‘Something unquiet’: Book examines what happens after migrants die at the border

In ‘Border Afterlives,’ an ASU professor explores efforts to recover and identify the dead — and provide answers for their families

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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Story highlights

In her new book, “Border Afterlives,” ASU Associate Teaching Professor Gabriella Soto examines what happens after migrants die crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

The book reveals how uneven death-investigation systems can leave human remains unidentified and families without answers.

Drawing on more than a decade of research, Soto explores forensic investigation as both a scientific process and a form of care for the dead.

Soto’s research helped inspire ASU’s new Humanitarian Forensics Hub.

Long before Gabriella Soto began studying what happens to migrants who die crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, she saw evidence of their journeys scattered across the Arizona desert.

Soto grew up in Tucson, where her father worked in construction, paving roads and building campgrounds in remote areas. Along desert trails, she saw suitcases, backpacks, high-heeled shoes, food containers, water bottles and other personal belongings left behind.

There were also makeshift shrines with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, candles, rosaries, photographs and letters. Migrants created them to honor people who had died and to pray for their own safe passage.

Those images stayed with Soto, eventually shaping her career and her new book, "Border Afterlives: Migrant Deaths, Forensic Investigations, and the Politics of Haunting."

"The book is about a crisis involving how we care for the dead as a country and on the border," said Soto, an associate teaching professor and Honors Faculty Fellow at Arizona State University's Barrett, The Honors College.

"Border Afterlives" draws on more than a decade of Soto's research in Arizona and Texas. It follows what happens after migrants die — from the recovery of their remains through efforts to determine how they died, identify them and return them to their families.

And it examines the difficulty of applying forensic best practices in rural and underfunded jurisdictions that may lack trained personnel, laboratory access or space to store remains. It also asks what it means to care for the dead and what society owes people whose names and stories might otherwise be lost.

"I want you to be haunted, too," Soto writes near the beginning of the book.

That is, she wants readers to not only understand how unresolved deaths and disappearances continue to affect families, forensic investigators, search volunteers and entire communities, but to carry that understanding with them long after they've finished the book.

"It's not that I'm cursing you with this haunting," Soto said, "but I want you, the reader, to share in the reality of what's happening."

Through the idea of haunting, Soto explores how the dead continue to affect the living — not as objects of fear, but through the obligations they create. At its heart, she said, the book insists that the dead be remembered and that every reasonable effort be made to restore their identities.

A path shaped by the desert

Since 2000, the remains of more than 4,500 migrants have been handled by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, according to Soto. Many others remain missing or have never been recovered.

Soto began volunteering with search teamsSoto volunteers with search and rescue groups including Águilas del Desierto and Remote Wildlands Search and Recovery. in 2023 while completing her book. Before that, her early experiences in the Arizona desert planted the seeds for her work today.

As a high school student, Soto participated in organized desert cleanups. She later studied history and political science in college, but an archaeological field school in Honduras changed the direction of her career.

Soto earned a master's degree in 20th-century conflict archaeology from the University of Bristol in England. She initially considered studying the Spanish Civil War, but a conversation with her father brought her attention home.

"He was like, 'What about all the conflict archaeology out here?'" Soto recalled.

She returned to Arizona and earned a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Arizona. Her work with the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and volunteer search organizations became part of the research that eventually led to "Border Afterlives."

Soto hopes the book will introduce more students to humanitarian forensics and encourage readers to recognize the human stories behind unidentified remains.

"It is a request to acknowledge that every set of unidentified remains represents a person — and a family that may still be waiting for answers," she said. "Ignoring it isn't making it go away."

So, each month, Soto joins groups of 20 to 30 volunteers searching remote areas of Arizona and Texas for missing migrants and human remains.

The searches usually begin with information from a missing person's family, sometimes relayed through smugglers, about where the person was last seen. Because the location is often only an approximation, volunteers begin searching several miles before or beyond that point.

The work helped Soto recognize a limitation in her original research: Her book focused largely on people who had died and whose remains had been recovered. Search organizations introduced her to the far larger number of people who remain missing.

"There are a lot of missing people in the borderlands, and I want to help the groups who are able to search," Soto said. "I am by no means a leader. I am trying to help as a way of also trying to understand the bigger missing-persons crisis happening in the borderlands."

Her research also helped inspire ASU's new Humanitarian Forensics Hub, which brings together researchers, forensic practitioners, students, community organizations and families to improve efforts to find missing people, identify the dead and return them to their loved ones. Like Soto's book, the hub addresses fundamental questions about how society investigates deaths and what it owes the dead and their families.

A patchwork system

When human remains are found in the desert, what happens next can depend largely on where they are discovered.

In one county, a medical examiner may conduct an autopsy, collect DNA and compare fingerprints in an effort to identify the person. Elsewhere, limited funding, storage and expertise may mean remains receive little investigation before burial.

Although migration-related deaths are the focus of Soto's book, the problems she documents extend beyond the border. The United States has no single system governing death investigations, she said. Procedures, resources and professional requirements vary among states and counties.

Depending on the jurisdiction, an investigation may be led by a medical examiner, coroner or justice of the peace. Medical examiners are physicians with specialized training, while coroners and justices of the peace may be elected officials who are not required to have medical or forensic expertise.

The result, Soto said, is a patchwork system in which remains may go unidentified and families may never learn what happened to their loved ones.

Volunteers have stepped in to fill some of those gaps. Search teams travel into remote areas looking for missing people and human remains. Forensic anthropology teams examine bones, collect DNA and help authorities compare information with missing-person reports.

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Soto's research also has taken her into government records, medical examiner offices and forensic laboratories. She has studied death certificates, investigative reports and the decisions that determine whether remains undergo further examination.

Adequately caring for the dead begins with practical steps, she said: conducting a thorough investigation, determining a cause of death, collecting identifying information and making every reasonable effort to locate the person's family.

"If your loved one is missing, you want to know what happened to them," Soto said. "You want to know if there was foul play. You don't want there to be assumptions."

Identification can be especially difficult when remains are discovered after months or years in the desert. Fingerprints may no longer be available, leaving investigators to rely on dental records, DNA or an examination of the bones.

Even after DNA has been collected, remains may need to be stored for years while investigators search for a match. Soto said some forensic teams have run out of space, while some local agencies have used refrigerated trucks or buried unidentified remains because they lack long-term storage.

Caring for the dead

"Border Afterlives" extends beyond the mechanics of forensic investigation to consider why caring for the dead matters.

"You don't have to believe in an afterlife," Soto said. "You don't have to believe in God. You don't have to believe in ghosts. I think it is unambiguously troubling that we have thousands of unidentified and unrecovered dead in our borderlands."

Throughout history and across cultures, people have buried the dead, left offerings and created rituals of remembrance. Those traditions reflect a connection between the living and the dead that goes beyond practical concerns, Soto said.

“We learn from the dead,” she said. “Our societies are built on the knowledge that passes through generations.”

That connection led Soto to make “haunting” one of the book’s central themes — a way to describe how unresolved deaths continue to affect those left behind.

Soto experienced that emotional weight while reviewing years of death-investigation records. She initially approached the work as an objective researcher, concentrating on how scenes were documented and causes of death were classified. Over time, however, the details began to affect her.

“It eats away at you,” Soto said. “You can ignore it, but it eats away at you.”

Death investigators have described similar experiences, she said. Some dream about the scenes they encounter or feel as though the cases follow them home.

“That is why ‘haunting’ is the language,” Soto said. “It goes beyond just the individual. It’s this wider sense of something unquiet.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

[1] Soto volunteers with search and rescue groups including Águilas del Desierto and Remote Wildlands Search and Recovery.

Main image



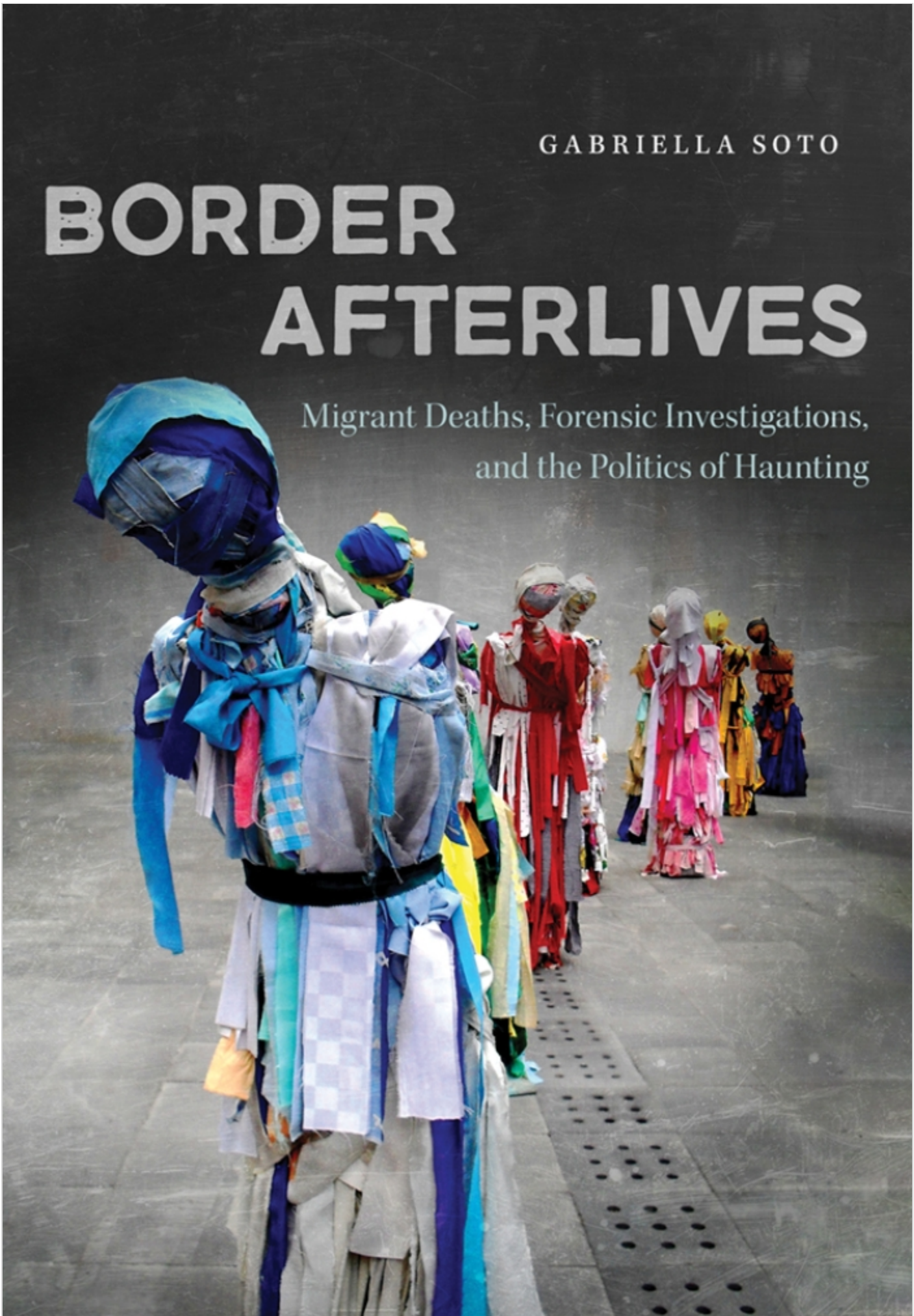
The U.S.-Mexico border. iStock image

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GABRIELLA SOTO

BORDER AFTERLIVES

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