What We Carry, What We Lose:

Objects, Artists, and the Presentation of Mexican Migration

By Sailor Stanley

Department of History

Abstract:

This paper examines how contemporary artists transform objects of Mexican migration into sites of public memory. Analyzing Tom Kiefer's photography, Susan Harbage Page's anti-archive, Margarita Cabrera's sculptural transformations, and Elizabeth Z. Pineda's cyanotypes and performances, I argue that these artists construct an alternative archive that challenges dehumanizing political rhetoric. Objects function as tools of survival, identity preservation, and evidence of state violence. The paper compares three modes of presentation—photography, direct display, and artistic transformation—and asks how each shapes public understanding of migration. This paper also questions who holds authority to tell these stories, contrasting white artists and Mexican artists. By tracing objects from borderlands to museums, this paper demonstrates that public memory is not discovered but actively created through choices that determine which objects matter, whose stories are told, and how viewers are invited to respond.

I. Introduction

Artist Elizabeth Z. Pineda remembers her mother's cooking. Not as recipes, but as proof of her culture and identity. "I made cyanotypes of my birth certificate, marriage license, and the only picture of me I have as a child on corn husks to give them the validity taken away from them," she explains. "Shortly thereafter, I realized that the experience made me question my belonging and the idea of home, what home is, who has a right to dictate what home is, and who has a right to it. Home is ultimately my mother and her cooking... This is the heart and intent of this work. It gave me the validity I lost. It permitted me to feel whole again. I believe it also gives others a voice; one through a humble corn husk."[4]

Pineda is one of several artists transforming objects related to Mexican migration into art. The U.S.-Mexico borderlands are often discussed in terms of security, sovereignty, and illegality. Missing from these discussions is the reality of being a migrant and the everyday objects they carry and leave behind. A water bottle wrapped in duct tape. A single blue shoelace. A toothbrush, bristles splayed and dirty. A child's backpack with the character Miffy on it. These objects—discarded by the thousands who cross the border every year—constitute an alternative archive of Mexican migration. In recent years, artists and museums have turned these objects into sites of remembrance. Tom Kiefer photographs them. Susan Harbage Page collects them. Margarita Cabrera transforms them into sculptures. Pineda turns documents into art.

This paper asks not only how these artists present the story of Mexican migration, but why they present it the way they do. In what ways are these artists channeling public memory and contributing to it? The answer lies in the objects themselves, and the choices artists make when presenting them. These choices shape how the public understands the humanity and trauma embedded in migration.

[4] Pineda, Elizabeth Z. “Maíz.” Elizabeth Z. Pineda.

The twenty-first century has witnessed a dramatic transformation of the U.S.-Mexico border. Following the U.S. government passing legislation such as the Illegal Immigration Reform, Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, as well as the post-9/11 securitization of borders. The goal of the U.S. government was to deter migrants, but the actual effect was redirection. Border policies pushed migrants away from ports of entry and into the dangerous stretches of desert and mountains in the borderlands. Since 1998, thousands of migrants have died in the borderlands.[5] Hundreds of thousands more have been detained, deported, or abandoned by smugglers. In public discourse, Mexican migrants are rarely seen as people. Instead, they become "illegals," "criminals," "job stealers." These framings share a common failure: they erase the human reality of migration. They cannot account for the weight of a child's toy carried three hundred miles or the decision to abandon your shoes. This paper argues that artists who present migrant objects help humanize migrants by showing what is stripped away through political rhetoric and legislation.

This paper argues that the material culture of Mexican migration—the objects migrants carry and the objects they leave behind—offers an alternative archive, one capable of showing the nuance, humanity, and specificity of the migrant experience. Objects function as tools for survival, identity preservation, and emotional resilience. In contrast, the objects left behind bear witness to the violence, danger, and trauma embedded in the act of crossing the border. These objects are not trash; they are testimony. But these objects do not stay in the borderlands. Increasingly, they are recovered, photographed, and displayed in museums and galleries. Moving

[5] U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Border Patrol Fiscal Year southwest border sector deaths (FY 1998 - FY 2020) | U.S. Customs and Border Protection. https://www.cbp.gov/document/stats/us-border-patrol-fiscal-year-southwest-border-sector-deaths-fy-1998-fy-2020.

an object from the site of trauma to the space of display transforms its meaning. Each mode of presentation tells a different story and shapes public perception differently.

This paper focuses on the objects themselves and the artists who bring them to the public. In *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream*, Tom Kiefer's photographs show objects deemed non-essential by the Border Patrol, while Elizabeth Z. Pineda's art highlights documents associated with migration. Susan Harbage Page's *Objects from the Borderlands* presents objects she picked up along the border, photographed as found and later in her studio against colorful backgrounds. Margarita Cabrera's *Blurring Borders* reimagines Border Patrol uniforms as sculptures of desert plants. Their choices of what to collect and how to frame it shape how the public understands Mexican migration.

Scholars across disciplines have examined migrant material culture from different angles. Jason De León documents the physical consequences of U.S. border policy through archaeological methods. Maruška Svašek and Chiara Giuliani & Kate Hodgson examine how objects carry emotion and memory across transnational spaces, though they focus on settled migrants rather than discarded belongings. Susannah Radstone and Rita Wilson analyze how memory and trauma translate across contexts. Diana Flores Ruiz explores competing stories told through objects, and Hana Masri uses a queer lens to reveal the vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ migrants. This paper builds on these foundations by asking what happens when objects leave the borderlands and enter museums—and how the artists who present them shape public memory in the process.

This paper is guided by several research questions. How do migrant objects function as tools of survival, identity, and resilience? What do they reveal about state policy and the hardships of migration? How do museums and artists select and curate these objects, and what narratives

emerge from display, photography, and art? How do exhibitions differ between white artists and Mexican or migrant artists? And what are the ethical implications of telling migration stories through objects, including who has authority to speak for them?

This paper's methodology is interdisciplinary, drawing on public history, anthropology, museum studies, and material culture. It analyzes the objects themselves using documentation of the artists' works. It then compares the three modes of presentation—direct display, photography, and artistic transformation—to see how each shapes narrative and public perception. The primary sources are the exhibits: Tom Kiefer and Elizabeth Z. Pineda's *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream*, Susan Harbage Page's *Objects from the Borderlands*, and Margarita Cabrera's *Blurring Borders*. Secondary sources provide theoretical support without displacing the centrality of the objects and their presenters.





(Page, Susan Harbage. *Objects from the Borderlands: The U.S.-Mexico Border Anti-Archive*, Greensboro Project Space, Greensboro, NC, 2018; Kiefer, Tom. *El Sueno Americano/The American Dream*, Coconino Center for the Arts, Flaggstaff, AZ, 2023; Cabrera, Margarita. *Blurring Borders*, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX, 2022.)

II. Historiography and Theoretical Framework

Migrant material culture has been examined from different angles by scholars of multiple fields. Anthropologists, museum studies scholars, memory scholars, and art historians have approached the objects left behind in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands asking different questions and reaching different conclusions.

Material Culture of Migration

Jason De León provides the most foundational work on migrant material culture in the borderlands. In *The Land of Open Graves*[6] and his article "Better to Be Hot than Caught,"[7] De León argues that objects migrants carry represent a standardized but contradictory set of tools shaped by U.S. border enforcement policies. His methodology combines archaeological surveys, use-wear analysis, and ethnographic interviews to document physical suffering that is otherwise invisible. De León's work is foundational but has limitations. He centers his own emotional responses in ways that can overshadow migrant voices. His graphic descriptions risk sensationalizing the subject. Moreover, he focuses primarily on male Mexican migrants and documents objects in the desert as they were left—but he does not analyze what happens when objects leave the borderlands. This is a significant gap because once objects enter museums or galleries, their meaning changes. They are no longer evidence of a single crossing but become public testimony, shaped by curatorial choices that De León never examines.

Where De León focuses on physical and political dimensions, Maruška Svašek focuses on the emotional aspects. In Moving Subjects, Moving Objects, Svašek develops three concepts: transit (movement through space), transition (changes in meaning and emotional value), and transformation (changes in identity). She argues that objects are active agents, not passive holders of memory. This means objects do things. A rosary carried across the desert does not just represent faith; it actively provides comfort and anchors identity in chaos.[8] Her framework

[6] Jason De Leon and Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015. doi:10.1525/9780520958685.
[7] Jason De Leon, "'Better to Be Hot than Caught'": Excavating the Conflicting Roles of Migrant Material Culture." *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 3 (2012): 477–95. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1433.2012.01447.x.
[8] Maruska Svasek, *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*. Edited by Maruška Svašek. 1st ed. Vol. 1. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. doi:10.1515/9780857453242.

explains why migrants carry what they carry, but it focuses on settled migrants' homes, not the borderlands where objects are abandoned.

Chiara Giuliani and Kate Hodgson's Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture bridges this gap. Objects create continuity and function as "vessels of memory."[9] Johanna Carvajal González shows how Erika Diettes' Relicarios—reliquaries containing objects from disappeared victims—turns the museum into "a space where they meet the dead person, the one that disappeared."[10] A reliquary is traditionally a sacred container for the physical remains of a saint. By placing ordinary objects into reliquary-like displays, Diettes transforms them into sacred relics. The museum becomes a site of pilgrimage and mourning. This transformation happens through context: the object itself does not change, but how viewers are asked to see it changes entirely. Mastoureh Fathi demonstrates that ordinary objects become symbols of national identity after displacement: "The straw did not convey these meanings when she was in Syria. The item became a staple of her identity as a Syrian woman only after she was in Turkey."[11]

Memory, Trauma, and Translation

Susannah Radstone and Rita Wilson's *Translating Worlds: Migration, Memory and Culture* expand "translation" beyond language to a process of parsing how people bring the familiar and unfamiliar into conversation. For this paper, "translation" means understanding how an object's meaning changes when it moves from the Borderlands to a museum or gallery. A water bottle found in the brush means one thing; that same water bottle photographed and hung in a

[9] Chiara Giuliani and Kate Hodgson, eds. *Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2023: 2. doi:10.4324/9781003112457.
[10] Johanna Carvajal González, "Why Is a Museum a Place to Rest in Peace? 1: Relicarios by Colombian Artist Erika Diettes." In *Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture*, 1st ed., edited by Chiara Giuliani and Kate Hodgson, 1: 64. Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003112457-5.
[11] Mastoureh Fathi, "Memories of Material Home: Refugee Women's Depiction of Absent Objects." In *Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture*, 1st ed., edited by Chiara Giuliani and Kate Hodgson, 1: 105. Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003112457-8.

gallery means something else. The artist acts as a translator, deciding what the object says and what should be heard by the audience.[12] Maria Tumarkin critiques the Melbourne Immigration Museum for presenting a flat version of migrant interiority that suppresses grief. The museum, she argues, focuses on successful settlement and grateful assimilation, avoiding the complicated emotions of trauma, ambivalence, and loss. This sanitized presentation does a disservice to migrants and to visitors, who never confront the full reality of migration and displacement. She calls for the "translations, non-translations, and counter-translations of memories across and between the domains" because this allows us to confront difficult emotions. This framework can be applied to U.S. museums presenting the story of Mexican migration. [13]

Alexandra Bounia and Andrea Witcomb's *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma* addresses ethical responsibilities in displaying collective trauma. These responsibilities include avoiding retraumatization, sharing authority with source communities, and being transparent about collecting methods. There is significant debate about whether these principles are achievable or even desirable in all contexts.[14] James B. Gardner provides a framework: museums must ask what to collect, when, how, and for whom. On collecting from migrants: "What is a museum's ethical obligation to them as people rather than just subjects of a collecting initiative?"[15] Alexandra Bounia identifies three tropes of collecting forced migration: archaeological activism (using excavation methods to document suffering as evidence), curatorial initiative (rapid-response

[12] Susannah Radstone and Rita Wilson, *Translating Worlds: Migration, Memory, and Culture*. London; Routledge, 2020.
[13] Maria Tumarkin, "Having Left, Not Having—yet—Arrived: Migrant Interiority, Translation, and Memory." In *Translating Worlds*, 1st ed., edited by Susannah Radstone and Rita Wilson, 81. Routledge, 2021. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429024955-5.
[14] Alexandra Bounia and Andrea Witcomb, *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma: The Role of Museums in Collecting and Displaying Contemporary Crises*. 1st ed. Edited by Andrea Witcomb and Alexandra Bounia. Oxford: Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003139485.
[15] James B Gardner, "Toward A Higher Standard: Museums, Communities of Trauma and the Public Trust" in *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma: The Role of Museums in Collecting and Displaying Contemporary Crises*. 1st ed. Edited by Andrea Witcomb and Alexandra Bounia, 83. Oxford: Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003139485.

collecting by museums), and artistic appropriation (artists collecting objects to create installations). She warns that appropriation may universalize refugee experiences and erase individual stories.[16]

Representation, Power, and Perspectives

Diana Flores Ruiz examines how objects tell competing stories through counter-narratives that challenge dehumanizing framings. Her work asks: who gets to tell the story of migration, and whose stories are left out? Hana Masri's article "Queer Border Objects" applies a queer lens to Tom Kiefer's photographs of birth control packets and condoms. Masri argues that acknowledging the sexual realities of migration—including assault, survival sex, and queer desire—humanizes migrants in ways that avoid sanitized or victim-only narratives. These objects "communicate migration as a process intimately shaped by sexual and gender norms."[17] Together, Ruiz and Masri demonstrate how we talk about migrant bodies—their sexuality, their gender, their humanity—shapes whether the public sees them as people or as threats. Amy K. Levin's Global Mobilities highlights the "residues of border control"—material remains left by migrants and enforcement.[18] Susan Harbage Page and Inés Valdez argue that viewing these residues "makes us aware of how the frailties and vanities of our own habits of seeing reinforce unspoken ideologies of power."[19]

---

[16] Alexandra Bounia, "Collecting (Forced) Migration: The Ethics of Collecting 'Neglected things'" in *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma: The Role of Museums in Collecting and Displaying Contemporary Crises*. 1st ed. Edited by Andrea Witcomb and Alexandra Bounia, 198-214. Oxford: Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003139485.
[17] Hana Masri, "Queer Border Objects and the Sucio Material Politics of Migration in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands." *QED (East Lansing, Mich.)* 5, no. 2 (June 2018): 2. https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.5.2.0001.
[18] Amy K. Levin, ed. *Global Mobilities: Refugees, Exiles, and Immigrants in Museums and Archives*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2017: 9. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315695563.
[19] Susan Harbage Page and Bernard L Herman, "Longing: Personal Effects from the Border." *Southern Cultures* (Chapel Hill) 16, no. 1 (March 2010): 31. https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.0.0099.

Historiographical Gaps

These frameworks share a common concern: how objects mediate between migrants and the public. Together, they show that migrant objects are never just objects. They are evidence, memory, testimony, and art. But none of these scholars specifically analyze what happens when objects move from borderlands to galleries and how different modes of presentation shape public memory. This paper moves beyond existing scholarship by following migrant objects from the borderlands into museums. Specifically, this paper argues that these exhibits do not just document migration; they actively create public memory by deciding which objects matter, whose stories are told, and how viewers should feel.

Svasek and Giuliani & Hodgson highlight how objects carry memory and emotion within migrant homes and transnational networks. This paper extends their insights into objects that never reach a home—objects discarded, seized, or lost. These objects carry a different kind of memory: not of settlement and adaptation, but of rupture and movement. The public archive formed from these abandoned things remembers migration differently than the private archive of a family photograph kept on a mantel.

Bounia and Witcomb provide ethical frameworks for museums collecting trauma. This paper adapts those frameworks to a different reality: objects whose owners may be dead, undocumented, unable or unwilling to be found. When no one can speak for the dead, who has authority to display their toothbrush, their child's shoe, their documents? This paper argues that ethical presentation requires transparency about what is known and what is not, and that artists who share identity with migrants have a different claim to authority than artists who do not.

This paper also compares three modes of presenting migrant objects—photography, direct display, and artistic transformation—asking how each mode shapes how the public understands

migration and trauma. It also asks who is telling the story. Kiefer is a white former janitor who worked for the state. Page is a white artist walking the border. Cabrera is a Mexican-American artist working with immigrant communities. Pineda is a Mexican immigrant speaking from personal experiences. These positionalities shape what gets collected, how it gets presented, and who has authority to speak. By tracing objects from the borderlands to museums and comparing how different artists present them, this paper contributes to a framework for understanding migrant material culture as living testimony that is translated and transformed.

III. Objects: Survival, Identity, and Trauma

The objects migrants carry across the U.S.-Mexico border are not random belongings. They are carefully chosen tools for survival, anchors of identity, and sources of comfort. A water bottle wrapped in duct tape, a child's backpack with a cartoon character, a birth certificate folded into a pocket, a single shoe abandoned in the brush, each object tells a story that political rhetoric cannot capture. This section analyzes what these objects reveal about the migrant experience, drawing on the work of Tom Kiefer, Elizabeth Z. Pineda, Susan Harbage Page, and Margarita Cabrera.

Tools of Survival and Comfort

Survival in the desert requires more than determination. It requires specific tools and resources, yet migrants often carry inadequate supplies due to economic constraints and the chaotic conditions of crossing. De León's book shows that most migrants carry only one to two gallons of water when the minimum needed for a three-day crossing is 4.8 gallons. A gallon weighs 8.35 pounds; four gallons alone adds 33.4 pounds to a migrant's load. The water bottles themselves can heat to over 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer sun.

Tom Kiefer's *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream* documents what happens to these tools after migrants have been processed at border protection stations. Working as a janitor at a U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility in Ajo, Arizona, Kiefer collected objects that were deemed "non-essential" or "potentially lethal" and thrown into the trash.[20] His photographs show things like water bottles, toothbrushes, religious items, medications, and clothing—items that represent the bare minimum for hygiene, health, and the care of children during a journey that can last days or weeks. By photographing these objects, Kiefer transforms discarded trash into testaments of human needs.



(Kiefer, Tom. *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream* – Miffy, Aqua, 2019; Black Combs and Brushes, 2013; Duct Tape Water Bottle, 2017)

Susan Harbage Page's Objects from the Borderlands takes a different approach to collecting objects related to migration. Walking the border near Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, Page collected over 867 objects over eleven years.[21] Where Kiefer photographs objects seized by the state, Page recovers objects that were left behind—wet clothing discarded after crossing; hygiene products left at pickup sites, shoes too damaged to continue wearing. Her method of photographing objects first in the landscape, as they were found, then against colorful backdrops in her studio, emphasizes their dual nature: they are both evidence of a

[20] Tom Kiefer, "El Sueño Americano / the American Dream." Tom Kiefer.
[21] Susan Harbage Page, "U.S.–Mexico Border Project." Susan Harbage Page, October 9, 2017.

specific moment of crisis and artifacts worthy of contemplation. An eyeshadow palette or a comb speaks to the desire to fit in, to present a presentable self when arriving at a new life. These objects are not merely functional; they are tools for preserving dignity in conditions designed to strip it away. The "anti-archive" Page creates refuses the authority and pretensions of objectivity that traditional archives claim. By keeping objects dirty and acknowledging that their stories are incomplete, Page shows how migrants' lived experiences should not be restricted to conventional museum frameworks.



Page, Susan Harbage. *Objects from the Borderlands: The U.S.-Mexico Border Anti-Archive - Love Shoes,* Hidalgo, Texas, December 2013; *Shoestrings, Belt, Socks, Shirt and Pants*, near border wall, Hidalgo, Texas, 2013; *Anti-Archive Object No. 806,* Brownsville, Texas, 2014.)

Identity Preservation and Resilience

Objects do more than keep migrants alive. They preserve identity and provide comfort. Across all four artists' work, personal objects and narratives emerge as powerful evidence of how migrants resist erasure. Is photographing or collecting discarded objects enough to tell migrant stories? No. But it is a start. The objects alone cannot speak. They require interpretation, context, and the voices of migrants themselves. The artists discussed in this paper balance these tensions in different ways.

Official documents appear repeatedly. Kiefer photographed passport photos that were seized and thrown away. Page collects them, found lost or abandoned along the border. Both collections include children's items like shoes, backpacks, and clothing. These objects humanize

migration in ways that statistics and data cannot. The objects are testaments to love, sacrifice, and what it takes to survive.

Elizabeth Z. Pineda takes this further in her Maíz series. A cyanotype is a photographic printing process that produces blue prints. She makes cyanotypes of her own birth certificate, marriage license, and only childhood photograph she brought with her when she migrated on corn husks. "To give them the validity taken away from them," she explains.[22] Printing these documents on corn husks reclaims their importance. The state sees paper documents as proof of identity. Pineda argues that identity is also carried in food, in tradition, in memory, and in mother's cooking. The corn husk becomes a vessel of validity. Corn holds deep significance in Mexican tradition; it is not merely food but a cultural foundation. By printing these identity documents on corn husks, Pineda reclaims the material as something that nourishes and sustains. Pineda states, "I believe it also gives others a voice" —this suggests that a goal of her work was to create a space for collective recognition.[23]



(Pineda, Elizabeth Z. Maíz - Licencia Valida, Acta Valida, Self-Portrait – Hija del Maíz, 2022)

[22] Pineda, “Maíz.” Elizabeth Z. Pineda.
[23] Pineda, “Maíz.” Elizabeth Z. Pineda.

Religious objects appear in both Kiefer and Page's work. Kiefer photographs rosaries and Bibles—the latter often marked or written in. Page's Anti-Archive includes items carried for spiritual protection like necklaces and Bibles. Anne Sigfrid Grønseth's research on Tamil refugees in Norway shows that amulets and ritual objects create relationships and generate comfort.[24] The same is true for Mexican migrants.



(Kiefer, Tom. *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream* – Virgen de Guadalupe, Necklace, 2019; 5 Minutos, 2018; Nueva Testamentos, 2013)

Cabrera's Blurring Borders exhibition includes *Pepita Para El Loro Para Que Hable O Calle* (A nugget for the parrot so that it speaks or stays quiet), a piece inspired by Mexican parrots endangered by the pet trade. The title, drawn from a Mexican proverb, invites reflection on voice and silence. Who gets to speak? Who is silenced? The embroidered Border Patrol uniforms in the exhibition give voice to migrants directly; their own words and images stitched onto the fabric.

[24] Lisette Josephides and Anne Sigfrid Grønseth, *The Ethics of Knowledge Creation: Transactions, Relations, and Persons*. 1st ed. Vol. 31, edited by Anne Sigfrid Grønseth and Lisette Josephides. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781785334054.



(Cabrera, Margarita. *Blurring Borders, 2022*)

Evidence of Danger, Violence, and Trauma

The objects left behind bear witness to what migrants endure. De León's use-wear analysis of shoes—holes worn through soles, repairs made with scavenged materials—documents blisters, the most common documented injury after environmental exposure.[25] But blisters are not the worst. Page's collection includes objects like bras and underwear, which are known signals that a woman has been raped.[26] This sexual violence while migrating is so prolific that "rape trees"—trees hung with bras and underwear—are common along the border.[27] The article "The Things Migrants Carried" describes smugglers' wristbands—color-coded plastic that serves as "proof of payment." Those without wristbands report being held until relatives paid fees of at least $6,000.[28]

Kiefer's photographs include items that evidence the state's role in trauma. The objects he rescued from the trash were seized by officials—not because they were dangerous but because

[25] Jason De Leon and Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015. doi:10.1525/9780520958685.
[26] Susan Harbage Page. "Borderlands-Evidence from the Rio Grande Virtual Exhibition." Gregg Museum of Art + Design, 2019: 6.
[27] Hana Masri, "The Performative Speech and Silence of Rape Trees: Staging Sexual Violence Against Migrant Women in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands" (2013). *International Studies Honors Projects*. 19.
[28] Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Carolyn Cole, 2021. "The Things Migrants Carried — and Dropped — as They Crossed the Border." *The Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2021.

they were deemed "non-essential." A child's toy is non-essential. A photograph of family left behind is non-essential. A Bible is non-essential. The state's definition of necessity strips migrants of comfort, identity, and hope. Even though these objects are discarded—the question of who speaks remains. Is it the migrants, or is it artists speaking for migrants? That distinction matters. Kiefer and Page do not claim to speak for migrants; they present objects and invite viewers to draw conclusions. Cabrera and Pineda, as Mexican and Mexican-American artists, claim a different kind of authority—one based on shared identity and, in Cabrera's case, direct collaboration. Neither approach is better but being transparent about who speaks and on what authority is ethically vital.

Pineda's work confronts violence directly. Her *Reverencia*: Arizona Migrant Death Mapping series consists of silk scrolls printed with the names of migrants who died crossing the border. *Ceremonia*, a film documenting a day-long performance in the Ironwood Forest National Monument, shows Pineda wearing a twenty-yard-long blue silk cloak—blue for grief—as she walks through the desert calling out the names of the dead and saying "sin nombre" for those whose names are not known. She types their names on handmade corn-husk paper as she walks. Her work goes beyond documentation. This is memorialization and a refusal to let the dead be forgotten. Pineda's work is most powerful as a model—an invitation for others to remember in their own ways. The silk scrolls displayed in galleries do the work of repetition, reaching audiences the performance alone could not.

The desert itself participates in the violence migrants face while crossing the border. De León's work explores necroviolence—the specific treatment of corpses perceived as offensive or inhumane—which prevents proper burials and denies families closure.[29] Pineda's work intervenes

[29] Jason De Leon and Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015: chapter 3. doi:10.1525/9780520958685.

in this erasure. By speaking the names aloud, by typing them onto corn husks, by performing grief in the very landscape where people died, she insists that the dead are not gone. They are not "sin nombre." They were someone.





(Pineda, Elizabeth Z. Reverencia, Ceremonia, Maíz - Self-Portrait)

Cabrera's approach to border violence is transformative. The Border Patrol uniforms she and workshop participants embroider are the literal symbols of state violence. To cut them, to stitch them, to embroider them with stories of survival is to disarm them. The uniforms lose their "prickling armor," as Angelique Szymanek puts it, and become vessels of memory, expressions of resilience, acts of reclamation.[30] This transformation does not erase the violence. It refuses to let violence have the final word.

IV. Modes of Presentation

While the objects themselves contain powerful narratives, the way they are presented determines how these narratives are interpreted. The works of Tom Kiefer, Susan Harbage Page, Elizabeth Z. Pineda, and Margarita Cabrera highlight three modes of presentation: photography, direct display, and artistic transformation. These modes differ not only in technique, but in who

[30] Angelique Szymanek, "Haptic Encounters: Margarita Cabrera's Space in Between." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)* (New York) 79, no. 3 (July 2020): 78. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2020.1801098.

holds authority, how much context is preserved, and what relationship the viewer is invited to have with the object. Each mode also raises different ethical questions about consent, appropriation, and the limits of representation.

Kiefer's photographic work isolates objects from their original context and places them against plain backgrounds. On one hand, isolation elevates the objects, forcing viewers to confront them as worthy of attention. On the other hand, this removal risks detaching the object from the conditions that produced it. The desert, the journey, and the moment of abandonment are no longer visible. However, Kiefer's work resists full detachment because of the institutional context in which the objects were acquired. These objects were confiscated and discarded by the state. Their presentation, therefore, implicitly critiques systems of power. By carefully arranging and photographing what the state deemed "non-essential," Kiefer exposes the violence and depersonalization embedded in that classification. The viewer is asked to reconcile the dissonance between the state's judgment and the object's obvious humanity. Yet the ethical tension identified by Bounia's concept of "artistic appropriation" is present. Kiefer, a white American artist employed by the state, raises questions about authority: who has the right to frame these narratives? The photographs invite empathy, but they also centralize the artist's gaze as the primary lens through which migrant experience is viewed. Kiefer does not consult the owners of these objects — because he cannot.

Page's direct display approach emphasizes context and continuity. Her "anti-archive" resists the clean separation seen in Kiefer's work. By photographing objects as she found them and later in her studio, Page preserves the context these objects exist in. The initial image situates the item within the landscape, maintaining its connection to a specific moment and place. The studio image, often set against a colorful background, invites contemplation and re-interpretation.

This dual presentation aligns closely with Giuliani and Hodgson's concept of objects as vessels of memory. Rather than isolating the object, Page layers its meanings. The viewer encounters the object as something that has moved—through space, through hands, through interpretive frames. This movement mirrors Svašek's framework of transit and transition, emphasizing that meaning is not fixed but accumulative. However, while Page seeks to preserve context, the transition into gallery space inevitably alters meaning. The objects become part of a curated narrative, shaped by the artist's decisions about selection, arrangement, and display. Her "anti-archive" is still an archive, still a form of authority.

Cabrera and Pineda's artistic transformation alters objects fundamentally. Cabrera takes Border Patrol uniforms—symbols of border enforcement and exclusion—and cuts, embroiders, and reshapes them into sculptures of desert plants. This process involves the Mexican community, who contribute their own stories through stitching. The resulting works are collective acts of meaning-making and memory preservation. Here, artistic transformation functions as a reversal of power. Materials associated with surveillance and control are reworked into artworks that showcase community resilience. Cabrera's work aligns with Flores Ruiz's concept of counter-narratives, actively challenging dominant representations of migration by centering migrant voices and experiences. Crucially, Cabrera's collaborators are not subjects but co-creators. This model directly addresses the ethical concerns raised by Bounia about artistic appropriation: migrants are not silent objects of representation but active participants in making the art.

Similarly, Elizabeth Z. Pineda transforms personal documents into pieces of cultural and personal significance. By printing them on corn husks, she recontextualizes bureaucratic identity within a framework of cultural continuity. Her performative and memorial works extend this transformation into embodied practice, where the act of naming and remembering is central.

Pineda's authority to speak for the dead comes not from community collaboration—she works alone—but from shared identity and experience. She is a Mexican immigrant. The documents she transforms are her own. The names she calls out are her people.

These different modes of presentation demonstrate that there is no neutral way to present migrant objects. Each approach emphasizes certain aspects of the migrant experience while obscuring others. The differences between the artists also reveal the importance of positionality. Kiefer and Page, as white American artists, tend to allow the objects to speak for themselves, positioning themselves as mediators of migrant stories. Cabrera and Pineda, as Mexican and Mexican-American artists, engage in reinterpretation and reclamation, embedding their work within cultural knowledge and lived experience. This distinction shapes not only the look of the art, but who has authority to tell the story and what ethical responsibilities attach to that authority.

Ultimately, these modes do not compete with one another. Together, they form a broader visual and material discourse on migration. By moving between documentation, preservation, and transformation, migrant objects are not only saved from disappearance but are continually reinterpreted. This ongoing process reflects Radstone and Wilson's concept of translation: meanings are not fixed but negotiated across contexts. In the transition from the borderlands to museums, from object to artwork, migrants become active parts of how migration is remembered, understood, and contested.

V. Conclusion

This paper has traced migrant objects from the borderlands to museums and galleries, asking not only how artists present these objects, but why they present them the way they do. The answer reveals that public memory is not found; it is made. Kiefer's photographs, Page's

anti-archive, Cabrera's transformed uniforms, and Pineda's memorial performances each construct a different version of what migration means and who migrants are.

This paper contributes a replicable method for analyzing material culture and curation in other migration contexts. The three modes identified here—photography, direct display, and artistic transformation—apply beyond the U.S.-Mexico border. In the Mediterranean, in Southeast Asia, along any border where people flee and things are left behind, scholars and curators can ask the same questions: Who collects? Who presents? Who speaks? And who is silenced? The framework developed here offers a model for analyzing how public memory is formed when trauma is present.

The question of who holds power in creating this art is central. Kiefer and Page, as white artists, inevitably mediate migrant stories through an outsider's gaze, no matter how empathetic. Their work is valuable because it brings attention. It humanizes. It also forces viewers to confront what the state discards and the dangers of crossing the border. But it is not the same as Cabrera's community collaboration or Pineda's lived experience. Neither approach is inherently better, but they are different, and those differences are important to how public memory is created.

In an era of dehumanizing political rhetoric, the smallest object—a shoelace, a toothbrush, a child's toy—can become a powerful carrier of memory. Pineda understood this when she printed her birth certificate on a corn husk. "It gave me the validity I lost," she said.[31] It permitted me to feel whole again. I believe it also gives others a voice; one through a humble corn husk."[32] The question is not just what objects mean. The question is who gets to tell their story, how they tell it, and whether we are willing to listen.

[31] Pineda, “Maíz.” Elizabeth Z. Pineda.
[32] Pineda, “Maíz.” Elizabeth Z. Pineda.

Bibliography

Primary Sources and Exhibits

Cabrera, Margarita. “Pepita Para El Loro Para Que Hable o Calle (A nugget for the parrot so that it speaks or stays quiet),” 2019, Border Patrol uniform fabric, thread, and audio device. Photograph.

Cabrera, Margarita. 2022. *Blurring Borders*. The McNay Art Museum.

Cabrera, Margarita. Detail from the *Space in Between* series, 2022. Border patrol uniform fabric, copper wire, pvc pipe, foam, thread, terra cotta pot. Photograph

Cabrera, Margarita. *Space in Between* – Nopal. Border patrol uniform fabric, copper wire, pvc pipe, foam, thread, terra cotta pot. Photograph.

Kiefer, Tom, and Elizabeth Z. Pineda. 2025. *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream*. The Matlz Museum.

Kiefer, Tom. *Duct Tape Water Bottle*. 2017. Photograph.

Kiefer, Tom. *Miffy, Aqua*. 2019. Photograph.

Kiefer, Tom. *Nueva Testamentos*. 2014. Photograph.

Page, Susan Harbage. 2014. *Objects from the Borderlands: The U.S.-Mexico Border Anti-Archive*.

Page, Susan Harbage. *Shoestrings, Belt, Socks, Shirt and Pants, near border wall, Hidalgo, Texas*. 2013a. Photograph.

Page, Susan Harbage. *Spanish Language Bible, Anti-Archive Object No. 546*. 2013b. Photograph.

Page, Susan Harbage. *Eyeshadow, Anti-Archive Object No. 800*. 2014. Photograph.

Page, Susan Harbage. *Girl’s “Love” Shoes*. 2015. Photograph.

Pineda, Elizabeth Z. “Maíz: Acta Valida.” Elizabeth Pineda. 2022a. Photograph

Pineda, Elizabeth Z. “Maíz: Licencia Valida.” Elizabeth Pineda. 2022b. Photograph

Pineda, Elizabeth Z. “Maíz: Self-Portrait – Hija del Maíz.” Elizabeth Pineda. 2022c. Photograph

Pineda, Elizabeth Z. “Ceremonia En Esta Tierra Sagrada,” 2023a. Single channel video. Screenshot.

Pineda, Elizabeth Z. *Reverencia: Arizona Migrant Death Mapping Archive of the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and Humane Borders.* 2023b. Photograph.

U.S. Border Patrol. U.S. Border Patrol Fiscal Year southwest border sector deaths (FY 1998 - FY 2020) | U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Accessed May 6, 2026.

Books

Bounia, Alexandra, and Andrea Witcomb. *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma: The Role of Museums in Collecting and Displaying Contemporary Crises*. 1st ed. Edited by Andrea Witcomb and Alexandra Bounia. Oxford: Routledge, 2024.

De Leon, Jason, and Michael Wells. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015. doi:10.1525/9780520958685.

Giuliani, Chiara, and Kate Hodgson, eds. *Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2023. doi:10.4324/9781003112457.

Josephides, Lisette, and Anne Sigfrid Grønseth. *The Ethics of Knowledge Creation: Transactions, Relations, and Persons*. 1st ed. Vol. 31, edited by Anne Sigfrid Grønseth and Lisette Josephides. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.

Levin, Amy K., ed. *Global Mobilities: Refugees, Exiles, and Immigrants in Museums and Archives*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge, 2017.

Radstone, Susannah, and Rita Wilson. *Translating Worlds: Migration, Memory, and Culture*. Edited by Rita Wilson and Susannah Radstone. 1st edition. United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020.doi:10.4324/9780429024955.

Svasek, Maruska. *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*. Edited by Maruška Svašek. 1st ed. Vol. 1. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. doi:10.1515/9780857453242.

Articles

De Leon, Jason. "'Better to Be Hot than Caught': Excavating the Conflicting Roles of Migrant Material Culture." *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 3 (2012): 477–95. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1433.2012.01447.x.

Hennessy-Fiske, Molly, and Carolyn Cole. 2021. "The Things Migrants Carried — and Dropped — as They Crossed the Border." *The Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2021.

Masri, Hana, "The Performative Speech and Silence of Rape Trees: Staging Sexual Violence Against Migrant Women in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands" (2013). *International Studies Honors Projects*. 19.

Masri, Hana. "Queer Border Objects and the Sucio Material Politics of Migration in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands." *QED (East Lansing, Mich.)* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1–22. doi:10.14321/qed.5.2.0001.

Page, Susan Harbage. "Borderlands-Evidence from the Rio Grande Virtual Exhibition ." Gregg Museum of Art + Design.

Page, Susan Harbage, and Bernard L Herman. “Longing: Personal Effects from the Border.” *Southern Cultures* (Chapel Hill) 16, no. 1 (March 2010): 31–45.

Szymanek, Angelique. “Haptic Encounters: Margarita Cabrera’s Space in Between.” *Art Journal (New York. 1960)* (New York) 79, no. 3 (July 2020): 70–79.