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Material Culture and Archaeology of Citizenship on the United States/Mexico Border

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# MATERIAL CULTURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF CITIZENSHIP ON THE UNITED STATES/MEXICO BORDER.

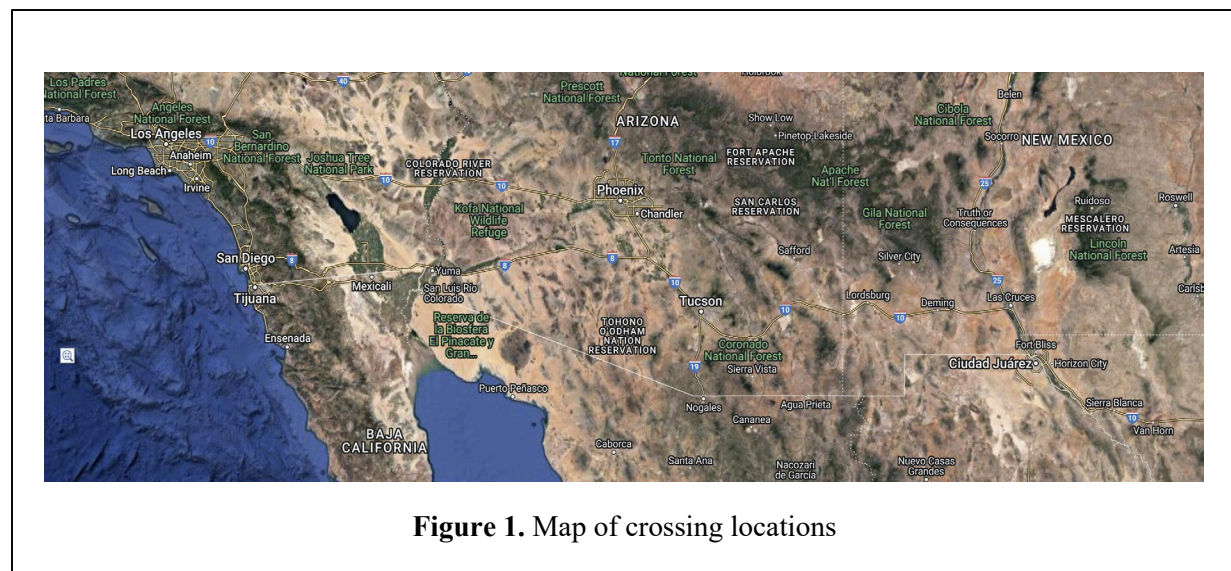
## *Stahl Research Report*

2022, Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley  
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5wd355h9>

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Issues regarding Undocumented Border Crossers continue to remain an area of engagement and research among anthropologists, specifically in the border states of Arizona, Texas, and California (De León 2015; PCOME 2018). The mass migrations that continues to be experienced across these border states are related to several “push-pull” factors (i.e. what ‘pushes’ a person to immigrate, and why specifically “pulled” to the United States). These factors have not necessarily been addressed or deeply investigated at an ethnographic level. Instead, many researchers such as De León (2015) have investigated this phenomena through a archaeological lens in looking at material culture. Other researchers, such as various forensic anthropologists have looked at it through a medico-legal lens (Anderson and Spradley 2016; Beatrice et al. 2021).

An area of more limited study are the structures of violence, both direct and indirect, that lead many of these individuals on the treacherous journey to cross the border, and their long-term effects on health (Farmer 2003; Galtung 1990 & 1969; Klaus 2012). In order to address this gap in research I began my own ethnographic study to deduce the various reasons behind the need to cross the United States/Mexico border, keeping in mind how dangerous this crossing is. What the skeletal and material data are able to show us is that structural violence lies at the root of this issue (Klaus 2012). The now global humanitarian crisis that has resulted in these mass migrations can all stem from this single issue (Reineke and Halstead 2017). Skeletal data was obtained in 2019 from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner’s Office (PCOME) with dates ranging from 2017-2019. Data on materiality and demographics on who is crossing



the border, specifically in Arizona, was also obtained by the PCOME and the Colibrí Center for Human Rights (2019) for the previously noted date ranges (See **Figure 1**). With this framework as the basis of my ethnographic work I set to identify and interview individuals who had been successful in their crossing of the United States/Mexico border, since most of the information we do have are of the deceased. I wanted to develop here a perspective in which many of the individuals who were able to successfully cross can explain these data through their own perspective while also holding to the validity of previously noted evidence.

These individuals have agency, they are not just a number, or a skeletal lesion, or a person carrying a backpack (Glencross 2011). They are individuals who are dynamic, fluid, and have a whole story of their own that they are able to tell. In order to engage in this work, I submitted this research for approval to the UC Berkeley Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) and the Office for Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS). Given the sensitivity and risk that may be encountered by potential interviewees during the ethnographic portion of this study, a full board review was required. Revisions were necessary to ensure the safety and comfort of interviewees. As of February 18, 2022, the research has been approved and deemed ethical. In order to further protect the interviewees, I was not able to obtain any type of identifiable information from these individuals. Meaning, I could not take down names, take photos, or even have them sign a consent form. Interviewees needed to verbally consent to the interviews and were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time if they ever felt uncomfortable or if they might be in danger. Many of the individuals interviewed still did not have legal documentation to be in the United States, so to make sure they did not fall into any unnecessary risk the previously noted protocol was applied to this ethnographic research. Part of the research plan that was also noted and reviewed by CPHS and OPHS was that these individuals needed to have migrated within the last 20 years. This time frame was applied in order to correspond with the other data provided by the PCOME and Colibrí for comparison purposes.

Part of the approval process for my ethnographic work was to also submit the questions that I would be asking individuals during our one-hour interview. These questions included asking where they were originally from, why they decided to leave their home, daily life in their home country, access to health care, crossing the border, and life in the United States after crossing. Interviewees were also given time and space to speak about anything they felt was important in their journey that was not addressed in the interview questions.

A total of 30 individuals were interviewed in 2022, of these interviewees 28 individuals were male and two were female. Given that the majority of interviewees were male is not surprising given that other data provided by the PCOME and Colibrí also noted a higher male population. Individuals were recruited using a snow ball method, meaning that people I interviewed would tell friends or family members and spread the word. Given that many individuals did not have legal documentation to be in the United States, they were weary of interviews on the topic of their migration, so it was imperative that trust be established first. Once they knew who I was and family or friends explained that I was “safe” to speak with individuals would participate. However, before the interview occurred I explained what the interview would be about, compensation, and time that I would need to conduct the interview. I also made sure to let them know ahead of time that if they wanted to stop at any point they could and they would still receive compensation. All interviewees completed the interview process, however, there were several who became very short with their answers when they felt uncomfortable with a question. This was acknowledged and I moved on quickly. The purpose was not to make them feel uncomfortable but rather to understand in their own words their experiences (see Figure 2).

*“No pues, estaba difícil no, pues no más yo y mi familia trabajamos en el ranchito ni era de nosotros, no más para los frijoles. Así pues, quien quiere vivir así, yo quería juntar un dinerito para comprar una casita y terrenito.”*

-Individual 1

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*“Nos decían no corran, no corran, pero uno por miedo pues le corre y allí queda uno. ¿Usted cree que a mí se me va a olvidar eso? No y los carros como si nada. ¿Si es difícil como le digo, pero que hace uno, se regresa? No se puede rajar uno porque tiene que comer y la familia depende de uno”.*

-Individual 9

**Figure 2.** Quotes obtained from individuals interviewed.

Throughout the interview process several trends were noted. The first was in regards to their trekking corridors and where they were originally from. All 30 individuals were from various parts of Mexico that included Chiapas, Tijuana, Sinaloa, and Guadalajara. These individuals primarily crossed the Arizona or California border. Many also noted that they did not cross just once, but rather crossed several times. Sometimes they would cross again right after they were caught by border patrol, or they would cross several times over the years during the summer so that they could work as farm laborers. All 30 interviewees also stated that one of the primary reasons for coming to the United States was for economic reasons. In their home town they were either unable to get work or if they did have work it simply did not pay enough to live. Not only were they economically struggling but they were unable to have secure housing, access to healthcare, food, and clean water. A combination of these factors is what led them to make the decision to leave, they all truly felt there was no other option if they and their family members were to survive. They knew there was zero opportunity for upward mobility if they stayed. They also knew there was a high probability they would not be successful in their crossing and maybe even die. However, them staying where they were also meant they would die, so the better option was to leave and at least try.

Another interesting point that these interviews shed light on was on the material culture associated with crossing (i.e. the things they carried). When discussing their crossing I had to prompt every single individual to discuss what it is they took with them during their crossing. Many times individuals were a bit confused on why I would ask this or why this was important, so I explained to them the work conducted by Jason De León (2015). In De León’s work he explains how the things left behind by people crossing the border can shed light on who they were as individuals, what they deemed as important, and the process of crossing the border through perilous circumstances. It would make sense that this line of evidence be used for those who are deceased, but those who are living, this materiality is

not always seen as an extension of who they are or what they experienced. This is not to say one method of gathering information is more valid than the other, but rather it emphasizes the importance of using them in unison to obtain a more holistic picture of what is occurring.

While it may be difficult to discern at first glance many of these individuals experienced very real stressors that not only impacted them at a social and emotional level but through time can and will also impact their bodies and in turn their skeleton. It is this skeletal data that has been so often the focus of various studies. However, I would argue that in speaking with the individuals that “made it”, I and my colleagues can get a better sense of what it really means to encounter these stressors and what propagated them to occur in the first place (i.e. structural violence). How their stories connect to the skeletal and material data will be further extrapolated on in future work. For this research it was important to allow individuals to speak on their own behalf rather than allowing researchers to make their own interpretations of what occurred in their lives.

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