



Examining Migration Tools and Techniques on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Original article: ["Better to be Hot than Caught': Excavating the Conflicting Roles of Migrant Material Culture" by Jason De León](#)

Introduction

The dangers and fears of **border-crossing** are something that most of us know about but how do migrants do it? What techniques are they using and are they effective? Anthropologist Jason De León sought to answer these questions by surveying travelers either before their crossing of the Mexico-U.S. border or immediately following their deportation from the U.S., and by excavating artifacts from migrant stations.

Historical Background

It's important to remember that migration has been a quintessential part of human history; however, the establishment of political borders has influenced how humans migrate and the public perceptions of **migrants**, or people who move from one place to another to find work or better living conditions. U.S. border security strategies and enforcement have pushed migrants from Latin America to travel through tougher, more dangerous desert terrains, like the Sonoran Desert. These areas are more penetrable, but the extreme weather conditions and inhospitable landscape force migrants to rely on human smugglers—also known as coyotes, guides, or drivers—to assist them on their journey through the desert.

Anthropology as a Tool for Understanding

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To understand elements of border crossing, deportation, and the human smuggling industry in Latin America, De León collected ethnographic data through surveys, interviews, and participant observation. **Ethnography** is a type of social research that examines the behavior and beliefs of participants to reveal the motivations behind cultural phenomena. To supplement this qualitative data, De León also analyzed items left behind at migrant stations, “places where people rest, eat, change clothes, and leave items behind while crossing into the United States” (p. 478). An example of a migrant station is depicted in Figure 1 A. Through this form of contemporary archaeology, he found that the common technology and material culture adopted by migrants is neither effective nor safe. **Material culture** is defined as physical objects that support human survival, define social relationships, represents facets of identity, or benefit peoples’ state of mind, social, or economic standing (Buchli, 2004, 241). In his research, he focuses on three artifacts that impact the carrier’s body, shape their behavior, and projects social distinctions: water bottles, shoes, and clothes.

**A**



Figure 1: A) Resting at a migrant station. B) Over the course of repeated use, migrant stations can develop into sizeable archaeological sites.

For example, the most abundant cause of migrant injury or death is dehydration and the only way to combat this is with bottled water. Unfortunately, there is a common assumption that clear or white water bottles are easily spotted by border patrol agents, so migrants cover the bottles in cloth or paint them black to camouflage them. This method is ineffective because the cloth and black coverings attract heat, thus causing the bottles to rapidly increase in temperature, making the water almost undrinkable. Additionally, border patrol agents rely on foot tracking, ground sensors, infrared cameras, and sound to locate people, not just sight.

The idea of having dark items to avoid detection extends to clothing, as well. Migrants wear dark clothing that is usually made of thick cotton, synthetic fibers, or denim that absorb heat and moisture. This increase of heat not only increases the rate of dehydration and exhaustion, it also makes the migrants easier to detect through thermal imaging. In Figure 1 B, the majority of the items left behind at the migrant station are dark-colored shirts, blankets, coats, and discarded water bottles.

Finally, the sneakers migrants wear are cheaply made, poorly constructed, ill-fitting replicas of

higher-priced U.S. models. They choose to wear these shoes because they believe they will be sufficient to make it across the desert and that it will help them blend in once they arrive in the U.S. It is not uncommon to see migrants crossing with new sneakers and fresh haircuts. There is a common belief among migrants that the best way to avoid detection is to “not look poor” even though the sneakers cause severe blisters, which if untreated, can lead to infection.

Conclusion

Each of these techniques, at best, are minimally effective at preventing detection. Border patrol agents and criminals who attack migrants can easily identify migrants based on their clothing style, interaction with the environment, behavior, and the objects they carry with them. If these strategies are not as effective as the migrants think they will be, why do they continue to use them? The answer to this question is that there is little regulation of folk knowledge and a lot of mythology about what the process of border-crossing is actually like. Migrants cannot test their techniques beforehand, but assume they will work because they were told they would by guides. People’s ideas of the functionality and the efficacy of certain items are usually in conflict directly with the social impact they are associated with (e.g. choosing sneakers that will help migrants blend in not aid their journey through the desert). Understanding the social dimensions of how a technique is used is important to understanding why it is used. The conflicting role of migrant culture helps improve our knowledge of the process of border crossing.

Additional References

Buchli, Victor. 2004. *Material Culture: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge.

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World on the Move

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