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## INTRODUCTION

Comparable to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean and southern European Union, thousands of migrants are fleeing every year from extreme violence, poverty, and corruption in Central America and Mexico seeking sanctuary in the U.S.

Rates of migrant death along the U.S. southern border constitute an ongoing mass disaster resulting from militarized border enforcement policies that force migrants to cross treacherous desert terrain. Finding human remains with personal belongings, as well as material traces of migration routes and campsites is almost a daily occurrence in South Texas.

Operation Identification (OpID) within the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State, an initiative that seeks to facilitate the identification and repatriation of unidentified migrant remains found near the South Texas border, has recovered hundreds such personal effects associated with remains that have been forensically exhumed or transferred from local authorities.

The present research is part of an ongoing study examining the personal effects of all current OpID cases based on a theoretical framework that ascribes material objects important and active qualities and meanings.

This research also sheds light on the role that personal effects play in migrant death investigations and in the concepts of postmortem human dignity and collective memory.

## THEORETICAL APPROACH

The new *Material Turn* framework is based on the concept that materiality is not merely a product of cultural worlds, but an integral and entangled element of it: objects and landscapes have their own unique characteristics that both shape and are shaped by human realities.

In this view, materiality does not so much passively carry meanings endowed to it by cultures and societies, but rather constitutes a dimension without which culture could not exist.

Evolving from Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the *Material Turn* applies the Symmetrical Approach to studies of humans and material objects, recognizing that social worlds create materiality that, in turn, influences humans and societies to the highest degree.

Even the smallest things can therefore be material *actants*, serving as conveyors or mnemonics of messages and meanings, and representing Tales in themselves.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to understand the patterns and categories of objects recovered with migrant decedents in South Texas, data from previously washed, photographed, and catalogued personal effects from each of the 316 unidentified, presumed migrant cases to-date were systematically analyzed and recorded in what will become a searchable database. Categories of personal effects were created based on common themes. Case examples are provided.



OpID 0408

OpID 0377

Examples of portable religious objects that participated in the migration journey.

OpID 0463

OpID 0383

## RESULTS

### Categories of personal effects

- 1) Necessities**, such as clothing, shoes, hats, food and water, toiletries, money, cellular phones, identification (personal or alias), etc.
- 2) Carefully-selected personal mnemonic objects**, such as jewelry, photographs, drawings, stuffed toys.
- 3) Small religious (Catholic) items**, such as pendants, rosaries, prayer cards, iconographic images of Virgin Maria, Jesus, Saints, etc.

### Case Examples

**OpID 0377:** a transparent cross pedant with a grain of rice inside with the engraved names “Sara” and “Rigo” worn by an unidentified female 35 – 50 years old.

- A unique and personal object that is a literal conveyor of a message.

**OpID 0383:** blue Nike tennis shoes worn by a 23 year old male from Mexico and a necklace.

- The shoes and necklace, recognized by the family on NamUs, initiated the positive identification.

**OpID 0408:** luchador mask and stuffed animal lion found with a 35-56 year-old male.

- Items embodying the memory and identity of the decedent that should be identifiable and meaningful to the family, whenever they are found.

**OpID 0463:** a child’s drawing and note belonging to a 27-year-old woman from Ecuador.

- The letter directly conveys part of the woman’s story and led to a positive identification.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Personal belongings are elements of Actor-Networks on two ontological and epistemic levels: individual - regarding a single, particular victim, and collective - speaking to the process and experience of undocumented migrations into the borderlands of Texas.

Acknowledging the Symmetrical Approach to studies of humans and material objects and taking into consideration that the personal belongings of deceased migrants are those which victims have either on them or with them in the very moment of death uplifts their significance in regards to postmortem human dignity, or the desire to restore identity and inter remains according to cultural norms.

As the last material legacies of the deceased’s identity and mnemonics of their fate, personal effects hold and tell fragments of the life and death story, especially for the individuals who may never be identified.

From an investigative standpoint, personal effects continue to play an active role in initiating positive identifications and contributing to the grieving process of families.

Both reflecting and participating in the act of migration, these personal objects of OpID cases, whether necessities, personal mementos, or religious vessels, create a collective memory of these migrants and their journeys.

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