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Forensic citizenship among families of missing migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1990s, US federal policy has funneled unauthorized migration through remote portions of the Sonoran Desert, resulting in thousands of deaths and disappearances. Research about the work to find, care for, and identify those who have died at international borders largely focuses on forensic authorities or humanitarian volunteers. Often left out of such analyses are the families of the missing and dead, who I argue are some of the most critical actors in this work. Drawing on fieldwork done between 2006 and 2021, in this article I discuss how families of missing migrants impact forensic procedures on the US-Mexico border. They do this by learning forensic skills and developing relationships with state forensic authorities. I argue that families of missing migrants are engaged in forms of active citizenship that build relationships of care and obligation among themselves, state forensic authorities, and the missing and dead.

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Introduction

On a December morning in 2018, I joined a small group of mourners gathered near a road on Tohono O'odham land in Arizona. We were gathered to remember Nancy Ganoza Cordova,¹ whose remains had been found at the site seven years prior, only recently identified in 2018. Nancy had travelled from Lima, Peru. She had decided to undertake the dangerous journey because she missed her two daughters, who had been living with their father in New Jersey. She crossed into Arizona with a group in October of 2009. 'From there, she was just missing' (Interview with the author, New Jersey, 2011) her daughter explained. Her daughters and former husband then began a search for information. This included traveling to Mexico and interviewing witnesses, traveling to Arizona to search the area where she disappeared, and contacting dozens of humanitarian organizations, police agencies, and forensic offices. Almost a decade after Nancy's disappearance, the Tucson-based NGO, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, collected DNA from Nancy's daughters. The saliva samples were coded and then shipped to a private genetic laboratory for comparison against the DNA profiles of over 1,100 unidentified human remains cases found in the deserts of Arizona.

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¹In this case, the real name of the person is used accurately, as was requested by the family of Nancy Ganoza Cordova. All other names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

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In November of 2018, when a strong genetic match reported by the lab was confirmed as a positive identification by forensic authorities at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights called Nancy's daughters and delivered the news. Their DNA had matched that of a cranium found in 2011 along South Mission Road. Shortly after receiving the news, the family called Colibrí to request help to do the following: conduct a search of the area for more bones, hold a ceremony at the site with a Catholic priest, and plant a cross on the spot where the cranium had been found. Colibrí obliged and brought together members of the local border humanitarian and human rights community to honor the family's wishes. Members of three religious communities (Tohono O'odham, Catholic, and Presbyterian) attended and blessed the site, a local artist planted a handmade cross (purple, Nancy's favorite), and those who had helped the family in their search participated and mourned at their side. After the blessings by the priests and the planting of the cross, Nancy's daughters shared what they called 'Nancy facts', with the group, which they read aloud from small cards that were later distributed: 'If one of us was in trouble, both of us was in trouble so that we would stay united', 'You always knew it was her at the door, because she would use her ring to knock', 'She didn't believe in wearing makeup' (Author's fieldnotes, Arizona, December 2018).

Later, a handful of press and academic articles covered the memorial event. Most of them credited Colibrí with organizing the memorial and sharing remembrances of Nancy. The labor of the family was invisible. This omission is common in both press and academic literature about care for the dead at borders: the work of border NGOs or forensic authorities is visible, but not the labor of families of the missing and dead. There are legitimate reasons for this, including the fact that for those who are undocumented, visibility comes with risks. However, families of the missing find ways to impact forensic procedures and in so doing, challenge dominant boundaries defining who has the right to have rights (Arendt 1973). It is the goal of this article to begin to make this labor more visible and to detail its political significance.

Through an ethnographic account of families of the missing engaged in the forensic process, I argue that families practice active citizenship in ways that emphasize relationship-building. Setting aside for a moment the extreme pain and anguish caused by such disappearances, which has been discussed elsewhere (Reineke 2016, 2019; Crocker, Reineke, and Ramos Tovar 2021), the focus here is on ways in which families practice forensics and engage with state authorities. To understand and appreciate the specific work of these families, I bring together the work of scholars of active citizenship, who define citizenship as a series of practices rather than a status bestowed by a state (Bosniak 2000; Isin 2009; Swerts and Oosterlynck 2020) and the work of scholars who study civil engagement with forensic science (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016a, 2016b; M'charek and Casartelli 2019; Rygiel 2016). Families of missing migrants engage in a form of citizenship that not only represents 'active engagement in the life of the community' (Bosniak 2000, 455) but also involves direct intervention with forensics, a set of practices usually monopolized by the state. The work of these families is both personal and political: while they search for an individual missing loved one, they also insist that state forensic authorities in the US include the border dead within social and legal 'obligations of care' (Wagner 2019) owed to the dead.

Two decades of death and disappearance along the US-Mexico border

Data from coroners and medical examiners has consistently demonstrated that the deaths of migrants crossing the border increased dramatically following US federal border security efforts in the mid 1990s that were based on a strategy of prevention through deterrence (Eschbach et al. 1999; Cornelius 2001; Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006; De Leon 2015). The only border-wide enumeration of the dead is produced by Customs and Border Protection, a count which has been critiqued for being inaccurate and unreliable (O'Dell, González, and Castellano 2017; Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006; Martinez et al. 2021). Some regional medicolegal offices, like the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner in Tucson, Arizona, produce reliable data for large portions of the border. Data from this office reveal that following the implementation of prevention through deterrence policies between 1999 and 2001, the deaths of migrants increased more than tenfold (Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006). Between 2000 and 2020, recoveries of remains in southern Arizona continued at an average of 162 per year, culminating in a total of 3,356 at the close of 2020 (Martinez et al. 2021).

The policies that have caused deaths in the desert have also led to a vast number of disappearances. At the time of writing, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights was managing 1,815 active missing person reports for people who had disappeared while crossing the US-Mexico border and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team 1,443 (Personal communication, August 2021). Many of the same factors that have pushed migrants to their deaths in the desert contribute to disappearances: those wishing to cross undetected take remote trails through desert wilderness, and if they die, it can be months or years before their remains are located (De Leon 2015; Martinez et al. 2021). Recovered remains are usually decomposed or skeletal, and can be very difficult to identify, leading to a large number of unidentified remains and missing persons (Anderson 2008; Reineke 2019). However, in addition to being disappeared by border policies, the missing are also bureaucratically disappeared by state forensics in the US. Families face a confusing and often inaccessible forensic system in the US where data about the dead and missing are disorganized and science and technology are often inaccessible to those who are undocumented. As will be discussed, there are individual forensic authorities who have responded to families with care and respect, but on a systemic level, families of the missing face a nightmarish quagmire where information is decentralized, inaccessible, and inaccurate.

Ethnographic research in a forensic context

Observations for this article are drawn from both research and personal experience between 2006 and 2021. For nearly fifteen years, I have participated in forensic efforts in Arizona to respond to families' demands for information and access to services. Doing research in settings where violence is taking place is ethically fraught and requires careful dialogue with local communities before, during, and after the research process. Decolonial scholars have argued for deep engagement and collaboration with communities impacted by ongoing colonial violence throughout the research process and beyond (Harrison 2011; Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019). This approach is important for ethnographic work done among undocumented immigrants, who face constant threats of

violence and exploitation due to their illegalization. As Alonso Bejarano et al argue, 'Under these circumstances, merely researching and writing academically about undocumented people seems profoundly immoral' (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019, 9). The authors go on to explain how ethnographers should 'work with local people to fight back against the predicaments in which they were enmeshed' (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019, 9). This is the ethical stance I had begun developing when starting my graduate research at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner in 2006. I was interested in academically understanding the social network that had formed around the border's dead, but I also wanted to be useful as a part of that network. The forensic anthropologist at the medical examiner's office shared this ethical approach, agreeing to support my research with the request that I also assist the office in managing the high volume of calls coming from families of missing migrants. My experience as a graduate student thus involved both ethnographic research and practical work at this office to collect and manage reports of missing migrants.

At that time, there were already hundreds of families searching for missing loved ones who had disappeared in the deserts of Arizona. Families were calling the medical examiner's office daily, and employees were struggling to manage those calls alongside investigating the unidentified caseload. At the invitation of the forensic anthropologist – a mentor in my graduate program – I served as the in-house coordinator for missing migrant reports at the medical examiner's office from 2006 until 2013. As I developed relationships with families of the missing, I would tell them about my research and ask for feedback and request interviews. What I learned during this process was that families wanted a better system for searching for the missing. They were tired of calling dozens of state offices and NGOs, always given the sense directly or indirectly that they were calling the wrong place. They wanted to be able to submit their DNA for comparison to the unidentified dead, and they wanted to meet other families. As my relationships with families deepened, I felt increasing obligations of care towards both the material remains of dead and the recorded details of missing persons. They had identified a gap, and I had begun to partially fill that gap as a graduate student in anthropology at the medical examiner's office. By 2013, I was managing 1,200 missing person reports and struggling to keep up with the demand from families. It was at this point that I brought together a small team who co-founded the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, which I directed from 2013 to 2019.

Before continuing, it should be highlighted here that both of the institutional changes discussed above – inviting an anthropology graduate student to manage calls from families of missing migrants and founding the Colibrí Center for Human Rights – were responses to the work of families to make themselves visible within the bureaucratic space of a county medical examiner's office. While the forensic anthropologist and I shared an ethical approach to research, it was the families who motivated each of us to make institutional changes. These are examples of the focus of this article – how the work of families has impacted the forensic process in southern Arizona.

All direct quotes or individual stories discussed in this article come from IRB-authorized research. As a part of that research, I interviewed a total of 39 individuals searching for a missing loved one on the border. All resided within the US at the time of the interview. Additional research methods included participant observation among families of the missing, analysis of public statements and speeches made by families,

document analysis of missing person reports, and interviews and participant observation with forensic authorities at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner. Alongside research, I also personally experienced the impact of families on the forensic process in my role with the medical examiner's office and with Colibrí. Thus my perspective is informed by both research and personal experience. With all of this said, I offer my observations with humility: I do not know what it is like to have a loved one disappear, just as I do not know what it is like to be a forensic expert employed by a government office. Being able to represent the work of others in an academic forum is an act of privilege that comes with great responsibilities of humility, honesty, and respect for all those represented.

Citizenship in the borderlands

A growing body of literature is concerned with understanding and making visible the citizenship practices of those who have been denied state-authorized citizenship through legal status and documentation (Bosniak 2000; Isin 2009; McNevin 2013; Nyers and Rygiel 2012). Linda Bosniak describes this approach as one that views citizenship as 'active engagement in the life of the community', rather than one that recognizes citizenship only as a formal legal relationship with the state (Bosniak 2000, 455). As Engin Isin describes, active citizenship is 'direct participation in public affairs' (Isin 2009, 382), and the 'actors of citizenship are not necessarily those who hold the status of citizenship' (Isin 2009, 370). Much of this literature is positioned in opposition to frameworks following Agamben that emphasize the abjectivity and circumscribed agency of migrants (McNevin 2013; Nyers 2015; Squire 2011). Instead, scholars share empirical evidence of irregular migrants engaged in both community-making and political struggle (Gaja and Hughes 2017). Examples of active citizenship performed by those who may not have legal citizenship include attending school board meetings, participating in neighborhood communities, supporting other immigrants or refugees, or engaging in public acts such as protests or demonstrations demanding rights. The related framework of 'relational citizenship', as developed by Jeanette Pols (2006, 2016), emphasizes the critical role of relationships and the emotional impact we have on one another within these spaces and activities. In the US-Mexico border context, where being publically visible can come with great risks, individual relationships with state authorities have become both meaningful and strategic.

A handful of researchers have used the lens of citizenship to approach issues related to the deaths and disappearances of migrants at international borders. They have looked at organizing and protest among families of the missing in Central America and Mexico (Kron 2016; McLean 2020); acts that commemorate the dead and expose violent EU border regimes such as 'grief-activism' (Stierl 2016) or 'activity-based artwork' (Lewicki 2017); and state responses to the appearance of dead bodies along the sea borders of Europe (Rygiel 2016; M'charek and Casartelli 2019; Edkins 2016). Both Rygiel (2016) and M'charek and Casartelli (2019) emphasize the relational nature of citizenship, and make the case for the power of the dead to compel a response from state and non-state actors alike. Research in the context of ongoing state and para-state violence in Mexico on the work of families to forensically find and identify the disappeared emphasizes the political nature of such work (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016a, 2016b; Mendoza;

Robledo Silvestre 2018). Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago call such practices ‘forensic civism’, and show how families transgress ‘expert and political boundaries’, thereby transforming both forensic knowledge production and the state-dominated narrative of past events (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016b, 489).

My work builds upon and complicates these analyses by emphasizing the role of families in work to find, identify, and care for those who have died or disappeared along the US-Mexico border. In the ethnographic sections that follow, I speak to the ways in which families engage in practices of forensics and citizenship. While there are certainly individual forensic authorities who approach their work with care and equity, they are also affected by their interactions with families. In turn, families are not passively waiting for information, but are actively involved in searching, practicing forensic techniques, and building relationships with those who have more power and access to information. As in Mexico, these civic practices ‘are not a sign of desperation, as many critical voices claim, but a strategic stance against impunity, lack of punishment, or even the lack of investigation’ by the state (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016b, 485). Although the work done by these families is not highly visible, it is highly political.

Searching for truth: families of missing migrants

Before discussing the active citizenship and forensic investigative work done by families of the missing, I will first discuss some of the obstacles and constraints they confront as they search. Like other systemically marginalized and over-policed populations in the US, such as those from Indigenous and Black communities, immigrants from Mexico and Central America face extreme obstacles when they search for a missing loved one. Families face a vast and complex search area with forensic systems that are fragmented, inconsistent, or inaccessible. For some, it isn’t clear if the missing person made it to the border, and the search area includes two or more countries. Many families are contacted by strangers trying to extort money, and some are preyed upon by unscrupulous individuals posing as private investigators or lawyers. As the brother of a missing man from Guanajuato explained, ‘It is a terrifying place, and very dangerous. Everyone wants to take a piece of you. I was lucky to make it alive. I know what it’s like’ (Interview with the author, Arizona, 2016). Although many relatives of the missing have experienced a desert border crossing themselves, the landscape can feel vast and unknowable when they begin to search for someone who has disappeared. Families do this work despite the severe psychosocial stress of having a loved one disappear (Crocker, Reineke, and Ramos Tovar 2021; Boss 1999). ‘It’s like a fog’, explained Julieta, whose husband had disappeared. ‘It’s like my husband was just swallowed up by darkness. Everyone I speak to has a different story about what happened. I don’t know who to trust. I just want the truth’ (Interview with the author, Arizona, 2017).

Families with undocumented members face added risks of deportation and abuse. My interlocutors expressed fear and anxiety about contacting state authorities regarding a missing person. Some even described silencing and denial within the family about the fact that someone had disappeared because of fear that word would get out and an investigation would lead to someone being deported. Although the focus of this article is on the experiences of those who live within the US, all of these families are transnational and include members who live in Mexico, Central America, or South America. Family

searchers in each region face challenges that are locally specific, but some can be described in general terms and include extortion and abuse from smugglers or drug trafficking organizations, exploitation by state authorities, structural racism and systemic marginalization (especially among those from Indigenous communities), linguistic barriers, and the complexity of searching in one country while residing in another. For many of the families I have worked with over the years, the investigation was transnational. Family in Mexico would work with the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (Secretariat of Foreign Affairs) and join family-led organizations like *El Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano*, while relatives in the US would call coroners and medical examiners along the border.

The list of offices to call is long. The official enforcement zone stretching from California through Texas includes territory up to 100 miles north of the international boundary, creating a landscape of nearly 100,000 miles (No More Deaths and La Coalición de Derechos Humanos 2021). This geography maps to an ever-changing list of officials and agencies, each with their own rules, jurisdictional boundaries, and information-sharing habits. Family searchers contact dozens of agencies including the Border Patrol, state and local police, medical examiners, coroners, consulates, NGOs, press, hospitals, and even private investigators. When contacting US authorities, they are often told they are not calling the right place and turned away. Camerina described searching for her son: ‘When I learned that he had disappeared, I looked everywhere. I knocked on so many doors, but every one was closed to me’ (Colibrí Center for Human Rights 2018). Human remains found in the desert borderlands are transported to a number of medicolegal offices, some following best practices, others failing to do the minimum required by law, for instance burying the unidentified dead in unmarked graves prior to autopsy or DNA sampling (Kovic 2013; Frey 2015; Latham and O’Daniel 2018). Although dead bodies are unambiguously the responsibility of the state (Rygiel 2016), this responsibility is not consistently honored along the US-Mexico border. Throughout the borderlands, families inquiring about missing loved ones reach forensic authorities who refuse to provide information or assist in any way. Families describe experiences of racism and abuse. Those I interviewed would often repeat the phrase, ‘We are treated like animals’.

Families not only face challenges and obstacles at the local level, but also at the federal level. There are two forensic databases designed to help families of the missing in their search and facilitate comprehensive comparison between the missing and dead – the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) for non-genetic data, and the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) for genetic data. Traditionally, each has required that families report to US law enforcement in order to make use of the services. Given that local law enforcement agencies usually require such reports to be made in person in the jurisdiction where the person disappeared, and that most undocumented immigrants harbor significant feelings of fear and mistrust of police, these policies have created barriers to access for families of missing migrants (Reineke 2016). My interlocutors expressed reluctance to contact US law enforcement or said they were turned away when they tried. Several expressed concern about putting their DNA into an FBI-run system. The bureaucratic obstacles encountered by families of the missing at the border align with a process Robledo Silvestre has described in the Mexican context, whereby victims are absorbed into a bureaucratic system that mutes political speech

(Robledo Silvestre 2015). Families feel they must do a tremendous amount of work if they are to have any hope of finding their missing loved ones. I interpret their investigative practices as one aspect of political speech by families, with other aspects including organizing (especially in Mexico and Central America) and demanding that their home countries respect their rights as citizens. In the following sections, I will focus first on how friends and families of the missing in the US perform forensic investigations on their own before discussing how they compel state authorities to act.

Forensic citizenship

The search by families of the border's missing is representative of a forensic process. The word 'forensic' is derived from Latin *forensis*, 'pertaining to the forum', with the forum originally serving as a multidimensional space of politics, law and economy (Weizman 2014). Most definitions of the term forensic involve two components: a) the use of scientific knowledge or techniques and b) their application within law courts or public discussion. Family searches involve both components – families learn techniques developed in various fields of forensic science and they apply them in a legal and public forum. It should be noted that most forensic practitioners today are not conducting scientific research, but are rather using techniques developed with scientific methods or accepted by courts of law as being scientific (whether they truly are scientific is another matter). Like official forensic practitioners, families utilize techniques and technologies developed within various fields of forensic science. While there has not yet been a legal court where the abuses of the US federal government in the borderlands can be addressed, families engage in other public forums, including but not limited to that of local and regional medical examiner's and coroner's offices. Although families practice a form of forensics, their investigations differ from traditional forensics in ways that have uniquely transformative potential.

Families interviewed for this research have conducted extensive investigations as they search for missing loved ones. Forensic techniques used by families include: collecting evidence in the form of cell phone records, scene photographs, or video taken by survivors; interviewing witnesses or survivors; searching among records for the unidentified dead in online databases; using the science and technology of DNA; and conducting line searches in the desert for human remains. One's legal status can be a major limiting factor, and those families I interviewed with undocumented members tended to perform the search more remotely, leaning more on the relationships they established with border NGOs and forensic officials, as will be discussed in the next section. Nancy Ganoza's family (discussed in the introduction) did not have fears of deportation, and serves as an example of how extensive these searches can be. Shortly after Nancy's disappearance, her former husband and her daughter traveled to northern Mexico to investigate. They interviewed the owners of an inn where Nancy had stayed before crossing, who then connected them to several people who had been traveling with her when she disappeared. These interviews produced valuable information about where exactly Nancy was last seen – along south Mission Road near Tucson. The family then traveled to Arizona and spent several weeks searching the area. They created detailed fliers with information about Nancy including biometric information and an annotated photograph showing the precise location of her scars and moles. They visited various government offices,

including police and Border Patrol, both of which refused to take a missing person report or share any information with the family. As Nancy's daughter explained: 'I learned that there was no official help for an illegal immigrant gone missing in a foreign country unless she was declared dead. So, we investigated ourselves' (Interview with the author, New Jersey, 2011). They continued to search for nearly a decade, until Colibrí followed up on the family's request to search among the unidentified dead using their DNA, resulting in the identification of Nancy. The entire search process took nine years (2009–2018). If one of the two law enforcement agencies they visited had taken a missing person report, the family would have been eligible for free DNA testing and could have had news about the discovery of Nancy's remains as early as 2011. Like family-led investigations described by Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago (2016a) in Mexico and Colombia, family forensic investigations in the US-Mexico border context are not just a desperate search for information about a missing loved one, but also a response to state inaction and impunity.

Among important differences between the approach to forensic techniques by families versus state-employed forensic experts, the role of emotion is primary. For traditional forensic experts with university training, the ideal of objectivity is fiercely protected (Clemmons and Winburn 2021; Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016a; Rosenblatt 2015). Because forensic practitioners must defend their procedures and findings in the courtroom, they often promote their expertise as objective to the point of being infallible (Crossland 2013; Keenan and Weizman 2012). An example of this is oft-repeated phrases like that of pre-eminent late forensic anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow, who was famous for saying, 'Bones make great witnesses. Although they speak softly, they never forget and they never lie' (as quoted in Keenan and Weizman 2012, 66). Simultaneous to this process whereby the role of the interpreter is erased, the objectivity paradigm also struggles to recognize those impacted by the very violence tried in the courtroom as anything other than 'emotional' (Clemmons and Winburn 2021). This is likely one of the reasons that the impact of families on forensic procedures is so invisible – to acknowledge that 'emotional' families have a role in the 'objective' process of forensic science may call the whole project as constructed into question.

In fact, emotional as it is, the forensic labor of families can be what cracks the case. An example I participated in was when Gloria found the remains of her son by recognizing her own sewing work on a pair of pants. Gloria's son, Alberto, had disappeared crossing into Arizona in 2012. She would call or email me almost daily at the Medical Examiner's Office. One day in 2013, Gloria called me after finding a case in NamUs noting that an unidentified man was found wearing camouflage pants. She asked to see a photo of the inside of the waistband. The Medical Examiner's staff obliged (Figure 1), and I emailed the photos to Gloria, who called back and told me that she recognized her own sewing work. Before Alberto had crossed, he had borrowed pants from his father, which were too small. Gloria had sewn in extra fabric to expand the waistband. It was this detail that led to a one-to-one DNA comparison, positively identifying the remains as Gloria's son. In this case, the expert lens of forensic authorities would not have been able to appreciate details that Gloria could perceive. I accompanied one of the office's forensic anthropologists when she took the photograph. Standing over the pants which were spread out on a gurney, neither of us could tell that they had been modified, and were unsure of which view Gloria would need to see. Sarah Wagner has written about the multiple layers of



Figure 1. Pants found with unidentified remains which featured the sewing work of the decedent's mother, who recognized her own sewing, resulting in the forensic identification of her son. Photo used with permission from Dr. Caitlin Vogelsberg, Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner.

'recognition' involved in social processes of human identification – technoscientific recognition on the part of experts, personal or affective recognition on the part of relatives of the deceased, and finally, collective recognition of the dead as members of a shared community (Wagner 2008, 10). Gloria's act of personal recognition was key to opening possibilities for the others.

In some cases, it wasn't the identification that was impacted by the family investigation, but rather the discovery of the remains. In 2005, the father of a missing woman found three other bodies before finding the remains of his daughter, Lucrecia, recognizing her by the rings on her fingers (Marosi 2005). Similarly, Ely Ortiz has been outspoken about how he was able to find the remains of his brother, Rigoberto (Lo 2015). When he was lost in the desert, Rigoberto had called both Ely and 911. The 911 operators transferred him to BORSTAR (Border Patrol's search and rescue unit), who conducted an unsuccessful search by helicopter. For months, Ely struggled to get permission to search the federal land where his brother had disappeared. When finally able to search, he and his friends found the decomposed remains of both his brother and another person within a day. Ely now works with *Aguilas del Desierto*, a nonprofit search and rescue organization that has helped dozens of families to find remains in the deserts of Arizona and Texas (Lo 2015).

My observations align with those of Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago, who have discussed how 'pain and emotion are integral for opening up the political possibilities of forensic technologies' (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016b, 497). One political possibility is pushing an official forensic investigation forward, as exemplified by Gloria's and Ely's stories. By taking matters into their own hands, they triggered a series of actions and reactions that compelled state and federal authorities to respond. Another political possibility includes forms of self-transformation and subjectivity development. The

transformative nature of citizenship practices has been discussed by scholars of active citizenship (Isin 2009; McNevin 2013; Rygiel 2016; Swerts and Oosterlynck 2020). Similarly, Schwartz-Marin and CruzSantiago have discussed how forensic civism is characterized in part both by practices of ‘self-improvement (learning about law, forensic science and narcopolitics) to navigate uncertainty’ and ‘as a core site of identity formation for both individuals and affected families’ (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016b, 59). In the border context, families engage in a transformative process as they engage with forensic techniques and procedures. For example, Juana, whose sister disappeared in 2006, showed me a box full of her sister’s medical records, photos, notes from her calls with authorities, printed email correspondence with officials, and even the backpack Alma had been carrying at the time of her disappearance, brought home by Alma’s son who survived the journey. She explained that it was the search for Alma that compelled her to learn English, how to use the internet, and how to project confidence when contacting state authorities. She laughed with pride when she told me the parts of the story where she had overcome her fears in order to search. ‘I even took a flight! I was so scared they would ask me for my papers, but I did it’ (Interview with the author, North Carolina, 2011). She flew to Arizona to retrieve Enrique, Alma’s son, and nurtured him after the trauma he had endured. Juana is now an advocate for immigrant rights and speaks to audiences about her experiences. She told me that the skills she developed in the search helped her navigate immigration bureaucracy to successfully obtain legal citizenship (Interview with the author, Arizona, 2020). Similarly, Gloria, who recognized her son’s camouflage pants, now helps other mothers to use NamUs and speaks at migrant shelters in Mexico to encourage young men not to cross. Not all families experience positive transformation and empowerment, however, and the predominant experience is one of feeling deeply and irrevocably harmed by the disappearance. Most of the families I spoke with described their continuing search as a duty to honor the missing person and to refuse to allow them to be forgotten.

Relational citizenship

Relational citizenship is characterized by Pols (2016, 177) as a process through which ‘people become citizens through interactions, whereby they create particular relations and social spaces’. Building on Pols, M’charek and Casartelli argue that the work of volunteer forensic scientists in Italy brings deceased migrants into a community bounded by relationships of care: Through this forensic care work bodies become people, individuals who belong to the community, rather than objects or waste to be disposed of (2019, 739). They expand this analysis to include NGOs, arguing,

By counting, analysing available data, making the numbers of deaths available, and filling in the gap where states fail, these NGOs perform acts of citizenship, as they make the dead members of a community of human beings (M’charek and Casartelli 2019, 742).

While the authors do make mention of ‘more than fifty families’ (Ibid., 747) coming to participate in the forensic process, the impact of these families on issues of sociality and relationality remains unseen. Along similar lines, Rygiel argues for a view of relational citizenship that emphasizes the act of death as that which compels states to respond, thereby subverting the dominant political order. ‘The death of the migrant/refugee forces

the state to forgo its categorization of legality/illegality in order to administer to the dead body' (2016, 549). Rygiel argues that because state authorities have an obligation to facilitate identification, burial, and notification of relatives, the dead gain a kind of 'posthumous citizenship' as 'the dead migrant or refugee acquires a new status as a legal-rights holder' (2016, 551). In both discussions, the relationality is that between the deceased person and the state, volunteer forensic expert, or NGO. The role of families of the dead and missing in relationships of care regarding the dead is absent. Non-family forensic experts and NGOs (and the dead) are credited with subverting a biopolitical order whereby migrants are categorized as external to the body politic. In my experience and research, families have a much more active role in this process than these depictions would suggest. As I will discuss below, families effect change through relationship building with those who have more access to information and public forums.

The first glimpse I had of the impact of families on forensic procedures in Arizona was when I began typing handwritten missing person reports into an Excel spreadsheet. These were 'courtesy reports' taken by the medical examiner's staff as families inquired about the unidentified dead. While it is typically the role of police to collect official missing person reports in the US, some medical examiner's offices will take unofficial reports so that they may be aware of missing persons with particular characteristics. In 2006, there were about 250 or 300 such reports for migrants, almost all handwritten, many with original photographs stapled to the front. As I typed the details and digitized the photos, I observed evidence of relationships of care between families and forensic officials. For example, a missing person report taken by a forensic anthropologist contained not only the usual information such as name, age, date last seen, and identifying features, but also handwritten notes in the margins reading: 'She was a good person. She did not bite her nails' (Author's fieldnotes, Arizona, October 2010). These qualities were noted despite the fact that the anthropologist knew that such details would not aid in a forensic identification: he was listening to and respecting what a family remembered about their missing loved one. Other reports included details like the fact that the missing person was a newlywed, a parent to children, or a schoolteacher – irrelevant to the forensic investigation, but important to the family and, perhaps, the forensic authority. Many reports were thick with multiple staples having been added to attach additional pages. These pages contained sometimes years of email correspondence between the forensic official and the family members of the missing person.

In the years to come, I would observe the ways in which individual forensic authorities are affected by families of missing migrants. In interviews with forensic anthropologists at the medical examiner's office, each could list a handful of missing persons by name, remembering specific details about the person and their family. While this is not unique to the border context (they could also list the names of missing persons unrelated to the border), it is significant that this evidence of relationality was apparent despite the enormous obstacles facing families of missing migrants as discussed above. I argue that in addition to caring about their work and caring for forensic infrastructure (M'charek and Casartelli 2019), forensic authorities also care about families and are affected by specific relationships with families. Each call, email, or visit from a family prompted a series of actions in the medical examiner's office: reviewing the report, checking the database again, updating the search, and responding.

Over time, such relationships can lead to forensic practitioners becoming advocates for the families of the missing. There is a small but growing network of forensic authorities along the border who have been active in pressuring local or federal government to make changes that would help families of missing migrants find information. In one case, forensic authorities joined families and NGOs to provide testimony at an Interamerican Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) hearing. At the hearing, the FBI was asked to defend the agency's refusal to allow massive genetic comparisons between family reference samples collected by NGOs and genetic samples from unidentified remains uploaded by medical examiners and coroners. Families provided emotional testimony in which they remembered their missing loved ones and explained the devastating impact of disappearance on their lives. In the years following the hearing, CODIS administrators have made progress in creating a mechanism for families to submit DNA through their consulates rather than through US law enforcement. In another case, problematic practices in Brooks County, Texas ended after families informed border NGOs and forensic authorities how they were being treated. The NGOs and forensic authorities then pressured county leadership, resulting in the cessation of some bad practices and initiation of large-scale exhumations so that those who had been buried improperly could be finally cared for (Author's fieldnotes, Arizona, August 2013; Frey 2015; Latham and O'Daniel 2018).

Through relational citizenship, families of missing migrants are instrumental in creating a network of care and obligation around the dead and missing. Regardless of the legal citizenship of the dead, families push forensic authorities to recognize their duty to investigate the dead within their jurisdictions and, through personal relationship-building, make the dead 'members of a community of human beings' (M'charek and Casartelli 2019, 742). Still there are forensic authorities in government offices throughout the border region who do not see the border dead as their responsibility: They do not see these dead as members of a community to which they hold any obligation. Thus it is not necessarily through 'the act of death' that 'the refugee or migrant forces others (the government and state) to recognize their right to have rights' (Rygiel 2016, 549). If the dead are not first recognized as human beings to which a debt of care is owed (Wagner 2019), they are treated as matter out of place and disposed of accordingly. By asserting that the dead 'have the right to have rights' (Arendt 1973), families of the missing along with some forensic authorities remind state authorities of their obligation to administer to the dead body. By demanding that the dead be recognized and respected, not just by anyone, but by US government authorities, family searchers bring these stigmatized and liminal dead back into membership as part of a community.

Conclusion

The families of those who have disappeared along the US-Mexico border are neither passive nor desperate in their search for information about missing loved ones, but rather engage in strategic practices of forensics and active citizenship. Like families of the disappeared in Argentina, they demand that the state investigate and provide answers. By using forensic techniques and technologies to investigate the disappearance of their missing loved ones and by building relationships with individual state authorities, families are instrumental in both the identification of individual dead bodies and the

creation of a growing community concerned about treatment of the collective dead along the US-Mexico border. In some cases, family relationship-building with forensic authorities is subtle, involving regular phone calls, emails, and work to humanize the missing person. In other cases, it is more direct, as exemplified by families testifying against FBI and Border Patrol officials at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2018. This work has impact beyond their individual cases, and is deeply political. To name and make visible these dead is to name and make visible the violence of US border policy. This labor is what Claire Moon calls ‘extraordinary deathwork’, which engages with mass dead that are of social and political importance, and can ‘enter into and change the interpretation of history, constitutions, laws and social relationships’ (Moon 2020, 45).

Through long-term ethnographic research, I have been able to show how these families, many of whom are undocumented, not only remind state authorities of their obligation to administer to dead bodies, but also knit together a growing community of care that advocates for the rights of those who have died while crossing the US-Mexico border. This is radical work that actively contests dominant conceptions of who has the right to have rights. It is only through the work of families that the border’s dead come to be recognized – scientifically, personally, and as members of a collective (Wagner 2008) that have been harmed by US border policy. Families of missing migrants re-connect, re-claim, and re-member the dead, incorporating them back into the life of the community as individual persons deserving of rights, respect, and care.

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