanish, Arabic, Berber, and French, and it has garnered international critical viewership and awards in Beirut, Cairo, and Valladolid. What dramatizes these representations of dead bodies and brings them transnational recognition? What relationships might be seen between these bodies and the peripheral towns and borders in which they die and are “discovered”? In my study, I will use these texts to undertake an exploration of transnational American border theory, focusing on the lines between Mexico and the United States and Spain and Morocco. In doing so, I aim to understand why artistic depictions of migratory work do not necessarily stop at death; rather, dead bodies found in peripheral border locations may be read as mobile counterpoints to international networks of fear, paranoia, and bodily commodification that leave a border’s citizens particularly vulnerable to physical violence buttressed by neoliberal economic power.