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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 *ca-guama* (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 Tumaácori 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 *coyote*²⁴ 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

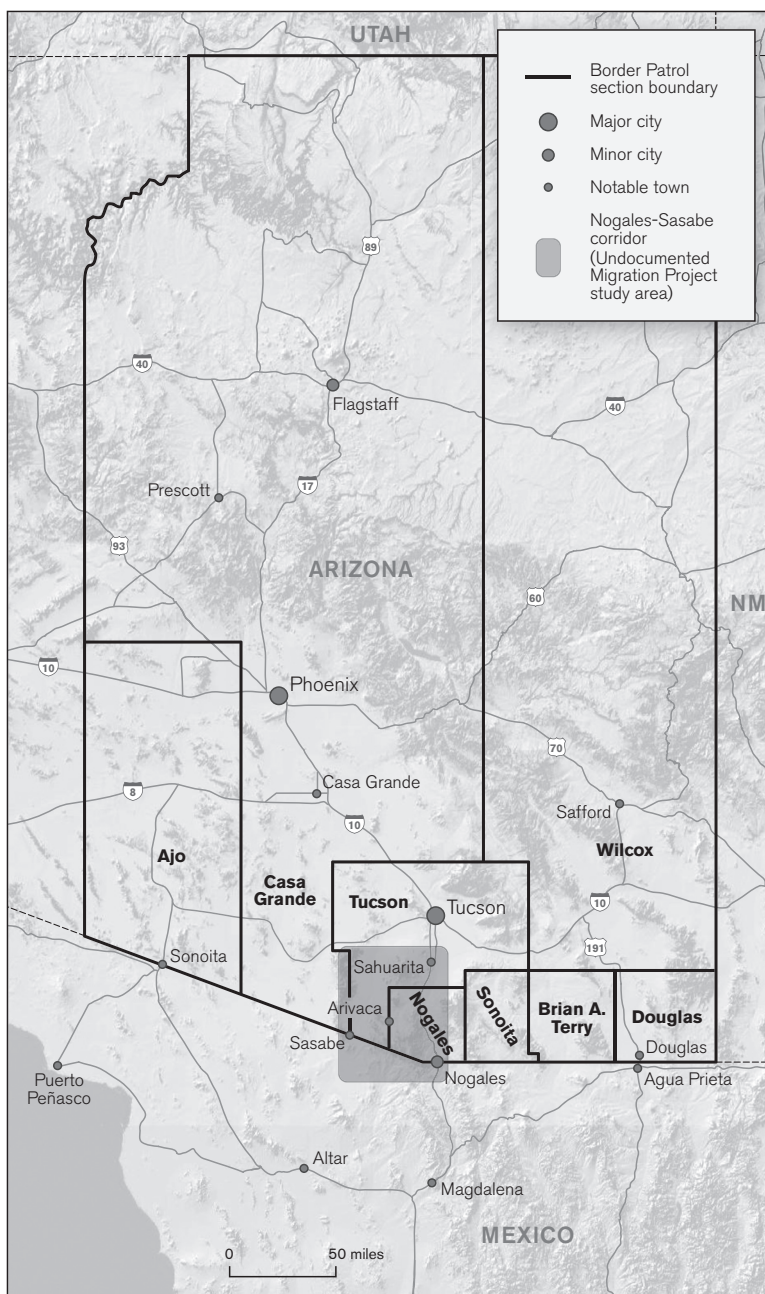
Finally, this type of participant observation has always struck me as problematic because it tends to focus on the experiences of the writer⁴⁰ and doesn’t necessarily give us insight into the terror and violence suffered by Latino border crossers. Holmes’s descriptions emphasize his feeling “like a rabbit, 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."



Looking west toward the Baboquivari Mountains. Photo by Michael Wells.

Prevention Through Deterrence

NOTES FROM A CRIME SCENE

Drive out in the late afternoon to one of the many hills on the outskirts of the tiny Arizona town of Arivaca and look west. You will see the golden sun creep behind the Baboquivari Mountains. The vanishing orb makes it look as if the distant peaks and valleys have been cut out of thick black construction paper. It's the stenciled silhouette you see in old western films. For an hour or so, the backlit barren landscape glows as though it's slowly being covered in liquid amber. The beauty of this Sonoran Desert sunset is overwhelming. It can convince you that there is goodness in nature. It will make you briefly forget how cruel and unforgiving this terrain can be for those caught in it during the height of summer. Right now I'm dreaming about that sunset; visualizing my hand plunging into a watery ice chest full of cold beers. I can feel the touch of the evening breeze on my skin. These are the tricks you play in your head during the dog days of July in the desert.

The Norwegian explorer Carl Lumholtz once wrote that the summer heat in the Sonoran Desert felt like "walking between great fires."¹ That's putting it nicely. Right now it feels more like walking directly through flames. Despite the protection of my wide-brimmed cowboy hat, the sides of my face are sunburned after only a few minutes of exposure. Tiny water-filled blisters are starting to form on my temples, cheeks, and other places that get exposed to the sun when I lift my head or stare up at the empty blue sky. I try not to look up unless I have to duck under a mesquite tree or the trail makes a

hard break left or right. Better to keep your gaze downward to watch for sun-bathing rattlesnakes and ankle-twisting cobbles.

Sweat beads up and rolls off my chin, leaving behind a trail of droplets on the ground as I walk. It takes only a few seconds for these splashes to evaporate. My clothes, on the other hand, are soaking wet. I find myself periodically shivering and getting dizzy; my body is working hard to make sense of this inferno. The overpriced backpack I am wearing has started to heat up along with the water bottles it contains. This means that from here on out, every time I try to quench my thirst, it's like drinking soup. It is easily over a 100 degrees and it is only 10 A.M. My sunset and cold beer fantasies are starting to lose their efficacy. Mike Wells and I are climbing through the Tumacácori Mountains with my longtime friend Bob Kee,² a member of the southern Arizona humanitarian group the Tucson Samaritans. Bob has been haunting these trails for years, leaving food and water for unseen migrants and occasionally giving first aid to abandoned souls he comes across.

It's a rough path full of sharp-angled rocks and angry mesquites whose branches all seem to be aiming for your eyes. We are moving at a fast clip, which is typical for any outing led by Bob. He is almost thirty years our senior, but is running us ragged as we struggle to keep up. Mike and I are being led by a wilderness Zen master who never seems to sweat, complain, or slow down. Every turn he makes seems to lead to another steep climb. I am convinced he seeks out the most arduous routes just to make sure that those he takes into the desert get a sense of how punishing this environment can be for migrants and anyone else who dares to hike this terrain in the middle of a summer day. "We're almost there. I promise," Bob says. I force a smile because in the past when he has told me this, it was a white lie to make me feel better. "Almost there" is one of Bob's euphemisms for "four more miles to go." On this day, however, the tone in his voice is different. He is not his normal jovial self. He hasn't been joking around, which usually includes offering to carry me on his back. It is clear that he is on a mission. We round a bend and stop. Bob calmly says: "This is the spot where I found the person. The sheriff's department came out and took away what we could find, but it was getting dark and we didn't have a lot of time to go over the entire area. It was mostly arm and leg bones and some pieces of clothing. I want to see if we can find the head. That would make it easier to identify the body. I'm sure there are still bones out here."

Just a few weeks earlier Bob had encountered the fragmented and skeletonized remains of a border crosser in this area. It was the second person he

had found in under a month. He called the police, who sent two detectives out to remove what bones they could find. Bob says they spent five minutes poking around before they called it quits. It was too damn hot and the cops were unprepared and unmotivated to do a large-scale survey. Besides, searching for the bones of dead “illegals” has never been a top priority for any law enforcement agency out here. The three of us have returned and are now looking for the rest of what was once a living, breathing person.

Bob is right. There are bones that the detectives overlooked, but we have to cover a lot of ground before we find any of them. There are pieces strewn everywhere. We walk downslope and see part of an articulated arm wedged between two rocks. Aside from sinew still holding the bones together, it has been picked clean of skin and muscle by an unknown creature. Further up the trail I notice several white flecks that stand out against the red mountain soil. It looks as if someone dropped a box of blackboard chalk on the ground. I get closer and realize they are splinters of human bone, mostly sun-bleached rib fragments that have been cracked and gnawed by some long-gone animal. Just off the trail I spot a complete tooth lying on top of a rock. This dental find gives us hope that the skull is nearby.

We start a desperate search for this person's head. Rocks are overturned. Subterranean nests are probed. Bleeding hands blindly grope under thick brush in hopes of finding bones that may have been squirreled away by scavengers or deposited by monsoon flood waters. Everyone is moving with great urgency despite the debilitating heat. After forty-five minutes of intensive survey, we give up. There is no skull. There are no other teeth. We do, however, come across a pair of worn-out hiking boots in close proximity to some of the bones. Where the hell is the skull? I start imagining what has happened to it. A montage of laughing vultures rips this person's eyeballs out of the sockets. I hallucinate two coyotes batting the head around like a soccer ball so that they can access brain matter through the foramen magnum. It's a moment when you despise the capacity of the human imagination. People whose loved ones have disappeared in this desert will tell you that it's the not knowing what happened to them coupled with the flashes of grotesque possibility that drive you insane.

Mike starts snapping photographs while Bob collects bones. The gnarled arm fragment goes into a black trash bag. The ribs and tooth fall into a Ziploc. Bob scribbles down the GPS coordinates and will later deliver the remains to the sheriff's office, where he will be scolded for “disturbing a crime scene.” The irony of the statement is that the police were already out here once and Bob is



Human tooth, Tumacácori Mountains, 2011. Photo by Michael Wells.

simply collecting what they overlooked during their hasty survey. The fact of the matter is that although this is a crime scene, few people actually care or want to know what has happened here. For many Americans, this person—whose remains are so ravaged that his or her sex is unknown—is (was) an “illegal,” a noncitizen who broke US law and faced the consequences. Many of these same people tell themselves that if they can keep calling them “illegals,” they can avoid speaking their names or imagining their faces. The United States might be a nation founded by immigrants, but that was a long time ago. Countless citizens today suffer historical amnesia and draw stark divisions between the “noble” European immigrants of the past and Latino border crossers of today. How quickly they forget about the violent welcome receptions that America threw for the Irish, Chinese, and many other newly arrived immigrant groups. The benefit of the chronological distance from the pain and suffering of past migrations is that many Americans today have no problem putting nationality before humanity. A cursory glance at the online comment section of a recent article titled “Border Crossing Deaths More Common as Illegal Immigration Declines”³ provides insight into some of the more extreme anti-immigrant perspectives on migrant death:

I'm not condoning deaths or anything, and I do think it's cruel to let a human being die in pain, but in a way isn't it better? I mean after all some of these people are risking their lives because there are nothing better [*sic*] back home, and if they die on the way, at least they end their sufferings [*sic*].⁴

Since it is a common practice to print indications on everything in the US, and since just printed indications will not . . . [deter] people from entering the US illegally [*sic*], why not . . . take some of those dried out corpses, hang them at the places where they [migrants] are known to cross with a legend, "This may be you in a couple of days."⁵

When you see such comments, which accompany practically every article about migrant death on the Internet, you think you're mistakenly reading the American Voices column from the satirical newspaper *The Onion*. It should be easy to dismiss responses like these as extreme forms of Internet hate speech, but this disregard for the lives of undocumented people and the idea that dead bodies should act as a form of deterrence to future migrants are fundamental components of the US federal government's current border security strategy.

But that fact doesn't really matter as we survey the ground for more human remains. The desert has already started to erase this person, along with whatever violence and horror she or he experienced. This event will soon be forgotten before it was ever known.

BONE DUST: RENDERING BARE LIFE

Many border researchers turn to Giorgio Agamben's influential work on sovereignty, law, and individual rights to understand the role that the physical space between adjoining nations plays in the construction of citizens, noncitizens, and state power.⁶ Agamben's *state of exception*—the process whereby sovereign authorities declare emergencies in order to suspend the legal protections afforded to individuals while simultaneously unleashing the power of the state upon them—is a particularly salient concept for those working on the margins of nation-states. It is here that the tensions of sovereignty and national security are both geolocated and visibly acted out on a daily basis.⁷ Like Agamben's characterization of the concentration camp, the spatial arrangement of borders often allows a space to exist outside the bounds of normal state or moral law. Border zones become *spaces of exception*—physical and political locations where an individual's rights and protections under law can be stripped away upon entrance. Having your body consumed by wild animals is

but one of many “exceptional” things that happen in the Sonoran Desert as a result of federal immigration policies.⁸

Roxanne Doty has pointed out that the US-Mexico border forms an exemplary space of exception where those seeking to enter the country without permission are often reduced to *bare life*—individuals whose deaths are of little consequence—by border policies that do not recognize the rights of unauthorized migrants.⁹ At the same time, these policies expose noncitizens to a state-crafted geopolitical terrain designed to deter their movement through suffering and death.¹⁰ The perception that the lives of border crossers are insignificant is reflected in both their treatment by federal immigration enforcement agencies and in the pervasive anti-immigrant discourse, including the online comments cited above. Contributing to this dehumanization is the fact that the Sonoran Desert is remote, sparsely populated, and largely out of the American public’s view. This space can be policed in ways that would be deemed violent, cruel, or irrational in most other contexts. Just imagine how people would react if the corpses of undocumented Latinos were left to rot on the ninth hole of the local golf course or if their sun-bleached skulls were piled up in the parking lot of the neighborhood McDonald’s.

The isolation of the desert combined with the public perception of the border as a zone ruled by chaos allows the state to justify using extraordinary measures to control and exclude “uncivilized” noncitizens. It is a location “where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of civilization.”¹¹ Sovereign power produces migrants as excluded subjects to be dealt with violently while simultaneously neutralizing their ability to resist or protest. The environment becomes a form of deterrence so that “the raw physicality” of the desert “can be exploited and can function to mask the workings of social and political power.”¹² If we dare to approach this frightening geopolitical space, we can see how America’s internal surveillant gaze functions,¹³ and understand why maps of this region should be labeled “Here be monsters.”

As we start to walk away from this death site, I notice something on the ground. Crouching down, I pick up a piece of bone smaller than my fingernail. It immediately crumbles to dust. I try to hand it to Bob, and an unexpected breeze passes through and blows many of the particles off my hand. I scrape what I can from my finger and sprinkle it into the bag. It’s a futile gesture. There is little that forensic scientists can do with bone dust. This person will

likely become a line in the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner's database of migrant fatalities reading: "Name: Unknown. Age: Unknown. Country of Origin: Unknown. Cause of Death: Undetermined (partial skeletal remains)." The identity of this individual and much of his or her body has been swallowed up by the desert, and there were no witnesses. Bare life has been reduced to shoes, shards of bone, and the "Unknown."

I often think about this particular day, for two reasons. First, we know this death and its physical erasure are by no means a unique event. Between October 2000 and September 2014, the bodies of 2,721 border crossers were recovered in southern Arizona alone.¹⁴ Approximately 800 of these individuals are still unidentified.¹⁵ Second, this particular moment in the desert perfectly illustrates the structure, logic, and corporeal impact of current US border enforcement policy. This point was driven home in the spring of 2012 when I visited the Juan Bosco migrant shelter in Nogales (see chapter 5). The stucco walls of this nonprofit organization are always decorated with glossy Mexican government fliers that warn about the conditions in the desert, oversized maps produced by the group Humane Borders showing locations of border crosser deaths, and photocopied posters put up by family members of missing migrants. It wasn't until 2012, though, that I noticed for the first time a tiny sign on the wall of the men's bathroom that had been produced by the US Department of Homeland Security. In Spanish the flier warned, "The next time you try to cross the border without documents you could end up a victim of the desert." This line was accompanied by a pathetic cartoon drawing of a saguaro cactus.

I laughed at this crude representation of the desert, but also started thinking about how this was one of the few times I had seen a warning sign produced by the US government in a Mexican shelter. More interesting, however, was that the wording of the pamphlet personified the desert as a perpetrator of violence targeting migrants.¹⁶ Conveniently, this flier contains no mention of the tactical relationship between federal border enforcement policy and this harsh landscape. When put in historical context, however, this public service announcement offers insight into the structure of the Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) strategy that since the 1990s has deliberately funneled people into the desert. It also illustrates the cunning way that nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously

providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim. In what follows, I outline the history and logic of PTD and begin to draw the connections between border enforcement policies and the migrant suffering and death that I explore in detail in the rest of the book.

OUT OF SIGHT

In July 1993, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)¹⁷ promoted Mexican American Border Patrol agent Silvestre Reyes to chief of the El Paso Sector. Reyes was brought in during a moment of crisis when a series of lawsuits and claims of human rights violations had been brought against the Border Patrol in the region. Two of the major grievances lodged against the agency were that legal Latino residents were subjected to unfair racial profiling and harassment, and that the consistent pursuit of undocumented border crossers through neighborhoods was a dangerous and abusive practice.¹⁸ The majority of El Paso residents who lived along the border were Latino, which made it difficult for *la migra* to figure out who was “illegal” without directly interrogating people. Locals were tired of law enforcement questioning them about their citizenship while they were going about their daily business. In response to these complaints, Reyes came up with a radical new enforcement strategy that would fundamentally change how the border was policed. Timothy Dunn describes what happened on September 19, 1993, when Reyes launched “Operation Blockade”:

The emphasis of the operation was to deter unauthorized border crossings in the core urban area between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso by making a bristling show of force. . . . This took the form of posting 400 Border Patrol agents (out of 650 total in the sector) on the banks of the Rio Grande and adjacent levees in stationary, ubiquitous green and green-and-white patrol vehicles around the clock, at short-distance intervals (from fifty yards to one-half mile) along a twenty-mile stretch between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. . . . This mass posting of agents created an imposing line, if not [a] virtual wall, of agents along the river, which was supplemented by low-flying and frequently deployed surveillance helicopters.¹⁹

Prior to this strategy, the standard operating procedure had been to try to apprehend border crossers *after* they had crossed the boundary line. The circuslike atmosphere created when dozens of people at a time jumped the bor-

der fence while agents in green uniforms chased after them like Keystone Cops was ludicrous. Comedian Cheech Marin even built his film *Born in East L.A.* around this borderwide phenomenon. These daily scenes exemplified the difficulties of trying to seal the border. Reyes's mass deployment of agents in and around the El Paso port of entry was an effective public relations move that seemed to satisfy local residents. This "show of force", however, didn't stop illegal immigration. It mostly frustrated migrants accustomed to crossing in urban zones and forced them to move toward the edge of town where they could easily hop the fence in depopulated areas.²⁰

In addition to funneling traffic away from downtown, this strategy also made migration less visible and created a scenario in which the policing of undocumented people occurred in areas with few witnesses. Out of sight, out of mind. Despite the fact that this "deterrence-displacement" strategy only made border crossers harder to see,²¹ some politicians soon touted it as a success.²² The operation's effects were felt along much of the US-Mexico border during the 1990s when it was adopted in Southern California ("Operation Gatekeeper" in 1994), Arizona ("Operation Safeguard" in 1994 and 1999), and South Texas ("Operation Rio Grande" in 1997). When Reyes set Operation Blockade in motion, he intended to shift traffic away from the city and "put [migrants] out in areas where they're on [Border Patrol's] turf."²³ Little did he know that this approach would soon evolve into a large-scale policy that would strategically use the natural environment and subsequently become the foundation for border security in a post-9/11 world.

HOSTILE TERRAIN

The logic behind Operation Blockade was straightforward. Placing heightened security in and around the downtown urban port of entry in El Paso would force undocumented migrants to attempt crossings in more rural areas that were easier for law enforcement to monitor. Although this initial strategy in El Paso had neither been officially sanctioned nor fully evaluated by INS, it immediately garnered media and political attention and was soon adopted as a part of a new federal project. Less than a year after Operation Blockade, INS published its Strategic Plan,²⁴ which essentially repackaged what Reyes had done informally into a national program: "The Border Patrol will improve control of the border by implementing a strategy of 'prevention through deterrence.' The Border Patrol will achieve the goals of its strategy by bringing

a decisive number of enforcement resources to bear in each major entry corridor. The Border Patrol will increase the number of agents on the line and make effective use of technology, raising the risk of apprehension high enough to be an effective deterrent.”²⁵ One of the primary components that structured the new PTD strategy was the recognition that remote areas along the border (e.g., the Sonoran Desert) are difficult to traverse on foot and hence can be effectively used by law enforcement. This, however, was by no means a recent epiphany, as noted by historian Patrick Ettinger: “From their earliest work enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Acts [enacted in 1882], immigration authorities had discovered that the desert and mountain wilderness could be made effective allies in the fight against undocumented entry. Desolate routes deprive migrants of access to food and water. Only along well-defined roads or on railroads could immigrants obtain the necessary resources for travel, and it was along those routes that immigration patrols might be best stationed to capture undocumented immigrants.”²⁶ As one federal agent testified in 1926, the goal of border enforcement was to “at least make attempts to cross the border dangerous and hold illegal entry down to small proportions.”²⁷

The acknowledgment that the desert, as well as the other extreme environments cross-cut by the border, could strategically be used to deter migrants from illegal entry on a large scale was not, however, formally laid out in policy documents until the start of the official PTD era, after 1993. The initial Strategic Plan memorandum was among the first to refer to environmental conditions as a potential resource for securing the geopolitical boundary: “The border environment is diverse. Mountains, deserts, lakes, rivers and valleys form natural barriers to passage. Temperatures ranging from sub-zero along the northern border to the searing heat of the southern border effect [*sic*] illegal entry traffic as well as enforcement efforts. *Illegal entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border can find themselves in mortal danger*” (emphasis added).²⁸

Although policy makers have written extensively about PTD for decades,²⁹ only the earliest documents associated with this strategy articulate a clear vision of the role that officials imagined the environment playing in enforcement: “The prediction is that with traditional entry and smuggling routes disrupted, illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more *hostile* terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement” (emphasis added).³⁰ Prior to PTD, the dominant enforcement practice emphasized catching people after an illegal entry had been achieved and then processing them through

the *voluntary-departure complex*, whereby apprehended migrants were permitted to waive their rights to a deportation hearing and returned to Mexico without lengthy detention.³¹ Many have described this as a relatively useless process that individuals become familiar with, and less afraid of, after repeated apprehensions.³² PTD was a direct reaction to the ineffectiveness of this previous disciplinary practice.

In the 1994 Strategic Plan, the use of the word *hostile* suggests that this new form of boundary enforcement was intended to be more aggressive and violent (and thus more effective) than previous programs. The word choice is also interesting given that the architects of the Strategic Plan did not involve only the Border Patrol, but also included “planning experts from the Department of Defense Center for Low Intensity Conflict,”³³ experts who had previously been charged with developing strategies for quelling insurgencies in the developing world.³⁴ The great irony is that some of the migrants whose movement these defense experts were working to stop were fleeing violence in Central America that US interventionist policies had sanctioned and supported.³⁵

After this initial report was issued, the words used to characterize the desert environment would be gradually changed from “hostile” to “harsh,” “inhospitable,” and the like.³⁶ This shift in tone reflects but one of many bureaucratic attempts to sanitize the human costs of this policy. For example, although actual desert conditions are a linchpin of this enforcement strategy, relatively few public documents focused on PTD describe them or comment on the correlation between the strategy and migrant fatalities.³⁷ In addition, despite showing numerous photographs of agents both on patrol and “rescuing” people in the Sonoran Desert, the 2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan makes no mention of this landscape or its key role in deterring migration. This hostile terrain is now camouflaged in policy memorandums.

In 1994, it was predicted that PTD would push the migrant experience beyond simple apprehension and deportation. The architects of the Strategic Plan relied on a number of key assumptions, including the fact that “violence will increase as effects of strategy are felt.”³⁸ *Violence*, however, was poorly defined in this document and probably too blunt for some people’s liking. Later policy briefs substitute this word for euphemisms such as “costly.” A congressional report written just three years after the Strategic Plan stated: “The southwest border strategy [previously known as the Strategic Plan] is ultimately designed

to deter illegal entry into the United States. It states that “The overarching goal of the strategy is to make it so difficult and so costly to enter this country illegally that fewer individuals even try.”³⁹

Although no public record explicitly states that a goal of PTD is to kill border crossers in an attempt to deter other would-be migrants, the connection between death and this policy has been highlighted by both academics and various federal agencies charged with evaluating Border Patrol programs.⁴⁰ An excerpt from a 2010 report to Congress reads: “‘Prevention Through Deterrence’ . . . has pushed unauthorized migration away from population centers and funneled it into more remote and hazardous border regions. This policy has had the *unintended consequence* of increasing the number of fatalities along the border, as unauthorized migrants attempt to cross over the inhospitable Arizona desert without adequate supplies of water” (emphasis added).⁴¹

This comment that the increasing number of migrant fatalities is an “unintended consequence” of PTD is misleading and ignores previous evidence suggesting that policy makers were well aware of the role that death would play in this enforcement strategy. For example, a 1997 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identifies as one of the “Indicators for Measuring the Effectiveness of the Strategy to Deter Illegal Entry Along the Southwest Border” the “deaths of aliens attempting entry.” Concerning the “predicated outcome if AG’s [the attorney general’s] strategy is successful,” the same report claims that it “depends on how enforcement resources are allocated. In some cases, deaths may be reduced or prevented (by fencing along the highways, for example). In other cases, deaths may increase (as enforcement in urban areas forces aliens to attempt mountain or desert crossings).”⁴² I had to read the foregoing quote several times before I fully grasped its message. It clearly and publicly states that one way for the government to measure the efficacy of PTD is via a migrant body count. In some ways this is merely a sanitized version of the many anti-immigrant comments that accompany online articles about border crosser deaths; for example: “As long as the immigration numbers are declining . . . I can live with the border death numbers.”⁴³ The sector of the American public that attributes a low value to the lives of migrants seems to mirror the federal government’s perspective.

The statement from this official document suggests both that early on in the planning of this policy the migrant death rate was considered a useful metric to gauge the program’s effectiveness (i.e., “violence will increase as effects of strategy are felt”) and that the Border Patrol clearly understood that

fatalities would rise as “enforcement in urban areas forces aliens to attempt mountain or desert crossings.” This report was published prior to the spike in deaths that occurred in the Arizona desert starting in the early 2000s.⁴⁴ As early as 1997, however, evidence clearly showed that the body count associated with PTD was primarily caused by “environmental exposure (falls, hyperthermia, dehydration).”⁴⁵ Rather than shooting people as they jumped the fence, Prevention Through Deterrence set the stage for the desert to become the new “victimizer” of border transgressors.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Since the beginning of PTD, both the number of people who have been apprehended in the remote regions of Arizona and the annual rate of migrant fatalities have risen steeply. In 1993, 92,639 people were caught by Border Patrol in the Tucson Sector. By 2000, this number had grown to 616,346, an almost sevenfold increase (see appendix A). Although overall apprehension rates across the southern border did not rise significantly during this seven-year period, the funnel effect of PTD became visible as crossing attempts in the Tucson Sector skyrocketed. In 1993 this sector accounted for 8 percent of total southern border apprehensions. By 2000, 37 percent of all immigration arrests happened in this region. For almost two decades, until recently, the Tucson Sector was the primary crossing corridor for undocumented migrants.⁴⁶

Although Prevention Through Deterrence redirected people toward more “hostile” ground, it has not significantly dissuaded would-be crossers, a point recognized as early as 2001 by the GAO: “Although INS has realized its goal of shifting illegal alien traffic away from urban areas, this has been achieved at a cost to . . . illegal aliens. . . . In particular, rather than being deterred from attempting illegal entry, many aliens have instead risked injury and death by trying to cross mountains, deserts, and rivers.”⁴⁷ Many have died since the implementation of this policy, and the correlation between the funneling of people toward desolate regions of the border and an upsurge in fatalities is strong.⁴⁸ Still, even when the connection between PTD and migrant death is recognized by the federal government, there is generally a refusal to causally link the two phenomena. As a 2012 GAO report notes:

Known migrant deaths fell from a high of 344 in 1988 to a low of 171 in 1994 before climbing back to 286 in 1998. According to DHS data, known migrant deaths climbed from 250 in 1999 to 492 in 2005, and averaged 431 deaths per

year in 2005–2009 before falling to an average of 360 per year in 2010–2011. . . . The apparent increase in migrant deaths is particularly noteworthy in light of the declining number of alien apprehensions (i.e., estimated unauthorized entries) during the same period. . . . Overall, these data offer evidence that border crossings have become more hazardous since the “prevention through deterrence” policy went into effect in the 1990s, though once again the precise impact of enforcement on migrant deaths is unknown. [emphasis added]⁴⁹

There is also significant disagreement among the federal government, social scientists, and human rights groups regarding how to count dead border crossers. Compared to other organizations, the Department of Homeland Security routinely publishes the lowest number of recorded migrant deaths.⁵⁰ Given the unpopular and controversial nature of such statistics, it is not surprising that the government lowballs these body counts. A conservative estimate is that 5,596 people died while attempting to migrate between 1998 and 2012;⁵¹ and between 2000 and September 2014, the bodies of 2,771 people were found in southern Arizona,⁵² enough corpses to fill the seats on fifty-four Greyhound buses. These grim figures represent only *known* migrant fatalities. Many people may die in remote areas and their bodies are never recovered. The actual number of people who lose their lives while migrating will forever remain unknown (see chapter 3).

Silvestre Reyes’s Operation Blockade in El Paso in 1993 may be separated by 350 miles and almost two decades from the ravaged skeleton described at the start of this chapter, but the two phenomena are unequivocally linked. Operation Blockade became the cornerstone of a nationwide border policy that used, and continues to use, the desert as a weapon. Prevention Through Deterrence has evolved from an explicit program that once acknowledged that the dangers posed by the desert could be strategically exploited as a weapon in the war on immigration to a sterilized description of an enforcement paradigm that has unfortunately (and “unexpectedly”) resulted in migrants “risking their lives.”

In 1994, the federal government clearly appreciated that people could be funneled over “hostile terrain” where law enforcement had “tactical advantage.” Twenty years later, the common Border Patrol discourse focuses on blaming the smugglers who “endanger migrants in the desert.” This shift in federal tone that now deflects culpability away from policy and toward the environment

and *coyotes* is summed up well in an article in the *Arizona Daily Star* in which a Border Patrol agent reflects on the discovery of several migrant bodies: “The Sonoran Desert is extremely vast and remote with very few water sources. . . . [I]t is important to realize illegal immigrants are being victimized and lied to by smugglers who lead them through treacherous terrain and expose them to extreme conditions.”⁵³ Joseph Nevins has wisely pointed out that the federal government’s refusal to acknowledge any responsibility for this death toll, coupled with the blaming of *coyotes* for taking people through high-risk areas, overlooks the fact that the “significant growth in use of *coyotes* has been the predictable, direct result of the enhanced border-enforcement strategy.”⁵⁴

The increase in migrant traffic through Arizona and the rise in crossing fatalities indicate that security practices have effectively and systematically funneled people toward violent terrain and made the process more deadly. In no uncertain terms, Prevention Through Deterrence relies on the desert to “deter” people from attempting to cross. But what does this “hostile” landscape look like? What are the environmental factors that are meant to stop people? In the following chapter I address these questions and offer a theoretical framework to help understand the complex relationship between border crossers and the many humans and nonhumans who act as agents of deterrence.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. DHS is a cabinet department of the United States federal government created following the events of September 11, 2001. It absorbed twenty-two agencies including the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which had previously housed the Border Patrol. Three new agencies were created to deal with immigration issues: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which includes the Border Patrol; Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which typically handles things like deportations and trade regulations; and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which processes administrative issues related to citizenship.

2. Falcón 2001; Hsieh 2014; Ortiz et al. 2014.

3. *La línea* (the line) is the name that migrants often use to describe the 1.3-mile physical space between the two major ports of entry in Nogales, Mexico (see chapter 5 for detailed discussion).

4. Grupo Beta is a Mexican federal agency primarily responsible for protecting migrants who are en route to the United States or have been recently deported. This organization is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

5. All names are pseudonyms unless otherwise noted.

6. *Pinche* may be loosely translated as “damn” in milder contexts and “fucking” in more spirited ones.

7. For example, see Reeves and Caldwell 2011.

8. Vicens 2014.

9. See the excellent historical analysis of this event in Dunn 2009.

10. Roughly translated as a “fucking pile.”

11. Durand and Massey 2004; Guerin-Gonzales 1994.

12. *Campesino* means “peasant” or “dirt farmer.” *La migra* is slang for Border Patrol.

13. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “United States Border Patrol: Southwest Border Sectors; Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions by Fiscal Year (Oct. 1st through Sept. 30th),” www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Apps%20FY1960%20-%20FY2014_o.pdf.

14. Anti-Defamation League 2012.

15. Bazzell 2007.

16. Prior to 1986, the O’odham people were officially known as the Papago.

17. See Cadava 2011; Ettinger 2009.

18. It is beyond the scope of this book to address the impact of undocumented migration on the Tohono O’odham Nation, and none of the archaeological work I conducted occurred on the reservation. No community along the southern border, however, has been as negatively affected by border crossings, migrant fatalities, or Border Patrol presence as the Tohono O’odham.

19. Nabhan 1982:26.

20. Zepeda 1982:17.

21. Ettinger 2009; St. John 2011.

22. Hernández 2010; Nevins 2002; Andreas 2009.

23. Dunn 1996, 2009.

24. *Coyote* is a Spanish euphemism for a human smuggler.

25. Clark 2012.

26. Sullivan 2010.

27. De León 2008.

28. Urrea 2004.

29. Those looking for more sensitive popular accounts of border-crossing stories are encouraged to check out Luis Alberto Urrea’s novel *The Devil’s Highway* (2004) and Ferguson et al.’s book *Crossing with the Virgin* (2010). For an exceptional journalistic take on Central American migrants crossing Mexico, see *The Beast* by Oscar Martínez (2010).

30. L. Chavez does, however, offer some observational data from Tijuana’s soccer field (1998:45–52). Also see Sergio Chavez’s fascinating ethnography (2011) of undocumented workers crossing through official ports of entry.

31. Spener 2009:169.

32. Holmes 2013. The Triqui people are from the mountainous Mixteca region of Oaxaca, Mexico.

33. Holmes 2013:9.

34. A story that ran on Fox News about the Undocumented Migration Project in 2012 included a stock photo of two masked Border Patrol agents on ATVs with bales of marijuana strapped to the front of their vehicles. The caption to this image read, “Shoes, backpacks and other objects discarded in the desert by undocumented immigrants have been collected by a team of anthropologists to document the difficult journey they make to get into the United States” (see EFE 2012).

35. See Annerino 2009; Connover 1987.

36. Holmes 2013:14–17.

37. I use *gringo* here not in a racialized way, though race often seems to be the elephant in the room during these types of endeavors. *Gringo* is intended to mark Holmes as an American. Mexicans will commonly call all U.S. citizens, including Latinos, *gringos*.

38. Annerino 2009:54–58.

39. Holmes 2013:25.

40. Oscar Martínez's (2013) excellent journalistic account of Central American migrants crossing Mexico is an exception.

41. Holmes 2013:19.

42. Singer and Massey 1998:562.

43. Anzaldúa 2007; Limón 1994; J. D. Saldívar 1997; R. Saldívar 1990, 2006; Paredes 1958.

44. J. D. Saldívar 1997:xiii, quoting Foucault.

45. Marcus 1998:3–132.

46. This jurisdiction includes 262 miles of border, encompasses approximately 90,500 square miles, and contains a wide range of environments (e.g., mountain ranges and valleys). Parts of the Tucson Sector include protected federal lands (e.g., Buenos Aires National Wild Life Refuge [BANWR] and the Coronado National Forest), as well as public state lands. Internally it is subdivided into eight “stations” (see the map on page 15), and our survey work focused primarily on two stations, Nogales and Tucson. The Nogales station, which the Border Patrol describes as “high desert terrain with rugged mountains to rolling hills with numerous deep canyons,” includes 30 miles of border and approximately 1,800 square miles. The Tucson station has “terrain that varies from open valleys to rugged mountains and . . . [is] covered with various desert shrubs” and includes 24 miles of border and 3,790 square miles (GAO 2012:54). Our survey area focused on the western part of the Tucson Sector, in the corridor between the Nogales and Sasabe ports of entry. The survey’s western edge extended to the foothills of the Baboquivari Mountains, which is the boundary line of the Tohono O’odham reservation, and extended north to the town of Three Points. The survey area’s eastern edge was demarcated by US Interstate 19 and extended north to the southern edge of the town of Green Valley. This corridor is approximately 1,081 square miles (2,800 sq. km). The area that we surveyed encompassed approximately 33.5 square miles (86.78 sq. km) and cut across the Santa Cruz and Pima County lines.

Because of the size of this corridor and the difficulty involved in accessing some of the terrain, we were unable to conduct a survey of any large area. Instead we opted to sample parts of this corridor systematically, based on differences in topography, distance from the border, and information obtained from interviews with migrants about where they had previously crossed. Although our survey area is relatively small in comparison to the corridor’s overall size, our sampling strategy enabled us to document the different stages of the crossing process and their associated sites and artifacts (see Gokee and De León 2014). Our base camp was the small unincorporated town of Arivaca, Arizona. We focused on this particular corridor because it was a primary crossing point for people leaving from Altar, Sasabe, and Nogales and therefore it was

relatively easy to correlate the ethnographic data collected in those Mexican towns with the archaeological data collected on the Arizona side.

47. In subsequent chapters, I describe some of the geographic and environmental features of the UMP survey area that act as natural deterrents to the movement of people. However, much of what is described can be generalized for the entire Sonoran Desert region.

48. Forty-five interviews were conducted by other UMP researchers in the summer of 2013 in Nogales and Altar.

49. Forty-five interviews conducted in 2013 were semistructured.

50. See De León and Cohen (2005) for discussion of this method.

51. The archaeological work was conducted as part of a multiyear field school supported by the Institute for Field Research that involved dozens of students and post-doctoral researchers.

52. This editing sometimes included combining separate interviews with the same person into one narrative. Occasionally, missing words were added to complete sentence fragments and extraneous sections of interviews were deleted to preserve flow (see the comment on editing in Bourgois 1995:341n20).

53. In general, everyone (documented and undocumented) wanted his or her real name used. People were disappointed when I told them that I needed to change names to protect their identity. However, most of the main characters in the book chose their own pseudonyms.

54. Galtung 1969 and Farmer 2004. For specific discussions of structural violence and immigration enforcement, see Nevins 2005 and Spener 2009.

55. See De León, Gokee, and Schubert 2015.

56. Žižek 2008.

57. Ruiz Marrujo 2009.

58. Men do get sexually assaulted during the migration process, but none of my interlocutors described this happening to them. Given the stigma surrounding male rape, it is no surprise that the subject was taboo. On the few occasions that men described male rape, it was in the form of stories they had heard about bandits who assaulted men who tried to stop attacks on women.

59. Ruiz Marrujo 2009:31.

60. The sexual assault that border crossers experience continues to be poorly documented in the migration literature.

61. Mulvey 1975.

62. Simaski and Sapp 2013: table 10.

63. Snow 1989:31.

64. See, e.g., Biehl 2005; Wright 2013.

65. Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Hoffman 2011.

66. For example, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jose Antonio Vargas and various student activists have recently “outed themselves” by declaring their undocumented status publicly.

67. Schonberg and Bourgois 2002:389.

I. PREVENTION THROUGH DETERRENCE

1. Lumholtz 1990:337.
2. Not a pseudonym.
3. Moreno 2012.
4. Moreno 2012.
5. Oscar329, 8/18/2012, in Moreno 2012.
6. Agamben 1998, 2005. For border studies drawing on Agamben, see, for example, Doty 2011; Jones 2009; and Salter 2008.
7. Jones 2009.
8. Also see De León, Gokee, and Schubert 2015.
9. Doty 2011.
10. Cornelius 2001; Nevins 2005.
11. Mbembe 2003:24.
12. Doty 2011:607.
13. Salter 2008:369.
14. Data from “Deaths on the Border and the Recovered Remains Project,” Coalición de Derechos Humanos, <http://derechoshumanosaz.net/projects/arizona-recovered-bodies-project/>.
15. Reineke 2013.
16. The flier also refers to the risk migrants face of “ending up victims of organized crime.” This phrasing is similar to many other instances mentioned in this book in which the federal government attempts to shift blame to others (e.g., the desert, smugglers, migrants themselves) for injuries sustained during the migration process.
17. See note 1 of the Introduction for a discussion of the relationship between the INS and the Department of Homeland Security.
18. Dunn 2009:21–22.
19. Dunn 2009:59–60.
20. Dunn 2009:61.
21. Dunn 2009:61.
22. Nevins 2002:90–92.
23. Dunn 2009:61.
24. This has also been referred to as the Southwest Border Strategy (GAO 1997). While the official title has changed over the past two decades, the general strategy that uses the natural environment (along with various deportation practices [De León 2013a] and legal proceedings) to impede undocumented migration is often simply known as Prevention Through Deterrence.
25. USBP 1994:6.
26. Ettinger 2009:156–157.
27. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many undocumented Chinese and eastern European migrants who could not pass inspection at Ellis Island or who were banned based on ethnic exclusion laws attempted to cross the Sonoran Desert on foot and died as a result of dehydration, exposure, and murder by bandits.

(Ettinger 2009: fig. 2; St. John 2011:106). Federal agent's 1926 testimony quoted in Ettinger 2009:157.

28. USBP 1994:2.

29. GAO 1997, 2006, 2012.

30. USBP 1994:7.

31. Heyman 1995:266.

32. Heyman 1995; Singer and Massey 1998.

33. USBP 1994:1.

34. Dunn 1996.

35. García 2006.

36. GAO 2001:24 ("harsh"); Haddal 2010:19 ("inhospitable").

37. See, e.g., GAO 2001.

38. USBP 1994:4.

39. GAO 1997:50.

40. Cornelius 2001; Nevins 2002; Doty 2011; Magaña 2012.

41. Haddal 2010:19.

42. GAO 1997: appendix V, table.

43. Comment by "TYRANNASAURUS, 8/19/2012" in Moreno 2012.

44. See Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006.

45. GAO 1997: appendix V.

46. Shifts in enforcement strategies have recently made South Texas the most common crossing corridor on the southern border. See appendix B and discussion in the conclusion.

47. GAO 2001:3.

48. Rubio Goldsmith et al. 2006; D. Martínez et al. 2013.

49. Haddal 2012:32.

50. See Haddal 2010: fig. 10.

51. Anderson 2013: table 1.

52. "Deaths on the Border and the Recovered Remains Project."

53. Trevizo 2013b.

54. Nevins 2002:7.

2. DANGEROUS GROUND

1. Cohn 1987.

2. Cohn 1987:690.

3. Callon and Law 1995.

4. Latour 2005.

5. Bennett 2010:21.

6. For example, Harraway 2003; Latour 2004; Keane 2006.

7. See Gell 1988; Basso 1996; Fuentes 2006:129.

8. See Kirksey and Helmreich 2010.

9. Callon and Law 1995:485.