

Documenting Memory, Surveillance, and Carceral Geographies at National Park Sites in the US–Mexico Borderlands

 **Brittany Romanello**

ABSTRACT

This article is based on two years of postdoctoral research at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Juan Bautista de Anza Historic Trail. Using visual anthropology, ethnographic site visits, and participatory data collection, I explore how these public lands, often seen as spaces of heritage, recreation, and preservation, also function as sites of surveillance, violence, and contested memory. My research highlights how over-policing, resource shortages, and colonial narratives continue to influence these two National Park Service locations. Despite efforts toward reconciliation and “healing” through co-stewardship with Indigenous groups, both sites’ histories remain deeply tied to settler-colonial violence and ongoing state militarization. This complicates the implementation of practices that could foster community trust and engagement. Drawing from data and projects developed at both sites, I analyze the limitations of federal and community partnerships in addressing historical and present-day inequalities that affect not only the landscape but also how migrants, residents, employees, and tourists interact physically with these spaces. This work contributes to the scholarship on public lands, race, and memory by highlighting the often-overlooked human impact amid the social and political tensions of borderlands embedded within so-called protected and public lands. Community-led, ethnographically grounded approaches offer a promising path forward. By prioritizing Indigenous sovereignty, migrant experiences, and local stories, heritage practices can evolve toward more just and accurate representations of the complex interplay between federal oversight, legal policies, human movement, and public discourse at the US–Mexico borderlands.

Keywords: National Park Service; Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument; Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail; Arizona; California; Mexico

On Christmas Eve 2023, I stood inside Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument while the Lukeville Port of Entry (PoE) on the US–Mexico border stayed shuttered. Hundreds of asylum seekers and families from Senegal, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Mexico, Ukraine, and beyond had been pushed into the desert after being denied formal processing at the Lukeville PoE, where both citizens and migrants have the right to seek entry. Volunteers handed out water and blankets as cold weather persisted into the night. Nevertheless, Border Patrol agents, frustrated and short-staffed, shouted at us, their voices piercing the thin winter air. I watched one officer yell at an immigrant couple for not speaking English as he kicked trash across the sand, scattering wrappers and water bottles over the remains of a saguaro destroyed during the border wall construction.

In the O’odham language, the saguaro is called “Ha:sañ,” a sacred relative honored through millennia of ceremony and cultural practice (Parker 2023). Seeing their body treated as refuse, while asylum seekers endured verbal abuse simply for using the only route now available to them, through the rusted fences near a national monument, revealed a brutal contradiction. Sacred nature and cultural memory were and are desecrated next to the border wall, a symbol of empire. Human movement, which was and remains natural, was diminished and degraded here, within a designated national park site intended for preservation and storytelling. This moment crystallized the contradictions at the heart of my experiences in two borderland national parks. These sites are presented as places of heritage and protection for tourists, yet they also function as landscapes where

 **BRITTANY ROMANELLO**, Sociology and Criminology Department, Latin American and Latino Studies, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

surveillance and exclusion shape the everyday lives of those living in these areas.

USING CARCERAL FRAMEWORKS AND COMMUNITY METHODOLOGIES AT TWO NPS BORDERLANDS SITES

The US borderlands have long been regarded as spaces of intense sociopolitical entanglement; regions where cultural heritage, national identity, and state power converge. They serve simultaneously as sites of cultural and environmental preservation, often managed by the US National Park Service (NPS), and as zones of intensified militarized enforcement shaped by the construction and governance of the US–Mexico border wall. Across these varying borderlands landscapes that span from the coastal desert of San Diego to the historic trails threading through the Southwest and onward to Brownsville, Texas, in the Gulf of Mexico, NPS is tasked with interpreting collective memory and stewarding ecologies framed as “pristine” and “without people,” despite long-standing evidence of Indigenous land care and presence (Sifford and Chester 2007). This ideology, “preservation-as-emptiness,” reflects a federal infrastructure that casts heritage as something to be protected from human disturbance, reinscribing a settler-colonial imaginary of frontier life to be built on or over, even as communities with ancestral ties to these lands have never ceased to maintain them, even when forced away.

Research has shown that NPS units situated within the US–Mexico borderlands¹ are complicated to “manage” or “interpret” (Piekielek 2009; Provenzano and Nevins 2019). Their inclusion within 100-mile-wide border enforcement zones subjects locals, workers, and visitors to discretionary stops and searches by US Customs and Border Protection (USBP), transforming ostensibly public spaces into zones of suspicion and surveillance (Flores-Gonzales et al. 2024). In the borderlands, the constant possibility of detention, enhanced by the physical terrain and social atmosphere, is what scholars identify as *carceral geographies*: spatial formations in which the logics of imprisonment, control, and containment permeate the natural world of its inhabitants, including animals, humans, and even the spirits (Moran et al. 2018; Russell and de Souza 2023).

Within NPS sites, carceral geographies also influence heritage narratives and ideas of what is considered “natural.” The preservation of nature here can conflict with border enforcement infrastructures, creating spaces driven equally by fear, risk, and political volatility. In my two years as part of the Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship program, I did ethnographic fieldwork that engaged with these dynamics at two NPS units located along or crossing the US–Mexico border: Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (ORPI), situated directly on the Arizona–Sonora border, and Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail (JUBA), which extends from Hermosillo, Mexico, north through Arizona to Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco (Figures 1 and 2).

I was selected for this research because of my expertise in visual and place-based methodologies, including Photovoice² collaborations, oral histories, and participant observation with insular religious groups and undocumented immigrants. Yet, the extent to which these methods could be ethically implemented varied sharply between the two sites. At ORPI, where a presidential administration’s border wall expansion in the years before I arrived brought heightened militarization, fear of federal and state agencies, and legal ambiguity, ethnographic methods commonly used in anthropological inquiry became unviable and, in some instances, potentially unsafe. As a result, my analyses are primarily grounded in detailed field notes,

FIGURE 1. Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (from Piekielek 2016). KATIE JOHNSON

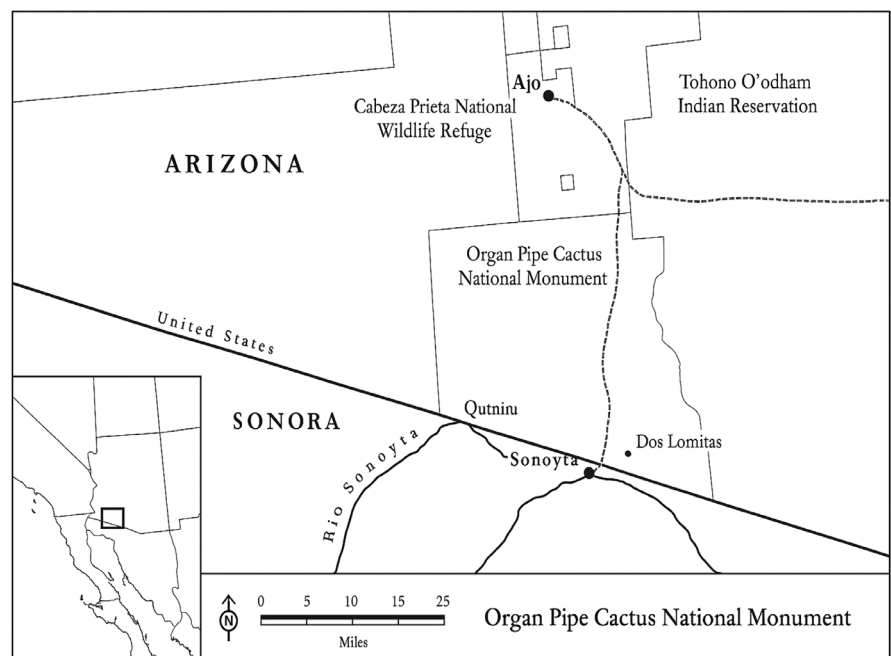


FIGURE 2. Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail.
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

observations, and documentation of interpersonal dynamics in situations where formal interviewing or participant observation could not be conducted without risk. In contrast, JUBA's multi-sited, community-embedded structure created space for more generative partnerships, collaborations with descendant and Indigenous communities, and shared interpretive work.

These divergent research experiences underscore the embedded contradictions at the heart of NPS borderlands units: spaces framed for visitors as landscapes of protection, heritage, and ecological stewardship, yet experienced by communities and practitioners as arenas of surveillance, exclusion, and racialized state power. The emotional intensity of these contradictions, shaped by differing political views, institutional mandates, and local leadership approaches, became a central feature of my post-doctoral research. Because my work is grounded in the study of migration, which NPS often opted to call "human movement," a subject that cannot be meaningfully depoliticized, the borderlands demanded a continuous negotiation of ethical obligations, personal safety, and methodological flexibility. Drawing on this, I examine how NPS functions as both a cultural memory institution and a mechanism to extend the reach of state surveillance; both of these institutions center "protection" as a priority. My analysis was guided by two questions: How do "protected" lands operate simultaneously as heritage spaces and enforcement zones? And, in responding to public discourses regarding heritage spaces and enforcement, how do borderland communities navigate, contest, and reinterpret the social issues embedded in these landscapes?

This article traces how these tensions manifested differently at ORPI and JUBA. As I will outline below, militarization, sweeping surveillance, and institutional fear constrained my research at ORPI to the point of ethical impossibility, leading me to be relocated to another NPS site within eight weeks of starting my postdoctoral research appointment.



While work on immigration and border governance remained challenging, my experience with NPS leadership at JUBA was much more collaborative, enabling meaningful and ethical opportunities for dynamic research and opening pathways for relational, historically accountable public engagement. At JUBA, I undertook extensive projects that reveal the complexities of human movement and public discourse at NPS borderlands sites and their neighboring communities. Ultimately, I argue that community-led interpretation and policy approaches offer more ethical and effective means of recognizing the communities affected by the border and militarization. When US federal governance does not prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, such community-led approaches have the power to honor complex histories of migration and resistance and reimagine what responsible "stewardship" can look like in carceral geographic spaces.³

MILITARIZED GOVERNANCE AND THE CARCERAL GEOGRAPHIES OF NPS BORDERLANDS SITES

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act and the various homeland security measures, USBP has authority to conduct warrantless searches, arrests, and patrols within

100 miles of the border (Flores Gonzalez et al. 2024). This includes sites such as ORPI, where the border shapes its daily operations. This coexistence is managed through interagency agreements, notably a 2006 memorandum of understanding among the departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Interior, and Agriculture, which mandates that USBP coordinate with land managers, such as NPS, on surveillance, road maintenance, and security activities. A 2023 briefing described this collaboration as an effort “to secure the border, [and] save our national parks” (US Department of the Interior 2023). Although USBP activities are usually subject to environmental and cultural laws, security expansions after 2002 gave DHS broad authority to waive these protections, further diminishing Tribal sovereignty and ecological mindfulness (Andreas 2012; Romanello et al. 2025; Repanshek 2025). As a result of this interagency collaboration, national monuments, wildlife refuges, and other federal lands became part of a system where conservation areas also serve as surveillance zones.

Additionally, Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) policies gained popularity in the mid-1990s. PTD migration and border “security” policies deliberately rerouted migrant crossings from populated ports of entry, such as Tijuana/San Diego and Ciudad Juárez/El Paso, into remote, dangerous terrain, transforming the desert itself into an instrument of enforcement (Nevins, 2002; De Leon, 2015; Cantu, 2018⁴). Due to these PTD implementations, migration patterns shifted crossings into areas like ORPI in southern Arizona, migrant fatalities surged (De León 2015). My initial aim during this postdoctoral fellowship was to examine how these NPS sites, part of “protected” lands, became tools through which federal governance strategies intersected and often undermined the core NPS mission (**NPS Mission Statement**). I also sought to observe how NPS staff and visitors interpreted these borderland sites. I hypothesized that many involved, visitors, staff, and nearby communities, etc., did not want to ignore the enforcement approaches that were causing risk, suffering, and death, but instead sought a more nuanced conversation about these issues. In practice, though, the result is a complex operational interdependence that binds conservation agencies to enforcement regimes. NPS and USBP share radio frequencies, conduct joint patrols, collaborate on restoration projects, and maintain an expanding network of vehicle barriers, access roads, and surveillance towers across park landscapes (Author fieldnotes, October 2023). These same lands have also become sites where humanitarians providing water or medical aid face prosecution (Martinez and Slack 2013; Boyce 2019), demonstrating how carceral logics extend into spaces designated by the federal government as

public, protected, and educational. Agencies such as USBP and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) may now operate with expanded authority across national parks and monuments (Cunningham 2020; Diaz et al. 2020), creating environments in which conservation, recreation, and enforcement are inseparable.

NPS borderland sites such as ORPI and JUBA are not, then, neutral interpretive spaces but rather terrains shaped by overlapping histories of colonialism and militarization. Enduring legacies of violence and displacement materialize through fences, checkpoints, surveillance towers, and patrol routes that influence the daily routines of tourists, residents, and migrants alike. These conditions highlight the structural tensions within NPS borderlands: stories of shared national heritage coexist with, and often mask, ongoing practices of exclusion and control that underpin the contemporary carceral “nature” of a border regime.

ORPI: BARRIERS TO RESEARCHING NEAR THE BORDER WALL

ORPI, located along the Arizona–Sonora border, is recognized by NPS as a unique desert wilderness, and a space for ecological preservation, public education, and recreation (Piekielek 2016). Yet, from an ethnographic perspective, ORPI is one of the most heavily militarized areas in the United States. Surveillance technologies, USBP checkpoints, and federal enforcement infrastructure saturate daily life within the park, revealing the contradictions embedded in how “protection” is both conceptualized and operationalized. These conditions not only shape visitor experiences but also restrict interpretation itself. For example, I found that many NPS staff must navigate political pressures that limit public engagement with Indigenous histories or the realities of migration.

ORPI is located on the ancestral homelands of the Tohono O’odham and Hia-C’ed O’odham peoples (Martinez 2023). Families of Hia-C’ed O’odham descent have maintained long-standing stewardship over Quitobaquito Springs, a sacred and vital oasis in the desert (Shroyer 2013; Piekielek 2016). The monument’s federal designation in 1937 and subsequent NPS policies displaced Indigenous families and limited access to traditional lands. As Orsi (2023) notes, federal efforts to “protect” Quitobaquito nearly destroyed it. In the 1950s, NPS purchased land around the springs for about \$13,000 from the Orosco family, bulldozed what had been their home, expanded the pond, and built a visitor center (Parazo Rose and Penner 2023). Livestock were removed, invasive species were poisoned, and non-native fish were introduced, all in the name of

preservation, resulting in ecological degradation that was disconnected from Indigenous knowledge systems (Flesch et al. 2023). As legal scholar Rebecca Tsosie affirms, “Indigenous presence is vital to the stewardship of the land,” emphasizing that sustainability depends on centering Indigenous relationships to place (Rose and Penner 2023). Beginning in the late 1990s, PTD strategies started being implemented within ORPI. For tourists, these may appear as brief delays at checkpoints or as visible infrastructure on the horizon. For Indigenous communities, they mean restricted mobility and increased surveillance, conditions that undermine sovereignty and threaten safety (Painter 2021). For migrants, these same conditions often lead to dehydration, injury, or death in the desert (Jones 2022).

I joined ORPI in August 2023 as a Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow. During my interview the previous spring, I clearly shared my personal, political, and academic views on the human toll of the border wall and the violent history of policing and activities of USBP. As immigration scholars, we are trained to analyze these perspectives, their historical backgrounds, and their influence on current work. Additionally, my experience in immigration law, humanitarian aid, and working at

Some NPS leaders at both the national and park level viewed humanities and social science researchers as potential threats to the park’s operations and reputation.

the Maricopa County Medical Examiner’s office involved regular contact with police officers and USBP agents. The NPS staff did not view my disclosure negatively; they offered me the position within a day of the interview, despite the presence of other strong candidates. This is an important context because the NPS staff who interviewed me knew my views, background, and training, yet still chose me. However, none of us expected the rapid and drastic change in migration patterns along the US–Mexico border in Arizona that summer.

Upon starting my fellowship, crossings from Sonora into ORPI surged to hundreds or sometimes thousands per week, profoundly shaping my experience at ORPI from the outset (Romanello et al. 2025). My initial one-on-one meeting at ORPI’s physical location after being hired revealed that they viewed my role as deeply embedded within the NPS employee hierarchy, rather than as an external researcher collaborating equally

with leadership and community members (Author field notes, September 2023). Park staff advised me to be “careful” when expressing my views on immigration, as they were “nervous” about how my suggestions might be received (Ibid.). This advice to be cautious was not new to me, but the behavior and treatment by NPS leadership surprised me.

For example, in my first week, after speaking with some of the visitor center staff about what they felt was going well in interpretation and what they wished were different, a few expressed a desire to have better talking points for visitors about the ongoing surge of migrants in the park. I mentioned this during a group training with other Mellon Fellows during our NPS orientation, when prompted to share our goals for the fellowship. Before a staff meeting later that week at which the superintendent would be present, I was advised to “tone down” my enthusiasm for discussing immigration (Ibid.). Later that day, the superintendent held a staff meeting to announce new USBP regulations for ORPI personnel. Leadership emphasized caution while driving through the park and advised us to be ready to identify ourselves as NPS staff due to the presence of journalists, anti-immigrant vigilante groups, and tourists accessing private roads without permission. Further, USBP also announced that it would pay an undisclosed sum in the “millions of dollars” to ORPI for damage caused to park roads and wildlife by “reckless off-road driving” of USBP vehicles (ORPI printed meeting agenda, August 2023). Later, I learned that USBP had been fined for damaging ORPI roads, and that some migrants had been injured or killed by USBP vehicles in recent years due to reckless driving by its agents (Ibid.). This meeting established a very stark precedent for the rest of my time at ORPI.

In anthropological research, documenting conversations or events as outlined above is crucial for understanding the sociopolitical context of a new research site and for tracking patterns during fieldwork. Early interactions, as illustrated here, made clear that some NPS leaders at both the national and park level viewed humanities and social science researchers as potential threats to the park’s operations and reputation. Although not explicitly instructed to remain silent, I was pushed to the margins in unexpected ways without explanation. For example, I was often denied access to key leadership meetings that could provide resources, such as transportation, and to informational signs located a few miles within the park that my vehicle could not access. Employees were also instructed not to speak with me without their supervisors’ prior approval, and my only

access at the visitor center was to the library (Author field notes, September 21, 2023). I conveyed my budding concerns to my Mellon supervisor, characterizing this behavior as a “complete 180” from the interview and hiring experience. I had not expected a site that requested an in-house researcher, only to systematically block access to the resources needed to make objective, comprehensive recommendations to improve visitor and public engagement.

However, while based in Ajo, about 30 minutes north of ORPI where I was living, new details emerged. I gained better insight into why I might be receiving this treatment from NPS leadership. I often met with select ORPI colleagues after hours at the only grocery store or at the bar in Ajo’s downtown plaza. Sometimes we went to Costco in Tucson or drove to nearby towns to eat. During these times, ORPI employees told me they felt more comfortable speaking freely about their experiences and voicing concerns regarding how I and others were being treated. They also shared their views on the ongoing migration and leadership tensions at ORPI. One common theme was that they felt bound by a “code of silence,” which compelled them to downplay their concerns, questions, or dissatisfaction about the lack of transparent communication between senior leadership and staff. Some described how they built private networks of information to protect themselves and their jobs from political scrutiny and the real dangers at ORPI posed by armed agents and traffickers crossing the park. One employee, who had significant access to ORPI security and contact with USBP agents, told me that “people are suspicious of a new researcher because they are afraid you’ll ‘expose’ the park to unwanted attention.” Based on all this information and the “code of silence,” it became clear during my first weeks at ORPI that larger issues were at play beyond my individual capacity to address. I believe these issues reflect broader tensions within the Mellon Humanities NPS Postdoctoral Fellowship program, especially the ambiguous role of non-federal scholars within NPS bureaucratic and management structures. Consequently, I requested a transfer to another NPS site where institutional support for community-based, collaborative approaches might be more consistent.

While awaiting approval to leave Ajo and move to another NPS site, the Lukeville PoE, located in the middle of ORPI, unexpectedly closed during December 2023 and January 2024. This port is a key route for authorized workers, students, and tourists from Mexico traveling to Arizona, thereby bypassing less-developed, sometimes dangerous

border highways. It also serves as an important crossing for members of the Tohono O’odham Nation to visit relatives in Mexico. USBP stated that the closure, made with little advance notice, was due to narcotrafficking and migration issues (USBP 2023). This closure, in addition to the internal issues I experienced at ORPI, severely limited my ability to conduct further fieldwork on human movement, given its unprecedented impact on the region’s social, political, and economic conditions (Romanello et al. 2025). Nonetheless, living in Ajo and volunteering with park and community members after hours, I saw how these themes of dispossession, the described “code of silence,” border governance, and a lack of holistic solutions to the various issues facing borderland communities resulted in the “border crisis” often referred to on the news or at the national scale. Further, in working directly at the border wall, I saw firsthand in this particular historical moment which lives, stories, and memories are treated with validity, which lives are treated as disposable, and what was considered “natural” in this brutal landscape, such as was my experience on Christmas Eve at the beginning of this article.

JUBA: PLACE-MAKING, AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

After living in Ajo and briefly working at ORPI, I relocated to JUBA from February 2024 to August 2025. Extending from Arizona to California, JUBA commemorates the 1775–1776 Spanish colonial expedition that brought settlers to what is now San Francisco. NPS **promotes the trail** as a multicultural corridor that celebrates diverse influences on the American West. However, beneath this celebratory narrative lies a more complex and often violent history: colonial conquest, Indigenous dispossession, Afro-Mexican erasure, and selective memory. Ethnographically, my experience working with JUBA offered more meaningful opportunities for community partnership than my work at ORPI. This difference was mainly due to JUBA leadership. My impression of the superintendent and other management was that they prioritized the well-being of their constituents and were committed to telling comprehensive histories, including those acknowledging the US government’s forceful and violent actions, as part of their interpretive storytelling. Unlike ORPI, where surveillance by USBP overshadowed interpretive goals and public discourse, JUBA leadership actively supported community-driven approaches that fostered more open engagement with complicated histories.

My work at JUBA focused on highlighting issues of migration and community memory. Human movement actively influenced partnerships and local communication along the trail, especially in neglected or less-well-understood

areas such as El Centro, California, and Yuma, Arizona, near the border. I was interested in how NPS interpretive practices often sanitize colonial histories by removing the harm and violence caused by settler colonialism and by omitting or downplaying Afro-Mexican, Indigenous, and Latinx contributions, particularly in relation to historical and current immigration patterns. For example, one of my early projects was updating the trail's public materials. I worked with JUBA leadership to revise brochures to include Afro-Latinidad, challenging the dominant historical stories that had long excluded these borderland and California communities, partly due to Mexican migrations such as the Anza Expedition (Schloepner 2021; Glegziabher 2022). This means I aimed to make the stories more inclusive and to emphasize gender and intersectionality, showing how Black Mexican migrants were both helped and harmed by these same historical events. This work was an important step in correcting institutional interpretations, but such efforts must be part of broader structural changes to truly address colonial legacies.

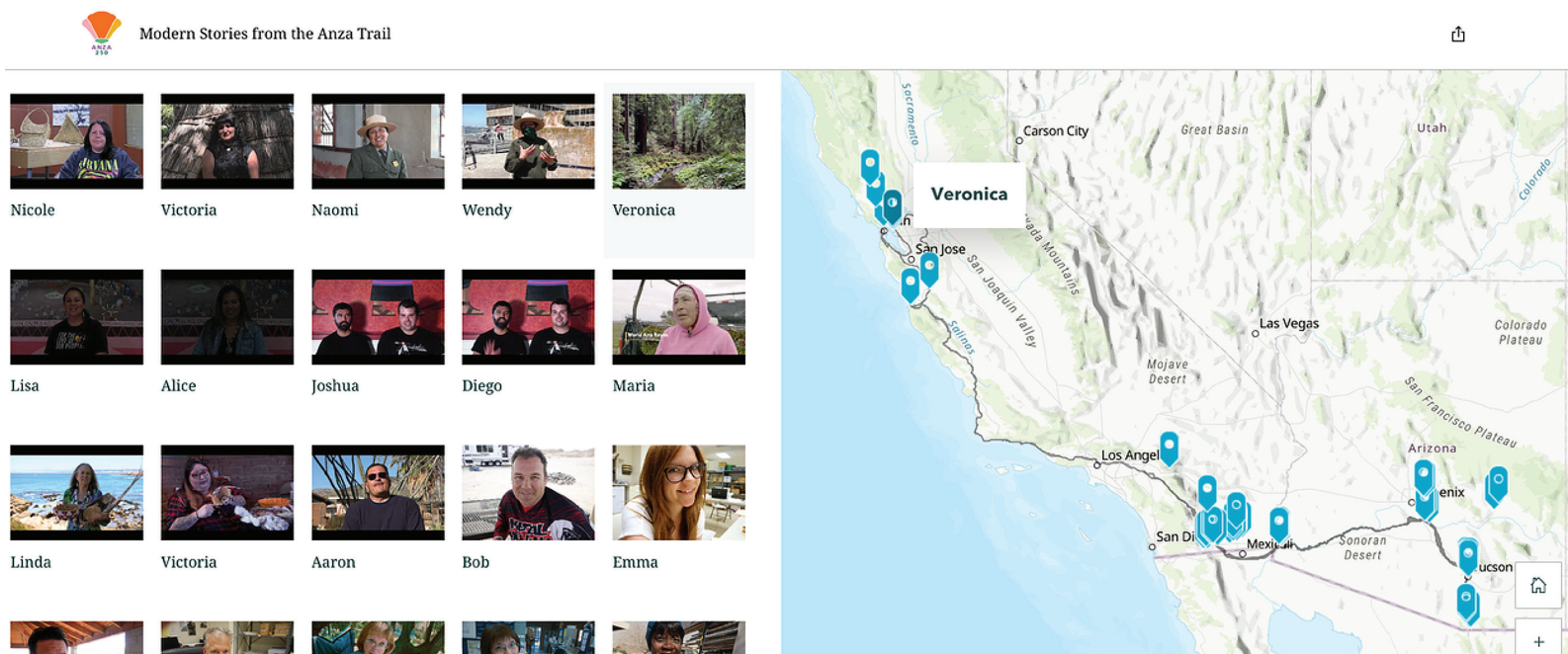
Notably, despite the lingering effects of colonial legacies, JUBA leadership supported community-driven, experiential methods. In fact, they actively endorsed these approaches during initial meetings about potential site visits along the trail (Author field notes, March 2024). With guidance from Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow Sarah Montoya, JUBA leaders developed a new public values statement that explicitly emphasized the importance of

addressing incomplete or sanitized histories along the trail. This change in emphasis prompted institutional reforms, such as discontinuing historically inaccurate re-enactments, redesigning the trail's logo to eliminate offensive and anti-Indigenous imagery, and supporting my work through multiple site visits in Arizona, California, and Mexico. These visits helped evaluate interpretive materials, provide cultural competency recommendations, and secure funding for community-informed projects focused on repairing harm and providing reparations (Author field notes, October 2024). For example, this included funding Indigenous education initiatives and projects led by groups dedicated to uplifting Indigenous and Latinx communities at JUBA sites. Coordinating these efforts with leadership support helped build trust and reduce hesitation between academic researchers and community members, creating a foundation for mutually beneficial partnerships. Such collaborations have been shown to boost public confidence in federal institutions such as NPS (Doctors and Carter 2021; Perry et al. 2025).

During summer 2024, after receiving valuable input from various site visits, I developed and led a Photovoice project with 25 participants across Nogales, Rio Rico, and Tucson, Arizona, as well as El Centro and Imperial Valley, California (Figure 3).

Participants submitted over 250 photos reflecting landscapes influenced by Indigenous disenfranchisement,

FIGURE 3. A screenshot of the Modern Stories website, updated with my Photovoice data.



genocide, and the modern border wall. In April and May 2025, the project expanded to include youth from Tucson and San Miguel, Hermosillo, Mexico, who created community art and broadened the ethnographic perspective. These visual stories highlighted how official views often differ from community memory and lived experience. Participants focused on themes such as displacement, environmental change, resilience, and multicultural belonging. The photos captured how border wall construction has disrupted sacred landscapes, changed cultural practices, and revealed daily survival strategies, memories, and cultural ties. These themes are largely missing from federal narratives, which tend to favor sanitized or romanticized stories of colonial migration and settlement. Conversely, our community-created content shifted the trail's interpretation toward greater honesty and inclusion. The ability to collaborate freely contrasted sharply with ORPI, where even small interpretive actions were limited because of the presence of USBP and other federal agents addressing immigration in the area. Further, the “code of silence” many employees described to me further exacerbated tensions and quality of work life at ORPI.

Additionally, collaborations with institutions such as UNIDEP (a private career college in Mexico) and the Sonora branch of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), as well as youth organizations like Ironwood Tree Experience in Tucson, helped expand the project's reach and reinforce its transnational basis. During my visit to San Miguel de Horcasitas in Hermosillo, Mexico, in February 2025, made on behalf of JUBA for a joint project between the US and Mexico commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Anza Expedition, I saw firsthand the strong support from Mexican partners for youth-centered ethnographic methods, increased Photovoice data collection, and art creation. UNIDEP archivist Julio Perrea, the original principal investigator on the project in Mexico, led efforts to recruit young participants aged 12–18 and engaged local non-profits and government representatives who previously had been difficult to involve. The Mellon partnership and funding enabled our international team to explore both the opportunities and challenges of binational collaboration, providing space for voices often excluded from prior conservation and heritage initiatives. Nonetheless, agency-wide NPS policies restricted the extent of interaction between Mexican partners and US employees or sites, highlighting the tension between NPS institutional aims for international cooperation and the practical constraints faced by small teams like JUBA's in developing these relationships.

Ultimately, my work with JUBA embodies both the promise and precarious nature of heritage interpretation. On one hand, it provides platforms for communities to assert presence, resist erasure, and engage in place-making through

My time at JUBA showed me the many possibilities for rethinking how federal and national sites in the borderlands engage with topics such as land acquisition, race, gender, and Indigenous histories.

various methods. On the other hand, if done without considering the intersectional considerations of the many communities shaped by colonial institutions, interpretation may reproduce sanitizing state violence, restrict transnational partnerships, and marginalize communities who are already historically excluded from full participation in reconciliation efforts. My time at JUBA showed me the many possibilities for rethinking how federal and national sites in the borderlands engage with topics such as land acquisition, race, gender, and Indigenous histories. The necessity of ethnographically grounded, community-led strategies reflects the complex, often painful histories of the borderlands. My time also illustrated how institutional support, when genuinely aligned with community priorities, can help build bridges that can repair mistrust and foster meaningful, lasting partnerships.

CREATING COMMUNITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND MEMORY IN NPS BORDERLANDS SITES

The case studies of ORPI and JUBA illustrate how protected areas in US–Mexico borderlands serve as both carceral geographies and memory landscapes. These areas are racialized zones of surveillance and exclusion, yet also spaces where stories of protection, reconciliation, and multiculturalism are actively formed. Surveillance here is both physical and symbolic, with both types being racialized and influencing access, safety, and belonging based on Indigenous sovereignty, migrant status, and race. Reconciliation efforts by NPS and similar agencies are often well-intentioned but limited by structural constraints. Initiatives to highlight Indigenous histories, include diverse narratives, or partner with Tribal governments often fall short of addressing the core issue of land theft from Indigenous peoples. Concepts such as “co-stewardship” enable NPS to recognize Indigenous presence without acknowledging land-return demands, functioning more as institutional “band-aids” than as transformative, long-term strategies (Yogev 2024). These

cases show that policing and criminalizing humanitarian aid happen not only at the border but also within landscapes managed by NPS, demonstrating that heritage sites are intertwined with the security state.

The human toll of these contradictions is profound. Migrants risk and lose their lives in landscapes simultaneously celebrated as wilderness. Residents navigate the duality of recreation and securitization, in which tourism economies coexist with humanitarian crises. Indigenous communities continue to confront restricted access to ancestral sites under forced federal control or have to navigate precarious access under the tenets of “co-stewardship.” These realities underscore that public lands in the borderlands are not neutral spaces of leisure or memory; they are contested terrains where racialized violence is ongoing.

At the same time, community-based projects, such as Photovoice, oral histories, and youth collaborations, offer glimpses of alternative possibilities. By centering local knowledge and lived experience, these projects challenge exclusionary narratives and assert more pluralistic, grounded accounts of borderlands history. They reveal how heritage can be practiced differently, even within the constraints of federal frameworks. Ultimately, public lands in the US borderlands hold public memory, but they also erase it. They offer reconciliation, but they also reproduce violence. Recognizing these contradictions is essential for NPS employees, researchers, stakeholders, policy-makers, and community advocates seeking to transform how memory and place are constructed in contested landscapes.

RETHINKING NPS REPRESENTATION AND PLACE-MAKING IN THE BORDERLANDS

NPS sites in borderlands are complex, contradictory spaces. They aim to commemorate, preserve, and educate, yet also engage in surveillance, exclusion, and harm. The case studies of ORPI and JUBA demonstrate how these contradictions are woven into the core of heritage preservation and border enforcement structures. Ethnographic methods, especially community-driven visual techniques like Photovoice, highlight these tensions by giving voice to those most impacted. Migrants, Indigenous and Black communities, and residents share experiences of displacement, resilience, and belonging often missing from official NPS stories. These accounts show that shaping memory in borderlands is not neutral or apolitical but deeply linked to colonial histories and current securitization efforts. Although these dynamics are present throughout the borderlands, this article

emphasizes NPS sites to argue that preservation and securitization are deeply interconnected.

For both researchers and federal employees, the implications are evident. Protected lands should not be viewed solely as areas for recreation or reconciliation. Instead, they must be acknowledged as contested terrains where racialized surveillance and exclusion continue to be active. Interpretive strategies need to go beyond token inclusion and authentically represent the diversity, complexity, and violence of borderlands histories. Community-driven, ethnographically based methods provide a promising way forward. By prioritizing Indigenous sovereignty, migrant experiences, and local stories, heritage practices can become more just and accurate. Although structural limitations persist, these approaches open the possibility of rethinking public lands as sites of memory, accountability, and restoration. During my fellowship, I was reminded that engaging ethically with these landscapes involves not only conserving ecosystems and honoring history but also embracing discomfort. This research has been complex, controversial, and challenging at times. Still, it underscores the potential for a more inclusive and holistic future, one that remains attainable if our dedication to change endures beyond current obstacles and political barriers.

ENDNOTES

1. Some NPS sites located within the 100-mile-wide border enforcement zone are: Amistad National Recreation Area (TX), Big Bend National Park (TX), Chamizal National Memorial (TX), Coronado National Memorial (AZ), El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (Mexico City to Santa Fe, NM), Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail (Hermosillo, Mexico, to San Francisco, CA), Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (AZ) Padre Island National Seashore (TX), Saguaro National Park (AZ), and Tumacácori National Historical Park (AZ).
2. With Photovoice, participants document their environment and share their perspectives on social, health, and community issues through photography. They take pictures to document their lived experiences, discuss meaning through storytelling, and use the images and narratives to promote dialogue, raise awareness, and advocate for change. Often, this process is used to empower marginalized communities and influence policy-makers.
3. I acknowledge here that “stewardship” is a fraught term. I do not wish to undermine NPS’s attempts, locally or federally, to recognize past and ongoing

harms towards Indigenous nations and Tribal membership. However, I also would like to note, that in my short time working with NPS and its stakeholders, many Indigenous individuals and groups I encountered or worked with actively rejected the idea of “co-stewardship,” and the lasting harm that this concept has caused their ancestors and contemporary communities by minimizing displacement and erasure. My opinion is that if NPS is to actively seek lasting change and reparations, part of that initiative should include problematizing and interrogating the model of co-stewardship as being inherently impossible. Many groups have asked again and again to give the land

back. Without returning the land back to its rightful caretakers, Congress continues to violate treaties and promises. Land-based decisions for and about Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island should be theirs alone. For more information, please see Amy Jo Dugan-Kimball’s “Indigenizing the National Parks [sic] Service—Unlearning settler colonial history on Native lands” (2024).

4. I want to acknowledge Francisco Paco Cantu as one of my academic inspirations and also my official mentor for the duration of my postdoctoral work with the National Park Service. I could not have become the researcher I now am in these borderland spaces without his mentorship.

REFERENCES

- Andreas, Peter. 2012. *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Boyce, Geoffrey Alan. 2019. The neoliberal underpinnings of Prevention Through Deterrence and the United States government’s case against geographer Scott Warren. *Journal of Latin American Geography* 18(3): 192–201.
- Cantú, Francisco. 2018. *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*. New York: Penguin.
- Congressional Research Service. 2021. *U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s Powers and Limitations: A Primer*, November 30. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB10559>
- Cunningham, Hilary. 2020. 8 Necrotone: Death-dealing volumetrics at the US-Mexico border. In *Voluminous States: Sovereignty, Materiality, and the Territorial Imagination*, Franck Billé, ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 131–145. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478012061-010>
- Daniels, Roger. 2005. *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882*. New York: Hill And Wang.
- De León, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Díaz-Barriga, Miguel, and Margaret E. Dorsey. 2020. *Fencing in Democracy: Border Walls, Necro-citizenship, and the Security State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Doctors, Emma Rose, and Katherine E. Carter. 2021. Small museums and community partnerships: Equity, education, and interpretation. *Journal of Museum Education* 46(3): 285–295.
- Dugan-Kimball, A.J. 2024. Indigenizing the National Parks [sic] Service—Unlearning settler colonial history on Native lands. Master’s thesis, Montana State University. <https://scholarworks.montana.edu/items/a3aefd29-5e1c-4bd7-a3cb-5fdb151cc4fc>; <https://scholarworks.montana.edu/handle/1/18676>
- Flesch, Aaron D., Gary P. Nabhan, and Peter Holm. 2023. Historical changes in bird communities at Quitobaquito Springs, Arizona and impacts of climate, spring flow, and shift from Indigenous to federal-agency management. *Journal of Arid Environments* 219 (2023): 105075.

- Flores-Gonzalez, Nilda, Emir Estrada, Michelle Tellez, Daniela Carreon, and Brittany Romanello. 2024. The Impact of the 100-mile Border Enforcement Zone on Mexican Americans in Arizona. *American Behavioral Scientist*: 00027642241229532.
- Glegziabher, Meskerem Z. 2022. Where are all the Black folks? Popular narratives and the erasure of Black history in Arizona. *Journal of Arizona History* 63(3): 345–362.
- Heyman, Josiah. 2012. Capitalism and US policy at the Mexican border. *Dialectical Anthropology* 36: 263–277.
- International Sonoran Desert Alliance. 2025. Sonoran Desert Biosphere Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.
- Johanson, Emily J. 2020. The Migrant Protection Protocols: A Death Knell for Asylum.” *UC Irvine Law Review* 11: 873.
- Jones, Reece. 2022. *Nobody is Protected: How the Border Patrol Became the Most Dangerous Police Force in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
- Jordan, Miriam. 2024. African migration to the US soars as Europe cracks down. *International New York Times*, January 5.
- Licata, O.M. 2025. A self-fulfilling prophecy: Realism in U.S. foreign policy. Thesis, Claremont-McKenna College.
- Luna-Firebaugh, Eileen M. 2002. The border crossed us: Border crossing issues of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. *Wicazo Sa Review* 17(1): 159–181.
- Martinez, Daniel, and Jeremy Slack. 2013. What part of ‘illegal’ don’t you understand? The social consequences of criminalizing unauthorized Mexican migrants in the United States. *Social & Legal Studies* 22(4): 535–551.
- Martínez, David. 2023. Sand people and yellow fever: O’odham Himdag, Arizona Territory, calendar sticks, and resistance, 1851–1860. *Journal of Arizona History* 64(2): 139–172.
- Moran, Dominique, Jennifer Turner, and Anna K. Schliehe. 2018. Conceptualizing the carceral in carceral geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 42(5): 666–686.
- Nevins, Joseph. 2002. *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Remaking of the U.S.–Mexico Boundary*. New York: Routledge.
- Orsi, Jared. 2023. *People of a Sonoran Desert Oasis*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Painter, Fantasia Lynn. 2021. *Bordering the nation: Land, life, and law at the US–Mexico Border and on O’odham Jeved (land)*. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.
- Parazo Rose, Maria, and Daniel Penner. 2024. The National Park Service’s efforts to protect Quitobaquito Springs almost destroyed it. *High Country News*, January 24. <https://www.hcn.org/articles/the-national-park-services-efforts-to-protect-quitobaquito-springs-almost-destroyed-it/>
- Parker, Sam. 2023. Symbols of the Southwest: Saguaro cacti embody cultural, spiritual, natural significance. *The Daily Wildcat* [University of Arizona], October 24. <https://wildcat.arizona.edu/150465/news/symbols-of-the-southwest/>
- Perry, Elizabeth E., Jennifer Jewiss, Robert E. Manning, and Clare Ginger. 2025. How to define urban park relevance? Examining and integrating the views of the U.S. National Park Service and its partners on the goal of ‘relevance to all Americans.’ *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 68(8): 1950–1968.

Piekielek, Jessica A. 2009. Public wildlands at the US–Mexico border: Where conservation, migration, and border enforcement collide. PhD diss., University of Arizona.

Piekielek, J. 2016. Creating a park, building a border: The establishment of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and the solidification of the US–Mexico border. *Journal of the Southwest* 58(1): 1–27.

Provenzano, Adriana, and Joseph Nevins. 2019. Arming the environment, and colonizing nature, territory, and mobility in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 18(2): 456–485.

Repanshek, Kurt. 2025. GOP senators introduce legislation to open up wilderness to homeland security activities. *National Parks Traveler*, October 5.

<https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2025/10/gop-senators-introduce-legislation-open-wilderness-homeland-security-activities>

Romanello, B., G. Sanchez-Bachman, and J. Orozco. 2025. Asylum seekers' rights denied and border communities disrupted: Ethnographic accounts on the 2023 border closure in Lukeville, Arizona. *Social Sciences* 14(10): 617.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14100617>

Russell, Emma K., and Poppy de Souza. 2023. Counter-mapping the mobile border: Racial surveillance and data justice in spaces of disappearance. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 41(3): 494–512.

Setiawan, Dani, Darra Ananda, and Tina Kartika. 2025. Media framing of Donald Trump's 2024 election victory: A case study on international media. *MEDIASI Jurnal Kajian dan Terapan Media, Bahasa, Komunikasi* 6(1): 1–21.

Schoeppner, Michael A. 2021. Black migrants and border regulation in the early United States. *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 11(3): 317–339.

Sifford, Belinda, and Charles Chester. 2007. Bridging conservation across La Frontera: An unfinished agenda for peace parks along the US–Mexico divide. In *Peace Parks: Conservation and Conflict Resolution*, Saleem H. Ali, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

USBP [US Customs and Border Patrol]. 2023. Statement from CBP on Operations in Lukeville, AZ. December 2.

<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/statement-cbp-operations-lukeville>

US Congress. H.R.5005 – 107th Congress (2001–2002): Homeland Security Act of 2002.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/5005>

US Department of the Interior. 2023. National parks and border security. Statement of Michael T. Reynolds, National Park Service, before the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight And Investigations, October 18. <https://www.doi.gov/ocl/national-parks-and-border-security#:~:text=Regardless%20of%20proximity%20to%20U.S.,enter%20the%20lands%20we%20manage>

Yogev, Yonit. 2024. Equity and inclusion in the National Park Service: Historical challenges, new possibilities. In *The Changing Geography of National Parks and Protected Areas*. Joe Weber and Selima Sultana, eds. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 153–177.