
THE LAND OF OPEN GRAVES

LIVING AND DYING ON THE MIGRANT TRAIL

Jason De León

With photographs by Michael Wells



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US-Mexico border near Sasabe, Arizona. Photo by Michael Wells.



Unidentified human remains from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner.
Photo by Michael Wells.



Juan Bosco Shelter, Nogales, Mexico. Photo by Michael Wells.



Migrant campsite near Green Valley, Arizona. Photo by Michael Wells.



Storytelling, 2014. Photo by Michael Wells.



José Tacuri with his sister and niece, Cuenca, Ecuador. Photo by Michael Wells.

Introduction

Flies.

I mostly remember the goddamn flies.

It's funny how memory works. I made a thousand mental notes of the scene—and wrote a good many of them down soon after the event—but only a couple of years later they now seem to be forgotten, buried, reduced to background noise. After spending just a few weeks on the US-Mexico border hanging out with the desperate people looking to breach America's immigration defenses, I quickly learned that death, violence, and suffering are par for the course. It all started to blur together. Disturbing images lost their edge. As an observer, you grow accustomed to seeing strangers cry at the drop of a hat. Tears no longer had the impact they once did. Tragic stories repeatedly told under the strain of a cracking voice transformed into well-worn hymns that lost their provenience and became difficult to seriate. I fought sensory overload so as to not lose sight of the big picture or the brutal details. I tried to write it all down so that I could later connect the observed realities to larger structural forces. This, at least, is what I kept telling myself I needed to do during my five years of fieldwork on the Arizona-Mexico border and later as I wrote this book. It's what I told myself in this first encounter with death. It's easier said than done. It didn't matter, though, because on this day in July 2009 none of it could be comprehended, much less theorized. All I could do was stare at the flies and wonder how the hell they had gotten there so quickly.

It happened on my first day conducting ethnographic research in the border town of Nogales, Mexico. I had spent the sweltering morning sitting in the

shade talking with recently deported migrants. These were women and men who had just attempted and failed to walk across the Sonoran Desert of Arizona to illegally enter the United States. A few of them had been deported from elsewhere by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)¹ in hopes that being placed in geographic proximity to the desert, where hundreds die each year while migrating, would be enough to deter them from attempting a crossing. I didn't know his name, but I had seen him earlier in the day. Among the tired masses of deportees, he didn't stand out. Recently repatriated people are easy to spot in Nogales because of the uniformity of their appearance: dark T-shirts with powdery salt rings under the armpits and circling the neck; sneakers that look like they have been through a meat grinder; dusty black backpacks stuffed with extra socks, a few cans of food, and whatever meager personal possessions they have managed to hold on to. Their brown bodies broadcast exhaustion and vulnerability like a scarlet letter. Faces show a mix of sorrow, weariness, fear, and optimism. They may have walked for three days lost, quenched a paralyzing thirst at a cattle trough where the water was mostly algae and swimming insects, been robbed at gunpoint by bandits, and raped by a Border Patrol agent before being deported.² Still, the next time is going to be different. There is a husband waiting in Carrboro, North Carolina. A guaranteed job painting houses in Phoenix. A little girl with an empty belly back in the tiny village of El Manchon, Guerrero. *Si Dios quiere, voy a pasar.* The next time is going to be different.

I don't remember what he looked like when he was alive. In fact, I didn't really notice him at all until I was making my way toward the convenience store a block from where I had been conducting interviews down on *la linea*³ in front of the Grupo Beta Office.⁴ Like many who get caught in the cycle of repeated crossing attempts, he decided to spend the morning drinking a *caguama* (quart-sized bottle of beer) while planning what to do next. I passed him a few hours prior as he headed to an abandoned field across from the store. I took more notice of the early happy hour he was having than of his actual facial features. All I remember is that he was tall and skinny and had a shaved head. The next time I saw him was when I spotted a crowd gathering near the abandoned field. I walked up to investigate and found myself standing behind a chain-link fence with several migrants, including a short bald man I would soon come to know as Chucho.⁵ For ten minutes Chucho and I stared in silent awe at the limp body flopped on the dirt. This dude had been dead for less than an hour and yet the flies were already there in full force.

They were landing on his milky eyeballs and crawling in and out of his open mouth. His head was turned and facing the crowd of migrants. He seemed to be staring right through everyone. We watched flies lay eggs on this man's face for what seemed an eternity.

Finally some Good Samaritan showed up with a Dallas Cowboys bedsheet and covered him up. A paramedic and a few of the neighbors milled around the corpse chatting, but no one seemed to be fazed. Death lay there like a casual summer breeze. I thought to myself that maybe this guy was headed to Dallas to wash dishes at an Applebee's. Maybe he hated the *pinches* Cowboys⁶ after spending too many years in Philly doing landscaping jobs and rooting for the Eagles. No one seemed to know him. They just knew that he needed to be covered up to keep the flies away. I turned to Chucho for some insight into this spectacle. He shrugged and said, "This happens all the time. Some people get tired of trying to cross the border after many failed attempts. Some turn to drugs and alcohol to kill time. Who knows what killed him?" Reading the worry on my face, Chucho continued, "You watch. No one will remember this tomorrow. It's like it didn't even happen."

He was right. I would ask migrants the following day about the dead body in the field three hundred feet from the Grupo Beta Office, and no one would know what I was talking about. It was almost as if it didn't happen.

This book is about the violence and death that border crossers face on a daily basis as they attempt to enter the United States without authorization by walking across the vast Sonoran Desert of Arizona. If you live in the United States, you already know about many of the people you will meet in these pages. They pick your fruit, detail your cars, and process your meat. They toil in occupations that US citizens can't or won't do.⁷ Keep in mind, though, that not everyone who crosses the desert is a first-timer. In the Obama era of mass deportations, close to 2 million people were removed from the country through fiscal year 2013.⁸ Many of these deportees are now running scared across Arizona's Mars-like landscape to reunite with family members or simply return to the only place they have ever called home. My argument is quite simple. The terrible things that this mass of migrating people experience en route are neither random nor senseless, but rather part of a strategic federal plan that has rarely been publicly illuminated and exposed for what it is: a killing machine that simultaneously uses and hides behind the viciousness of the Sonoran



Dallas Cowboys death shroud, Nogales, Mexico, 2009. Photo by author.

Desert. The Border Patrol disguises the impact of its current enforcement policy by mobilizing a combination of sterilized discourse, redirected blame, and “natural” environmental processes that erase evidence of what happens in the most remote parts of southern Arizona. The goal is to render invisible the innumerable consequences this sociopolitical phenomenon has for the lives and bodies of undocumented people.

Those who live and die in the desert have names, faces, and families. They also have complicated life histories that reflect an intimate relationship with transnational migration and global economic inequality. We just rarely ever get to see them up close as they make these terrifying journeys or hear them describe this process in their own words. In what follows, I bring into focus the logic and human cost of the US border enforcement monster known as “Prevention Through Deterrence,” a strategy that largely relies on rugged and desolate terrain to impede the flow of people from the south. I also present stories of survival, failure, and heartbreak that happen on *la linea* and beyond from the perspective of those who directly experience this unique security apparatus. Documenting these largely undocumented stories and giving the reader an up-close look at faces and bodies can perhaps help us remember tomorrow that people lived and died in this desert today.

BORDER STORIES

Keeping track of the sheer number of publications that focus in some way on the US-Mexico divide is an impossible task. It seems as though every month a new exposé hits the shelves and tantalizes the public with the trials and tribulations of the troubled geopolitical margin where the phrase “the Third World meets the First World” is still thrown around as if it means something. We don’t like to admit it, but the United States is simultaneously afraid of and intrigued by its southern border. The general public can’t shake its love of the movies, news programs, reality television shows, and tell-all books that reassure us that this is in fact a zone that is “out of control.” If you’re a writer, toss in words like *danger* and *violent* and come up with some creative (or not so creative) uses of war metaphors, and you’ve got yourself a best-selling piece of immigration pornography.

Don’t get me wrong, there are many excellent books written about the border. It is a place full of captivating tales and complex histories, but also a well-worn path that many others have mapped out better than I ever could. Rather than giving you a history lesson that you could learn elsewhere, this book abruptly starts in 1993, the year that the policy later coined “Prevention Through Deterrence” (PTD) was first deployed in El Paso, Texas. At the time, PTD was just an off-the-cuff homegrown preventive measure against the unsightliness of brown-skinned illegal fence jumpers and the subsequent chaos the Border Patrol caused by chasing them through poor Latino

neighborhoods where it was impossible to figure out who belonged and who didn't.⁹ By placing a gaggle (or is it a "murder"?) of crew-cut Border Patrol agents in combat boots and crisp green uniforms in and around downtown El Paso, the immediate goal of discouraging boundary offenders from attempting to hop the fence in these populated areas was achieved. Frustrated, but undeterred, these scrappy individuals, many of whom were locals from Ciudad Juárez simply commuting to work in Texas, went to the edge of town where the fence magically disappeared and agents were few and far between. Business quickly got back to normal.

Everything changed, though, after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The United States promised economic prosperity for its southern neighbor if it would only open up its ports of entry and take shipment of cheap goodies. Soon after Mexico signed on the dotted line, it found itself drowning in a *pinche montón*¹⁰ of subsidized *gringo* corn that crashed their economy and put millions of peasant farmers out of work. As they had done in previous generations when things were bad in Mexico or when *los Yanquis* needed cheap labor,¹¹ this impoverished population started making their way north by the hundreds of thousands. Optimistic *campesinos* lined up in Tijuana, Juárez, and Reynosa and waited their turn to try and get past *la migra* so that they could join the US undocumented labor force.¹²

This NAFTA-induced human flood now meant there were hordes of fence hoppers in San Ysidro, California, and McAllen, Texas. Once again, the Border Patrol needed a way to reduce the bad press that comes with an avalanche of poor people spilling onto the streets of border towns daily. That little experiment in El Paso to push the Spanish-speaking invaders to the edge of town soon became a nationwide security paradigm that is still in place today. The basic premise was, and continues to be, that if they can't stop the huddled masses, at least they can funnel them into remote areas where the punishment handed out by difficult terrain will save money (or so some foolishly thought) and get this unsightly mess out of public view, which it did.

Between 2000 and 2013, approximately 11.7 million people were apprehended while trying to make the illegal pilgrimage to the United States via Mexico. During this same period, 4,584,022 of these arrests occurred in the Border Patrol jurisdiction known as the Tucson Sector, a craggy, depopulated, and mountainous patch of land that stretches westward from New Mexico to the Yuma County line in Arizona.¹³ If you include the neighboring Yuma Sector during this same period, the number of arrests in this state climbs to



Border Patrol sectors and locales mentioned in the text.

5,304,345 people. This is equivalent to the population of Houston, Texas. It's no wonder Arizona hates immigrants;¹⁴ for close to two decades the federal government has been using that state's backyard as a gauntlet to test the endurance of millions of border crossers and has often left local communities holding the medical bill.¹⁵ Still, everyone knows that if you survive this death race, the backdoors of US stockyards, carpet factories, meat rendering plants, and sushi restaurants are wide open.

Much of what is described in this book took place in the strip of desert just south of Tucson between the Baboquivari and Tumacácori mountain ranges. This beautiful and challenging landscape has been home to the indigenous Tohono O'odham¹⁶ ("Desert People") and their ancestors for millennia. Long before the arrival of colonial-era Spaniards seeking gold and Christian converts, nineteenth-century American geological surveyors itching to draw new maps, and twentieth-century Border Patrol agents,¹⁷ the O'odham people were cultivating a set of cultural traditions and practices that has allowed them

to thrive in an environment that to most outsiders appears too barren to sustain agriculture or human life.¹⁸ As ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan writes: “The perspiring and panting in the middle of the saguaro forests—they are part of the raw intimacy the [O’odham] maintain with the desert. Somewhat ugly to the outside eye, this routine is an honest indicator of the strong bonds between the Desert People and their surroundings. Instead of running away from the desert during its driest, hottest time, some still run to the heart of it.”¹⁹ O’odham poet Jeanette Chico sums up this intimacy: “When I walk in the desert the animals stop and look at me as if they were saying ‘Welcome to our home.’”²⁰

Unlike the Desert People, the border crossers who pass through this region do not share in the cultural acumen that conceptualizes this landscape as inviting. Try to envision what it is like going from the lush tropical lowlands of Veracruz or the cool mountains of Oaxaca to the sparse and smoldering desert. Migrants will tell you, “I never imagined it would be like this.” How could they? They are fugitives traversing a deadly alien planet. The Border Patrol counts on this. This terrain is that federal agency’s not-so-secret weapon, and the migrant injuries and death toll provide evidence that it is a painfully effective one. What’s agonizing for the O’odham is that the American federal government has turned their sacred landscape into a killing field, a massive open grave.

The line in the sand that currently exists between Arizona and Mexico was first drawn after the Gadsden Purchase of 1854. This geopolitical space has since had a troubling history marked by colonial and postcolonial subjugation and violence, much of which I skip so that I can draw a tighter focus on the lives of those who have passed through this political geoscape between 2009 and 2013. There are, however, several excellent publications that influenced my thinking about boundary enforcement and its evolution over the past hundred years. For those looking for a deeper, diachronic view of the geopolitics of this region, I recommend Patrick Ettinger’s *Invisible Lines* and Rachel St. John’s *Line in the Sand*;²¹ both of these superb books provide up-to-date syntheses of archival material and previous historical research. Despite the amount of ink I dedicate to Border Patrol policies, this book lacks anything resembling a “History of Boundary Enforcement” section. Instead, I lean heavily on Kelly Lytle Hernández’s thorough, eye-opening analysis of the US Border Patrol, Joseph Nevins’s seminal book *Operation Gatekeeper*, and Peter Andreas’s *Border*

Games to provide the reader brief glimpses into the history of immigration policing and the political chicanery that often (mis)guides how the United States negotiates the property line between its backyard and that of its Mexican neighbors.²² Finally, Timothy Dunn's books *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992* and *Blockading the Border and Human Rights* helped me appreciate the crucial backstory to our modern border industrial complex and describe the seeds that sprouted the current enforcement paradigm that I take to task in this book.²³ Obviously, many others have written about the US-Mexico border, and I cite them throughout this work, but the aforementioned authors proved especially useful for understanding how and why things have gotten so bad in southern Arizona and northern Mexico in the past two decades.

Having briefly lamented the quality of many recent books on the current border situation, I now find myself in the awkward predicament of needing to justify writing yet another book about this exhausted subject. I didn't start this project out of some misguided hubris that I was somehow going to get the story right. I'm the first person to tell you that no matter what you do, you can never get full comprehension of what is *actually* happening on our southern frontier. The system in place has too many moving parts traveling at sometimes blinding speed. Your view of any single part is blurry at best. But it doesn't matter what you can actually see, because there are always things going on out of sight. I'm not just talking about some gold-toothed coyote²⁴ speeding away in a primed minivan full of migrants or glue-sniffing cholos hiding in the bushes waiting for the next pack of border crossers to rob. I mean the closed door strategy meetings at Border Patrol headquarters in Tucson where new forms of "deterrence" are plotted and schemed using euphemistic defense jargon and slick corporate promotional videos touting next season's line of unmanned aerial drones. Sometimes it's those secretive moments when two nervous agents sit in their truck on a dusty road and try to get their story straight about why they shot some unarmed Mexican kid while he was hopping the border fence to run back into Mexico.²⁵ Don't forget the off-the-record dinner conversations when politicians and their federal contractor friends eat Delmonico steaks and drink single malt while laughing about how they are going to fill newly constructed private detention facilities and charge the government a pretty penny.²⁶ You are never going to capture all of the things that make the border system (dys)functional, and that is not my intention here.

CROSSING OVER

It started as nothing more than dinner conversation sometime in the fall of 2008. Fresh out of graduate school, I found myself teaching at the University of Washington and struggling to find a post-dissertation project. I had just spent a couple of years scrutinizing thousands of tiny pieces of obsidian in an attempt to reconstruct the political economy of the ancient Olmec,²⁷ those precocious indigenous people who built Mesoamerica's first great civilization. During the course of my doctoral fieldwork, I had become increasingly fascinated by the lives of the local Mexican women and men I had worked with on various excavations. These individuals, many of whom I became close with over the years, had a significant amount of experience migrating to the United States, including firsthand knowledge of what Prevention Through Deterrence felt like in the Arizona desert.

As soon as I finished my thesis, I said good-bye to ancient stone tools and made the first in a series of questionable career choices when I decided to change subdisciplines and reinvent myself as an ethnographer. As an undergraduate at UCLA and later a graduate student at Penn State, I had bought into the idea that anthropology's major contribution to knowledge production was its comprehensive approach to the human condition: past, present, and future. The discipline's holistic combination of archaeology, biology, language, and culture provides a vast set of tools and approaches to understand the things that make us human. By logical extension, all archaeologists, ethnographers, osteologists, and linguists are anthropologists at the end of the day. This is what we tell our students and that's what I believed when I made this career shift. I was simply following my anthropological interests.

Over dinner one night with an archaeologist friend, I began talking about Luis Alberto Urrea's moving book *The Devil's Highway*.²⁸ This tragic tale of fourteen border crossers who lost their lives in the Yuma Sector in 2001 was on the reading list I was using that semester to develop what was then a vaguely defined project about immigration. This friend said to me, "You know, when I was conducting archaeological surveys in the Arizona desert, we would often come across the things that migrants left behind. Once we found a backpack that contained a love letter in Spanish. It was really sad." She then joked, "I bet someone could do some sort of weird archaeological project on that stuff." A month later I was standing in the wilderness south of Tucson staring at an overwhelming pile of empty water bottles and abandoned clothes.

When I started the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP) in 2009, my goal was modest. I wanted to test the idea that archaeology could be a useful tool for understanding the evolution of border crosser technology and the economic system that undergirds clandestine migration. I quickly realized that I should also be asking other types of questions about this phenomenon and that archaeology was only one of the many tools I could use to get answers. One of the first conclusions I came to during the planning stages of this work was that, despite the intense public and academic interest in the subject, few scholars or journalists had attempted to write carefully about the physical movement involved in unauthorized migration. The firsthand accounts of border crossings in recent times largely came from the musings of gonzo journalists who headed down to the border and teamed up with some overly trusting Mexicans who let these people shadow them as they headed for El Norte. Privileged journalists running across the desert with their passports in their back pockets while chasing migrants produce little beyond what I consider problematic “Choose Your Own Adventure” books for American consumption.²⁹ One of the goals of the UMP was to collect robust data on the migration process that could provide a counternarrative to this literature.

DOCUMENTING THE UNDOCUMENTED

Given the furtive and illegal nature of undocumented migration, it is no surprise that academics have looked at it largely from a distance. Two outstanding books, for example—Leo Chavez’s *Shadowed Lives* and David Spener’s *Clandestine Crossings*—provide nuanced insight into the act of border crossing. The one limitation of both studies, from my perspective, though, is the fact that much of their data are collected after crossing events happened,³⁰ or their descriptions are almost exclusively based on interviews, a problem that Spener himself points out.³¹ That being said, I am also not convinced that participant observation, the methodological cornerstone of ethnographic research, is an appropriate tool for understanding this type of migration.

Medical anthropologist Seth Holmes begins his recent book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* with a description of a clandestine border crossing through the Sonoran Desert that he undertook with indigenous Triqui migrants whom he first met while conducting research on a farm in northwestern Washington State.³² Holmes writes that he decided to cross the border with his interlocutors because, “early in my fieldwork, I realized that an ethnography of suffering

and violence and migration would be incomplete without witnessing firsthand such an important site of suffering for Latin American migrants.”³³ Although I understand his desire for an up-close view of a key aspect of the lives of the undocumented farmworkers he studies, I have never been comfortable with this type of ethnography.

Over the course of five years of research, many people I met in Nogales invited me to accompany them into the desert. For a number of reasons, I declined every offer. First, I have always believed that my participation in a border crossing would be an unnecessary risk for my informants to take and something that would have reinforced, if not exacerbated, the hierarchy between me (a college professor) and the working-class migrants who trust me with their stories. Putting myself into a research scenario where my interlocutors are highly vulnerable while I am protected by my citizenship status is at odds with the type of anthropology that I want to practice. A second, albeit from my perspective less important, issue is that “entry without inspection,” which is what US citizens are charged with when they cross the border through a nonofficial port of entry, is a crime (a mere civil offense) and something that could potentially jeopardize my employment and federal grant funding. If I had undertaken such a problematic endeavor, the headline in the right-leaning media outlets that occasionally throw stones at this research would no doubt read: “Mexican Professor Helps Illegals Cross the Desert and Uses National Science Foundation Money to Pay for It.”³⁴

An unspoken issue that I think undermines Holmes’s attempt to “witness” this process is the fact that his participation in a crossing is highly disruptive and guarantees that the event is anything but “normal.”³⁵ By his own account, Holmes’s presence in a group of migrants made various smugglers nervous, led to him being singled out by Grupo Beta, and resulted in his companions asking him if he could drive them to Phoenix to get past a Border Patrol checkpoint.³⁶ Moreover, his Triqui companions were no doubt well aware of the shit storm that would ensue if something happened to a *gringo* in their care.³⁷ It is easy to imagine how the media would spin a story about an American graduate student who died while crossing the desert with a bunch of undocumented migrants. Essentially, whether he liked it or not, Holmes became a concern and burden for the group as he attempted to observe this process. This phenomenon is something that journalist John Annerino experienced firsthand when he became sick while traveling through the Yuma Sector and ended up having to be cared for by the Mexican border crossers he was photographing.³⁸

Although rattlesnakes and heat stroke can kill you regardless of citizenship, these “documented” observers don’t have to worry about being abandoned by their *coyote* in the desert or getting brained by a Border Patrol Maglite.

Despite the good intentions behind accompanying migrants, these anthropologists and journalists have authorization to be in the United States, and after getting caught, they are inevitably set free. Holmes’s description of his crossing routinely highlights that he had a lawyer whom he could call on for help and that his credentials as a student studying migration were a get-out-of-jail-free card. Although he was not allowed to use the phone or given toilet paper while in detention, Holmes was put into his own cell and received special treatment by law enforcement, which highlights just how abnormal his presence was for all parties involved. The Border Patrol threatened to charge him with illegal entry, but this turned out to be part of the normal scare tactics that agents use against citizens and noncitizens alike. In the end, the anthropologist was let go with a warning, while his nameless companions were processed and deported.³⁹

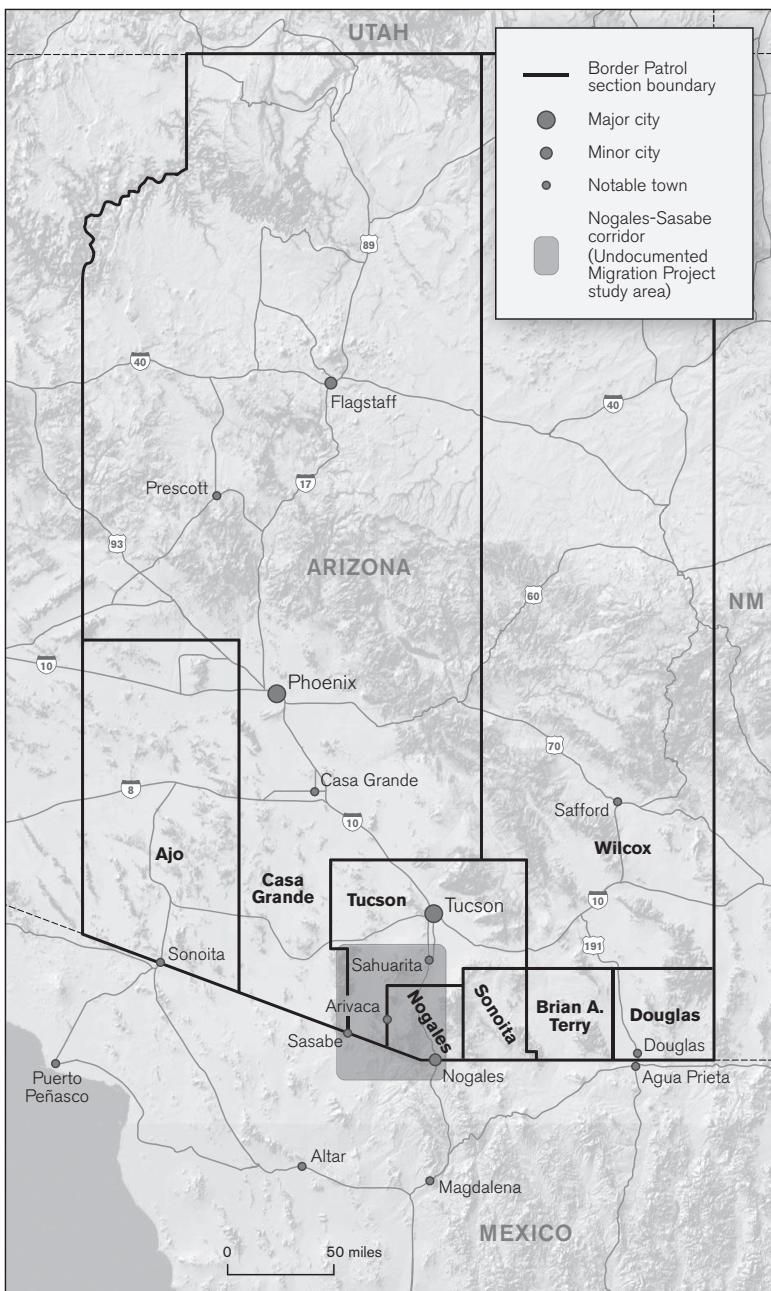
Finally, this type of participant observation has always struck me as problematic because it tends to focus on the experiences of the writer⁴⁰ and doesn’t necessarily give us insight into the terror and violence suffered by Latino border crossers. Holmess’s descriptions emphasize his feeling “like a rabbit, vulnerable and hunted,” while the voices of his traveling companions are noticeably mute or altogether absent.⁴¹ To compound this issue, two of the three photographs of this event position Holmes as the center of attention and are labeled with captions such as “The author and Triqui men in the border desert.” We get to see the grinning anthropologist’s face and hear about his suffering, while these men are relegated to the status of anonymous undocumented border crossers. While I greatly value the work that Holmes has done to reveal the brutality and racism that indigenous farmworkers experience, I think that we as ethnographers need to be more critical regarding the contexts where participant observation is deployed and more reflective about how we write about the act of witnessing other people’s trauma. In my approach to clandestine migration, I have sought to paint crossers not as anonymous shadows scrambling through the desert, but as real people who routinely live and die in this environment and whose voices and experiences we should be privileging.

I am inspired by Audrey Singer and Douglas Massey’s recognition that undocumented migration is not the chaotic event often depicted in popular media but rather a “well-defined social process whereby migrants draw upon

various sources of human and social capital to overcome barriers erected by US authorities.”⁴² The Undocumented Migration Project has long been concerned with improving the resolution of the ethnographic data we have on this social process while also avoiding the problematics of directly observing a clandestine and illegal act. Accordingly, over the years I have freely borrowed various methods and theories from the anthropological toolbox. As you will see, this book draws on a four-field anthropology—that is ethnography, archaeology, forensic science, and linguistics—in the name of enhancing our understanding of the process of undocumented desert migration. In many ways, this project is intended to challenge preconceived notions about what a holistic anthropology can look like and how it can be deployed in politically hostile terrain.

If my writing is at times acerbic or in nonstandard academic English (or untranslated Mexican slang), it is because I am trying to match the frankness, sarcasm, and humor of my interlocutors, as well as the grittiness of the difficult worlds they inhabit. It is also because I see little public or personal benefit to “toning down” what I have seen, heard, and experienced while trying to get an anthropological handle on the routinely chaotic, violent, and sometimes tragicomic process of clandestine migration. Like many scholars before me, I aim to sully the often sterile anthropological discussion about undocumented Latino migration and its associated geographic, cultural, political, and economic boundaries.⁴³ By doing so, I want to show how productive it can be to sneak back and forth across the border between “accepted discourse and excluded discourse” in the name of generating new knowledge and new forms of cultural understanding.⁴⁴

As I began working with a population in transit, it soon became obvious that a multisited ethnographic approach was needed to capture various elements of the migration process.⁴⁵ Over the years, I followed people across multiple states, countries, and continents. Although I conducted several dozen interviews during a ten-day trip to Ecuador in 2013, numerous short trips to New York in 2013 and 2014, and some two dozen domestic and international phone calls and Skype interviews, most of the ethnographic, forensic (chapter 3), and archaeological data (chapter 7) were collected in the border town of Nogales, Mexico, the northern Mexican town of Altar, and the deserts of the Tucson Sector between Nogales and Sasabe (see map of Tucson Sector, opposite).⁴⁶



Undocumented Migration Project study areas and corresponding Border Patrol substations in the Tucson Sector. Based on map by Cameron Gokee.

From 2009 to 2013, I interviewed hundreds of men and women between the ages of eighteen and seventy-five who were in the middle of the migration process.⁴⁷ These conversations took place at bus stations, on street corners, in restaurants, bars, humanitarian shelters, cemeteries, and any other place I encountered border crossers. The majority of people were Mexican nationals, though some Central Americans were also interviewed. Our interactions tended to be unstructured, and depending on the situation, I either took written notes, used a digital voice recorder, or both.⁴⁸ On several occasions, people were shown photographs of the desert and other migration-related settings and asked to comment on them.⁴⁹ In addition, I spent countless hours observing deportation proceedings in Tucson, touring government facilities with Border Patrol agents, and walking on the trails that migrants use to cross the desert.⁵⁰

The interviews I conducted were almost exclusively in Spanish and are presented here in their translated English form, with some phrases and words left in their original language for effect. Because people often ramble, repeat themselves, or tell complicated stories out of order, at times I have edited material to preserve the narrative flow and reduce redundancy.⁵¹ I made these edits carefully and sparingly, striving as much as possible to preserve the speaker's original meaning and tone. In all except a few cases, I used pseudonyms and changed some personal details to protect identities.⁵² The names of the dead and missing have not been changed. Their families wanted their "real" stories told. They wanted to guarantee that the lost were not forgotten.

DEPICTING VIOLENCE

The primary theme of this book is violence: how it is constructed in the desert, its productive nature from the perspective of those benefiting from it, and how its victims come to know its destructiveness. The things that happen to the undocumented migrants who experience the strong pull of the US economy and the simultaneous blunt force trauma of its immigration enforcement practices can be generally characterized as a form of *structural violence*.⁵³ It is violence that is indirect (i.e., the result of federal policy). No one individual is responsible for it. Moreover, it often occurs out of site, many portray it as "natural," and it can easily be denied by state actors and erased by the desert environment.⁵⁴ Throughout this book the scale of analysis and perspective on this form of structural violence change depending on the context, moment, and analytical

goal. In some instances, the discussion focuses on federal enforcement discourse and large-scale infrastructure. At other times I give the viewer a full-frontal view of how those on the ground experience this policy.

The intent is to show what the violence looks like up close, and thus avoid sanitizing it, but also to offer what Žižek terms “sideways glances” that may help foster new ways of thinking about border crossings and the routinized pain and suffering that accompany them.⁵⁵ Theoretically, these efforts are aided by two key ideas. First is the proposition that nonhumans (e.g., the desert) play a major role in this process (see chapter 2) and should be considered crucial elements of the Border Patrol’s enforcement strategy. The second argument is that the types of death people experience in the desert reflect their precarious political position and that the postmortem biographies of their corpses provide insight into the production of trauma that has a hemispheric reach.

There is no easy way to represent violence, a fact that I was acutely aware of throughout the course of writing this book. I spent many nights worrying whether the descriptions contained here are too graphic or insensitive. Admittedly, much of this endeavor is written from a male perspective. As a Latino researcher, I had significantly more access to men than women, at least during the phases of ethnographic work that took place on the northern Mexican border. For various reasons described throughout the text, men were more readily available for interviews, and it was their perspective on border-crossing violence that I became most familiar with. This means that I came to know about much of the sexual violence that women experience en route through the eyes of men who bore witness.⁵⁶ One researcher estimates that as many as 90 percent of women who attempt to cross undocumented into the United States through northern Mexico suffer sexual assault,⁵⁷ which indicates that there are many untold stories of trauma.⁵⁸ In fleeting moments the physical traces of the sexual assault that women experienced were visible to me. This sometimes manifested itself as blackened eyes or bruised wrists on the bodies of recent deportees. On a handful of occasions, I encountered deported women who were in catatonic states or were so visibly shaken that they couldn’t be consoled. These are just the rare instances in which assault left visible marks. Whatever events caused these bruises or moments of trauma, they were largely inaccessible to me because of a combination of ethical, methodological, and gender issues.⁵⁹ That being said, I have tried to include as much as I can in this book about the gender-based violence women experience.

Although they are present throughout this text, at certain moments women are visible only through male eyes.⁶⁰ This is especially true in part 2, "El Camino." It is not my intention, however, to make "woman an icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men,"⁶¹ but rather to emphasize that males primarily between the ages of eighteen and forty make up the bulk of apprehended border crossers (86.5 percent in 2012)⁶² and were the population whose perspective I became most familiar with. I acknowledge the male perspective as a recurring framework in parts of this book largely for the purpose of illustrating that in this research context that perspective shouldn't be written off as simply patriarchal or pornographic. Instead, the viewpoint of men can highlight the power and experiences of female border crossers and illustrate the extent to which the narratives included here signal male "identification with, sympathy for, or vulnerability to the feminine."⁶³ In the end, I hope that my prose and the various perspectives I seek to represent strike a balance between reflecting violent realities and maintaining all people's dignity.

Finally, to complicate my written descriptions of violence, I have risked including photographs of vulnerable people in all types of precarious positions. This was a decision influenced by the new wave of photoethnographies published in the past ten years.⁶⁴ I was particularly inspired by Bourgois and Schonberg's *Righteous Dopefiend* and Danny Hoffman's *The War Machines*, both of which sensitively pair difficult-to-view images with insightful analyses of violence.⁶⁵ From the start of this project I knew that words alone could never capture the complexity, emotion, or realities of the violence, suffering, and victories that people experience during the migration process. You have to hear their voices *and* see their faces to appreciate them as human beings. Over the past several years many undocumented people in the United States have bravely come out of the shadows to tell their stories.⁶⁶ The people you will meet in this book wanted to do the same thing. They wanted to be heard and seen. For this reason, I have included pictures taken by border crossers while en route, troubling photos of physical injuries, and graphic images of death. Perhaps by humanizing that nebulous mass of humanity that we call the undocumented, we can begin to have a serious conversation about how to fix America's broken immigration system.

Although some of these pictures were taken by me or migrants themselves, the bulk were shot by my friend and longtime collaborator Michael Wells. Present from the beginning of this project, Mike Wells (everyone calls him by his full name) spent countless days with me hiking in the desert, hanging out in

shelters in Mexico, interviewing people in New York, and visiting with families of migrants in Ecuador. He is not an anthropologist by training, but for me his photos reflect a keen ethnographic sensitivity attuned to both the subtle reflections of humanity that happen in the blink of an eye and the minute details of the multiple worlds that migrants pass through. I have paired Mike's and the other images used here with various anthropological lenses (e.g., migrant narratives, archaeological typologies, and forensic descriptions) with the firm belief that long-term anthropological work that fuses text and photographs is "more than the sum of its parts analytically, politically, and aesthetically."⁶⁷

The decision to include people's faces in a large number of the images in this book was largely informed by those whose stories are included here. The undocumented wanted you to see them as people. They wanted you to see what they go through and how the process of migration impacts their lives. I once asked Christian (whom you will meet in chapter 10) whether he wanted me to obscure his face or include photos of his sister-in-law in this book. He responded: "I want you to put photos that show our reality. That is better. That way people can see what happens. The realness. That way people will believe what is happening. That they will know that this is the truth. A lot of people think it's all a lie. That this stuff doesn't happen." Maybe the photos and stories revealed in the following pages will somehow help those of us who will never know the desperation required to head into the desert or the sorrow that accompanies losing someone to this process get a little closer to "the realness."