

Immigration, Environment, and Security
on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Lisa Meierotto

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Lisa Meierotto
School of Public Service, Global Studies
and Environmental Studies
Boise State University
Boise, ID, USA

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To Zoe, Dimitri, and Lukas. May you always find the passion to pursue your dreams, the drive to stick with your goals, and the support of family, friends, and community throughout your lives.

In Memory of my father, Kenneth Elmer Meierotto, 1943–2019

PREFACE

The first time I crossed the U.S.-Mexico border was in December 1997. I had graduated from college the previous spring and was feeling bored and unsatisfied with my nine-to-five job. I wanted to do something “more” with my life. To quell the boredom and in search of a grand adventure, my sister and I planned an odyssey of sorts. We decided to retrace the immigration route of our maternal grandparents from northern Mexico and Texas to southern Idaho some 50 years earlier. I named the trip the *descubrimiento de mis raíces* tour. Technically, my grandmother was an “illegal” Mexican immigrant. However, back in the 1920s, when she crossed the border with her siblings, perceptions of “illegality” were more fluid. Family lore has it that my grandmother, along with her brother and sister, crossed the border together. They brought along a “pretty friend” to flirt with the border guards, and then they simply walked through the border turnstile to begin their new life in San Antonio, Texas.¹

From San Antonio, my sister and I took a Greyhound bus to Bracketville, Texas. Bracketville at that time was a dusty, empty, quiet town near the border. It was home to our maternal grandfather. From there, we took a bus to Del Rio/Ciudad Acuña, Mexico. We were the only people on the bus that hot afternoon. In a funny twist of fate, my sister and I had failed to secure proper travel visas to enter Mexico. Thus, we were illegal border-crossers in the opposite direction, and we had to pay a hefty fine to the Mexican government before we could travel home three months later.

¹Thank you to my cousin and author Teresa Funke for documenting and our sharing our family stories!

I was struck by the amount of garbage and the pollution, and the number of armed guards on the Mexican side of the border. The dramatic juxtaposition of wealth and poverty, order and chaos, cleanliness and filth that demarcates the international border was striking. Since that first trip over 20 years ago, I have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border at many different times and in several different locations—from San Diego, California, to Tijuana, from Nogales, Arizona, to Nogales, Mexico, and from Lukeville, Arizona, to Sonoyta, Mexico.

Prior to beginning my dissertation research, all of my border-crossings were through urban areas along common transit routes. In these urban crossings, border-crossing is not subtle, one is able to immediately observe differences in wealth, lifestyle, and economic opportunity.

However, in rural Southern Arizona, the dichotomy between rich-poor and polluted-clean is not so distinct. For example, the Pinacate Biosphere Reserve—the protected area south of Cabeza Prieta in Mexico—is actually less threatened environmentally, than the wilderness protected areas north of the border in the U.S. This is primarily because the vehicle and foot traffic coming out of Mexico into the U.S. travels on the main roads and highways until reaching the international border. When immigrants and smugglers reach the international border, they fan out into the Arizona desert, north, east and west, disrupting plant and animal life, and sometimes leaving garbage, footprints, and tire tracks behind. But it is not just immigrants and smugglers who cause environmental degradation in the desert. The massive Homeland Security response to undocumented immigration and smuggling (of both humans and drugs) leaves a heavy environmental footprint. The impact of Border Patrol vehicles, in particular, is ubiquitous and environmentally destructive in Cabeza Prieta.

When I began my doctoral research at the U.S.-Mexico border, I started with a single objective: I hoped to better understand how environmental issues relate to immigration concerns. I was drawn to the isolated, desolate desert region of Southern Arizona after observing media coverage that was hyper-focused on the ways in which “illegal” Mexican immigrants were trashing the natural desert landscape in Arizona. My research began with a simple question: Are undocumented Mexican immigrants “trashing” the border, as is often suggested in the popular media? Web-based news sources such as CNN and Fox News regularly show images such as discarded clothing, backpacks, and other

immigrant “trash.”² Media reports describe this trash as an environmental problem. In addition to studying the trash issue, I sought to better understand the impact of Border Patrol on conservation efforts. In particular, I wondered how the extreme build-up of Homeland Security post 9/11 had impacted wilderness areas along the border. I thought it possible that security efforts might *protect* the environment from undocumented border-crossers and smugglers. I also thought it possible that all of the fences, walls, and vehicle traffic must likely leave a heavy environmental footprint in the deserts of the Southwest. Lastly, I wondered about the relationship between the militarization of the border and border conservation. How could these two seemingly different national policy objectives (border security and border conservation) coexist in the same space?

My dissertation fieldwork, followed by several years of archival research and media review, resulted in this book. In the chapters that follow, I present an analysis of how conservation efforts in the stunning Sonoran Desert have been impacted, in both positive and negative ways, by its remarkable geopolitical position at the frontlines of immigration battles, militaristic pursuits, and Homeland Security development. While many of the components of the story are particular to this specific place, there are lessons that can be learned relevant to conservation in borderlands around the world.

In today’s globalized world, unprecedented flows of people and contraband cross international borders. Many of these borders are home to environmentally sensitive and protected areas. Scientists have identified 242,843 protected areas around the globe (<https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/our-work/world-database-protected-areas>). Further, according to the last inventory, in 2007, on global transboundary protected areas, there are over 200 transboundary conservation sites (TBPA.net). Given the importance of the location of many protected areas in border regions, we must consider the question: How can we protect the natural environment in unstable and politically charged border regions?

It is worth noting that this work itself is situated in an academic borderland, as it is theoretically and methodologically located at the edges of disciplinary boundaries. My training is in anthropology; as such, a good portion of the book is based on ethnographic fieldwork. However, much

² Several scholars discuss and deconstruct the idea of immigrant trash. I discuss this in later chapters.

of the book is written from a historical perspective, and several of the early chapters in the book are more akin to environmental history than anthropology. I also focus on geopolitical spatial concerns, an approach typically favored in political ecology. Lastly, I utilize discourse analysis of popular media, personal discussions, and archival materials throughout. The book is simultaneously a case study of a specific place, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, and a broader analysis of the general U.S.-Mexico border region. I hope that students, scholars, and anyone with an interest in the U.S.-Mexico border and global border conservation will gain a deeper understanding of border history, border conservation, and the politics of undocumented immigration.

Boise, ID

Lisa Meierotto

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The research presented in this book is based, in part, on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the Arizona borderlands between 2007 and 2010. It is also based on archival, historical, and media review conducted between 2006 and 2019. The story centers on Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, a federally protected Wilderness Area in southern Arizona. I am immensely grateful to the people of Ajo, staff at Cabeza Prieta NWR, and Border Patrol agents for giving of their time while I was conducting the ethnographic portion of this research. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the observations and analysis presented in this book are mine alone and not representative of any individual or agency.

In addition to ethnographic observation, I tell the story of Cabeza Prieta through an examination of historical archives, government reports, and media accounts. I then draw upon scholarly literature in political ecology and environmental justice, along with race and place-based studies to analyze the roles and relationships in conservation efforts along the border. Cabeza Prieta NWR is a fascinating place to explore, as we can gain insights into the ways in which border security and border conservation have co-evolved on the U.S.-Mexico border. Perhaps, most importantly, this book offers insights in the ways in which the politics of race and nationalism are subtly, but significantly, interwoven into border environmental and security policy.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Meierotto is an assistant professor in the School of Public Service at Boise State University. She teaches in the Global Studies and Environmental Studies Programs. Dr. Meierotto earned a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Washington, which she completed in 2009. She also holds an M.A. in International Development, Community Planning, and the Environment from Clark University. She attended Pacific Lutheran University as an undergraduate, completing a B.A. in Anthropology and Global Studies. Her research interests center on global migration, human rights, and environmental justice.

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