

Book Review/ Reseña

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***Border Afterlives: Migrant Deaths, Forensic Investigations, and the Politics of Haunting.* By Gabriella Soto. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2026. 386 pp. Hardcover, \$100, ISBN-13-978-0-8165-5508-6; paperback, \$36, ISBN-13-978-8165-5507-9; Ebook, \$36, ISBN: 9780816555093.**

In her pioneering research, anthropologist Gabriella Soto painstakingly threads together several fields of analysis with the catchy title, *Border Afterlives: Migrant Deaths, Forensic Investigations, and the Politics of Haunting*. The heart of the book covers the extensive, but underinvestigated and sloppily recorded, deaths of probable Undocumented Border Crossers (UBC, her acronym reference). Soto tries to make philosophical sense of this travesty with references to haunting and ghosts, applying theorists' complex concepts to her findings, including such theorists as Kristeva, Foucault, Latour, Derrida, Mbembe, and others.

Soto spent more than ten years with the Arizona Border Migration Institute (BMI) where she worked with academic colleagues and nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists to learn how officials at the local county and federal levels deal with bodies and death. For the most part, their efforts were wholly inadequate for a variety of reasons. Soto's focus is on the US side of the border rather than on the efforts of Grupo Beta Mexico to prevent deaths with water and medical assistance in the hostile terrain of the arid transborder desert and heat through which migrants pass.

For decades, US policy has funneled migrants traveling to the US away from urban areas and highways in a policy it calls "prevention through deterrence." Deaths have been documented—no doubt undercounted, given quick skeletonization in the desert heat and animal ravages on bodies—but the deaths seem somewhat invisible to the US public.

Embedded in the heartbreaking work of recovering "remains," the careless disposal of what some officials call migrant "trash" (113, 263), which is often crucial for later UBC identification and interactions with distraught relatives, Soto and her team developed an

early “best-practices” guidebook in 2014 after methodical research and interviews with county sheriffs and their deputies, justices of the peace (JPs), forensics staff, and the rare medical examiner (ME) stretched across many underbudgeted counties (Texas, for example, has only 13 MEs covering 254 counties). Soto and her team worked to strengthen the guidebook, but few local governments will reach the higher standard of care provided in Arizona’s Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in which Tucson is located, elaborated on at length in the book.

Soto’s recent research (2020–2025) took place in her case study of Brooks County, South Texas, a small county of 7,000 people and mostly private ranchland. She takes a deep dive (some readers might consider it to be too deep) into their practices in Chapter 4, complete with pictures. Although far from exemplary, some county officials made good-faith efforts to behave professionally, with care, particularly when their relationship developed with the South Texas Human Rights Center which assists with the complicated matter of time-consuming identifications. In one of Soto’s visits to a mobile morgue amid chronic understaffing in December 2022, she said: “an individual in storage had been awaiting attention for the rehydration of her fingerprints since the summer” (151).

The book should be a reminder to all about the importance of NGO engagement with locally elected officials, including those titled (in Texas) County Judges and Justices of the Peace, the latter of whom also certify death, like coroners, if the county is not fully staffed. Obviously, bureaucratic fragmentation, laws, and titles are made complex in the fifty states of the US federal system. Added to this complexity is the far better resourced US Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, the Border Patrol, and the constant changes within which they play a more secondary role to recovery practices.

Besides Soto’s thorough review of multiple fields of knowledge, from border studies to forensic science, she took thorough notes over a number of years. Copious references in the body of the book are cited by date as “personal conversation” and “field notes.” Among many other sources, Soto examined hundreds of official “incident reports” and analyzed how crucial information about how someone died or the manner of their death never got recorded in the clearly deficient categories locked on forms and death certificates.

Soto sometimes refers to local officials by their first names. Some, like JP “Nora” (later elected as a county judge), went above and beyond her duties to work with care; Nora also talked about feeling “haunted” (117), as did others in the Brooks County sheriff’s office (187), where staff sought to pursue best practices as the 2014 BMI manual specified.

Soto reveals, in near auto-ethnographic form, the “ghostliness” (28) that accompanied her work which, I believe, adds to the overall quality of the book and the moral challenges

raised in horrific US official practices that treat the probable-migrant dead with neither dignity nor respect. Bureaucratic fragmentation and complexity constitute virtual nightmares and reduce accountability.

In the introduction and closing chapters, Soto draws on theories and concepts to make sense of death, afterlife, and bureaucratic follow-up. For me, their applications were less valuable than the stark, detailed realities covered in multiple chapters that form the heart of the book, Part I, Chapters 1–5. However, in the near-final chapter's section on "decolonizing anthropology," Soto illuminates the insights of fuller attention to Indigenous people's ways to think about the continuities between life and death (301–303).

The federal government is responsible for the conditions that lead to UBC deaths, but investigation and identification fall mostly on local, under-resourced and often untrained county, (some callous) officials whose sheriffs see themselves as enforcers of state, not federal, law. And the Texas Operation Lone Star practices since 2021 add to the punitive treatment of UBCs. A dying UBC person might be charged with "criminal trespassing" if entering private ranch property.

In Chapter 6, "Homicide without a Murderer," Soto makes a persuasive case for characterizing how UBCs died as "homicide," given the way US policy corrals them into hostile terrain, rather than the usual official recordings as "natural causes" or "indeterminable." Even though such a reform toward more accurate language would be nonprosecutorial, the political likelihood that this could happen is near zero.

Soto's book is testimony to the importance of scholar-activists tackling heretofore near-invisible, under-researched problems with methods that range from in-depth embeddedness (also called participant observation), archival research, interviews, bureaucratic manuals, case law analysis, death certificates and databases (and their flaws), advocacy, witnessing, detailed notes, multiple and comprehensive sources and approaches, in addition to the standard full reviews of literature and relevant concepts.

Soto's book, albeit painful to read, should be comprehended in many disciplinary fields to include forensics, sociology-anthropology, government, and immigration and border studies. In her concluding chapter, Soto asks: "How do you reanimate the dead as rights holders deserving of care?" (313). Yes, Gabriella Soto, I agree that these deaths represent a "slow-moving mass casualty" (213); the deaths implicate us all who consent to, rather than challenge or resist, such policy and practice.

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