

CHAPTER 9

DEAD BODIES
*The Deadly Display of
Mexican Border Politics*

Rocío Magaña

The United States–Mexico border has been characterized historically as a site of national vulnerability and physical danger. Not surprisingly, then, the declarations of U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman Lloyd Easterling in the early summer of 2010 that “the border is safer now than it’s ever been” astounded northern and southern residents and observers of the boundary alike. The pronouncement intended to calm bi-national anxieties produced by the ratification and federal lawsuit against the controversial Arizona law SB1070, which criminalized the unauthorized presence of immigrants in the state and imposed immigration enforcement duties on local police. It is not often that safety, positively framed, is employed to characterize the region; the recurrent choices have been variants of “brokenness,” “insecurity,” and “threat.” With well over 2,000 migrant deaths in southern Arizona alone in the preceding decade, and nearly 25,000 killings throughout Mexico in the last four of those years (resulting from a relentless battle over drug-trafficking corridors), Mr Easterling’s enthusiastic remarks raised some questions and more than a few eyebrows. Amidst so much death and bloodshed, how could the U.S.–Mexico border be safer?

The measurements that provide the bases for statements like Mr Easterling’s are interesting for the types of politics and social management they reveal. In this case, the assessment rested on the relation between the strengthening of the American policing apparatus and a drop in the number of reports of aggression directed at U.S. Border Patrol agents. From this perspective, the improved safety pertained only to the physical well-being of American policing forces, which is no small thing. After all, violence,

death and neglect – as captured by the specter of the dead in general and the fallen American officer in particular – have shaped public attitudes and state interventions throughout the boundary's history. Nevertheless, the selective social geography the pronouncement lays out elucidates how, in the politics of protection at work on this border, not all vulnerabilities or deaths count equally. The injured and the dead remain at the center of state activity on the border. The tense triangulation among transgressed territoriality, dead bodies, and state politics is the conundrum that drives this discussion. The objective of these pages is to show how, at the juridical and territorial margins of the state, the dead body paradoxically becomes a productive site for the performance of authority. Ethnographically, I focus on state intervention on the bodies of Mexican subjects who die in relation to this border's illicit flows – namely drug-trafficking and unauthorized migration. I show how the politics of death is rendered visible amidst the state's inability to effectively control both the intensifying violence and suffering intimately tied to unauthorized migration and drug-trafficking, and its ambivalent relation of simultaneous complicity with, dependency on, and condemnation of, these deaths. In this politics, the corpses that could otherwise index state failures to protect, police, and provide for its citizens are strategically mobilized to sustain state authority and promote social cohesion.

In this examination, I turn my attention almost exclusively to Mexican state actors working on both sides of the boundary. This is not meant to exonerate their American counterparts, who also have a complex set of practices surrounding the operationalization of border-related injuries and death to sustain enforcement policies. Rather, the ethnographic focus on Mexican interventions enables an analysis of the politics of intervention and display of border-related deaths that does not stop on either side of the boundary. This allows, instead, a regional look, in which the state's maneuvering of its jurisdictional and territorial margins is at the center, not the end, of its strategies. Another reason to focus on the Mexican state is that, too frequently, Mexico is seen as a passive party to border tragedies which, as I show here, is clearly not the case.

This discussion draws from ethnographic work on migrant deaths on the Arizona–Sonora border region, undertaken intermittently between 2002 and 2009, as well as informal conversations and exchanges with border residents and observers of the other major illicit border industry, organized crime. I sought the data on migrant deaths, actively for my doctoral work; I literally could not avoid the data on *narco-crímenes*. While I do not mean to imply that migrant and narco-deaths are equivalent, my goal is to draw attention to what they reveal about the roles the border and the (dead) body play in national politics and statecraft. I offer an ethnographic account of the handling of migrant bodies in Arizona and a reading of *narco-asesinatos* (drug-cartel killings) in the adjacent state of Sonora to show how the Mexican state productively asserts its authority over people and territory at places and moments where its failure to protect life would otherwise signal the limits of its power and governmental apparatus.

This discussion moves through three stages. First, I provide a brief conceptual sketch locating what I see as a Mexican border politics of death within contemporary scholarly debates. Second, I offer a reading of the handling of a narco-death crime scene through a contextualization of the dislocated corpse in Mexican history, politics, and sociality. Then, I discuss the repatriation process of migrant remains found on the northern side of the boundary to show the intricate efforts of the Mexican

state to cast itself as protective if not to its subjects' lives, then at least to their bodies. Each of these stages contributes to the idea that, on the U.S.–Mexico border, the dead body is one of the sites on which social, political, and spatial battles are currently fought.

A MEXICAN POLITICS OF DEATH

The intense physicality and sheer volume of the casualties registered along the U.S.–Mexico border makes them too tragic or horrific to ignore altogether, be they migrants dying of thirst, fatigue and environmental exposure or out-of-luck *narcos* killed at the hands of rival cartel assassins. Yet, the focus here is not in explaining or documenting how these deaths come about, but rather on the post-mortem interventions on these bodies and their effects. Like most social practices surrounding the dead, interventions on bodies post mortem affect the living. Anthropologists have long suggested the centrality of the body as a platform for the social. In his influential analysis of bodily customs among the Kayapo of Brazil, Terence Turner shows how “the surface of the body [...] becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted” (1980: 112). Following that, I want to suggest that such a performative quality of the body and its display is retained and even magnified upon death, and that interventions on the dead body can be directed at shaping the drama of socialization. This is particularly the case with deaths that seem unnecessary, unnatural or excessive and corpses that appear out of place. In other words, the semantic potency of the body as a symbolic stage on which the desirable or acceptable can be conveyed is precisely what makes interventions on the publically dislocated and displayed dead body sociopolitically productive.

As a growing body of scholarship has suggested, structural inequalities make the promise of physical integrity and protection far from political guarantees impartially extended to, and equally enjoyed by, all subjects and populations (Farmer 2003). Anthropological analyses with a biopolitical bent have shown that much of contemporary politics centers on the negotiation of physical exposure and bodily damage (Petryna 2002), neglect (Biehl 2005), and the exceptionally permissible, direct or indirect, killing of subjects whose death would otherwise be unconscionable (Butler 2004; Fassin 2007). Similarly, on the U.S.–Mexico border, the politics of protection, security and safety go hand-in-hand with the operationalization of risk, danger and physical exertion. I have suggested elsewhere (Magaña 2008) that where and when state actively fails to protect life or structurally endangers it, the constitution of political authority often rests on the operationalization of injury and the post-facto management of death. Migrant and narco-deaths are central to the Mexican state because, by taking place at its margins, they reveal its limits. In this sense, this analysis ethnographically echoes the assertion by Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) that the state is “the site on which biopolitics and thanatopolitics are instituted together ... [and] that this relationship, which is at the heart of the modern state, is much more visible on the margins than at the center” (Das and Poole 2004: 25).

Before discussing the cases in detail, it is necessary to lay the contextual and conceptual framework for this discussion.

The management, representation, and the actual infliction of death have long been considered the cornerstone of state sovereignty. Two schools of thought that have shaped recent analyses on the subject are particularly relevant to this discussion. Michel Foucault's (2003) notion of biopower offers an analysis of sovereignty dually based on the "regulatory" power of states over populations and the "capillary" modes of disciplinary power that produce "docile bodies." Based on this form of biopolitics, which is aimed at disciplining bodies and improving populations, Foucault further suggests that sovereign power rest not just in taking life or letting live, but in "making live" and "letting die" (Foucault 2003: 241). On the other hand, Giorgio Agamben (1998) offers an analysis in which the basis for political sovereignty focuses on the power to end life, the capacity to kill with impunity.

Although there are hundreds of migrants who are "let" to die while crossing the border each year, and there is certainly much killing that goes unpunished in this region, the politics of death at the U.S.–Mexico border does not neatly match either biopolitical model.

Other scholars have contended with the political management of death in contexts for which biopolitical notions of power seem insufficient. Reflecting on the multiple South African afflictions, Achille Mbembe (2003) asserts "necropolitics and necropower ... account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 2003: 40). My take on the Mexican politics of death is less severe; after all, and despite the anxiety and chaos that characterize the borderlands, the premise of a possible better life has been historically a driving force. As much as death tends to be dislocated into the public domain, this is not a death-world (not yet, anyway). This is a place where political life takes place *with* and *through* death.

Other approaches positively considered the critique on Agamben's turning of biopolitics into thanatopolitics to explore the extent to which death could mobilize political life. Employing a ritual-oriented approach, Allen Feldman (1991) explores how Irish political prisoners used hunger strike deaths – the ultimate political sacrifice – to transform the space of their segregation and the meaning of their imprisonment through the mastery of their bodies. Stepping away from looking at death as an agentive resource, I would like to hang on to this idea that in death, the observed body bears the possibility to resignify social, political and spatial relations.

The significance of the dead body on the U.S.–Mexico border is in its political "afterlife," so to speak. The articulation of Mexican sovereignty in relation to the border-related death of subjects is less centered on the how or why of death, than on the roles the dead body, its location and condition, make available for the state. As things stand in the country, the one thing that remains clear is that the state is progressively outmanned and outgunned by the various cartels that operate across its territory, and it does not hold a sovereign monopoly on life, death or violence. Not even the claim of the state's legitimacy over the use of violence goes unchallenged amidst complex layers of corruption that taint the system, from the lowest-ranking officers in the most remote police jurisdictions to the office of the federal executive. The all-too-frequent stories of morgues, hospitals and police stations raided by gangs to steal the bodies of their fallen comrades suggest that the state does not even hold

effective control over its dead, the knowledge their bodies may generate, or of how they are to be disposed. And what of the country's role in the decade-long deadly saga of its migrants across treacherous lands? The neglect that triggers this migration in the first place is complexly tied to the dependence on the remittances such migration generates. Put simply, there is no sovereign entity in Mexico with the power to determine effectively and proactively who lives and who dies, who can be killed without consequence, who can be made to live or let die. And yet, the management of the dead at the border allows us to see that there is nevertheless a connection between life, death and sovereignty at work here.

The public display of bodies and body parts along border cities, the violently written threats that accompany them, the apparently casual circulation of their images, the stories of migrants forever lost in the desert, the elaborate documentaries outlining the repatriation of remains – these are all recursive signs of contemporary battles for border control. In the face of the insecurity and uncertainty produced by the destructive power of the drug cartels and the physically taxing character of contemporary unauthorized migration, perhaps it is not surprising that the resulting dead bodies would be appropriated by the Mexican state in an effort to recast its image of authority. In this border politics of death, the constitution of the Mexican body politic, the production of authority and citizen protection pivots on the effective management and recasting of politically charged dead bodies. This can be observed through the technocratic techniques by which these bodies are made legible, reclaimed from the public sphere, and reinstitutionalized as objects of the state's performance. The recasting of bodies as evidence in criminal investigations and legal cases is an example of this. Such appropriation enables the transformation of uncertainty brought about by border violence and neglect and turns the deaths they produce into a political resource. Although interventions on the dead body may present the state as reactive at best, its seemingly improvised responses to these dislocated corpses draw their potency from a historically rich and complicated relationship that ties claims to territorial sovereignty and the formation of the Mexican body politic to the violent display of the dead. It is, in part, this historical narrative that makes the control of the public dislocation and display of dead bodies on the border so ripe with political possibility.

In the next section, I discuss how efforts to manage these bodies, their representation and their significance are mobilized to resignify the social, political and spatial relations that are so important for the Mexican state, particularly at the boundary with its northern neighbor. The cases I discuss present an array of efforts by Mexican authorities to make dead bodies work to support the state's claim to authority and territorial control in a context in which both have historically been challenged by the public recurrence of violent and unnecessary death. Put a different way, the dead body on the U.S.–Mexico border is and has been a site where state authority over people and space has been contested and defined.

HEADS, HEADSHOTS, AND THE DEAD BODY ON DISPLAY, PAST AND PRESENT

Early in my fieldwork in Arizona, I met a border beat reporter who kept a collage of border-related photographs – “trophy shots” – as the wallpaper for his computer

screen. Among the images of saguaros and contraband, the headshot of a youthful man with a contagious smile seemed particularly out of place. “That’s Kris Eggle,” the reporter shared, noticing my interest. The 28-year-old all-American park ranger was killed in 2002, a short distance from the border, in Arizona’s Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Eggle died in a confrontation with elements of the then-rising, regional cartel offshoot known as “Los Números,” who brought a level of violence and terror previously unknown to the region. When I asked the reporter why he kept the ranger’s photo, he first said it was a reminder of what happens when one is “at the wrong place, at the wrong time,” but quickly reconsidered. “This [border] can always be the wrong place; it’s all a matter of time.” This section offers a quick look at those moments in which state efforts and failures to control the border become crystallized in the images of the dead.

Long before the stories of fallen law enforcement agents could contribute to the perception of this place as a site of lawlessness and mayhem, forever in need of more state control, the ravages of death already defined state interventions and defied its pronouncements. Around the very same region where Eggle died, scalping once posed a major challenge to Mexican authorities. After government officials instituted scalp bounties to deal with the “Indian problem,” the practice was turned on Mexican settlers during the Apache and Comanche raids that defined the region for much of the 19th century. A silver lining to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in which Mexico ceded half its territory to the U.S., was negotiating American policing of native tribes in Arizona and New Mexico.

By the turn of the 20th century, the U.S. intensified policing not to keep the Native Americans in, but to keep out incendiary Mexicans and insurgent Texans of Mexican descent who routinely crossed the border south to escape the reach of American law. As Alejandra Stern (2005) has shown, in the early 20th century, the land south of the boundary represented a source of menacing threats to American integrity in political, social, racial and pathogenic terms. The proliferation of stories of border violence in the American media contributed to the concerns. For instance, the September 29, 1915 *New York Times* story about the kidnapping and killing of 21-year-old Private Richard Johnson by border rebels, who “exhibited [his head on a pole] as a trophy on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande,” helped intensify calls for tougher American policing. At that time, enforcement did not get much tougher than the Texas Rangers, who once deployed to the boundary actively contributed to the violence.

Unfortunately, the methodic killing and display of bodies and body parts is not just a matter of history in the affairs on this border. The spread of border-related “*notas rojas*” and “*chismes rojos*” – literally “red” or “bloody” news and hearsay – has been relentless and viral. One day’s worth of email received while writing this essay stands out not because of the goriness and ruthlessness of the content, but because of the almost mundane and unremarkable tone with which events were reported and discussed. The first story of July 2, 2010 to arrive in my inbox added three bodies to the tally of corpses left hanging from bridges, an increasingly common sight in the cartel wars. The second narrates an attack at 4:00 in the morning in which 21 people were gunned down with heavy artillery outside of the town of Tubutama on the historic *Camino de las Misiones* – a bucolic, solitary desert road I used throughout my research to get to Altar, still an epicenter of unauthorized migration. A few hours later, *El Diario de Sonora* broke the third story to its readers with two simple sentences: “A couple of

severed heads were found at 5:30 this morning in Nogales hanging from the fence of the Rosario Cemetery with a narco-message. Initial inquiries indicate the heads are those of two men” (Barragán and González 2010, author’s translation).

This last story merits particular attention not just because of the powerful abject quality of the scene, but because of the complex role severed heads have played in Mexican politics. More elaborate coverage on the events followed, but it is remarkable that on a day of intense online commentary and debate, this initial report merited only two comments. In the first one, someone clarifies the location of the cemetery. In the second, a user identified as “Arturo balderas” [sic] inquires casually in Spanish, “Hello. Does anybody have any photos from the scene?” The request is interesting for several reasons. Over the course of my research, I witnessed in awe how quickly organized crime developed a capillary presence throughout northern Sonora and how the promise of anonymity quickly turned online forums into active venues for the exchange of information, gossip, insults and the framing of rivals. The circulation and deconstruction of images is a strong component of such activity. I had a chance to witness a similar kind of engagement offline during my very first trip to the border in 2002. Every afternoon in a beauty parlor in Reynosa, smugglers, strippers, and other slightly deviant types would gather around the newspaper to dissect its images and stories for information that might reveal compromised locales, snitches, fallen bosses, and corrupt and corruptible officials. Years later, I would see law enforcement engage in similar activities, and partake in debates with reporters and editors over the ethics of publishing leaked images from questionable sources. Meanwhile, the growing ubiquity of photograph-taking gadgets, the possibility of viral and anonymous postings, and the escalation of violence throughout the border region have made the Internet a second stage where the dead can be displayed and made to work.

Images from scene at the cemetery were easy procured. Mexican police took the one shared by contacts in the field, which was also posted online. The photograph shows a sort of triptych display with a poster-size cardboard sign at the center flanked on either side by the head of a young man hanging upside down against a background of marigold colored cemetery walls. The night before, Erick Hanse, Urrea Cota and Gerardo González Moss had been forcibly picked up from their homes by a convoy of vehicles. As unwilling patrons, the heads completed the message of the hand-written insignia: “Man up. This will happen to you.”

It may seem tempting to qualify this incident simply as part of an ongoing criminal campaign that exploits the dead body to terrorize the public, intimidate the ranks of competing syndicates, and undermine state forces, but the effects and messages are more complex. A look at the comments in online forums or personal communications with the author proves revealing. A self-identifying middle-class forum user, “Alejandra,” shared a common lament: “It’s a calamity that things in this country are falling out of control in this way. How far will we go?” A post by “No-Mas-Por-Favor” celebrated, “This is great news! Let them kill each other.” Still the expressions of concern or disregard like these were in the minority among those inquiring about the scene’s context, details and significance. For example, “Laura” asked, “Could someone tell me what the narco-message says?” (“*me podrian dezir qe dice en el narco menzaje*” [sic]). Sentimentality was also absent from the discussion at the Border-Reporter blog, where a “Mario” inquired, “Who are these dudes?” “Who put the signs up and who are they picking a fight with?” demanded another user. Someone

responded with quite a bit of information on how the incident fits within the cartel wars: “I understand that these dudes worked for the Beltran brothers, and that they most likely were dispatched by Gigo or Yankee, who controls the plaza and works for Mayo and El Chapo” (“*tengo entendido ke esos weyes son gente de los beltranes y lo mas probable eske se los aya chihuahuado el gigo o yankee ke es el ke tiene la plaza y trabaja pal mayo y el chapo*” [sic]). Somewhere else, “devil’s advocate” added with sarcasm, “*Lo bueno ke se le esta ganado la lucha al narco*” [sic] (“It’s a good thing we are winning this war against the drug mafias”). However, a closer look at the photographs circulated reveals that in this particular battle scene, the state had the last word.

I would like to bracket the obvious violence against these bodies to focus on their handling, not just their decapitation, but the multiple layers of their flippant display. Following Mary Douglas’s (1985) analysis of taboo and pollution, it could be said that the dead body out of place actively defiles and upsets the social order. And yet, what this photograph captures is not disruption but reiteration. A closer reading of the photograph in tandem with narratives of severed heads in key episodes of Mexican history shows deadly displays not only as techniques of terror, but also as historical recurrent trope in the constitution of state authority, territorial sovereignty, and the binding of the national body politic.

A more complete description of the photograph of the scene I received is in its order. On the first plane, a member of Mexico’s Federal Police stands stoically, observant and anonymous with his back to the camera, adhering to safety protocols employed in operations against organized crime. The agent towers above four civilian onlookers, whose attire and indigenous phenotype bring to mind the many migrants who come through Nogales on their way north. From the left margin of the photograph, the right arms of two men work efficiently together to take possession of one of the heads. One latex-gloved hand cradles the head steadily from its crown in a gesture evocative of clinical births; the other prepares to cut to the wire holding it to fence. It is not insignificant that in a scene marked by deliberate gore, the arms of forensic experts working with clean precision stand for the state, as if the promise of procedural order were the antidote to the violent insecurity of the criminal social geographies of this border. Through the intervention of these hands, the criminal triptych is to be undone; the state is to take possession of the remains, bringing the once-dislocated under its jurisdictional fold, and the cemetery fence is to go back to being a less-suggestive separation between the living and the dead. This is not just an image of dead bodies criminally and violently dislocated into public space, but rather a depiction of the state at work to assert its power over the uncertainty of lawlessness at its margins.

Just as important as the hands retrieving the heads is the labor of the invisible hands behind the camera and the anonymous sources that circulate these images electronically or feed them to the media. All border agencies have strict protocols barring the photographing and documenting of crime scenes for anything other than official, investigative purposes, but images are constantly leaked to the press, posted online, and circulated among friends. After a former forensic investigator had shown me pictures of migrant death cases he considered outstanding because the bodies had not been found simply lying under a tree or shrub, I asked him about the usage protocols of such images. “Only investigators are authorized to photograph, and all photographs constitute evidence,” he responded quickly and authoritatively. “So if anyone is takes a photo, say, with their cell phone, that’s evidence. And if they’re caught with

it, well, that looks bad. It's incriminating." But when I pressed about photos we both had seen in extra-official contexts, he replied with a smirk, "Well, everyone likes trophy shots." Typically, "trophy shots" capture extraordinary events – a large drug bust, a particularly clever way to camouflage contraband, a peculiar crime scene, etc. Images are routinely sent to colleagues and peers partly as information, partly as bragging rights, partly for amusement and dismay. Moreover, the characterization of such images as "trophy shots" suggests narrative tropes of winners and losers, of hunters and kill. If the photograph taken at the cemetery could be considered a "trophy shot," the ultimate "hunter" would not be the perpetrating cartel, but the state. Far from an objective act of crime scene documentation, the strategic layout of these heads on display constitutes an active act of statecraft against the ravaging uncertainty produced by border violence.

By way of contextualizing the Mexican politics around the appropriation of the dead body on display, it is necessary to start at the beginning – at the begging for stories of severed heads for the author at least, at the beginning of the formation of Mexican subjects in the public school system, at the beginning of Mexico as a nation-state. Fortunately, they all coincide. Although I must recognize my grandmother, Dolores, for the unabashed delight with which she recounted folksy accounts of talking, glowing and tumbling heads, it was the state that first offered me haunting images of the beheaded.

Free textbooks, a constitutional right in Mexico, expose all school age children to a unified national historic narrative. I received my first Mexican history book in the third grade. Among the national origin stories it recounted, details of the struggle for independence were particularly striking. The start of the insurgency under the leadership of Miguel Hidalgo is marked with the storming the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, a public granary where colonial officials had taken refuge. A year after that battle, Hidalgo and a group of insurgent leaders fell. As a deterrent to further uprisings, the colonial government executed and beheaded Hidalgo and three of his companions – Ignacio Allende, Jose Mariano Jimenez and Juan Aldama – hanging their heads on each of the four corners of the granary. According to the textbook, the public display of the severed heads of the Mexican founding fathers lasted ten years. Once the war was won and the nation officially born, the newly independent government took down the heads, which are now buried under *El Angel de la Independencia*, the iconic Mexico City monument where Mexicans gather to celebrate national victories, from political elections to soccer tournaments.

The goal here is not to reduce the long and complex process of national independence to the fate of four heads, but rather to reflect on the role assigned to them in this national origin story and the formation of national subjects. As Lomnitz (2006) has shown, the cultural perception of death as a nationalistic popular construction in Mexico does not precede the state, but emerges and changes with it. If the execution of these insurgents was a way for the colonial government to punish them as individuals, their decapitation and public display was intended to control and punish the body politic. Still more important is the teaching of these events in which the termination of the public display of the dead signals the completion of Mexican sovereignty. It cannot be overlooked in this discussion that every person schooled in Mexico has learned that national sovereignty and effective statecraft results from the dialectic between the violently dislocated corpse and its orderly appropriation by the state.

Marcel Mauss observed long ago that, “from society to society, men know how to use their bodies” (Mauss 2006: 78). Although, as a “technique of the body,” this lesson is less centered on the living self, it certainly provides Mexican subjects with a shared repertoire of understandings with which to approach the politics of the public dislocation of the dead.

With this background in mind, the image of expert hands maneuvering to undo the work of organized crime can be centrally contextualized within the repertoire of Mexican statecraft. Through the recovery of these heads, the state counteracts the transgressions of organized crime and restores a sense of order in this border city. However, there is a limit to the state’s capacity to turn these deaths into a political resource when displays of violence that were once considered extreme in their nuanced theatricality increasingly seem mundane. When I expressed alarm at the “escalation of violence” in the region, one of my border contacts simply replied, “I’m getting bored with it, to tell you the truth. They lack imagination.” He was referring to the cartels, but it is possible to extend the observation to state actors whose response to the death of Mexicans on the border has remained steadily technocratic and similar over the years.

In the next section, I turn to the handling of migrant deaths on the Arizona border, a phenomenon through which Mexican authorities have tried to reframe the perception of their authority over people and territory in terms of protection. Although the scenario is different and the interventions more intricate, the desired effects are similar to the previous case.

TENDING TO NEGLECT: MIGRANT DEATH IN THE ARIZONA–MEXICO BORDER

Accounts about the fatal inclemency of the Sonoran Desert stretch back to the Spanish settlers, but with the implementation of the 1994 Border Patrol Strategy and its shifting of flows, from tactically policed urban enclaves to remote regions, this desert recently became *the* site of migrant death and injury. Death tallies vary and accurate counts are made difficult by incommensurable jurisdictions, protocols, counting politics and procedures. The U.S. Border Patrol reports 2,994 border-crosser deaths between 2000 and 2007 on the Mexican border. Coalición Derechos Humanos, a migrant advocacy group that compiles data from the Examiner’s Offices, puts 55 percent of those deaths in Arizona and tallies 2,004 bodies recovered between 2000 and 2009. Based on missing-person reports, the organization estimates as many as 5,000 deaths for the same period. Official death tolls are based only on bodies *recovered*. This makes the management of these bodies and their representation object of intense state investment and civic involvement. Ethnographic work with Mexican Consular Protection workers and civilian advocates in southern Arizona showed me that the technicalities of the repatriation of migrant remains are delicate components of border politics.

An omen of the times to come, the case known as the “Yuma 14” rattled the Mexican consulates in southern Arizona in May, 2001, changing radically their role in the region and the significance of their work to Mexico. By the end of the investigation, the bodies of 14 men were recovered along the path of their five-day journey

through the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. “Exposure to the elements” is the official cause of death offered for the combined effect of dehydration, hyperthermia, and physical exertion experienced by most who die crossing the desert. In death, the “Yuma 14” incurred another form of exposure – the media’s. With mounting pressure, Mexican consulate workers were forced to learn on the spot how to deal with the dead, the injured, and their families, as well as hospitals, morgues, the media, a wider range of American authorities, and their ever more-anxious superiors in Mexico City. Reflecting on this dramatic reorientation of the Consulates’ *Departamentos de Protección* – from legal referrals to intense forensic and hospital work – the then-secretary to the Mexican Consul in Tucson said to me, “The deaths began to happen more and more frequently. So quickly, we were just not prepared. With the Yuma 14, a tidal wave [of death and injury cases] arrived, and we found out we just did not know how to keep afloat.” Although attrition can be a problem, consular protection teams have managed to become cultural and institutional mediators in the identification and repatriation of migrant remains.

By strategically tending to the bodies of these migrants through its diplomatic instruments and representatives, the Mexican state attempts to recast itself in the models of paternalistic authority it has historically found productive. Theories of paternalism, according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, posit the state “as an independent and supernatant entity, one that ideally calms the transient tensions of the social organism and intervenes to promote justice” in ways that tend to “rationalize and reinforce inequalities” (Trouillot 1990: 20). Every step in the repatriation process is marked by elaborate bureaucratic interventions to document, inspect, and authorize passage that, while they ultimately facilitate closure, reinforce the inequalities between those who have resources and those who do not. At the end of a quest that may take weeks and even months, the state, as a pallbearer of sorts, delivers the bodies to their families for burial. A good way to illustrate the repatriation process and its political outcomes is by looking at a case selected by Mexican authorities themselves to represent the technocratic success of consular protection. This is the story of Jesús Cabral and his remains.

Breaking a several-year pattern of reticence towards the media – thankfully not extended to anthropologists – Mexican Consul Juan Manuel Calderon approved intense coverage of Jesús’s repatriation to showcase the consulate’s protection labor. A special report about it appeared on the Sunday edition of the *Arizona Daily Star* on September 30, 2007, the end of the fiscal year by which migrant deaths are counted. I never met the Cabrals but, over the course of my work in the Sonoran Desert, I encountered many other families looking for kin, worked alongside *Protección* employees, and spent much time with journalists including the ones working this story.

Many migrants lose both their lives *and* their bodies to the desert. Although some bodies are actively searched for and found, most are stumbled upon, as it happened with Jesús’s remains. He had entered the desert with a group of crossers on May 12, 2006, but he did not make it out. The abandonment and neglect in which his remains laid for almost a year stand in sharp contrast with the intensity of state maneuvers and media attention to which his family and his body were subjected over the summer of 2007. Just a few days short of a year after he had gone missing, the 44 sun-bleached bones that remained of John Doe 55, Jesús’s initial forensic alias, were found in the

Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. A quick inspection by a criminal investigator ruled out “foul play,” freeing the remains for potential repatriation. In a context in which people are basically “let die,” the declaration of their deaths as “natural” is politically profound. At the most basic level, the pronouncement absolves everyone from culpability and sets the stage for a politically productive technocratic performance around the handling of remains.

The effects of the desert on the human body quickly make the identification of remains a challenge, particularly when all that is left of a person is a few bones. In Jesús’s case, forensic anthropologist Bruce Anderson concluded the remains were most likely those of a young male, most likely a border crosser, who had died from exposure. Jéronimo García, the employee from the Mexican Consulate in charge of death cases, inspected with Anderson the personal effects found with the body. One of Garcia’s duties is to document and photograph all remains and belongings, and upload the information to a missing migrants database (SIRLI, System for the Identification of Remains and Localization of Individuals), so other Mexican officials may access it. This case was slightly different for Garcia, since photographer Dean Knuth had been authorized to shadow him by the Consul. At the time of the story, Knuth was the youngest photographer on staff at the *Daily Star*, and this assignment was just the right match for his gifted eye and a mantel waiting for awards. The savvy consular protection employee captured by Knuth seems a world away from the international relations graduate I met the summer of 2004 desperately dousing himself in Lysol in an effort to cover the smell of formaldehyde. Knuth’s prize-winning photographs portray Garcia with masterful expertise, whether he is handling bones or a heartbroken mother on the phone.

In every case, every item is carefully inspected for clues leading to the person’s identity – a phone number, a receipt, a letter. Jesús’s voter ID proved decisive in his case not because the remains could be identified from the photograph or fingerprint on the card, but because it provided a name to trace. When he went missing, his brother had Jesús’s information entered into SIRLI, so Garcia had no problem locating his next of kin. The indicators matching John Doe 55 and Jesús were strong, but the medical examiners needed conclusive evidence to surrender the body for repatriation. DNA testing was suggested.

In principle, the use of DNA testing to identify remains is a compelling idea; in practice, however, the Mexican insistence on centralized control can turn it into a bureaucratic nightmare. From the start, the Mexican government has insisted that all testing be done exclusively at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and that all data and DNA samples be sent through its Foreign Ministry headquarters in Mexico City. Cases can take up to a year. Adding to the delay, families must navigate obscure protocols, interagency politics, and distance. The Cabrals live a few hours from the border, but their blood samples would have had to hop south, from office to office, halfway across the country and then north, on a different but equally bureaucratic route. Once the test results were ready, they would have followed a path similar to that of the blood samples. Every stop is documented by a memo, every memo is a bureaucratic project involving several people, and every step is packed with a multiplicity of potential delays. Hoping to have Jesús’s body back in Villa Juárez soon, the Cabral Family decided to forgo the certainty of DNA, and go with the alternative denture analysis suggested by the medical examiner. Only a photograph showing Jesús smiling was needed. To make a long story short, instead of sending an electronic

scan of the photo to Tucson, the original photographs took the slow path of officialdom to Mexico City and then north. Almost two months had passed from the day the 44 bones were found to the arrival of the photographs.

It was a match. The repatriation process then began. A series of hurdles – logistical, financial, political, and even sanitary – must be cleared before bodies can retrace their way home for final rest. Federal recognition of the body as that of a Mexican national must be obtained. Funds must be petitioned. Public health certificates must be granted. Official death certificates must be paired with certified translation equivalents. Protection workers must file customs forms declaring that the “packages” lack commercial value. Air and ground transportation must be arranged. The resulting docket that accompanies each body can be as thick as an inch and represent several days’ worth of work.

Unwilling to wait any longer, Jesús’s brother drove to the border to pick up the remains as soon as the basic documentation had cleared. With the help of U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials, he loaded the casket onto the bed of a pickup at the Nogales Port of Entry and drove home, photographer and reporter in tow.

During the 2007 fiscal year, 237 bodies were recovered from southern Arizona, a 30 percent increase from 2006. Despite the discouraging death toll, Jesús’s story was presented as a case of success – state success. The account illustrates how binational state apparatuses process bodies and manage individual death cases in ways that render state intervention not only legitimate, but necessary. By diverting attention from the conditions and policies that cause these deaths to the logistics of recovery, the Mexican state transforms its role in these migration stories. The intense technocratic performance orchestrated around the recovery, identification, repatriation, or storage of bodies serves to further mark the state’s signature on this border and on the people subjected to it. The reporting on the story of Jesús’s body is similar to the photograph taken by the Mexican police officer outside the Nogales cemetery; one of its goals was to capture and display the intervention of the state on the dead bodies produced by this border. This public complement to the pronouncements, inspections, reports, permits, and memoranda required for the legal, southbound movement of dead bodies across the border and secured through the labor of Mexico’s Consular Protection teams are a way by which the Mexican state reasserts the strength of its capacity to intervene on behalf of the dead and regulate the living at the very limits of its territorial and legal domains. Certainly, post-mortem interventions do not always unfold well for the state. However, as this discussion has shown, the politics and practices that place life and death at the heart of the modern state are rendered visible at the state’s margins, but more importantly, the challenges that boundaries represent to state authority can be mobilized to renew and strengthen the state’s effects.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this examination has been to contribute to the idea that when politics and practices that compromise individual life become central to life of the nation, the dead body becomes a site on which social, political, and spatial claims are defined. Although my focus remained on Mexican state actors, the cases discussed looked at dynamics unfolding on both sides of the boundary. While Mexico and the United States seem

incapable of an agreement to effectively manage border flows, when it comes to dealing with its resulting casualties the most formidable form of interstate cooperation takes place. The casualties of the drug trade and the dead bodies of migrants betray both states' limited ability to protect, secure and provide for its subjects effectively, consequently turning some their vulnerable into sacrificial fodder to the systemic national dependencies on illicit transborder economies. Herein lies the paradox, through strategic management, that the dead bodies that could be indexical of the state's failures at its borders are turned into political resources that help strengthen its claims to authority over people and territory. Among the myriad challenges the northern border has historically represented for Mexico, the deaths of Mexican subjects there create opportunities for the state to emphasize its protective proficiency and authority despite the structural abandonment and weakness that cause these deaths in the first place. The Mexican politics of death at work here develop not from the state's ability to kill or let die, but through its capacity to affect the representation and resignify the perception of the publically dislocated death of certain marginal subjects. Ultimately, if the forensic removal of bodies from public sites and the repatriation focus of consular protection work on the border are of any political significance, it may very well be in that they reveal the centrality of death to the politics of safety and protection. Put differently, some states claim to protect the living by tending to the dead.

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