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Material Culture as a Means of Survival in the United States- Mexico Border Region

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by Amanda Forment

The United States-Mexico border separates two countries and cultures which are inextricably linked together through social, political, and economic ties. Undocumented migrants have to cross the Sonoran Desert in Arizona to reach countless destinations across the United States. Crossing the desert is a traumatic experience. Migrants endure bodily pain, extreme climatic conditions, intense physical stress, psychological terror, dehydration, malnutrition, and the threat of abuse at the hands of others. More than five million people have been detained by the US Border Patrol in Arizona since 2000.¹ Despite the risks, this border crossing has become an established process, familiar to a significant portion of working-class Latin Americans. Border crossing is a “well-defined social process whereby migrants draw upon various sources of human and social capital to overcome barriers erected by the US authorities.”² Apart from the knowledge migrants acquire, they also need objects in order to survive. These objects can serve as markers of their experiences and give testimony to their silence, since desert border crossings are illegal and those doing so occupy a marginal social

position in American society. Studying the material remains of migration can “help demystify, historicize, and humanize this process.”³

Two main actors are at play in the liminal space that constitutes the border, the migrants, and the Border Patrol agents. The migrants who endeavor to cross the vast Sonoran Desert or try to pass through ports of entry “actively construct, contest, and obfuscate a multiplicity of identities through various forms of material culture.”⁴ Border Patrol agents, informally called *la migra*, are tasked with keeping these migrants out of the United States. To do so, they rely on various types of material culture that reinforce the distinction between a citizen and a non-citizen. Ranging from clothing, hygiene products, identification paperwork, prayer cards and bibles, designed objects both aid border crossing and facilitate Border Patrol’s enforcement and abuse of migrating peoples. Throughout this article, these objects will be analyzed to understand and expose their importance.



The United States-Mexico Border

The border between the United States and Mexico divides two contiguous countries, covering over 2,000 miles from Texas to California. It includes six states in Mexico and four in the United States and has undergone a series of changes. The border has shifted and changed through time, from the Mexican-American War in 1848 to the 1963 resolution of the Chamizal Dispute on the border between El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Alongside the physical border changes, there have been changes to human mobility policies. In the decades following the Mexican-American War, there were no federal limits on immigration as citizens from both countries could move freely across the border. The first of many migrations from Mexico started with the construction of the railroads across the American Southwest. Soon after this, migrants became the leading agricultural workers in the Southwest and were employed as factory workers in the Midwest. By 1900, approximately 100,000 Mexicans were living in the United States.⁵ Limitations on the movement of Mexican citizens were not strictly enforced by the United States until the Mexican Revolution, which

lasted from 1910 to 1920, causing a large number of war refugees and political exiles to flee to the United States. Mexicans also left rural areas in search of stability and jobs. As a consequence, Mexican migration to the United States rose exponentially. However, after the Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916 and the explosive Zimmerman Telegram (1917) recommending a military alliance between Mexico and Germany during the First World War, the United States intensified its border security.

The Immigration Act of 1924 essentially eliminated immigration from Asia and greatly reduced the number of arrivals from Eastern and Southern Europe.⁶ It created a quota-based system that favored Western Europeans. Mexico was not included in the quota system, in part, because of the United States' dependence on Mexican labor. This was the same year the United States Border Patrol was created. Until the creation of the US Border Patrol, only about 60 mounted agents guarded the extensive border. In her book *Migra!: A History of the US Border Patrol*, Kelly Lytle Hernández examines the complex history of the federal agency.⁷ Agents were tasked to impose US immigration restrictions systematically by preventing unauthorized border crossings and patrolling borderland regions in order to detect and arrest people defined as unauthorized immigrants. However, these activities soon turned to disproportionately apprehending and deporting undocumented Mexican citizens. Paradoxically, it is estimated that over 50 percent of US Border Patrol Agents are of Latinx descent.⁸ The expansion of US Border Patrol has presented Latinx people and others in the region with a new professional career path that offers a good salary, decent benefits, and opportunities for advancement, despite the fraught relationship between US Border Patrol and Latinx people.

In 1993, two key policy changes were implemented in relation to illegal immigration from Mexico. The border was increasingly seen as a "conduit for a variety of defined threats to the United States, including drugs, illegal workers, and social instability,"⁹ and as a result, the Clinton administration increased the budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), especially the funds

used for border enforcement. Secondly, the government decided to “concentrate the new resources it was providing for border control along with a small number of relatively short segments of the border—the corridor that traditionally had been most heavily used by would-be illegal entrants.”¹⁰ This policy sealed borders in urban areas in California and Texas. Wayne Cornelius studies how these changes led to unintended consequences such as the sharp increase in deaths among undocumented migrants at the border. The border enforcement strategy has notably elevated the cost and physical risks of illegal entry into the United States. INS considered the increase in risks to be a way of discouraging migration—ideally, “the prospective unauthorized US-bound migrant would be deterred from leaving his home community in the first place.”¹¹

Instead, there has been an upsurge in the number of migrants who die trying to enter the country because of the “funneling effect.”¹² Migrants were forced to develop new routes in more dangerous areas like the Southwest Desert, which was assumed to be a deterrent to migration, yet this has proven to be untrue. Cornelius points out that most migrant deaths along the Mexico-California border between 1995 and 2000 resulted from “environmental causes: hypothermia (freezing to death in the mountains), dehydration, or heat stroke (after days of trudging through the desert).”¹³ The number of deaths has doubled since 1995 according to the US Government Accountability Office,¹⁴ and according to Humane Borders, 2020 was the deadliest year for migrants crossing the desert into Arizona, with a total of 227 deaths.¹⁵ This adds the death toll of over 7,000 migrant lives lost since 1998 in border crossings.

Yet, the increasing risks have not deterred migrants—most attempt to cross the border multiple times, even after the creation of the Homeland Security Department and the reinforcement of security policies post-9/11.¹⁶ The policy changes were not accompanied by new legalization to allocate more work permits for industries that are heavily dependent on immigrant labor, such as the agriculture and construction industries. The United States-Mexico border has progressively turned into a militarized zone, where “Border Patrol practice a strategy modeled on the Pentagon’s Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine, a policy

first designed to suppress domestic insurgencies in the “Third World.”¹⁷ Under the Trump administration, anti-immigrant rhetoric and sentiment were not only actively promoted by the White House but were also translated into draconian immigration policies. It is still unclear if comprehensive immigration reform will take place under President Biden’s administration.

The Material Culture of Migration

It is precisely the ambiguity of the remains [left in the border region] that allows us to hint at some of the multiple possibilities surrounding them. Each gives a fleeting glimpse of momentary experiences in the lives of the forced laborers without constraining these to single, presumably definitive situations. Perhaps it is part of the burden of history that some things must remain unknown and unsearchable.¹⁸

The concept of material culture can be found as early as 1875 when anthropologist A. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers used it to refer to “the outward signs and symbols of particular ideas in the mind.”¹⁹ Since then, the term has become ubiquitous, and its definition has shifted and evolved to afford other meanings. For the art historian Jules Prown, “objects made or modified by humans reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the large society to which they belonged.”²⁰ Thomas J. Schlereth’s definition is more inclusive, considering material culture to be “that segment of humankind’s biosocial environment that has been purposely shaped by people according to culturally dictated plans.”²¹ Along these lines, Paul Bolin and Doug Blandy promote the idea of material culture as a “descriptor of any and all human-constructed or human-mediated objects, forms, or expressions, manifested consciously or unconsciously through culturally acquired behaviors.”²² This study proposes an understanding of material culture from the viewpoint of a

subaltern group, which is quite distinct from how Prown and Schlereth have conceptualized the idea.

Dipesh Chakrabarty states that “the declared aim of subaltern studies was to produce historical analysis in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history rather than the objects of it.”²³ Subaltern studies branch off from postcolonial theory, as it aims to rewrite and uncover the histories of groups that have been marginalized, unrepresented, or directly undocumented. The research projects of these studies are characterized by “using unconventional or neglected sources in popular memory, oral discourse, previously unexamined colonial administrative documents.”²⁴

Undocumented migrants attempting to cross the Sonoran Desert into Arizona carry with them a distinctive set of things which have garnered attention in the border zones for their revealed intimacy. Local and national news often pick up stories of these objects, where “the objects figure in the mobilizations of a wide range of social groups, and they are a feature in the world of numerous artists.”²⁵ These everyday objects are oftentimes key for survival. With the shift in border crossings from urban cities to harsh terrain due to the change in the US Immigration and Naturalization Service policy, crossing the border between Mexico and the United States has become a life-threatening experience that requires physical stamina. For over a decade, Arizona has been the busiest crossing point along the southern border.²⁶ Those traveling through this region endure extremely long distances on foot, hostile climate conditions, bandits, and the possibility of *coyotes* (smugglers hired to lead migrants across the border) abandoning them in the middle of the desert. Additionally, migrants have to avoid being detected by the latest surveillance technology.

The Mexican town of Altar, just south of the Arizona desert, has become a center to prepare the hundreds of thousands of migrants for the dangerous journey. Altar, previously a small, agricultural town, has been completely transformed due to migration. *Coyotes*, merchants, and local manufacturers make a profit on people who require their services and goods such as guide services, temporary housing, food, and equipment. Smuggling has become a major business, and

many outdoor vendors and convenience stores specialize in goods used by migrants. Jason De León refers to this network as the Border Crossing Industry, which is “constantly evolving as migrants, smugglers, and vendors attempt to adjust to changes in enforcement practices and surveillance technology.”²⁷

Migrants obtain a somewhat-consistent set of practical and essential items for the crossing. They are generally not in a position to take their most cherished possessions, as “utilitarian objects necessary for survival often take precedence over other goods when decisions regarding transport capabilities are made.”²⁸ Therefore, everyday objects acquire new layers of meaning and importance. These artifacts include darkly colored or camouflaged garments, cheap sneakers

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or hiking boots, backpacks, salty foods, water, and first aid items such as gauze and pain relievers. Carrying mirrors is a common practice because they can be used to signal Border Patrol in case a rescue is necessary. The artifacts are transported in small dark-colored backpacks that can weigh over 50 pounds. The clothes are dark or camouflaged because it is believed that this quality helps migrants become invisible in the darkness of the desert. However, most of the garments are made from thick cotton, synthetic fibers, or denim, which makes them heavy and heat absorbent. Dark clothing renders infrared thermal imaging technology used by Border Patrol practically useless, though it “raises the body’s core temperature and signals to law enforcement that one is a border crosser,”²⁹ and it increases the difficulty of maintaining a survivable body temperature.

Apart from these essential objects, people take with them religious items,

photographs, letters, and personal documents. Beyond the objects they bring to aid their crossing, migrants must acquire techniques for surviving the desert, such as “how to effectively and clandestinely move across the landscape, how to conserve water, and how to handle the physical strain.”³⁰ This knowledge is proportional to the probability of a successful crossing and includes knowing just when to discard these items when they no longer serve a purpose or are forced to lighten their load. Sites where objects are typically dropped off are called migrant stations or lay-up sites. These places are also where people rest, eat, and change clothes before moving forward. Examining these places is central to trying to understand the border-crossing experience. For Juanita Sundberg, the empty water bottles and food containers alongside the backpacks and other intimate objects have become “common features of cultural landscapes in these states.”³¹ The things left behind by the undocumented migrants are often labeled as ‘trash’ and ‘garbage’ by the local population, politicians, and some environmental groups. Classifying these objects as trash “evokes a set of taken-for-granted social norms delineating appropriate and inappropriate modes of bodily comportment.”³² Migrants are perceived as having behaved inappropriately because they dispose of their intimate belongings that allow for their survival in the wrong place: The United States. The assumption is, by contrast, that ‘Americans’ are considered to know how and where to dispose of their objects. In this sense, notions of identity and national boundaries as well as ‘citizen’ versus ‘undocumented migrants’ are constructed through a “reference to a set of intimate norms, which in turn are naturalized as commonsensical and therefore beyond ideology or politics.”³³ The harm and difficulties migrants suffer are often made invisible by this paradigm, however these objects serve as testimony to this form of violence and their suffering.

De León emphasizes the importance of documenting the objects of migrants as the director of the Undocumented Migration Project.³⁴ The project aims to use anthropological and archaeological methods to record the “clandestine process of migration across the Sonoran Desert and to situate this process in a historical perspective.”³⁵ De León’s team collects discarded migrant objects, documenting

where and when they were found. They also carefully photograph all the evidence they find, making visible the stories of migrants through their objects. However, as De León shows, it is important not only to examine the objects but also their ‘use-wear,’ since it represents a valuable “analytical framework for documenting how people experienced the process. This is especially true on occasions where migration was forced, violent, or traumatic.”³⁶ The author defines ‘use-wear’ as the alterations made to the “physical structure of an artifact as well as objects that have been emptied of their content and in essence ‘used up.’”³⁷

The research on the intimate relationship that exists between the body and objects has been studied by Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller,³⁸ Joanne Entwistle,³⁹ and Lucy Norris,⁴⁰ among others. Their works can help inform and testify to the importance of ‘use-wear’ during cultural processes and experiences. In the case of the United States-Mexico border crossings, this process is reflected intimately on the bodies of the migrants and on their objects. After several days in the desert, their clothes become stained from dirt, urine, and blood. According to De León, the “traces of physical stress reflect the realities of what it means to move through a space where juridical order has been suspended.”⁴¹ Clothes, shoes, and backpacks often break in the middle of the journey requiring impromptu mending and repairs. Hiking boots are a luxurious commodity, unattainable to most. Additionally, many migrants believe that sneakers are actually more appropriate for the desert, or they chose to wear them because they believe it will help them blend in once they cross the border into the United States. They assume that the best way to “avoid detection is to ‘not look poor’, a strategy that can backfire.”⁴² The sneakers are cheaply made, usually imitations of higher-priced American models. Sometimes those who cannot afford them end up wearing sandals, or any other type of shoes they own. Migrants generally suffer greatly from friction blisters on their feet caused by the combination of long-distance walking, unsuitable footwear, and the scorching heat. Many of the shoes found in the desert reveal these injuries. They are riddled with holes because of the persistent rubbing of the feet against the sole, and they are often soaked in sweat or blood. The psychological power of these discarded artifacts cannot be

understated. Shoes are an object “whose physical properties are strongly tied to those who once wore them.”⁴³ In museums, shoes are often used as substitutes for those who cannot be physically present.

Water bottles are by far the most pervasive artifact found at the migrant stations—it is what keeps people alive through the crossing. Most of the water bought by the migrants is bottled locally from one of the many plants in Northern Mexico. In Altar alone, which has a population of approximately 9,000 people, there are about six water bottling plants. All of these factories produce the plastic one-gallon rounded jug that is favored by migrants because its durable and easy to carry shape. Before 2009, all of the one-gallon Mexican bottles were produced in clear or white plastic. For years, migrants had to paint the bottles black or create dark covers for the objects so as to camouflage it. After 2009, companies began producing one-gallon bottles made out of black plastic, “a sign that technological changes at the factory level were the direct result of migrant preferences.”⁴⁴ However, the color of water bottles does nothing to protect against ground sensors, infrared cameras, and sound technology that Border Patrol relies on. The persistence of using these darkened bottles suggests both the lack of understanding about surveillance technology as well as the attempts to exploit migrant folk logic.

At face value, the discarded empty bottles show that the person holding it drank all


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the liquid and had no further need for it. Yet De León, Gokee, and Forringer-Beal have offered multiple layers of meaning to the containers. The bottles are generally small, suggesting that the migrants were underprepared for the long distances of walking the crossings require, especially in the summer. Secondly, discovering water bottles in areas far from any known water sources or roads suggests that their owners could not save their water supply and ran out in a very unfortunate place. A common

technique among migrants to avoid the effects of the sun is to take small sips “to both prevent cramping and conserve a limited supply.”⁴⁵ Migrants tend to bring less water than needed for reasons such as the difficulty of carrying heavy loads, underestimating the supply they will need, and their lack of resources to purchase larger amounts. Many migrants are unacquainted with desert environments and have scarce knowledge of how much water is actually needed to avoid hyperthermia or dehydration. Furthermore, drinking hot water raises a person’s core temperature and makes the body expend additional energy to cool the hot liquid. Their water generally heats up even faster because of the heat absorption in the black water bottles.

As outlined above, there exists a contradiction in the dependence on particular types of water bottles, shoes, and clothing that might end up doing more harm than good. The ubiquity and combination of these objects creates a type of uniform which “betray[s] people by broadcasting their vulnerability to those seeking to either apprehend or assault them.”⁴⁶ In other words, what saves the migrants—their material culture—can also lead to their profiling and detainment. This notion will be further explored with the case of Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070, in which Border Patrol also uses phenotype to identify suspected undocumented migrants.

Arizona Senate Bill 1070 and Its Impact on Material Culture

In 2010, Arizona Senate Bill (SB) 1070 was sanctioned into law, providing state law enforcement with the ability to check any person’s immigration status at any time.⁴⁷ This law is arguably one of the strictest anti-immigrant policies passed in recent years. Arizona was the first state to ratify a regulation that orders law enforcement to inquire about the immigration status of individuals suspected of being undocumented immigrants and allows them to arrest people who fail to show the proper documentation. Additionally, it also criminalizes unauthorized individuals who apply for, or currently have, a job in Arizona. The main purpose of the bill is to “discourage illegal immigrants from living in Arizona by increasing concerns about being arrested, fined, detained, and deported.”⁴⁸ Given the divisive and controversial nature of the law, it received

widespread media attention. The way these arguments are framed plays an important role in how people react to these issues. This piece of legislation was a clearly contentious one; some believe it protected the state from the ‘threat’ of the undocumented immigrants, in an economic and cultural sense. Others saw a civil rights infraction because it grants local law enforcement the legal backdrop for the racial profiling of Latinos along the border, encouraging racism toward ethnic minorities and legal immigrants. It is also important to acknowledge that law enforcement officials have used race as a guiding principle for stopping and questioning people long before this bill was passed. Latinx citizens and residents have frequently had their legal rights suspended because of the unusual amount of inspection and harassment they face when encountering Border Patrol agents. The act of constantly having to prove their immigration status to law enforcement is a daily dehumanizing experience for many Latinx individuals living in Arizona.

Defenders of SB 1070 have declared that it is actually a ‘colorblind’ bill, and not rooted in racial profiling. However, Representative Brian Bilbray, while trying to defend the bill and its ‘color blindness,’ stated that law enforcement was going to focus on other aspects of the person in question, such as their clothes and objects: the material culture of migration. He declared, “they will look at the kind of dress you wear, there is different type of attire...right down to the shoes, right down to the clothes, but mostly by behavior.”⁴⁹ Bilbray was criticized for the crude way in which he replaced shoes and clothes for race. The congressman also conflated the people apprehended at the moment of crossing illegally with the approximately 12 million undocumented people who currently live in the United States. His comment also indicates that skin color and last names are not the only things taken into consideration when enforcing immigration laws, but also clothing, objects, and migrants embodied practices. For De León, this emphasizes the importance between “identity, citizenship and material culture that underlie border crossers’ interactions with federal law enforcement and the state more generally.”⁵⁰ Migrants use certain objects in order to survive the crossing of the desert and avoid law enforcement, while also using objects to

craft identities and challenge their delicate status in relation to the US Border Patrol Agents. These agents are able to easily differentiate between hikers, drug traffickers, and migrants based on clothing, backpacks, or the types of water bottles they carry. As such, the material culture of migration on the United States-Mexico border helps to mediate the relation between migrants, citizens, and the state.

Conclusion

The objects migrants abandon throughout their journey to the United States inform us of the choices and agency of the migrants themselves and help to illuminate an experience that is mostly abstract and elusive to those who have not experienced it. They leave behind a rich material trail of that allows them to survive the perilous migration. These multivalent artifacts operate on many levels; they record the trauma and social memory of migrants and highlight the capacity of survival for those who experience border crossings in one of the most contested and challenged borders in the region. Debates on border crossings have mainly focused on tragic deaths, misery, separations, and crime rather than the incredible resilience of migrants. By preserving and analyzing their belongings, we can begin to shift the focus from stories of tragedy to those of resilience and survival. Objects convey the experiences of individuals as well as a collective of people. Those who label the objects left behind by migrants as 'trash' fail to consider the historical, political, and economic forces that have molded and shaped border crossings into a unique social, economic, and political process in constant flux. On the contrary, this 'trash' should be considered our generation's 'treasure,' and it is our responsibility to pay close attention to these material artifacts in order to comprehend and combat the dominant false narratives on the immigrant experience. ■

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