Introduction

The Border and Its Bodies
The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line

*Thomas E. Sheridan and Randall H. McGuire*

Ever since the establishment of the present-day border, borderland residents have crossed it as a way of life.

—Geraldo Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground*

Beginning in the 1990s, in response to an unprecedented surge of migrants from México and Central America, the United States has militarized its southern border and made it far more dangerous for those who try to cross it without documents. More than 6,000 individuals have died and hundreds of thousands more bear the scars of their passage as they suffer detention, deportation, or life as an “illegal alien” in the United States. National ideologies use citizenship to equate liberty with freedom of movement and to regulate the mobility of noncitizens based on country of origin, race, class, and gender (Kotef 2015). On the U.S.-México border, liberty becomes a bodily experience. Freedom of movement or the lack thereof privileges some and stigmatizes others. In all too many cases, that stigma serves as a death warrant. Thus, studying the border as embodied experience gives us intimate and profoundly human insights into the political, economic, and cultural dynamics of undocumented immigration and its relationship to transnational processes. Using the body as the site of analysis humanizes current political and policy debates about immigration and draws attention to the most basic human costs of calls for even greater militarization of the U.S.-México line.

To that end, a group of archaeologists and cultural and biological anthropologists met for four days in March 2016 to take part in an advanced seminar entitled “The Border and Its Bodies: The Corporeality of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line.” Cosponsored by the Amerind Foundation and the University of Arizona Southwest Center, the seminar explored how risk becomes embodied in the lives—and deaths—of
 undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants. Our focus was on trauma, specifically the physical and psychological trauma of traveling to and trying to cross an increasingly dangerous border. For some, the trauma ends in horrific deaths from heat stroke and dehydration. For many others, the trauma continues to imprint itself on their bodies as they try to evade apprehension and build lives for themselves al otro lado—“on the other side.” Anxiety, depression, hypertension, diabetes—migrants actually get sicker the longer they stay in the United States.

The seminar was held at the Amerind Foundation campus in Dragoon, Arizona, less than 50 miles from the international border. It is a harsh and beautiful landscape—one that has seen its share of migrant deaths; there is a red cross with green accents and white lettering commemorating “Omar García Herrera, Age 28, 06/26/18” on Dragoon Road near the Amerind campus. Amerind is also located in the same county where someone murdered rancher Rob Krentz in 2010 (Duara 2017). Even though most of our attention focused on migrants, seminar participants David Seibert and Tom Sheridan talked about the toll the migrant surge took on rural residents in southern Arizona. The seminar culminated in a public program at Amerind. There rancher Dennis Moroney shared what it was like to live and work in a place as hundreds of migrants crossed his ranch and several died.

In this introductory chapter, we lay the groundwork for understanding the corporeality of risk on the border and introduce the chapters of the volume. Our studies take an anthropological approach to understanding the experience of border crossing. More specifically, we focus on how that experience becomes embodied in individuals, how that embodiment transcends the crossing of the line, and how it varies depending on subject positions and identity categories, especially race, class, and citizenship. All of this happens in a historical context that sets the prior conditions for the embodied experience of today. Those conditions include endemic poverty and enduring racism against Native people, collapsing rural economies because of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), civil war in Guatemala, gang violence in Honduras and El Salvador, the drug trade and corruption in México, and other “push factors” in México and Central America. We ask basic questions: Why do the migrants run such terrible risks—which for women include the probability of rape—to make their way through México and enter
the United States? Why are they afraid to return to their home countries? Why don’t their own countries address the problems that drive them northward? And, above all, why are they dying on the border? The experience of border crossing is not a single event but rather a journey with lifelong consequences. At a larger scale, the embodied experiences of undocumented migrants on the U.S.-México line are part of a global process of immigration from the global south to the global north, a process that kills many more people in other parts of the world like the Mediterranean. We conclude our discussions by introducing the individual chapters of the book.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

Anthropology is both the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences. (Wolf 1964)

Our seminar used an anthropological approach to understand the corporeality of risk along the U.S.-México line. Unlike disciplines such as political science, economics, or sociology, anthropology does not focus on a specific aspect of the human condition but rather seeks a holistic understanding of the full sweep and complexity of human lived experience. Anthropology as a way of thinking, of seeing the world and relating to the world, captures the tensions that exist in that experience and among the many different ways to analyze it. These tensions bring a degree of critique and self-reflection that make anthropological understandings always incomplete.

We asked two basic questions about the corporeality of risk on the border: (1) Why are people dying? and (2) What are the long-term consequences of migration for those who survive? Cultural anthropologists in the seminar examined themes such as the commodification of migrant bodies on the México-Guatemala border (Jason De León) and in private detention centers (Linda Green), how working-class people in northern México are affected by the drug trade (Shaylih Muehlmann), the protests against the arrival of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in Escondido and Murrieta, California (Olivia Ruiz Marrujo), how migrants link their emotional and physical suffering (Rebecca Crocker), how the recovery of bodies in the desert creates a particular border biopolitics that
often traumatizes the living (Robin C. Reineke), and the ethnographic poetics of uncertainty among rural residents in the U.S. borderlands (David Seibert). Several of these analyses shared an emphasis on the material conditions of lived experience that archaeological studies elaborated. Archaeologists applied archaeological thinking to understand how the physical militarization of the border separates undocumented from documented crossers and creates a different experience of crossing for each group (McGuire and Van Dyke). Finally, biological anthropologists used forensic analyses to discuss how the suffering of migrants—often years before they crossed—was etched in their bones (Soler et al.).

Anthropology necessarily entails a direct and personal engagement with the other. In all our studies, the authors base their analyses on fieldwork that put the researcher into contact with migrants, their families, or their remains. Every scholar brought to the discussion a special relationship to a place and to people. We talked about migrants not as numbers in a table or tabulations of responses to a questionnaire. This direct engagement with the other produces a distinctive anthropological space of self-reflection. Hierarchy and objectification require distance. Collapsing distance humbles the anthropologist and humanizes the subjects of our inquiries.

Cultural critique comes from such humbling. One of the major goals of anthropology is to make the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic. Our discussions of the corporality of risk consistently placed value in other ways of seeing the world. Cultural critique makes anthropology the most radical of disciplines because we challenge preconceptions and assumptions more than anyone else. There is no sacred cow that anthropologists have not butchered; we carved into several in this volume. Our discussions and the papers we produced dissected taken-for-granted assumptions about migrants and rural residents along the U.S.-México line.

EMBODIMENT

As noted above, the concept of embodiment is central to most chapters in this volume. It was also the underlying premise of the research seminar that generated this book. As the term implies, embodiment focuses on the bodies of individuals as loci of investigation—bodies embedded in and interacting with their specific biocultural environments. In the words
of Margaret Lock, “the biological and the social are coproduced and dialectically reproduced, and the primary site where this engagement takes place is the subjectively experienced, socialized body” (Lock 2001:484). Most of those bodies in this volume belong to poor people from México and Central America who try, and often fail, to cross the border between México and the United States. “The phenomenological theory of embodiment holds that the body is in constant dialog with its surroundings and relationships, and it follows that immigrants carry the intimate imprints of migration-related stressors in their physical bodies,” anthropologist Rebecca Crocker observes (Crocker 2015:2). But we also acknowledge the impact of the migrant surge on rural residents, especially ranchers, on the U.S. side of the border. With few exceptions, their embodied risks are not fatal, but those risks take an emotional, social, and financial toll.

Embodiment also has a strong historical dimension. Stressors experienced by individuals throughout their lifetimes burrow themselves into their bodies, affecting how they respond to present events. In the case of migrants, those stressors may include malnutrition and high rates of infection in infancy and childhood, so graphically expressed on their teeth and skeletal remains (see Soler et al. this volume). Among the hundreds of “undocumented border crossers” (UBCs) analyzed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME), dental caries (cavities), antemortem tooth loss, and dental abscesses are much higher than in Mexican American populations. Evidence of dental restoration is also comparatively rare. Moreover, skeletal indicators of poor nutrition or chronic infection such as short stature, porotic lesions of the eye orbits and cranial vault, and dental enamel defects are much more frequent among migrants. Bodies, in this sense, are historical archives that reflect the life histories of individuals. Those archives, like all archives, are incomplete records of the past. Many stressors affect only the soft tissues of the body—organs, muscles, blood—and do not leave their signatures on teeth and bones, or at least none that forensic scientists can read yet. And as the chapters by Reineke and Soler et al. so vividly illustrate, dying along the U.S.-México border quickly reduces most bodies to bones and teeth, if, in fact, those remains are recovered at all (see also De León 2015).

But even the survivors—the fortunate ones who evade death and the Border Patrol to carve out precarious lives for themselves in the United States—carry their pasts with them, including the trauma of crossing the
border itself. Crocker (this volume) enriches our understanding of the 
“Mexican migrant paradox”—the well-documented phenomenon that 
the physical and mental health of Mexican migrants actually deteriorates 
the longer they remain al otro lado (north of the border)—by examining 
the “emotional assault of migration on the body.” Carrying out ethno-
graphic research among undocumented migrants in Tucson, Arizona, 
Crocker reports, “I observed the unrelenting sources of stress that com-
bined to churn up a perfect storm of emotional upheaval in the Mexican 
immigrant community. The 40 Mexican immigrants whom I interviewed 
reported feelings of trauma (50%), fear (65%), depression (75%), loneli-
ness (75%), sadness (80%), and stress (85%) related to migration” (Crocker 
2015). Such stress also manifests itself in high rates of hypertension, dia-
abetes, and other so-called physical diseases. Fear of deportation—and the 
social isolation that accompanies it—haunts the bodies as well as psyches 
of undocumented immigrants, even in communities with large Hispanic 
populations and relatively friendly attitudes toward Latino newcomers 
(Sheridan 1986).

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Another key concept is structural violence or vulnerability (Carvajal et al. 
2012; Duncan 2015; Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969; Quesada et al. 2011). 
According to Johan Galtung, who pioneered the concept, “We shall refer 
to the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence 
as personal or direct, and where there is no such actor as structural or in-
direct” (italics in original). He goes on to say: “In both cases individuals 
may be killed or mutilated, hit or hurt in both senses of these words, and 
manipulated by means of stick or carrot approaches. But whereas in the 
first case these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons as 
actors, in the second case this is no longer meaningful. There may not be 
any person who directly harms another in the structure. The violence is 
built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently 
as unequal life chances” (Galtung 1969:170–171). Paul Farmer emphasizes 
this last point: “Social inequality is at the heart of structural violence. 
Racism of one form or another, gender inequality, and above all brute 
poverty in the face of affluence are linked to social plans and programs
ranging from slavery to the current quest for unbridled growth” (Farmer 2004:317).

In other words, structural violence is embedded in the patterns of everyday life for poor and marginalized populations. Because they suffer from poor nutrition, absent or inadequate health care, toxic environments, and greater exposure to violent crimes, their morbidity and mortality rates may be significantly higher than those of more privileged members of their societies. The violence or vulnerability they face originates from the persistent patterns of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation that define them, the lack of educational and employment opportunities that limits their ability to improve their socioeconomic statuses, and the grinding realities of their daily lives that inflict cumulative psychological as well as physical harm on them. Recent research on historical or intergenerational trauma strongly suggests that the effects of such violence may also be passed down from one generation to another, trapping people in centuries-long cycles of despair (Brave Heart 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2003; Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Duran and Duran 1995; Duran et al. 1998; Fogelman 1988, 1991; Kidron 2003; Sack et al. 1995; Shulevitz 2014).

A common trope about undocumented migrants is that they choose to put themselves in harm’s way when they cross the border without the permission of the U.S. government. Such an assertion places the responsibility for their suffering and death on themselves. But as the chapters in this volume make clear, this argument obscures centuries of institutionalized racism and exploitation, both in the United States and in the migrants’ countries of origin. It also displaces responsibility for the ongoing crisis from the governments of México, Central America, and the United States onto their most vulnerable populations. Did thousands of poor Mexican corn farmers choose to come to the United States after highly subsidized corn from the United States flooded Mexican markets after NAFTA and destroyed their already precarious livelihoods (Fox and Haight 2010)? Do children from Honduras and El Salvador choose to brave La Bestia (a series of trains heading north from México’s border with Guatemala) in order to escape narco-driven gang violence in their home countries? Do women choose a greater than 50-50 chance that they will be raped in transit to reunite with their husbands or children north
of the border (Ruiz 2009)? Such brutal realities make a travesty of the word “choice” itself.

It is beyond the scope of this volume to recapitulate the centuries of corruption and exploitation that have made México and Guatemala two of the most unequal countries on earth (see Green this volume). Nor do we have space to do much more than sketch the contributions of U.S. policy to that exploitation and point out the enduring racism of many U.S. citizens who continue to view Mexicanos and other Latinos as people of color and therefore threats to their image of English-speaking, Euro-American nationhood. What we have tried to do instead is focus on the violence, both “natural” and institutionalized, that current U.S. border policy wreaks on the bodies of migrants and rural residents. As anthropologist Jason De León so eloquently testifies, “The terrible things that this mass of migrating people experience en route are neither random or 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 Desert” (2015:3–4).

The policy of “prevention through deterrence,” which began under the Clinton administration in 1993 in El Paso, Texas, clamped down on undocumented immigration in border cities like El Paso, Nogales, and San Diego. That forced migrants into borderland deserts and mountains, where they began dying by the thousands from exposure to the “elements,” particularly relentless, tissue-sucking desert heat. “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,” De León continues. “The goal is to render invisible the innumerable consequences this sociopolitical phenomenon has for the lives and bodies of undocumented people” (2015:4).

**THE BORDER: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

The militarization of the border was not inevitable. On the contrary, it is the result of political, economic, and cultural contingencies that often reflect deep-rooted fears rather than on-the-ground realities. The modern U.S.-México border did not exist until the mid-nineteenth century.
The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 ended the Mexican-American War and transferred more than half the territory claimed by México to the United States, even though much of this territory was controlled by Native, not Euro-American, nations. Then, in 1854, the United States acquired southern Arizona and the Mesilla Valley of New Mexico through the Gadsden Purchase to put the last piece of the land taken from México in place. The modern border now extends along the middle of the Río Grande 1,255 miles to El Paso, where mapmakers and boundary surveyors used lines of latitude and longitude to define the remaining 699 miles to the Pacific Coast.

This volume focuses on the border west of El Paso, although in recent years more migrants, many of them Central Americans, have been attempting to cross the Río Grande into Texas. The entire line—less than two-thirds demarcated by a river, the rest a purely political construct untethered by geography—is the busiest international boundary in the world. Approximately 200 million people and $524 billion in goods legally crossed the U.S.-México border in 2016 (Bureau of Transportation Statistics 2017). We are concerned with those who try to cross without legal permission. And even though our emphasis is on people, not merchandise, the impact of the drug trade flows like a dark subterranean river through everything we write (Andreas 2009; Muehlmann 2014 and this volume).

The western border, from the Río Grande to the Pacific, runs through two of the four great North American deserts: the Chihuahuan and Sonoran. It is also, paradoxically, highly urbanized, with most of the people living on the Mexican side of the line. On the east is El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, with more than 2.7 million inhabitants. On the west is Tijuana/San Diego, with five million. In between are four transborder metropolises with 100,000 people or more: Calexico, California/Mexicali, Baja California Norte (more than 800,000, most of them in Mexicali); Nogales, Arizona/Nogales, Sonora (more than 300,000, most of them in Sonora); Yuma-Somerton, Arizona/San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora (nearly 300,000, two-thirds in San Luis); and Douglas, Arizona/Agua Prieta, Sonora (about 100,000, most in Sonora). It is important to note here that Mexican population statistics usually underestimate the number of people in urban areas.

Between these urban centers are the smaller border towns of Sonoyta, Sonora (about 13,000), the twin towns of Naco, Arizona, and
Naco, Sonora (about 7,000), the small communities of Sasabe, Arizona, and Sasabe, Sonora (about 2,500, most in Sonora), and Columbus, New Mexico/Puerto Palomas, Chihuahua (about 7,200). Like their larger urban neighbors, these communities serve as official ports of entry between the United States and México. But all the land between these cities and towns is sparsely populated desert punctuated by rugged mountain ranges with few roads, very little water, and temperatures that routinely climb above 100°F in the summer and drop below freezing in the winter. In western Arizona, the federally managed Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Yuma Proving Ground, and Barry M. Goldwater Complex encompass an area about the size of Connecticut, with restricted access and no resident population.

The U.S. and Mexican officials who created the western border in the 1850s imagined that they could easily separate sovereign space, but the reality of the borderlands has always made the construction of a border much harder than the drawing of lines (St. John 2011:14). Between 1849 and 1857, the two nations put up 52 boundary markers. Then, in the early 1890s, they restored or erected 258 monuments (St. John 2011:91–96). For most of the nineteenth century, border residents crossed back and forth with little surveillance. Many were bilingual, with ties of family and business in both México and the United States (Cadava 2013; Sheridan 1986). Mexican labor was critical to the development of the economy in the U.S. Southwest, dominating workforces in copper mining towns, on ranches, and in the expanding agricultural centers of the Salt River Valley, lower Colorado River Valley, and Imperial Valley. Meanwhile, U.S. capital financed Mexican railroads, mines, and ranches (Truett 2008). Labor unions tried to restrict Mexican labor in the mines and smelters (Sheridan 2012), but it was not until the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1910 that anxieties about México and Mexicans became a general fear along the border (Ettinger 2009; St. John 2011).

Even then, U.S. Customs officials were more concerned with keeping out Chinese immigrants and enforcing Prohibition than restricting Mexicans. The U.S. Border Patrol itself was not established until 1924. During its early years, its mission to interdict undocumented immigrants was counterbalanced by the high demand for Mexican labor. But the Great Depression reversed that demand as mines shut down, agricultural commodity prices tumbled, and unemployment among U.S. citizens rose
above 25 percent. Between 1930 and 1935, between 500,000 and 1.8 million Mexicans were “repatriated” back to México, including many U.S. citizens caught up in the sweeps (Balderrama and Rodríguez 2006; Wagner 2017). By 1939, the Border Patrol had nearly doubled from its initial 472 officers to 916 officers (K. Hernández 2010:33). In 1929, Congress passed the first U.S. law (the Blease Act) to require immigrants to cross into the United States at a port of entry with documents (K. Hernández 2017). The act made “unlawfully entering the country” a civil misdemeanor, and unlawfully returning to the United States after deportation a felony. Current U.S. law incorporates these same penalties for undocumented entry. Four years later, the U.S. government merged two existing agencies to create the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to supervise the process of naturalization and to control undocumented immigration. In the process, the United States laid the foundations for the modern border control apparatus (St. John 2011:9).

It was also the start of what might be termed institutionalized schizophrenia regarding Mexican immigration to the United States. Demonized during the Depression, Mexican workers were welcomed under the Bracero Program during and after World War II. Between 1942 and 1964, braceros signed 4.6 million contracts to seasonally labor in U.S. fields. The Bracero Program legalized circular migration for millions of Mexicans, mostly men, who temporarily worked in the United States and then returned to their homelands. It was the largest guest worker program in U.S. history. In 1954, nativist fears resurfaced as federal policy in Operation Wetback, the largest deportation drive since repatriation in the 1930s. But a voracious demand for Mexican workers in agriculture, manufacturing, and the construction industry kept the Bracero Program alive and pressured Border Patrol officers in many instances to turn a blind eye to undocumented immigrants working in established businesses. México provided the United States’ most important army of reserve labor throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, embraced during times of economic expansion, expelled when times got hard (Cardoso 1980; Ettinger 2009; St. John 2011).

What did not change was the attitude toward transborder commerce. Following World War II, the United States and México adopted a “Good Neighbor Policy” that emphasized cooperation, modernization, friendship, economic growth, and cross-border ties (Cadava 2013:22–23). U.S.
and Mexican business leaders and politicians avidly sought to increase trade between the two nations. Both the United States and México improved and modernized border ports of entry and border cities. México initiated the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF) to renovate the entire border and to make border towns showplaces of modern México rather than vice-ridden enclaves catering to U.S. tourists who wanted to drink and patronize the infamous zonas rojas (zones of prostitution) (Arreola and Curtis 1993:28; Cadava 2011:370). The leaders of PRONAF also proposed the Border Industrial Program (BIP), in part to compensate for the end of the Bracero Program in 1964. The BIP created the maquiladora industry, which allowed U.S. and other foreign companies to construct assembly plants on the Mexican side of the line. Utilizing much cheaper Mexican labor, the maquilas imported components from the U.S. duty-free and exported finished products back to the United States, paying only a value-added tax. Border towns and cities in México grew by leaps and bounds. In a 1962 love letter to his native state, Senator Barry Goldwater wrote, “Our ties with Mexico will be much more firmly established in 2012 because sometime within the next 50 years the Mexican border will become as the Canadian border, a free one, with the formalities of ingress and egress cut to a minimum so that the residents of both countries can travel back and forth across the line as if it were not there” (Goldwater 1962). By the late 1980s, some commentators even predicted that economic expansion, cultural mixing, and migration would erase the border altogether (Ashabranner 1987).

The Good Neighbor Policy, however, had started to fray by the 1970s. The maquilas, which drew so many Mexicans northward, primarily employed young women, marginalizing young men and others looking for work. The end of the Bracero Program removed tens of thousands of workers from the U.S. economy, but ranching, agriculture, and service industries still needed their labor. Consequently, undocumented crossings steadily grew in the last three decades of the twentieth century. During the same time period, the smuggling of drugs increased as Mexican cartels became the middlemen for Colombian cocaine while continuing to export Mexican-grown marijuana and heroin (Grayson 2010). More recently the trade has shifted more to Mexican-made methamphetamine (Ramsay 2015) and increasing amounts of heroin as prescription opioids get more expensive and harder to obtain (Partlow 2017).
CHANGING PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

The end of the Bracero Program and the growth of maquilas resulted in an immigrant surge unprecedented in border history. There is no direct measure of undocumented immigration, so Border Patrol apprehensions are the best proxy we have. Apprehensions began to climb in the 1970s, when the number went from 201,780 along the southwestern border (California to Texas) in federal fiscal year (FFY) 1970 to 795,798 in 1979. In 1983, the figure surpassed one million (1,033,974) for the first time. During the 1990s, apprehensions ranged from 1,049,321 in 1990 to 1,537,000 in 1999, with only one year (1994, 979,101) falling below the one million mark. They peaked the following year at the turn of the new century (1,643,679) and then slowly began to decline. There was an upsurge from 2004 to 2006, during the U.S. real estate boom, when apprehensions exceeded one million per year again. But when the boom went bust in 2009, apprehensions fell below half a million from 2010 (447,731) to 2017 (303,916) (U.S. CBP 2017a).1

Until the 1990s, most of these migrants crossed in one of the border cities, such as San Diego, Nogales, El Paso, or Laredo. Once across, they could merge into the resident Mexican American populations in those urban centers. Only the young and fit braved the desert, where they walked during the night to be picked up by vehicles in the United States. Beginning with Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, however, the United States fortified urban boundaries in San Diego, El Paso, and Nogales with walls to force migrants out into “hostile terrain” where they risked dehydration and death. Operating in remote border regions also allowed the Border Patrol to minimize conflicts with Mexican and Latino citizens. This policy of “prevention through deterrence” was supposed to reduce the number of would-be crossers by funneling them into remote and rugged country. In the desert they were also supposed to be easier to capture than in crowded urban contexts (Haddal 2010:3; Henderson 2011).

As the figures above reveal, however, the policy did not deter migrants. By the late 1990s, at the height of the surge, the majority of migrants were crossing remote deserts and mountains. In 1986, only 29 percent tried to enter the United States outside cities. By 2002, 64 percent walked in the deserts. Before 1995, the Border Patrol apprehended 90 percent of undocumented migrants in Texas and California, mostly in urban areas
From 1998 to 2012, the majority of apprehensions occurred in the deserts of Arizona.

And more of the migrants were dying. Stark figures from the Colibri Center for Human Rights in Tucson tell the story: more than 7,216 migrant deaths were reported by the Border Patrol between FFY 1998 and 2017. These deaths averaged 12 a year in the 1990s, but jumped to 157 per year between 2000 and 2017 for southern Arizona alone (Colibri Center 2019). Even though the number of migrants apprehended in the Tucson Sector for the same period declined from 616,346 to 38,657, a drop of 94 percent, the number of unidentified border crossers examined by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner rose from 74 in 2000 to 128 in 2017, topping out at 222 in 2010 (PCOME 2017). By 2017, 57 percent (175,978) of the Border Patrol’s apprehensions were “Other than Mexican.” And 45 percent (137,562), many of them from Central America, were crossing in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, while only 17 percent still trekked through Arizona (Tucson Sector: 38,657; Yuma Sector: 12,847). But a higher proportion of them were dying terrible deaths on their journeys to the United States.

“Prevention through deterrence” may have been one of the factors reducing the total number of undocumented Mexican migrants, although the Great Recession and an improving Mexican economy probably had more to do with the decline. Nonetheless, the militarization of the border intensified. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon ignited a widespread fear of foreign terrorism, leading politicians to call for “safe and secure borders” (Henderson 2010). Congress passed the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002, which greatly increased the requirements for inspection and documentation at the border. The next year the federal government combined the U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to form the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Then, in 2006, President Bush signed the Secure Fence Act. This legislation resulted in the construction of more than 650 miles of vehicle barriers and fencing of various types, most of it on the southwestern border (Ingold et al. 2017).

Those barriers are backed up by a system of “layered security,” with surveillance equipment (sensors, floodlights, trip wires, cameras, mobile observation towers, radar, blimps, and predator drones) and active patrols
by agents in vehicles, ATVs, horses, and helicopters. In the early 1990s, Border Patrol agents tended to be from the border region and to have many years of experience. They were usually armed only with a pistol. Today the Border Patrol is one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the United States, a paramilitary force that routinely carries automatic weapons and wears bulletproof vests. The Border Patrol Tactical Unit is a Border Patrol swat team with military weapons and equipment.

In 1992, there were 4,139 Border Patrol agents. By 2004, that number had more than doubled to 10,189 agents, and it doubled again to 20,558 by 2010. By 2017, it had dropped slightly to 19,437 agents, 85 percent (16,605) of whom were in the Southwest border sectors (U.S. CBP 2017b). Such rapid growth meant that most agents had no previous experience on the border and relatively little time in service. At the height of the surge, the second-in-command of the Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol told a community meeting of the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance that he used to be able to partner rookies with agents who had 8 to 10 years of experience. Now he was lucky if the veterans had two years under their belts. The result was a marked increase in corruption (Nixon 2016), greater environmental damage by agents who did not understand the fragility of desert environments, and less cultural sensitivity to Mexican American and Tohono O’odham citizens of the United States. The Border Patrol claims that they capture 81 percent of undocumented border crossers. Other, independent studies suggest the apprehension rate is in the range of 45–50 percent (Ingold et al. 2017). Based on our own first-hand experience on the border and with undocumented migrants, we believe the lower figure is more accurate.

WHY MIGRANTS EMIGRATED

During the late twentieth century, a perfect storm of economic and demographic factors blew millions of Mexicans northward. The “Mexican agricultural miracle,” which transformed México from a food-importing to a food-exporting nation between 1940 and 1965, came to an end. New irrigation districts in the north reached their limits, and some, like Caborca and the Costa de Hermosillo in Sonora, even began to shrink. As México’s population soared from about 50 million in 1970 to 90 million in 1990, food had to be imported once again.
Concomitantly, the first in a series of peso devaluations occurred in 1976 because of México’s growing balance of payments deficit. Enormous oil discoveries along México’s Gulf coast triggered a burst of economic optimism in the late 1970s, when petroleum production surged and petroleum earnings skyrocketed. But that just triggered an irrational boom mentality infecting Mexican officials and international bankers alike, who made bigger and bigger loans at high interest rates as the Mexican government binged on infrastructure and social service spending. Everything was predicated on rising petroleum prices, which nose-dived in the 1980s. The peso plummeted. Capital flight intensified. Corruption spiraled to truly surreal heights. In the words of Meyer et al. (2014:511), “the oil miracle had become the oil nightmare.” By 1987, the inflation rate was 159 percent, the exchange rate for pesos to dollars was 2,300 to 1, and México owed $105 billion in foreign debt (Meyer et al. 2014).

In response, President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) and his successors embarked on a series of neoliberal reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Mexican workers and the middle class bore the brunt of those austerity measures as state-owned industries were privatized, jobs evaporated, and social services were cut. Real wages dropped and prices of basic commodities rose. In 1992, México even amended its famous Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution and abandoned its commitment to agrarian reform (Meyer et al. 2014).

Two years later, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) allowed heavily subsidized U.S. corn to flood Mexican markets as the government eliminated its own price supports for small corn farmers. Corn and wheat production declined, and prices for Mexican corn fell by almost 50 percent (Fox and Haight 2010). Millions of Mexicanos from the poorer southern states no longer could make even a meager living on their small plots of land. So they moved north, where maquilas provided some jobs, particularly for young women (Massey et al. 2003). The explosive growth of México’s northern states also coincided with the metastasis of the drug trade, as cocaine and methamphetamine joined marijuana and heroin to supply insatiable U.S. and European appetites (Andreas 2009).

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, far fewer Mexicans and many more Central Americans were trying to cross the border. Most came from the so-called Northern Triangle of Guatemala,
Honduras, and El Salvador. In 2010, they made up 13 percent of total Border Patrol apprehensions. By 2016, their percentage had risen to 42 percent. Neither the Obama nor the Trump administrations have considered them refugees deserving asylum. But as a recent report from Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) observed, “The violence experienced by the population of the NTCA [Northern Triangle Central America] is not unlike that of individuals living through war. Citizens are murdered with impunity, kidnappings and extortion are daily occurrences” (Medecins Sans Frontières 2017:8). Nearly 40 percent of the individuals surveyed by MSF personnel in México stated that they or members of their families had been attacked, extorted, or forcibly recruited into criminal gangs. An even higher proportion—43.5 percent—had lost relatives to violence in the past two years. Conditions were particularly brutal in El Salvador, where 56.8 percent had relatives killed and 54.8 percent had been the victims of extortion or blackmail (Medecins Sans Frontières 2017:5).

As Jason De León’s chapter in this volume reveals, risks do not diminish once these migrants enter México. On the contrary, their passage through México is often more harrowing than life in their home countries. The MSF report noted that 68.3 percent of the Central American migrants they surveyed had suffered some form of violence in México. About one-third of the women and 17.2 percent of the men had been raped or had endured other forms of sexual abuse, often at the hands of criminal gangs or Mexican police (Medecins Sans Frontières 2017:11–12).

Two contributors to this volume—Randall McGuire and Ruth Van Dyke—worked with the humanitarian aid group No More Deaths/No Más Muertes during this time period. No More Deaths places water in the desert along migrant trails. The group also runs an aid station in Nogales, Sonora, to assist individuals who have been deported from the United States. They provide calls to the United States and Latin America, help recover money and possessions that the Border Patrol confiscates from detainees, and help migrants get money sent by relatives and friends via Western Union. Ruth and Randy met one group of six Hondurans at the aid station who were preparing to cross the border. They had ridden La Bestia for 27 days to reach Nogales. Perched atop boxcars, they tried to stay alert but one of their party fell asleep and slipped off, falling under the wheels of the car behind. The wheels sliced
his right leg off at the knee. They were forced to leave him in a hospital in Guadalajara. They also found one person dead with his throat cut. Twice they were robbed, and once they had to pay a bribe to Mexican soldiers. Ruth and Randy told them that they were very brave to face such risks. They shrugged their shoulders and said no, it was something they had to do for their families.

Several days later, two brothers from the Honduran group returned. One of the brothers had cut his ankle on the train. The second day in the Arizona desert, the ankle became infected and swelled up, while his feet were a mass of bleeding blisters. He could not keep walking, so everyone but his brother abandoned him. The two were forced to flag down the Border Patrol, and ICE dropped them off in downtown Nogales the next morning at 3:00 a.m. No More Deaths gave them food, medical care, and used shoes, but they did not know what to do. To go home meant reversing the 27-day trip on La Bestia and facing gangs in Honduras. But the one brother was not in good enough shape to cross the border again, and they risked arrest by Mexican authorities if they remained in Sonora. They left the aid station to sleep under a bridge.

Over and over again migrants repeated the same story: they made the trip to help their families. Thirty-year-old Roberto had a wife, son, and three daughters in Guatemala. He could not get work at home and was hoping to join a cousin working in a stable in Texas so he could pay for his son to go to an after-school program to learn how to use computers. The Border Patrol picked up 15-year-old Enrique from Oaxaca, who stood about five feet tall and weighed less than 100 pounds soaking wet. Randy dialed his mother’s number and handed him the phone. He could hear her telling him that he would try again and her begging him not to. When he handed the phone back, he broke into tears. Weeping, he said that he had failed his family.

Easily the saddest cases were migrants who had lived many years in the United States and had established their families there. Person after person told Ruth and Randy how U.S. police had stopped them for some minor violation—speeding in a car, jaywalking, throwing trash in a recycle can—and then turned them over to ICE to be deported. They yearned for the children and spouses they had left behind. They felt enormous responsibility for their families and were distraught about what
they would do now. Most indicated that they had no choice but to return to the United States.

Carlos had worked as a cook at a Marriott hotel in Denver for more than 18 years. His wife, Lydia, worked as a maid in the same hotel. They had three children, all citizens born in the United States; the oldest was 16, the youngest five years old. Aurora, Colorado, police stopped their car for failing to signal a right turn. When neither Carlos nor Lydia could produce a driver’s license, the police called ICE, and ICE deported them to Nogales. They had no family in México other than Carlos’s aged parents. The 16-year-old daughter took sole responsibility for her two siblings.

Someone they met on a Nogales street put them in touch with a coyote. They paid him thousands of dollars to guide them across the border. The trek in the desert did not go well. After two days, their feet were so badly blistered they could not walk. Luckily the coyote abandoned them on a well-traveled dirt road. Volunteers with Tucson Samaritans, another humanitarian aid group, found them and called the Border Patrol to pick them up. ICE medics cleaned their wounds, bandaged their feet, gave them a bottle of pain pills, and deposited them on a Nogales, Sonora, street corner at 4:00 a.m.

Carlos and Lydia’s blistered feet almost killed them. Thousands of others left behind in the desert were not so fortunate. But death also awaited migrants in other places. José worked as a landscaper. He and his American family had made their home in Los Angeles for 35 years. The Border Patrol picked him up in the Arizona desert as he was returning from visiting his sick mother in Sinaloa. They loaded him into a patrol truck and sped down a dirt road at high speed. The truck bounced off the road and rolled, severely injuring José’s back. When he refused to sign voluntary deportation papers, agents yelled at him, withheld food and water for 24 hours, and promised him pain medication and medical care only if he signed. When he did, they deported him to Nogales wearing a back brace and in extreme pain. The pain only got worse after he finished the handful of pain pills the Border Patrol medic had given him. He died soon afterward. When a No More Deaths volunteer called one of his daughters to ask if there was anything he could do, the daughter replied, “We do not know where our father is buried.” On the border, many bodies of migrants are never found. And even if their remains are
recovered, many are never identified, leaving their families in a limbo that never ends (Reineke this volume; Soler et al. this volume).

**PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRANTS**

African Americans struggle to remind us of the slave ships that brought an estimated 12–15 million Africans in chains to the Americas. Irish Americans recall the “coffin ships” that carried nearly 2 million starving Irish refugees from the Potato Famine to the United States, Canada, and Australia between 1845 and 1855. But migration from México and Central America, so vital to the economic growth of the United States, has no Ellis Island or Statue of Liberty commemorating the millions of braceros and mojados who kept the trains running, dug the copper, ran the cattle, or continue to pick the crops in the extractive West. Aside from Woody Guthrie’s “Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee),” U.S. popular culture is largely mute about the experiences of Mexicanos who braved heat, thirst, rattlesnakes, and la migra (the Border Patrol) to work in the United States (T. Hernandez 2017). You have to understand Spanish to understand the corridos (ballads) about life and death al otro lado (Muehlmann this volume; Wald 2001). Those corridos have not yet caught the imagination of the non-Mexican American public.

This may change as the U.S. Latino population continues to grow. In her dissertation on the impact of migration on Organ Pipe National Monument on the Arizona border, anthropologist Jessica Piekelek notes that some staff members at Organ Pipe wondered if it might be renamed “Immigrant National Monument” in the future. “There may always be tire tracks out there, but at some point, the first Latino president will come out here and dedicate this area as a memorial for the place his grandparents walked through,” one speculated (Piekelek 2009:100). For now, however, many U.S. citizens view Mexican and Latino immigrants with suspicion and fear.

U.S. attitudes toward migrants—and U.S. immigration policy along the southern border—still reflect racist ideologies like Manifest Destiny, when Euro-American pioneers conquered a continent in the nineteenth century. The first sustained contact between Anglos and Mexicans took place in Texas, where México, desperate to populate its northern frontier in the face of Apache and Comanche pressure, invited Anglos to
settle there as long as they swore a loyalty oath to the Mexican Republic (DeLay 2008; Hämäläinen 2008; Weber 1982). Anglos soon outnumbered their hosts, ignoring their oaths and looking down on the Mexican inhabitants as a “race of mongrels” whose Spanish blood had been defiled by miscegenation with Native peoples (De León 1983). After the Republic of Texas was created in 1836, pressure to annex Texas and seize more of northern México intensified in the United States. “Let the tide of emigration flow toward California and the American population will soon be sufficiently numerous to play the Texas game,” one New York newspaper trumpeted (qtd. in Weber 1982:179).

In 1845, the U.S. government upped the ante in the “Texas game” by granting statehood to Texas and sending a secret envoy to México to buy New México and California for $30 million. When México refused, President James Polk ordered U.S. troops to occupy disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. Mexican troops attacked, Congress declared war, and General Zachary Taylor invaded México and marched to Mexico City. Bankrupted by the War of Independence and crippled by two decades of civil war, México was forced to cede the Southwest and California to the United States under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Griswold del Castillo 1992). Six years later, the Gadsden Purchase added the Mesilla Valley and Arizona south of the Gila River, establishing the present border.

Meanwhile, the California gold rush sucked thousands of “argonauts” into its maw. Anglos quickly overwhelmed Californios, just as they had in Texas more than a decade earlier. Anglo entrepreneurs picked apart Spanish and Mexican land grants in violation of Guadalupe Hidalgo’s provisions, dispossessing and marginalizing Mexican inhabitants (Sheridan 2006). In many parts of the region, segregation and discrimination were institutionalized, and Mexican citizens fared little better than African Americans in the South (Acuña 2008; Camarillo 1996 [1979]; De León 1997; Montejano 1987). And even though Mexican middle classes developed in cities like Tucson and El Paso, Mexican immigration continually reinforced the perception that Mexicans were peons, disposable people who endured squalid conditions in migrant camps to pick the crops and move on (Cadava 2014; García 1991; Sheridan 1986).

But the modern West could not have been built without Mexican labor, which constituted much of the workforce in western mines, lumber
camps, railroad yards, and ranches, as well as fields. This led to the fundamental schizophrenia in U.S. policy toward Mexican immigration noted above. When the economy was growing, legal and extralegal restrictions on immigration loosened. When the economy shrank, immigrants became convenient scapegoats, and control clamped down (Cardoso 1980; Ettinger 2009; St. John 2011).

This schizophrenia intensified in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The real estate boom from 2005 to 2008 relied on Mexican construction workers in many regions. When the boom went bust during the Great Recession, states like Arizona passed legislation like the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, better known as SB 1070. Among other provisions, SB 1070 required state and local law enforcement “to determine immigration status of individuals who they reasonably suspect to be illegal aliens, and for all persons who are arrested.” In the words of Russell Pearce, president of the Arizona Senate then, Mexican migrants were “Invaders. That’s what they are. Invaders on the American sovereignty [sic] and it can’t be tolerated” (qtd. in Sheridan 2012:387).

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE U.S. BORDERLANDS

U.S. citizens living in rural areas along the U.S.-México border were also affected by the migrant surge. The Altar Valley southwest of Tucson, Arizona, was one of the major migrant corridors during this period. At the surge’s height, agents from Grupo Beta, a service of México’s Instituto Nacional de Migración, told Randall McGuire that an estimated 3,000 migrants a day arrived in Altar, Sonora. Those migrants would then board vans with blacked-out windows and be driven 70 miles north to the border town of Sasabe, Sonora, along a graded dirt road. There, guides known as coyotes or polleros would lead them on a trek through sparsely populated desert grassland with little available water, where temperatures dropped below freezing in the winter and rose above 100°F from May to October.

On these trails, blisters kill because migrants with blistered feet cannot keep up and the coyotes abandon them. Trails crisscross the valley to pickup points on Arivaca Road (more than 20 miles from the border), Route 86 (45 miles from the border) north and east to I-19 (nearly
50 miles), and even to I-10 (more than 100 miles). Humane Borders, another humanitarian group that maintains water stations and assists migrants in distress, reports that prior to 2006, when the Secure Fence Act was passed, deaths clustered in the Altar Valley and Baboquivari Valley on the Tohono O’odham Nation to the west. Those clusters probably reflected migrants who had died on their third day of walking. During the hotter months, migrants simply could not carry enough water to keep themselves hydrated (Burgess and Park 2013).

Tom Sheridan and his wife and daughter lived at the north end of the valley during this period. They would regularly see migrants or their trash on the outskirts of their neighborhood. Occasionally, migrants would find their way to their home in the middle of the subdivision, where they would ask for food, water, medical assistance, or rides to Tucson or Phoenix. One migrant from Sonora, exhausted by his ordeal, asked them to call the Border Patrol so he could return home. Another couple from the southern Mexican state of Chiapas knocked on their front door, perhaps drawn by a tile image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. They had been abandoned by their coyote because the woman could no longer keep up with the group. After Tom and his wife, Christine, gave them food and water and treated the blisters on the woman’s feet, the couple called a relative in Los Angeles who did not answer. They also had phone numbers from Florida and New York but had no idea how far away those places were. They set off again after resting a few hours but soon returned. Realizing they could not continue, the couple agreed to have the Border Patrol pick them up; the Border Patrol was everywhere in the valley, and knowingly transporting undocumented migrants is a federal crime punishable by up to 10 years in prison, a risk few people were willing to take. Almost everyone in the Altar Valley had similar stories about encounters with migrants during this time.

As David Seibert’s chapter in this volume points out, few of those encounters were threatening. Most of the migrants were poor people looking for jobs. But everyone knew there were darker forces at work in the valley, millions of dollars of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine snaking their way north in backpacks, bicycles, vehicles, and ultralights. A rancher and his cowboys at the north end of the valley even found a group of starving horses with their shoes nailed on backward. These were pack horses for the drug trade whose tracks would have led
the Border Patrol in the opposite direction from the smugglers’ route. The drug trade was capitalism at its most voracious, illegal supply irresistibly pulled northward by insatiable demand. For residents in the Altar Valley, this knowledge—and the rare encounters with drug smugglers or their material remains—created a sense of profound uncertainty, the destabilization and desettling of a place some of them had called home for three generations or more.

The surge had its biggest impact on the ranchers, who live in isolated homesteads scattered throughout the valley. The valley is their workplace as well as their residence, and more than anyone else they came into daily contact with the migrants and what they left behind. Like ranchers from Texas to California, for generations they had coexisted with the few migrants who crossed the border outside the cities. They had also minded their own business as smugglers plied their trade. The attitude along the border was a pragmatic live and let live as long as gates were closed and property respected. Every rancher had taken care of migrants in distress at one time or another. The ranchers worked outside, day after day. Heat, cold, thirst, spines, scorpions, rattlesnakes—more than anyone else, they knew how hard the country could be on bodies. And they were the ones who first found the bodies—or what was left of them—when the surge began to take its toll.

In a response to a questionnaire Tom Sheridan sent them, one woman whose family ranched at the north end of the valley talked about how the number of migrants increased during the 1990s, “cresting in the middle 2004–7 when the economy crashed.” “Until the early 1990s I was never concerned that the children would meet an illegal,” she continued. “They were usually on their way to Marana to work in the fields. If they needed food or help they would stay at the edge of the yard until we would go out and they would offer work for anything they needed. After about 1995 they would come into the yard and demand food or a ride to Phoenix.”

Another woman, who moved onto a ranch in the foothills of the Baboquivari Mountains in 1996, said, “In the early years of my time here, the numbers were huge with people traveling in all parts of the Altar Valley. Rarely would one drive to town without seeing people along the ranch road or the highway. As numbers reached their peak, the garbage was unbelievable—water jugs, clothing, personal items, food trash—and immense quantities.” Tom Sheridan remembers crossing a saddle at the
south end of the Cerro Colorado Mountains north of Arivaca while deer hunting. He found a small canyon filled with what looked to be at least 10 dumpster loads of trash. When migrants neared a pickup point, they were told to change into clean clothes and throw away their backpacks and any other items that would identify them as migrants.

The woman from the ranch in the Baboquivaris went on to say, “Many times we’ve had people wander in who are very dehydrated and weak. We provide water, and a chair with shade while they wait for the Border Patrol to pick them up.” Another rancher who manages two ranches in the valley while running his own ranch in southeastern Arizona noted that the migrants “have become more hostile. Maybe this is because they are involved in drug trafficking.” He contrasted migrants with drug smugglers: “We helped a female that was lost and appeared to have been abused by her coyotes. This and other encounters make me feel sorry for these migrants. My encounters with obvious drug runners have made me feel they are defiant and belligerent towards us.” The woman who ranches at the north end of the Altar Valley was more eloquent. “Imagine the desperation to travel through this country. Some were arrogant and demanding, others were terrified. We had two women come into the houses early one morning. They held each other’s hands with both hands and would not let go. We called Border Patrol and they came. We talked to the women and assured them they would be OK. They would not let go of one another. What must they have endured!”

All three ranchers mentioned that there had been break-ins at their ranches. The woman who lived at the north end of the valley said that they could no longer leave their ranch unattended:

Another time we all had to be gone so I asked a cousin to stay at the house. She did her laundry, washed her car in the yard, a bus from [Border Patrol (BP)] came in and picked up about 50 illegals. About 10 minutes later 3 men came to the gate and took a heavy stick from a tree to threaten the dogs. She came in the house and called BP. They told her they didn’t have anyone to send right then. The illegals broke into one of the other houses and stole a gun and 3 boxes of shells. They tore every mattress off beds, every closet was gone through, took food out of the freezer and left some melting on the floor.
The ranchers also described the damage done to critical ranch infrastructure, especially fences and waterworks. The rancher at the north end of the valley continued:

Our fences were ruined. Even the grass was trampled. The illegals would break the floats on the water troughs and drain thousands of gallons of water. When we moved the cattle to new pastures, we had to totally dismantle the plumbing on the troughs or the illegals would tear the pipes out of the ground. Every day my husband, son, and cowboy would go out to do ranch work and end up repairing damage done by the illegals. Every day! How would you feel going out to do work EVERYDAY to find fences torn, gates left open, cattle which have to be gathered back to their pasture, plumbing cut and destroyed, cattle standing at dry water tanks in 105 degree weather; and you must get someone to start hauling water from 6 miles away and the other two figure out where the pipeline is destroyed and gather the parts to repair it only to come back the next day and find the same thing happening again.

I worried because the men’s anger grew and grew. I wrote letters to legislators and presidents but it was never going to end. I was almost relieved when the economy went broke.

The outrage of the ranchers was fueled not only by the damage done by migrants but by their sense that neither the Border Patrol nor county sheriff’s deputies were making much effort to protect them. The woman on the ranch in the Baboquivari Mountains was complimentary. “As Border Patrol has become more effective (better strategy, wall & technology, road check points), we see the traffic predominantly in the mountains now. We rarely see individuals traveling along the ranch road or highway. When we do see people, they appear to usually be individuals who have split off from their group and wander into our buildings. We do see groups when riding in the mountains—and see sign very frequently.” Then she added, “The groups seem to all be run by smugglers.” The ranch manager had a different point of view. “I am not particularly impressed with the BP. I feel they make the problem worse,” he said. “If they were not chasing the migrants and drug runners around we would have less
problems personally and with our business. To be effective they should be on the actual border. Right now it feels like I-10 is the border.”

The Altar Valley is home to these people. They feel they belong—a belonging not just based on some abstract sense of citizenship but because of an embodied history of work and family and place building. But their sense of belonging has been profoundly shaken. When asked, “What impact upon you personally has migration in the Altar Valley had over the last twenty years?” the ranch manager replied, “It has made me much more cautious in what should be a beautiful valley. It has made me feel less confident in our government and its ability to govern.” The woman at the north end of the valley was more personal.

[My husband], the kids and I, and many of the kids’ friends would go out on the ranch for work. Maybe moving cattle, branding, building fence, rocking in eroding arroyos. If they had to gather cattle they all would go first and I would follow with lunch which we would heat over a small fire. We would all work together, have lunch, then finish up and head for home but we all worked together. Suddenly I could no longer go. When the trucks with horses or equipment left and about a half hour passed, the dogs began barking and illegals were coming into the yard. We had fun all being together.

After that I sent lunches but I stay here. I miss those times working and joking together. When [another rancher] was overcome by heat and rushed to the hospital we sent the cowboy down to stay with the property because they had no one there.

To this day we do not leave the houses alone. If it means we miss something, then we do.

THE GLOBAL MIGRANT CRISIS

When we wrote this introduction, President Donald Trump was promising to build a “big beautiful” wall along the U.S.-México border and to make México pay for it. Trump also wanted to hire 15,000 more ICE and Border Patrol agents. Both these goals are political and fiscal pipe dreams. The land border between México and the United States stretches

Introduction

THE GLOBAL MIGRANT CRISIS

When we wrote this introduction, President Donald Trump was promising to build a “big beautiful” wall along the U.S.-México border and to make México pay for it. Trump also wanted to hire 15,000 more ICE and Border Patrol agents. Both these goals are political and fiscal pipe dreams. The land border between México and the United States stretches
for 1,954 miles, much of it through deserts and mountains. Estimates for a barrier along the entire 1,954-mile border range from the Department of Homeland Security’s $21.6 billion to Senate Democrats’ $70 billion. As México’s economy improves and México’s population stabilizes and ages, fewer Mexicanos are venturing north. México’s birth rate has steadily fallen from nearly 22 per 1,000 in 2004 to just above 18 in 2016 (Moody’s Analytics 2018). Its fertility rate is also dropping; the number of live births per woman was 2.18 in 2017 compared to 1.8 in the United States and 1.6 in Western Europe (Geoba.se 2017). And no evidence suggests that greater surveillance has put much of a dent in the amount of drugs entering the United States. The spreading legalization of marijuana may reduce cartel profits, but Mexican drug smugglers are already supplying most of the heroin and methamphetamines consumed in the United States. The “war on drugs” is clearly a failure, one that has corrupted and corroded both nations. No border wall—transparent, solar, or otherwise—is going to stop the flow as long as demand continues.

On the contrary, any further militarization of the border will only lead to more suffering and death for migrants and more civil rights violations for Mexican American and Latino citizens (Ingold et al. 2017; McGuire and Van Dyke 2017; Price 2017). ICE and the Border Patrol cannot fill their existing hiring goals with qualified people, and hiring less qualified agents to meet the president’s targets will result in more corruption, incompetence, and abuse of migrants. A physical barrier with displays of U.S. military muscle will not stop people fleeing poverty and violence who have already traveled for weeks or months across México, braving rape, robbery, dismemberment, and extortion. A wall will also not stop those people who overstay their tourist visas (McGuire and Van Dyke 2017). The number of Mexican migrants has already plummeted, but Central Americans, especially from the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, are now embarking on even longer and more harrowing journeys. Fencing built in southern Arizona under the 2006 act forced more migrants to cross in western Arizona, some of the hottest, driest country in North America, where even more died (Duara 2015). Further increases in militarization will continue the trend. Migrants will walk even more days across the desert with minimal gear and little water, subject to heat stroke, dehydration, injury, and predation. Or they will take to the sea, as refugees in Africa and the Middle East have done.
The global north and the global south meet at the border between the United States and México. The destruction of bodies on the U.S.-México border is part of a larger global phenomenon of desperate people fleeing poverty and civil war. The killing fields of our southwestern deserts pale in comparison to the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean Sea, where people are dying in the thousands every year (UNHCR 2017). What has been called the European migrant crisis began in 2015 with a massive influx of refugees and migrants seeking asylum and opportunity in Europe. Undocumented entries to the European Union more than doubled from 106,800 in 2013 to 283,175 the following year. Then they soared to 1,822,260 in 2015, dropping to half a million in 2016 (FRONTEX 2017).

But the crisis is not limited to North America and Europe. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported more than 63.5 million displaced persons in the world, 40 million of these internally displaced in their own country (UNHCR 2016). These people from the Near East, Central Asia, the Americas, and Africa are forced from their homes by violence and persecution. Eighty-six percent of these refugees remain in the global south, while 14 percent have fled to the global north.

This global crisis of displaced peoples has several obvious proximate causes, particularly wars in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria (UNHCR 2016). However, the roots of the global migrant/refugee crisis go much deeper, anchored in structural inequalities in the world economy and aggravated by climate change, which is and will continue to devastate the global south far more than the global north, which is largely responsible for global warming (Abramowski et al. 2016; Clemens 2016; Moore 2015). The ultimate solution to the crisis does not lie in fortifying borders or in deporting migrants and refugees, turning the world into massive hemispheric gated communities. Rather it lies in reestablishing stability and increasing sustainable economic development in the global south. Easier said than done. But the current xenophobia and right-wing “populism” in the United States and Europe are zero-sum games that distract from the problem and offer demagoguery, not constructive programs for change.

ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

Because the volume begins and ends with the materiality of the border, with all its walls, barriers, surveillance apparatus, and enforcement...
personnel, chapter 1—“Crossing la Línea: Bodily Encounters with the U.S.-México Border in Ambos Nogales” by Randall McGuire and Ruth Van Dyke—explores “the increasing presence of walls at the boundaries of neoliberal nation states” where “a global economy with a free flow of goods and information paradoxically requires the control and exclusion of those the state deems to be ‘unruly’ people, lacking the rights of citizenship.” The authors focus on an “assemblage composed of interactions among three entities: the neoliberal state, the border wall, and the people who traverse the border, giving particular attention to the sensory, bodily experiences of those who cross illegally.” As in many of the chapters that follow, McGuire and Van Dyke concentrate on the major border crossing between Arizona and Sonora, the most active section of the U.S.-México line during the immigrant surge of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The volume then moves from the north to the south, reflecting the trajectory of migrants from Central America and southern México. Chapter 2, Linda Green’s “Seeking Safety, Met with Violence: Mayan Women’s Entanglements with Violence, Impunity, and Asylum” anchors the contemporary experiences of Mayan women, many of them indigenous, in “Guatemala’s inferno,” the monstrous counterinsurgency that claimed more than 200,000 lives and displaced more than a million people. After the Peace Accords of 1996, “the twin processes of dispossession and dislocation accelerated, forcing many Guatemalans, El Salvadorans, and Hondurans northward. The ones who survived the horrific trek through México and managed to reach the United States were then criminalized when they applied for asylum and commodified when they were detained.”

Chapter 3—“Como Me Duele’: Undocumented Central American Bodies in Motion” by Jason De León—complicates the traditional narrative of undocumented migration in two ways. First, he focuses his analysis on Central Americans, who represented 44 percent of those detained by U.S. immigration personnel in 2015, as they crossed the Guatemala-México line. Secondly, he pushes beyond the stereotype of the “economic migrant” who is “industrious, hardworking, and worthy of empathy” by carrying out rich ethnographic fieldwork among Honduran migrants who constitute “part of a disorganized and precarious transnational criminal network that preys on border crossers and exists on the edge of
life and death." As he observes, “The tendency is to paint the world of clandestine movement in black and white, with the protagonists (i.e., economic migrants) doing battle with various evildoers (e.g., smugglers, gangs, Border Patrol). We have yet to use ethnography to understand the gray realities that characterize border crossings in Latin America.”

Chapter 4—Shaylih Muehlmann’s “Singing Along ‘Like a Mexican’: Embodied Rhythms in Mexican Narco-Music” — jumps the narrative to northern México, ground zero in the vicious violence among Mexican cartels over crossing routes into the United States. Here she tackles an apparent conundrum in Mexican popular culture: the enormous popularity of narcocorridos among working-class Mexicans who often find themselves victims of that violent world. She argues that narcocorridos have to be appreciated on an affective and embodied level as “part of a distinct local habitus. The latter is forged under conditions of structural violence yet emerges as a deeply felt, coproduced celebration of what it means to be Mexican—and feel powerful because of it—in the midst of unprecedented violence, censorship, and government corruption.”

The next three chapters explore what happens to migrant bodies during the time and after they cross the U.S.-México line. Chapter 5—“Necroviolence and Postmortem Care Along the U.S.-México Border” by Robin C. Reineke—documents “the journeys of bodies of those who have died.” Utilizing critical race theory, Reineke argues that the “dead bodies of Latin American migrants inform a continuing narrative about who belongs and who is disposable.” She contrasts the “profound acts of care and compassion,” especially by personnel in the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME), with “the powerful and dominant forces of violence and erasure they contest.”

Chapter 6—“Etched in Bone: Embodied Suffering in the Remains of Undocumented Migrants” by Angela Soler, Robin C. Reineke, Jared Be-atrice, and Bruce E. Anderson—examines what forensic anthropologists, most of them working at the PCOME, have learned about the more than 6,000 human remains recovered in the U.S.-México borderlands. “In this chapter we consider the ways in which collective experiences of marginality and structural violence, as experienced by those who leave their homes in México and Central American countries to migrate to the United States, are mapped onto individual bodies in ways that can be recognized even after death.” Those skeletal manifestations—“poor oral
health, short stature, skeletal indicators of stress and disease, and poorly healed fractures”—mutely but eloquently reveal conditions in the home countries the migrants were attempting to escape.

Both chapters 5 and 6 focus on the bodies of migrants who did not survive their crossing. Chapter 7—“Bodily Imprints of Suffering: How Mexican Immigrants Link Their Emotional Trauma to Sickness” by Rebecca Crocker—documents the toll that crossing has taken on the bodies of those who have made it al otro lado. Exploring the “epidemiological paradox” that the health of Mexican migrants and their children declines after they reach the United States, Crocker moves beyond the statistics in the public health literature to give voice to the migrants themselves. In addition to experiencing the trauma of crossing an increasingly dangerous and militarized border, these migrants in Tucson, Arizona, live in perpetual fear of arrest and deportation. Such trauma and stress are embodied in high rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, depression, and anxiety. Viewed through the lenses of Mexican traditional medicine and a holistic understanding of health, “migration may thus be experienced by Mexican migrants as a fundamental ungluing, a disembedding and reembedding of the body into unfamiliar and often hostile spatial and social worlds.”

The final two chapters shift the volume’s gaze from migrants to U.S. citizens in the Southwest responding to the immigrant surge. Chapter 8—“Narrating Migrant Bodies: Undocumented Children in California’s ‘Little Arizona’” by Olivia Ruiz Marrujo—compares and contrasts different rhetorical tropes about migrant bodies in Escondido, California, often described as California’s “Little Arizona.” In 2014, protests erupted over federal plans to build a shelter for unaccompanied migrant minors there. Those in favor of the shelter referred to the minors as “children” and invoked the narrative of the “innocent child.” Those opposed “described the minors as out of control, diseased, and dangerous—imminent threats to the residents’ physical safety, the well-being of Escondido, and, ultimately, the larger body of national civic values and institutions.”

Chapter 9—“War Stories’ and White Shoes: Field Notes from Rural Life in the Borderlands, 2007–2012” by David Seibert—gives voice to the unease of ranchers, range scientists, game wardens, biologists, and others working in the Altar Valley southwest of Tucson, as they saw a familiar landscape “changed irrevocably.” Through “war stories” about finding
objects that should not be there, including two white tennis shoes “upright and spare, side by side and neatly arranged along the edge of a dirt road 28 miles north of the U.S.-México line,” rural residents “deploy the objects and stories as bulwarks against uncertainty and forgetting, even as their days and lives shift irrevocably.” When Seibert and an Arizona Game and Fish warden find the shoes in the middle of nowhere, they have the following conversation. “‘Do you smell anything,’ he asked quietly as he rolled down both windows. ‘No . . . ’, I replied just as quietly, now less certain than ever of what we were experiencing, and why. ‘Sometimes they take their shoes off right before they die,’ he said. ‘I don’t know why.’”

NOTES

1. See Appendix A in De León 2015:298–299.
2. We use “Anglo” as a simplistic but convenient generalization to characterize settlers of European or Euro-American origin.

REFERENCES


