

Essay

# The Missing and the Marginalized: A Biocultural Approach to Forensic Anthropology at the US/Mexico Border

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**Abstract:** Violence and trauma are nestled in human rights violations worldwide. Since the 1980s, several international and domestic organizations have formed to conduct investigations following instances of political unrest and sociocultural violence. These inhumane events are evidenced by structural violence, an invisible trauma that exacerbates societal discrepancies within a population and can manifest harm to marginalized groups. Structural violence can be observed in both living individuals and through the treatment of human remains. Individuals who are missing or remain unidentified from violent outbreaks are often from marginalized groups. Therefore, a biocultural approach is necessary as it emphasizes the interplay between biology, environment, and culture. Recent work on human rights violations in the Americas has focused on fatalities due to increased migration at the US/Mexico border. Multiple organizations from the United States and other countries have developed strategies to assist in the recovery, identification, and repatriation of migrants. We aim to highlight the biocultural approach in these humanitarian actions, especially the practice of forensic anthropology, with structural violence and humanitarian identification efforts related to the missing and unidentified persons found along the US/Mexico border.

**Keywords:** forensic anthropology; structural violence; missing persons; migration; biocultural approach; identification



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## 1. Introduction

Conflict brews as sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues grow within and between countries over time, often resulting in violence. Violence as a result of conflict can increase mortality, particularly in marginalized groups, and lead to thousands of missing and unidentified individuals. Marginalized groups, the missing, and the unidentified individuals represent inequalities between different socioeconomic and sociopolitical groups, including the role structural violence plays on the lives and bodies of its victims through embodiment, which is a term that refers to the physical manifestation of an individual's environment and explains potential pathologies presented in death [1].

Human rights violations can include direct violence and trauma inflicted upon individuals. Evidence of structural violence exists as an invisible trauma that exacerbates societal discrepancies persisting within a population and can manifest detrimental impacts on marginalized groups. Structural violence can be seen in the living and the dead through human remains and in how an individual is treated after death [2–5]. Missing and unidentified individuals from these marginalized groups further emphasize the interplay between biology, the environment, and culture, also known as the biocultural approach [6].

In the mid-1980s, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) sent a team of forensic scientists to assist families searching for missing loved ones connected to instances of political violence and human rights violations in Argentina after the Dirty War [7,8]. A member of the team, Dr. Clyde Snow, observed how interconnected

international work of human rights violations and forensics could be, and in particular, the benefits of those trained in forensic anthropology, where students are taught using a holistic approach that includes both scientific inquiry and cultural relativism or the ability to understand cultures and practices outside of one's own culture [7]. The use of a biocultural approach can be further illustrated in worldwide humanitarian efforts after violent events, including the aftermath of the genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s and early 2000s [9,10]. Methods from anthropology, archaeology, and the forensic sciences were all incorporated to recover and identify victims of the genocide and further use the evidence from these human remains to prosecute perpetrators under the auspices of International Humanitarian Law [11].

Recent work relating to human rights violations has focused on fatalities due to migration at the United States (US)/Mexico border, with multiple international and domestic organizations from the US assisting in the processes related to recovery, identification, and repatriation [1,2,4,5,12–17]. Much of this work has been performed thanks to efforts from organizations and groups with trained forensic anthropologists, which has helped not only give an individual back their identity but also allowed the families a sense of closure, especially since the uncertainty of the whereabouts of a loved one can have detrimental effects on the living, including issues with mental and physical health [18,19]. Through a biocultural lens, this paper emphasizes the correlation between forensic anthropology practices and human rights violations related to structural violence among the missing and unidentified persons found along the US/Mexico border.

### *1.1. The Biocultural Approach and Forensic Anthropology*

The biocultural approach is a theoretical framework that broadly examines the interdependent, dynamic concepts of biology, culture, and the environment [6]. The human body is multivocal and plastic. It is a cultural mirror that its external environment can also impact. Many aspects of a culture or society, including political, ideological, and social processes, can connect a single human to a group of people [6,20]. Academics, such as bioarcheologists and applied forensic anthropologists, analyze the effects of culture and the environment on skeletal remains using the biocultural approach cross-culturally to study patterns of human behavior [6,20].

Forensic anthropology is an applied biological anthropology subfield that focuses on the recovery and identification of skeletal remains, most often in medico-legal contexts, and by creating a biological profile that denotes age, sex, stature, population affinity, and pathology/trauma [21]. Practices utilized by trained forensic anthropologists allow them to connect biology and culture, especially when identifying unidentified individuals; this training allows a formerly unknown individual to reunite with their identity in life [21–23]. Therefore, the methods and practices used by forensic anthropologists have allowed forensic anthropology to flourish in a modern setting, seeing how their scientific and humanistic skills could directly impact human rights cases [1].

Forensic anthropology can benefit human rights cases using a biocultural lens regarding the identification of violence, trauma-related pathologies, and their holistic training, resulting from cultural relativism and the ability to interact with grieving families [1,17,22]. The field of forensic anthropology uses a multidisciplinary approach that works with the natural sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry, geography, and environmental sciences) and the social sciences, including sociology, to recover, identify, and then, repatriate remains; osteological examinations coupled with analyses of DNA and isotopes are used to help identify remains, geographical surveys are performed, and the environments are analyzed for possible postmortem intervals, and families or communities from which the remains originate are contacted in order to repatriate remains for proper burial [2,12,23–26]. As mentioned by Ubelaker and colleagues [8], the holistic approach has allowed forensic anthropologists to work on a variety of cases, which are related to human rights violations worldwide and through multiple organizations.

### *1.2. Forensic Anthropological Applications at the US/Mexico Border*

There are multiple international applications of forensic anthropology regarding missing and unidentified persons in migration cases, including the current US/Mexico border crisis. At least 8000 migrants have perished along the border between 1998 and 2020 [27], and according to many researchers, this number is grossly underestimated [5,28]. The border covers multiple US states, including Arizona, Texas, California, and New Mexico, while the two that receive the most migrants are Arizona and, more recently, Texas; forensic anthropologists and associated professionals from both states have worked relentlessly to recover, identify, and repatriate individuals back to their families, who would otherwise grieve their loss without proper closure [1,19,29,30].

### *1.3. Sociopolitical and Socioeconomic Tensions in Central and South America*

Individuals from Central and South American countries attempt to cross the US/Mexico border for various reasons, including poverty, gang and drug-related violence, familial connections, and the promise of a better life [1]. However, the number of migrants who attempted to enter the US did not seem to increase until the mid-1990s, when policies concerning the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) triggered the collapse of the farming economy in countries, such as Mexico [1,2]. NAFTA-related policies increased unemployment and other socioeconomic and sociopolitical reforms in Mexico, forcing many to travel to large cities or the US for work [2]. Paired with the structurally normalized demand for cheaper immigrant labor in the US, it perpetuated ideas related to structural violence [2]. Marginalized and vulnerable individuals and their families were exploited at the potential cost of their lives if they chose to cross the border, which can cause stress that negatively impacts their physical and emotional health [1,17,31,32].

The remains of marginalized individuals can embody the structural violence experienced. At the same time, they were alive in many ways, with some human remains forming physiological manifestations, including linear enamel hypoplasia (LEH) and Cribra Orbitalia (CO) [1,5]. Both LEH and CO affect the physical skeleton, including the teeth and eye sockets, respectively, during an individual's growth and development [1]. Furthermore, indicators of CO can also show up in adults who experience severe nutritional deficiencies [33]. These pathologies can provide evidence of nutritional deficiencies, which can be caused by modes of structural violence within vulnerable and marginalized groups, including poverty or a lack of access to healthcare in contemporary populations [1]. Evidence of nutritional deficiencies and a lack of accessible healthcare are just some reasons an individual may seek asylum in the US. However, it is important to consider that assessing health from human skeletal remains can be comprehensive and complex [26,34,35]. A lack of proper food or access to healthcare, especially in socio-politically charged or violent social climates, can be enough to push people to seek refuge elsewhere, even if it means crossing treacherous terrain; this perpetrated violence, both direct and indirect, drives people to attempt to seek asylum in the US, braving the conditions along the US/Mexico border [1,2,26].

The deadly deserts that individuals must cross to migrate to the US and increasingly stricter policies from the Border Control in the mid-1900s and early 2000s have led to drastic increases in migrant deaths and missing persons reports since the early 2000s [1,2,24]. While the US/Mexico border is 1 of the 13 most dangerous borders to cross globally, as mentioned by Ferllini [19], policies including the federal policy of "Prevention through Deterrence" concerning immigration (federal officials in the US believed that the harsh environments would be enough to deter people from attempts to cross), forced migrants to take longer, more dangerous routes that pass through hostile environments, including the Sonoran Desert, which has caused the death toll to rise since the late 1990s [1,2,8,12,21,25,26] (p. 539). The Sonoran Desert spans most of the border around Arizona, where individuals are likely to die from dehydration and sun exposure [1,15,21]. Arizona had the highest number of migrant deaths until Texas surpassed them in 2012 [29,36]. In Texas, deaths have

also occurred in dry, hostile desert environments, including the Rio Grande Valley (Starr County, Hidalgo County, Willacy County, and Cameron County) and Brooks County, which includes private and expansive ranchland [29,37]. Regardless of the location, the journey is treacherous, even deadly, for many who attempt it. Individuals are dying not only from environmental exposure and dehydration but also interaction with desert wildlife. Many have even drowned in locations where individuals have tried to travel by water [1].

The families and loved ones of individuals who attempt to cross the US/Mexico border and perish must live without knowing where their family members are or if they are safe and healthy. Moreover, watching others succumb to the elements is agonizing for families or groups of friends or acquaintances making the trek together [31]. In the work by Paramo [30], a biographical narrative tells the story of one woman's loss while attempting to cross the border into the US. The woman travels with her four children, and while three are independent and strong enough to handle the journey on their own, her youngest daughter, only four years old, is not so lucky; the young girl dies from exposure and dehydration [30]. The mother carries her dead child in her arms for days before others realize what has happened, and despite the woman's desire to give her little girl a proper burial in the US, the migrant group helps the family wrap and bury her remains in the desert [30]. This biographical narrative emphasizes the emotional toll faced by those seeking asylum in the US who must cross the border. The length of the US/Mexico border is expansive, covering approximately 2000 miles (~3218.69 km) of land, not including the land between Mexico and the US [38]. It is unlikely that that mother will ever get the opportunity to find her child and give her child a proper burial in connection with her cultural and religious beliefs. Therefore, she will constantly mourn the lack of closure [31].

#### *1.4. Sociopolitical Ramifications at the Border and Issues with Identification*

Both the US and Central and South American countries, specifically Mexico, have dealt with the sociopolitical ramifications of structural violence from the area surrounding the border [5,18,21,23,25]. These have included tensions with local governments and an overall lack of funding and laws addressing unidentified migrants, also called "Undocumented Border Crossers" (UBC), a term used explicitly by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Arizona [2] (p. 262), [15,23–25,36,38].

In many cases in the US, local governments prioritize domestic casework over migrants, even though more unidentified remains are from along the border than domestic cases [38]. Additionally, while states such as Arizona are approximately 91% public land, meaning it is easier to go out and search for remains, states such as Texas are only four percent public, meaning that 96% is private land that requires the permission of the people who own it. This permission can be denied [36]. The denial of permission to search the land can stem from attitudes relating to discrimination, racism, or the mistrust of government and affiliated individuals, with many remains found on these lands believed to be discovered and promptly buried in unmarked graves by those who own it [12,26]. Burials of migrants in unmarked graves are especially common since no laws directly address the handling or care of individuals believed to be migrants, except to say that those found by law enforcement must be documented, however, this is not enforced [36]. Perpetuation of structural violence is visible in the lack of care or respect given to the remains of probable migrants. Tossing a body into an unmarked grave decreases an individual's chances of being recovered and repatriated, primarily due to the vastness of the US/Mexico border. This improper burial further connects to socially-embedded ideas that lead to structural violence in the sense that a marginalized individual is not considered worthy of attempting to identify and promptly bury, whether it is because there are so many sets of remains of vulnerable people or that they are not prioritized over more affluent individuals or cases that receive more media attention [32,38].

Other countries, such as Mexico, are also facing repercussions of sociopolitical and socioeconomic reform because many individuals do not have proper access to healthcare, meaning they do not have dental records on file to compare against a set of remains. While

DNA can be utilized to determine a match from a database, this also accompanies issues that will be addressed later in this paper [25].

The other major problem related to issues at the border includes the lack of funding [26]. Brooks County in Texas is considered one of the poorest counties, yet it has an overwhelming number of annual migrant deaths, with around 533 unidentified remains discovered between 2009 and 2016 alone [26,29]. A lack of funding makes it difficult for those in this county to spend the proper time or use the appropriate resources to attempt to recover, identify, and repatriate remains back to families in other countries. Families from other countries with missing relatives also have a challenging time in recovering their loved ones from the US due to poverty; the DNA tests and transport required, among other resources, are not cheap, and families often cannot pay the fees, further perpetuating ideas surrounding structural violence [2,36]. Thankfully, many non-government organizations have stepped up to assist families with recovering their lost loved one over the years, such as the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense; EAAF) and the Colibrí Center for Human Rights [12,36].

Monetary problems, poorly enforced federal laws, and poor collaboration between international governments have made identifying migrants especially difficult throughout the years [12,21,25,39]. These identification issues are due to numerous factors, including those discussed above, such as a lack of data from the migrants due to social, political, and economic factors in their home countries and the general scarcity of interest from US law enforcement and policymakers, which reflects views related to structural violence and negative ideas related to discrimination [1,12,25,40]. Other problems include the broad array of countries represented among migrants and the lack of an accurate way to discern who came from where [23–26,39].

Based on a study by Martínez and colleagues [2], 13 countries were represented from Central and South America with UBCs analyzed by PCOME between 1990 and 2013, with 820 remains of the 2413 migrants still unidentified. Of those 13 countries, 90% of the remains were from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, with Mexico alone making up 82% of all the cases [2]. These origins can be identified through isotopic analyses and DNA if a match can be made to either a family member or individual should they be in a DNA database [23–26]. Isotopic analyses include the analysis of various isotopes, such as stable carbon isotopes and strontium, and the use of human body elements, including teeth, hair, nails, and bone [24,38]. Teeth and tooth enamel, specifically, are some of the best-preserved elements in the human body and are not as quickly affected by processes of diagenesis, which is a degenerative process that bones can be more susceptible to in certain conditions (such as the intense UV rays and temperatures found in the Sonoran Desert) [24]. Isotopes found in tooth enamel or bone can help researchers, including forensic anthropologists, to narrow down the place where a person may have lived since isotopes are similar to a geological footprint, in the sense that they can establish a diet and water source that was consumed, to narrow down a location [23]. While DNA cannot determine the geographic origin of an individual, both nuclear DNA (i.e., autosomal short tandem repeats; STRs) and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA, which comes from the mother) can be analyzed [25,41]. While mtDNA has been used successfully in the identification of remains from victims of Argentina's Dirty War and by PCOME, generally, due to the standardized use of STRs through the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), these are more commonly used for DNA analyses [25,42,43].

Furthermore, there are differences in state laws and procedures for DNA samples and analyses; PCOME relies on a private lab to run their mtDNA analyses, while Texas law requires DNA samples from human remains that are unidentified to be sent to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification (UNTCHI) for analysis, which is then uploaded to CODIS [26,42]. Many remains of recovered migrants have DNA samples taken and placed into systems such as CODIS, a US-based database overseen by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which has the ability to compare the DNA profile generated from unidentified human remains to family reference samples and other profiles

represented in the database [26]. Using DNA profiles and isotopic analyses, among skeletal observations, institutions, such as PCOME and Operation Identification (OpID) through Texas State University in San Marcos, can work to identify migrants with higher rates of success [26,42].

### *1.5. Among the Border: PCOME in Arizona and Increasing Cases in Texas*

As a border state, Arizona has been dealing with migrants and their remains for years. However, forensic anthropological methods have been incorporated into analyses since the late 1990s and early 2000s [7]. During that time, Arizona established centralized systems to address the identification of these marginalized groups [1]. Non-government and government organizations, including PCOME in Tucson, Arizona, have worked diligently to recover and identify the remains of the missing and unidentified [1,21]. Some key elements in the identification process pose a challenge, such as a lack of personal and identifying information on the missing individuals and the locations of their remains [1,40]. Many individuals in Central and South American countries do not have access to proper medical care due in part to political and economic instability; few people have medical or dental records to compare to any remains [5]. Families may either not know to report their family members as missing, do not report them out of fear of the repercussions, which may be taken out on them or their family members, or attempt to notify them as missing but due to discrimination and poverty, have their inquiries ignored [2]. Thus, any list of missing people from the journey across the US/ Mexico border is vastly underestimated, making the work of forensic anthropologists more difficult [1].

In attempts to counteract this difficulty in identifying remains, those at PCOME document knowledge from the remains of individuals into two profiles: the “Undocumented Border Crosser (UBC) Profile” and “Biocultural Profile” [1] (p. 120), [44]. These directly incorporate the biocultural approach, using biological, socioeconomic, and cultural characteristics to help determine and distinguish migrant remains [1]. The UBC includes geographic recovery location, biological features related to ancestry, personal effects, and other cultural items of dress or adornment. At the same time, the biocultural profile itself focuses on the biological aspects of the UBC Profile. As stated by Soler and Beatrice [1] (p. 121), the biocultural profile can be defined as “the manifestations of cultural and socioeconomic factors on the physical body, either incorporated into one’s biology or applied as semi-permanent modifications observed on one’s remains”. The biocultural profile includes the biological profile and how the individual embodies their environment [1,40]. This evidence of embodiment allowed PCOME to document poverty among undocumented migrants, allowing for an understanding of structural violence of the biological body and a deeper social identity.

Migrants began to travel through Texas more frequently after 2012 as policies along the border changed, pushing border crossers into more hazardous terrain [36]. Unlike Arizona, which has a centralized system for human remains, Texas is less centralized, with only 14 medical examiners for their 254 counties, all of whom live farther north and away from the border [26]. Any county (primarily in South Texas) that does not have a medical examiner or trained forensic pathologist operates under the authority of a Justice of the Peace (JP), who is responsible for managing any inquiries related to unidentified human remains [26]. In their capacity as JP, these individuals serve as the medicolegal authority over any unidentified human remains, even though they rarely have any medicolegal training in the identification of human remains because it is one of several duties that fall on a JP [26]. Due to the lack of funding and resources in rural and poorer counties, particularly in South Texas, the remains of presumed migrants are often not thoroughly examined and are placed into unmarked graves [26]. Over time, this process has led to hundreds of remains being left unidentified and placed in cemeteries, such as Sacred Heart Burial Cemetery in Brooks County, which has the remains of many individuals believed to be undocumented border crossers.

In attempts to identify the remains of the individuals left unknown, academic institutions with trained forensic anthropologists and forensic anthropologists-in-training have created operations, including OpID, which began in 2013 through the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS) [26]. Their mission involved working with the community to locate, identify, and repatriate remains back to their loved ones, and they initially received 45 migrants to analyze [26]. One of these migrants included Elmer Barahona, who had initially left El Salvador in 2012 in search of work and to escape gang violence [26]. His family received word that he had been left somewhere in the desert after he had been injured on the journey. Then, the family proceeded to fill out a missing person's report with the help of the EAAF, and DNA was submitted to the DNA bank in El Salvador. A US-based organization, the Colibri Center for Human Rights, entered it into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) [26]. Not long after he died, his remains were found in a routine recovery in Texas and buried in Sacred Heart after he could not be identified [26,36]. Shortly after, he was exhumed with the other 44 sets of remains from Sacred Heart by a team of Baylor University students led by Dr. Lori Baker, which was sent to FACTS for curation and pending identification efforts through OpID [26]. The remains were all examined and input into NamUs, where they realized an individual already matched the description [26]. After a cross-analysis, the family was contacted. DNA was used to further compare the remains to Elmer, which became a match following two more years of paperwork and attempts to collaborate with officials in El Salvador and the US. Elmer returned home five years after his death [26]. While this story has an ending where the family receives closure, many individuals remain unidentified. Those families are still waiting for closure because, as Robins [19] discussed, it is much easier to understand death than a disappearance.

#### *1.6. The Social and Cultural Importance of Identifying the Body*

One of the most significant benefits of identifying individuals who fall victim to human rights violations is the possibility of reconnecting these missing individuals with their living families and friends, as mentioned earlier in this paper. In this way, loved ones, including mothers, such as the one in the story described by Paramo [30], or families like that of Elmer, as mentioned by Spradley and Gocha [26], receive a sense of closure they would otherwise not get. Unfortunately, however, due to the barriers that come with identification, even in established government buildings, such as PCOME, there are more bodies than identifications. Furthermore, even those bodies underestimate the number of missing unidentified individuals [40].

The mental and emotional health of individuals missing a loved one can have terrible repercussions [17,19]. Those dealing with the disappearance of a loved one can develop mental issues, including depression and anxiety, as well as difficulty sleeping, which can all negatively impact physical health over time as stress levels rise [17,19]. As mentioned by Ferllini [25], families who get the opportunity to bury their dead can sometimes feel a sense of empowerment, which ties into ideas of agency as well, in which an individual can adequately bury their loved one rather than attempting to deal with the fact that a loved one is missing. Regarding the role forensic anthropologists play in cases of missing or unidentified individuals, they can maintain a comprehensive approach that utilizes science and the biology of a missing individual, allowing them also to understand and communicate with a family regarding cultural or social beliefs. In this way, they can play the part of an advocate for those who cannot speak up [1,4,30]. Advocacy also breaks down ideas of structural violence by giving the marginalized a voice to speak out and demand their agency, both for the living and the dead [3]. In particular, supportive advocacy with mutual understanding from the family's perspective benefits those actively participating in humanitarian identification efforts and allows the families to have a more active voice in recovering and identifying their missing loved ones.

## 2. Discussion

Forensic anthropology has played a vital role in the overall methods and practice of dealing with human rights violations due to its ability to incorporate a biocultural approach into its studies, addressing the connections between biology, culture, and the environment. In turn, this gives those practicing forensic anthropology in geographic locations with culturally or socially sensitive issues the training to respectfully engage with families and the community, such as in the case of the mass murderers in Argentina and the migration issues at the US/Mexico border [21,22].

The increase in remains at the US/Mexico border has emphasized the broader problems regarding structural violence rampant in the US and Central and South American countries. This violence can be seen in the physical remains, whether from the evidence of malnutrition, including LEH or Cribra Orbitalia, or how the bodies are recovered and sometimes buried without a name [1,26,29]. Stress markers and postmortem treatments of a body show how structural violence can be embodied within an individual. Nevertheless, it is essential to also consider that skeletal stress markers are not always present in every individual who experiences a life that includes extreme stress [45].

While forensic anthropology has developed new methods for identification, sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors still lead to barriers in identification and repatriation [8,23,25]. These have been due to a lack of a centralized system of handling remains and poorly reinforced laws relating to how to keep track of any remains that are found [12,36]. However, one of the most significant issues is that US policies related to the border have caused an increasingly high number of migrant deaths over the years. These deterrents, deadly and clandestine pathways, did not stop individuals from crossing and have led to more deaths annually [2,26]. Those who attempt to cross the border face an incredibly hostile environment. As border policies change, migrants will continue to move along the border, taking routes that could become more treacherous [1,19]. These policies and their consequences lead to the need for more forensic anthropologists and others who work in similar fields to focus on this issue since it appears to be getting worse. This situation has already left government organizations at the border with thousands of remains [2,26].

## 3. Conclusions

Forensic anthropologists are an essential part of a missing or unidentified individual's life since they are the ones who work to give the deceased back their identity. Biological and cultural factors also play a crucial role in emphasizing the interplay between the human body and cultural identity, and biological profiles assist in this endeavor. A biological profile is the amalgamation of the biological identity, and it can help to identify a person's generalized well-being over their life course. Life history can include factors such as trauma or stress, which they may have experienced, and any other cultural behaviors that may be present. The overview of connections between the human body and its identity can help forensic anthropologists determine the social or political environment they experienced.

Attempts to identify an individual are equally crucial between the person's loved ones, the culture or society in which they reside, and the person themselves. As Morewitz [18] emphasizes, accepting death without proof of death is hard, and identification reinforces culturally-bound concepts of mourning. When an individual is identified, the forensic anthropologist removes the anonymity created through processes of structural violence (i.e., economic status or legality/residency status). The positive identification of an individual, such as a victim of the US/Mexico Border, and the repatriation of that person back to their family reconnects their physical body with a place and a culture, as opposed to remaining in a liminal state which can occur when they perish, losing their identities in the process. Identification gives them back their name and life history, while also allowing their family to find closure, giving them peace, and enabling them to properly bury their dead according to their cultural or religious beliefs.

The issues at the borders of Arizona and Texas provide a complex situation for many, overwhelming facilities with the number of remains they receive. Nonetheless, returning

an individual to their family should, and has been, a priority along the border. However, the policies that caused this issue must also change because these policies along the border emphasize the interplay of biology, environment, and culture and highlight ideas relating to structural violence. While advocating for the families and communities impacted by missing and unidentified loved ones, forensic anthropologists must also advocate for the missing and unidentified in terms of US policies along the border. These policies must change, and views perpetuating structural violence must be broken down to keep individuals safe and bring them home.

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