The Border and Its Bodies

Sheridan, Thomas E., McGuire, Randall H.

Published by University of Arizona Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68204

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2411719
AN INTRODUCTION TO SHIFTING FIELDS

When I suddenly discovered two bright white tennis shoes in the desert, that landscape and all notions of its logic and my place in it were permanently confounded. The shoes lay upright and spare, side by side and neatly arranged along the edge of a dirt road 28 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico line, as if their owner had disappeared somehow with other garments, and forgotten them. (excerpt from field notes)

Those shoes had not been forgotten by their owner; nor were they randomly placed—a fact that I learned gradually and grudgingly during several years of natural resources fieldwork southwest of Tucson, Arizona. The sentences above represent an early attempt to render in words an experience that eludes logic and comprehension, much like the subjects of my writing attempts—distraught travelers seeking opportunity while learning that remaining alive in the desert had become a more immediate priority. Like the shoes, my words about them lay dormant but resonant at the margins of other topics in my early notebooks from the field, coincidentally at the height of the mid-2000s surge of human movement in the most active Border Patrol region in the country, the Tucson Sector. This zone encompasses the Altar Valley, a sparsely populated 600,000-acre desert grassland with little water or shade, and sprinkled with a handful of ranch houses and residents who struggle to incorporate into their working lives objects such as discarded protective footwear, along with the sometime presence, and sometime absence, of the traveling bodies who leave things for others to find.
Almost immediately on entering the Altar Valley in 2007, my memories of growing up in the region were challenged by encounters with people and objects that would force construction of a new version of the place I was about to inhabit. I would soon become a resident ecological restoration practitioner and cultural anthropologist intent on conducting habitat restoration with the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance, a strong group of ranchers focused on improving the rangeland habitat on which their livelihoods depend. However, when the alliance invited me to explore the potentials for restoration work, I was unprepared for the realities of living in the remote cabin where I spent several years, as opposed to visiting for data collection and returning to Tucson. I soon learned that for residents of the region, “work shifts” do not begin or end as they do for many who visit and depart. Those shifts continue through subtle and overt pulses of interaction, activity, and movement, and regularly remind residents that this is a place inhabited, managed, and utilized differently by day than by night, a place where hope, tragedy, fear, and beauty fuse in unexpected ways.

The field note format that makes up much of this chapter represents an attempt to report on that experience from the perspective of those who reside in remote rural areas. It attempts to capture the tenor of our shared experiences in place by deliberately mixing the found objects, the events of their findings by residents, and human ways of sorting, evaluating, and sharing experiences through story. The stories of discovery in the fields where we worked were insistent and unrelenting, features that were underscored when rediscovered at the margins of my own notes as I sought a means of gathering and curating them. They demanded a different kind of attention and a return to the storytellers with new questions.

My resident colleagues enthusiastically supported this return and our shared attempt to “tell the truth” and to “get it right” because the finding moments and intersections regularly forced the incorporation of barely comprehensible materials and experiences into what had been planned as a typical workday. As I learned in the field and began to surmise slowly over time, the findings also have significant emotional and political effects on the finders. As a response, people share stories with one another during impromptu comparative attempts at comprehension, cataloging, and orientation to emergent conditions, both for
themselves and for others. In this manner they deploy the objects and stories as bulwarks against uncertainty and forgetting, even as their days and lives shift irrevocably and unpredictably. As one colleague framed the experience of uncertainty, “You know something’s gonna happen” in this new version of the field of work. It was simply impossible to predict what that would be.

Assemblages of objects, stories about them, and their collection and curation contribute to the forging of cultural memory in place. My aim is to highlight, as my co-workers in the field did, the fact that this effort has as much to do with memory as it does with the potentials for forgetting the intensity and immediacy of lives lived under trying circumstances—for migrants, smugglers, and for residents who interact with them—and the potentials for such conditions to become acceptable or normalized as features inherent to border life. What follows is an attempt to convey this immediacy of experience by providing examples from the field, such as the original vignette above, that set the tone for my experience, and brief explanatory or theoretical pieces to frame them. However, it also seems appropriate to allow the objects, finding events, and people’s responses to them to stand on their own, as interstitial cracks always ready to give way to sudden eruptions into what had for decades been a more predictable set of circumstances on a shared landscape.

The research-oriented question, “What to do with all this stuff?” (field data and experiences), is lived daily by rural border residents. It’s a question that never seems to rest on comfortable answers for anyone. As a partial answer (both biased and incomplete) to this experiment in rural borderland inhabitance, the somewhat experimental narrative pieces below provide a sense of the contexts in which events continuously and relentlessly recur in the region, by requiring that readers participate explicitly in the project of meaning-making in ways akin to those who work and reside there. As such, this effort includes the horror, shock, despair, and tragedy that permeate life in the region. But an attempt at a more accurate form of accounting must also include events marked by grace, deliberation, care, and foresight that often go unreported. Finally, I have found it useful to consider the object-events that erupt at the interstices as metaphors, or conceptual bridges between disparate and seemingly unrelated terms, even as they retain a more concrete utility as figures of linguistic, social, and material practice. This perspective enables us to
entertain how intense and immediate object-event intersections initiate and hold potentials for change, both on the physical landscape and in the emotional lives of those who have found, and will continue to find, particularly resonant objects and enter situations for which they are often unprepared.

It is my hope that these accounts and methods of treating them honor in unique and accurate ways those who failed to move successfully across the desert, those who succeeded, and those who choose to dwell in a landscape of persistent uncertainty. But before continuing, we will complete the conceptual bridge with which we began through the story of the white shoes so that they, and the anonymous traveler who left them, might have a chance to hold more firmly a place in the region’s shared history.

INTERSTICE I—A PAIR OF WHITE SHOES, FOREGROUNDED

During my first fall of fieldwork exploration in 2007, I arranged a “ride-along” day with an Arizona Game and Fish Department game warden. I signed the necessary paperwork protecting the agency from liability, conducted some online research to orient myself to the agency’s mandates and goals, and happily hopped into my informant’s four-wheel-drive work truck. I immediately noted the presence of a shotgun and ammunition clips mounted onto the truck’s infrastructure, close at hand for the driver. Later during our discussion, I noticed that the driver wore a bulletproof vest. He explained that it was impossible to know what he would find in a day’s work. I made sense of the comment and the hardware by noting to myself that he surely confronted armed hunters during the course of his work enforcing game laws. I saw nothing unusual about that precaution, and we proceeded to drive remote dirt roads and to speak about his history and training, his length of tenure in the department, and the challenges he faced as a game warden.

After a few hours of exploring ranch roads, the driver slowed the truck and stopped. I noticed a small white glow on the tan road surface ahead and slightly to the right. We had stopped about 20 feet in front of what appeared to be, and then became, a pair of bright white tennis shoes. I stared for a few moments, trying hard to fit these objects into the version of the region that I had built internally over time and carried to the site. “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.” We paused. He exited the truck, walked to the front, and stood looking side to side. In retrospect, I believe I was too stunned to get out with him; not fearful, just shocked into inaction as I furiously attempted to work on and within this unexpected, emergent field that now contained new information in the form of discarded shoes in the desert. He climbed back into the truck without further incident or discussion. But the borderlands had changed in that moment—violently, dramatically, and permanently. Sometimes I regret not taking a picture of those white shoes, but no matter, as it turned out. In the years ahead there would be plenty of objects, plenty of first-time finding moments, and plenty of stories about them that would prowl at the edges of my consciousness. Besides, those shoes are very much with me in any case. They cannot be otherwise.

The development of a theory of object-event intersections as physical metaphors helps explain what many borderland residents experience as they attempt to make sense of their findings and of their surroundings. I suggest that this approach contributes to the development of a radically honest form of accounting that many researchers who work at the intersections of social and natural worlds encourage (Collier and Ong 2005; Williams 1980). This form of analytics also points to the locations and the mechanisms through which borderland residents forge a particular form of cultural memory, and to how researchers might honor and attend to the dynamics of memory formation from the middle of an emergent situation as it continues to unfold.

After driving around in silence for some time after finding the shoes, I attempted to pick up the pieces of our encounter and direct conversation to the warden’s daily life in the field and to how he made sense of his experiences. After starting and stopping in his explanations a few times, he practically yelled aloud, “I’m _out_ here!” He did not have much to say after I acknowledged his words, and we finished the day as many do, without another remarkable incident of any kind.

In retrospect, that incident and claim coupled to the white shoes further clarified for me the importance not only of choosing what field samples to collect, and how, but how to represent them discursively. As I assembled my own “war stories” (a common descriptor) of life in the
I began to reflect on the fact that the warden’s exclamation, “I’m out here!,” indexed bodily exposure that didn’t necessarily include the possibility of bodily harm but psychological distress and exposure of different kinds. In other words, during work periods in the region he is not in, or inside a given space, and therefore not covered or otherwise protected from whatever is “out” there awaiting him—yet another inevitable meeting at the unwanted but extremely creative intersection of people and things on the move.

This experience and exclamation signal the implication of the human body in work activities in new and remarkable ways. As I noted, it was no surprise that the game warden wore a bulletproof vest and carried a small arsenal as part of his daily routine. I have no reason to believe that the white shoes signaled any kind of physical threat to our safety, but every reason to believe they signaled something to those who live through and within such experiences regularly, and who grapple with ways to respond psychologically and emotionally, both within themselves and outwardly to others.
A natural resources agency official with decades of borderland experience seemed pleased and intrigued by the chance to describe her work conditions from decades ago, when “the Gate” along the current border that divides ancestral Tohono O’odham lands between the United States and México was a simple barbed-wire contraption, often left open. During our conversation, reminiscences of (technically illegal) working relationships with ranchers, tribal members, agencies, and others gave way to anecdotes of new forms and objects on the borderlands landscape—one, a human body that she and her co-workers found in a bullet-riddled car in the desert. Another was a cluster of water bottles and guns that had not yet become ubiquitous landscape features at the time she found them, in the late 1990s. Her intended work was to monitor range conditions with ranchers, but she slowly began to feel that such objects and events were becoming the norm, rather than anomalies. She said that after two such encounters with objects, she asked herself for the first time, “What the fuck am I doing out here?!” In our interview, she did not have an answer to her own question, neither from the field nor from the comfortable office where we sat and talked. At that point the landscape and her relationship to it had changed irrevocably, not to be forgotten but elided in favor of other work, other priorities. After a few more stories, she ended the interview with the observation that, “A lot of this stuff doesn’t make the papers, ya know.”

This stuff does make the conversations of those who have plenty to talk about simply because they inhabit a region undergoing deep transformations. They struggle to relay that information without sounding sensitive or sensational, and yet have no reason to believe that the topics and reasons for telling their stories will ever subside.

From a woman whose family has owned land in the region for generations:

Family members head into the field to check fences on their property. They are gone for about half a day during the excursion. On the drive home, along the same dirt road on which they had just traveled, they find a dead man leaning on the side of a large water tank in the shade, apparently the victim of exposure. The woman laughs nervously as she relays this event to me, as if she cannot
find another way to comment on the shock, another place to put it, another thing to do with it, and so she quickly moves on to other events in rapid succession.

After hearing what sounded like a gun battle in the middle of the night, two cowboys exploring the area the next day find a hidden cache of high-powered rifles and ammunition near the top of a hill on their private property.

During a routine check on cattle, cowboys find what is often called a “rape tree” displaying women’s undergarments from branches, less than a mile from the family home.

One of the family dogs returns late one morning with a human foot in its mouth.

As she relays these experiences 30 miles north of the border she laughs nervously, I suspect out of an inability to make sense according to comfortable forms and means, but with a quick comment: “We have kids around here!” As the woman explained after recounting the four events so quickly one after the
other that they seemed to spill from her consciousness for lack of anywhere else
to go, “You don’t know it’s there until it bursts through the surface.” (Instead,
maybe you try to forget, I think to myself.) Or you prepare in uncertain ways
for uncertain futures that can be measured in minutes—carry extra water and
first-aid supplies, distribute guns throughout your vehicle and home, or make
mental notes of the locations of the Border Patrol during a workday, so that
they can be summoned when someone suddenly emerges onto a work site and
declares themselves done with the exposure and suffering of traveling north.

The rancher’s note about the existence of kids in this environment is
poignant but indicative of how finding-event normalization processes
work through people’s bodies under partially understood conditions. Her
comment suggests that children should not see such things, and that
such events should not be part of their routine lives. While it would
probably be inaccurate to claim that she thought it acceptable for adults
to see such things, it is important to note that she drew a boundary, based
on age and experience, between what was completely unacceptable and
what belongs on the other side of the boundary of acceptability, given
the physical and social environments in which she now lives. She had
adjusted boundaries and adapted to circumstances, but that adjustment
was clearly incomplete. It had come with an emotional price that she
and I were both unable to reconcile from the middle of things, even
as we knew that ranchers and ecologists should not expect to find the
things they did, nor have to forge the version of cultural memory under
construction through their bodily experiences in ways and means not of
their choosing.

Together, my natural resources colleagues and I repeated many of
these types of interviews and casual conversations dozens of times and
from the places we made our lives—kitchens, the cabs of trucks, bars,
roadsides, meetings, diners, and conferences—in addition to the more
typical office-based sites of interaction. According to one agency pro-
fessional, one of her most common and productive means of gathering
information about the resource management challenges that ranchers
face involves “bouncing around in their truck, having a cup of coffee,”
because, “relationships are key. There is other data collected too.” I would
soon learn that shoes, guns, and bodies had already become a larger part
of the lived, shared experiment and data set of the contemporary border-
lands, whether anyone liked it or not.
INTERSTICE III—WORKING AMONG BODIES KNOWN AND PARTIALLY KNOWN

A wildlife biologist with whom I worked conducted most of his activities in mountain canyons and often along crests where he could expect to find wildlife. One afternoon while he checked wildlife monitoring devices, he met a group of marijuana haulers and their heavily armed escorts. The biologist nervously launched into an explanation of his wildlife research focus and the fact that he had no desire to have anything to do with the men’s efforts in that place. The escorts’ reply seemed confident and even professional, from the biologist’s account: “We know who you are.” The group turned and continued north without further comment or incident, and the biologist continued his work. The event repeats itself in a kind of regularized rhythm—bodies and their activities known to some bodies but not to others, and according to new yet very old logics. As with the war stories often dismissed by the storytellers themselves, my question, “What is it like to go about your workday in the field?” is usually met with a dismissive wave of the hand and claims such as, “Oh, they [smugglers] know who I am,” or, “I’m sure they see me all the time.” The number of portable radios and water, gun, and food caches found in the higher-elevation areas of intensive smuggling seem to corroborate this. As one environmental activist accustomed to work in remote areas of the borderlands put it, “When I smell cigarette smoke out in the field now, I don’t wonder if there is a hunter or rancher around. I leave.”

What my research participants and I had been grappling with in the region, in the effort to make sense of it and of our lives there, was that the “first times” of entering a new region or seeing something strange were infinitely recurrent as first-time events. That is, the events had not become relegated to the category of the everyday or mundane domains of lived experience. Their ubiquity created lived conditions that negated predictability and denied people rest and peace in many cases, including their ability to count on much of anything except the unexpected. Questions arise constantly here about levels of risk, danger, and exactly what has transpired in a given moment, or what might erupt from one day and one place to the next. Specific object-event encounters, particularly those that evidenced deliberation and care, punctuated my daily life and the daily lives of my participants and led me to wonder how objects, finding events, and their effects might be incorporated in a landscape
of uncertainty (Connerton 1989, 2004; Halbwachs (1980 [1950]); Nora 1989). The inability to count on conditions and to control variables, and therefore to guide many kinds of experiments that I noted above, makes experimentation particularly difficult for natural and social scientists. These conditions are particularly vexing for people like cattle ranchers, who already struggle with marginal incomes and unpredictable climatic and range conditions on which their livelihoods and families depend. In just one common incident, a landowner and I approached an ecological monitoring site and came upon three shoeless, beaten-down horses that she had never seen. “I’m just not surprised at anything I see out here anymore,” she said quietly, and we returned to our work.

Figure 9.3  Gallon of water nestled in a tree (photograph by the author).

INTERSTICE IV—A TRAVELER AND A COWBOY
IN THE FOUNDRY OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Ecological restoration survey and evaluation work continue on a hot day in a remote area. The focus is on erosion mitigation and soil and moisture retention
so that grass and other native plants may take hold and stabilize the watershed for the benefit of cattle ranching operations and wildlife. Maps and notes contribute to orientation in the dense and confusing assemblage of deep cuts in the earth, large trees, and vast distances. Slow, deliberate walks up and down the arroyos and from side to side are critical to reading this landscape and its needs. At one particularly dense confluence of dry water channels, large, old mesquite trees cluster and suggest that there may be surface water available here occasionally. The area is thick with discarded water bottles, clothing, and empty food cans. Deep footpaths lead in and out of the shade. After a rest and a short walk not far from this site yet another white object appears in the distance. That color does not belong here. Not that bright. Not here. On approach, it takes the shape of a cross, securely planted in the sand. Ecological work is suspended and careful listening ensues, as if there is something to bear. There is not. The object is as mute as the landscape that now holds it. The senses fail to register meaning from among the known quantities that were carried to this place from past experience, and from among the items on that morning’s agenda for work. This place is different now, different again.

There is nothing but a cross for an extended moment; other landscape features and objects seem to gather around it and blur at once, while attempts are made to fit this new object into older, more stable patterns. During a grudging and careful approach, the cross bears witness to more than an anonymous dream, more than random discard. It holds a name and a life span in pencil and wood: Lucresia Domínguez Luna, November 23, 1960–June 21, 2005. Death occurred on the summer solstice—a time of change on the pre-monsoon landscape, and of tremendous heat and little moisture. Notes are taken here in an attempt to record and to comprehend this anomaly, and to align what must have happened here very recently with what is happening in this new moment.

The cross enters conversation with the landowning family soon afterward. A cowboy notes that one day a small group of travelers arrived at the ranch house and asked if they could mark the spot with a cross, for it was their family member who died in that place. The landowning family allowed it. Border Patrol was not called. The travelers moved on. The cowboy tells me that he is tired of finding bodies on the range. He just wants to run cattle. He asks what I have seen. I respond, and his rejoinder is heavy with exhaustion: “If you haven’t found one yet, you will.” The reference is to human bodies and remains scattered amid other objects, some familiar, some foreign. There seems to be nothing more to say, and silence takes hold. The conversation returns to ecology
and collaborative conservation, perhaps so that temporary respite might be found in forgetting.

Materiality and material culture studies remain a particularly diffuse, wide-ranging, but unsettled field of research that offers a means of making sense of the times and places in which bodies and other things run up against and even incorporate one another in unique ways (Miller 1998, 2010; Tilley 2004). The perspective foregrounds and forces recognition of the difficult-to-map consequences of shifting human interactions with things made, found, and moved around (Olsen 2006; Shelton 2004). This is especially important for research in the border region at this historical moment because, as all my research participants have indicated, life here has changed dramatically over the last 10–15 years.

What had been a loosely organized system of exchange and reciprocity among residents and travelers from the south—who would predictably arrive for seasonal ranch work, do it well, and move on—has given way to mistrust and a fear of unknowns. Major trade agreements have effectively forced people to move into more dangerous territory, but increased drug cartel organization paired with heightened security and militarization from the north have changed more than just the physical landscape, and irrevocably. Today it is impossible for researchers to avoid the disturbing possibilities of what connections might be in place among governing agencies and groups on both sides of the border, now an active assemblage through which violent eruptions occur with a disturbing regularity among confusing combinations of official and criminal elements on both sides of the line (Bowden 1998, 2010; Hernández 2013 [2010]).

For many whose work centers on the borderlands, the region represents “a space that seems chronically unmade,” where control over land and life was, and in many ways still is, “tenuous, uneven, and incomplete” (Truett 2004a:309, 337). Such conclusions could understandably lead researchers to feel that contemporary conditions represent a failure to resolve centuries of frontier interactions among indigenous peoples, Spanish explorers, and contemporary citizens of México, the United States, and many other countries now, some of whom naturally have been and still are complicit in regionally pervasive violence and drug activity (DeLay 2008; Sheridan 2012; Truett 2004b; White 1991).

In just one example, over the course of centuries in the Southwest the effects of Apache control over vast geographies could be measured in
decades and generations, ebbing and returning in several episodic pulses across the landscapes, one of which included my fieldwork site and home in Arivaca. These are some of the most salient historical analogues to what continues to unfold in the region today. Although there are many obvious differences between Apache history and practices and those of modern drug cartels, perhaps their similarities will someday provide a rich if disturbing research platform that can help define why and how such groups emerged onto the southwestern landscape, and how and why they occupied and continue to occupy it so effectively, in spite of the massive surveillance and enforcement inputs that continue to flow to the region today. In a coincident irony that I discovered only recently, the shocking event related in the following interstice occurred in Arivaca several feet from the remains of a crumbling adobe structure, itself an artifact of multiple Anglo attempts to inhabit the region in the face of native inhabitants’ attempts to hold their ground in the late nineteenth century. When yet another artifact of the contemporary border conflict burst through the door of the room where I sat quietly that night, another chapter was not being written but extended into emergent and ancient territories at once.

INTERSTICE V—A SUDDEN AND UNWELCOME VISITOR IS JUST AS SUDDENLY WELCOMED

In the least inhabited borderlands communities, individuals and small groups spend the majority of their time in mundane pursuits—watching traffic on the road from outside a market, conversing with a friend while the friend works, or drinking among the quiet voices of a few friends in a cantina. Sometimes these proceedings are interrupted. On a late summer night a man drinks with a bartender while the television flits in silence behind him. It is dark and still. This seems to be a good place to allow one’s senses to rest for a time, perhaps to reflect on some things and to forget others. Suddenly, a side door that normally goes unused explodes open. A dark-clothed figure stumbles in, hits the ground hard, and exhales with a moan.

The female entrant has grass in her hair, a great deal it appears. It is likely the ubiquitously invasive non-native Lehmann’s lovegrass (Eragrostis lehmanniana), or so one of the men thinks. In hindsight this identification seems offensively absurd; although ecological restoration has been his primary focus
for work in this place, other things and ideas intrude and demand reckoning. He and others rush to her assistance, and through broken Spanish determine that she has been raped. It is difficult to know where or when, but this matters little right now, when sudden emergence demands bodily attention. Two women appear on the scene out of nowhere it seems, as if conjured for this purpose. They carefully guide the visitor away. She is welcome now and will receive care. The others do not see her again, or hear of her fate. More drinks are ordered and glances are exchanged, but not words. Forgetting might bring solace for those who met on this night under such conditions, but it is unlikely that there will be forgetting.

A late-night knock on the door at a cabin outside Arivaca opens new and uncertain fields of possibilities. Will the sound attach to an injured traveler, prospective thief, or lost Border Patrol agent? Will our interaction result in an enrichment of my borderlands experiment in the opportunity to assist a fellow human being, in an angry insistence on a ride to Cleveland, or in a testy interaction with a sheriff who attempts to enter my house because he is certain that I operate a safe house for illegal activity? In this emergent moment I have no clear plan or reason for why I stand on my threshold, hold space with my body, then step in front of the sheriff as he tries to enter. And yet my response has everything to do with the bloodied traveler sitting in my front yard, a young man who needs medical attention. I tell the sheriff I know the law even if I don’t, and say that his business is with the traveler and not with me. He becomes aggressive and I respond in kind, surprised at my response even as it emerges from my mouth. I tell him again that he cannot enter my house, in spite of my innocence. He eventually accepts my stance, in body and in theory and along with whatever it is that I decided to hold in place at that time, when a sworn protector seemed like an enemy and an anonymous traveler seemed like a friend.

Theoretical studies in phenomenology provide some guidance. They suggest not only how human bodies and other objects become entangled in unique ways during emergent events in extremely dynamic shared landscapes, but how those entanglements might be represented both accurately and without resolution at once. In one sense, it is a matter of telling the truth without providing an answer but through a research framework that incorporates the somatic and emotional effects of lived conditions in and through place (Casey 1996; de Certeau 1984; Tilley
1994); and it centers on the concept that “the body is our general medium for having a world” at all (Merleau-Ponty 1962:146).

INTERSTICE VI—BEING AND EMBODIMENT, AT THE TABLE . . .

“Sometimes you get sort of teary,” she says, about finding things and people on her land. “In the abstract you get upset, but when you meet them . . . ,” and her words trail off, leaving me to wonder about how to manage or relay a possible shift in perspective. Maybe when we tell, and when we listen, we bear witness to newly emergent conditions of life, as fraught as they ever were, just different now. In the abstract, discarded items are ubiquitous throughout much of the borderlands landscape, a fact that becomes readily apparent when one spends only a few days far from here. But “when you meet them,” our collective orientation to conditions changes dramatically. We know what we mean, and we all have our particular points of resonance. In this example, the finder was quick to couple the statement to an object that she references regularly in our conversations, perhaps in an attempt to humanize for herself a landscape and a set of political conditions that always challenge attempts at making sense. In nearly every conversation, she insists on telling me repeatedly of the many times she has found items related to small children, in particular children’s shoes. She is a mother, we sit in her kitchen, and this seems to matter. That child’s shoe matters. As she tells yet another story of such a finding while we comfortably drink coffee at her kitchen table, she slowly holds her hand up, measuring a gap of about four inches between thumb and index finger. In creating this metaphoric but somehow physical bridge, the now-absent shoe erupts right into the kitchen where we speak. She effectively closes the gap between those who caused that shoe to erupt into her life—politicians, voters, drug users, migrants, many others—those who left it more immediately in her path, and herself. For her, the world has changed; she seems to welcome it, but remains unsure of exactly how to orient herself to it effectively, how to make sense. At the same time, she has in fact created a space for the leavers of the object to inhabit her own place both in and out of the house, and in an unusual way. Neither is a place that either participant can inhabit easily, or otherwise. What they, and we, can do, through attention to objects, memories, gestures, and stories, is create and hold a space to “meet,” and to continue meeting as new social and physical territories emerge around and through us.
. . . AND FROM ANOTHER TRUCK
ON ANOTHER DIRT ROAD

An elderly man whose politics do not seem to align closely with providing aid to migrants, or to opening the border, stops during a workday on his ranch and casually exits his truck. In front of us in the grass is a heavy blanket, another object usually defined as trash in this environment. But when he picks up this newfound object, and carefully folds and hangs it on a branch beside a trail, something else happens. Something has changed on the landscape, and perhaps in him. Perhaps that ethnography is for another day, or even better, for a future historian to wonder about because those days will have passed for the region and its inhabitants. But not yet. As he reenters the vehicle on this cold winter day, he quietly informs the rest of us, “Someone’s gonna need that tonight.” Those who witness this act of grace silently from inside the truck, including a young woman who faced three desperate travelers in her own harrowing first-time encounter during her natural resources fieldwork, know why he does this. But it would be somehow improper to say so. Not here, not now. These witnesses too have inhabited the region for a time, have moved their own bodies

Figure 9.4 Shrine in the desert (photograph by the author).
through it in concert with others, some unseen and unmet, and so developed a local, practical sophistication around its varied and shifting topographies. They know what it means to live within and to participate in the construction of this place at the same time, and they have nothing to add to the man’s gesture and comment; he has already said and done all that is necessary, and possible, in a brief moment of finding, folding, and re-placement.

**ADJACENT POSSIBLES AND UNCONCLUSIONS**

The object-event intersections described here can be usefully considered as metaphors, not strictly as figures of speech, but as figures of practice that forge bonds between residents and travelers who may never enjoy physical proximity, and between people and places that are changing quite literally beneath their feet. As ethnographer Stephania Pandolfo describes them, “Metaphors express in other words and other images something that does not yet have a language of its own” (1997:281–282). The term indexes and works within the space between the objects’ material presence and the psychological and physical effects they have on the finders of objects. As we have witnessed, these include the unusual ways that bodies and other objects align, realign, or do not, and thereby contribute to a contemporary borderlands assemblage of interests, values, and bodily practices. They evidence impromptu practices of care and in-corporation that are both intra- and interpersonal, practices that had never been part of the plan of inhabitance for most residents.

These are tensions that remain unresolved, but can be managed and negotiated in the practices of inhabiting place, which in many instances become practices of care for one’s own body and for those of others in tandem. Thinking through metaphor and borderlands object-events accomplishes much more than enabling a mental passage from one concept to another. Instead, the approach suggested here, like the woman’s hand and the not-so-empty space between her index finger and thumb, between her body and the bodies of others inhabiting and creating the border region in new and creative ways, produces a set of adjacent possibilities through which we can create, hold, and inhabit a new middle ground that did not exist prior to the interaction. Considered in these ways, there are countless opportunities to think and rethink the limits of experience even as those limits emerge and shift around and through the
bodies of residents, travelers, and others. Here things run into, but also through, one another—babies’ shoes, firearms, mesquite trees carefully hung with blankets and jackets, empty water bottles, full water bottles, discarded backpacks, bones, and crosses without end—and encourage residents and researchers first to ponder them, but then to act on them and head off in both new and very old directions of travel.

The effects can be simple and profound at once. Those resonant white shoes and similar objects and events had always deserved further attention, including from more people than I could have imagined at the time. Remarkably but perhaps not surprisingly anymore, my 12-year-old nephew unwittingly responded with his own version of a “practice of care” from hundreds of miles away, on hearing his mother relate the story of the white shoes. Later that day and without prompting, he spontaneously drew a picture of the shoes and a road, again without a known person associated with them, but with an expanse of quiet and empty space surrounding them on the page.

If we allow them to, such objects, events, and the stories we tell of their leavings and findings can expose and coordinate in new ways the lived effects of a particular geopolitical assemblage that continuously erupt into and through the bodies of border region inhabitants of all kinds. Just north of the border, these practices extend backward in time and southward across space to points of origin and reasons for travel that researchers and activists today struggle to interpret and relate to the public. Crucial to bridging in accurate ways lived experiences under duress and uncertainty is that we create and maintain conceptual spaces that allow such things as a baby’s shoe, or a desperate desert moment—removing shoes, arranging them, and then moving away from a means of self-protection—to be recognized for what they truly represent. In this way what had been, at first, little more than an amalgamation of rubber and white cloth now stands at, and defends, a new threshold of comprehension and possibly compassion, by marking what was likely one person’s too short, too common, and now too acceptable life lived briefly in the U.S.-México borderlands.

REFERENCES


