

## DEAD END

“Vámonos?” Alex was waiting for me in the truck, ready to start the engine.<sup>1</sup>

The fire was in Mexico. We were a few miles north of the border, in the United States, wearing navy blue T-shirts with logos of the Nogales Suburban Fire District. Concerned that the blaze could jump the line into our jurisdiction, the chief instructed us to go and check it out.<sup>2</sup>

We didn't need to hurry. Heading south, we passed an area known as the Buena Vista Ranch: a handful of houses cradled in the desert, its pale skin barely covered by a stubble of mesquite trees. I could see why back in the day John Wayne made movies here: the scenery was an ideal stage for a Hollywood Western. Several hydrants, their red paint beginning to fade, pointed to another story, one about plans to develop the area. But the ranch happened to be on a route of intense drug and human trafficking. Locals say that fear of violence associated with illicit trade scared potential homebuyers away, squelching their dreams of building a community. We passed a yellow “Dead End” sign perforated by bullets (“target practice,” Alex reassured me), unhitched a gate with a barely legible sign warning “no trespassing,” and after a few turns found ourselves on a dirt road running parallel to the border wall. From afar, the wall is but a squiggly dark line following the contour of the hilly landscape; close up, it resembles the spiky spine of a stegosaurus, low curves giving shape to menace and fear. Stretching as far as the eye could see, to the east and to the west, the road next to the wall served as the US Border Patrol highway: federal agents, in search of unauthorized border crossers, steer a fleet of white trucks with green stripes up and down these slopes, expecting spectacular, newsworthy captures of marijuana, cocaine, or

methamphetamine loads, but more often encountering tired migrants with tattered clothes and blistered feet.

The fire department could use the road too, at least in emergency situations. Driving along the wall, we continued scanning the sky for smoke. Only a few days had passed since I chased fires with the crew of Mexican firefighters—the bomberos—in Nogales, Sonora. It was May, more than a month until the summer rains would arrive, and fires were so abundant that the bomberos might go from one call to the next without taking a break. On this side, in Arizona, fires were less frequent, but once they started, they could expand rapidly, fiercely devouring the dry vegetation and often requiring the US Forest Service to bring in helicopters and elite firefighter crews—the hotshots—to battle them for days or even weeks in remote canyons. The average temperature in Arizona has increased by over 2°F since the 1970s, making wildland fires in the region both bigger and more severe.<sup>3</sup> Down by the wall looking for smoke that morning, Alex and I didn't yet know that later in the afternoon La Sierra Fire would start in Sonora and cross the border about 17 miles west of us, on the opposite side of Nogales, burning thousands of acres and requiring joint efforts of Mexican and American firefighters to contain it. Binational cooperation in such situations was common—emergency managers and frontline responders recognized that the border did not stop fire. Nor, for that matter, did it halt flash floods, toxic fumes, or any other natural or manmade disaster.

We reached a place where the metal wall abruptly ends and gives way to several strings of barbed wire and a low-lying steel beam construction, known as a Normandy barrier. Even though it may not be obvious during the dry season, when all you see are lush green trees and occasional puddles of water, this is the bed of the Santa Cruz River, which crosses the border perpendicularly, running south to north. It is an important path for migratory wildlife—deer, javelina, mountain lions, ocelots, and the only known wild jaguar in the United States, El Jefe, who lives in the Santa Rita Mountains. The engineers didn't build a wall here since a solid barrier would threaten endangered species and cause damaging floods.<sup>4</sup> Unauthorized pedestrian traffic, involving migrants and drug mules, know about this gap, too. Dry arroyos are convenient paths across the undulating desert terrain: capillaries circulating life without regard to who is legally entitled to it.

We still didn't see any smoke. Nor, surprisingly, did we see any Border Patrol.

Alex was not fond of the Border Patrol. Though he meets them regularly on the job, when he goes through the checkpoint on I-19 they often look at

him with suspicion. “These guys, they come to Nogales from somewhere over there, say Montana—the ‘Holy See’ of white people—and at the checkpoint they see Hispanic people, Mexican people, driving up and down all day long.” Alex has been pulled over regardless of whether he drove his personal vehicle with firefighter union decals and his bunker gear thrown on the backseat or an official city truck with government license plates. They would still ask him: “Is this your vehicle? Do you have anybody in the trunk?” Short and stocky, with black hair and a thick mustache, he knows he looks like a stereotypical Mexican. He orders chilaquiles with a side of tortillas, making young Mexican waitresses smile. He is also stubborn. “I just laugh. I never answer,” he says. I believe him, for I saw how it played out at the station, where Alex’s blunt remarks were habitually taken as offenses. He had no intention to change. One time, after a joint exercise held in the tunnels under Nogales, he even had the guts to tell the Border Patrol that had it been a real emergency, he would not have stayed to rescue an injured federal agent; he would have grabbed his partner and they would have run for their lives. “I’m an honest asshole,” he admits. The agents at the checkpoint must sense his defiance: they send Alex into secondary inspection, again and again. A price he’s willing to pay for feeling righteous.

With the rescue truck obediently tracing the difficult topography of the desert terrain, we reached the easternmost limit of our jurisdiction and stopped to consider the rusted bollard fence spanning far into the horizon. “They used to smuggle chicken into Mexico through here,” Alex told me. Chicken in Spanish is *pollo*. I dwelt on the cruel irony: the only *pollos* crossing the border these days pay several thousand dollars to *polleros* (the “chicken wranglers”) for a chance to work long shifts in poultry-processing plants in Ohio, Missouri, or the Carolinas.

Though it had been a full year since I arrived at the borderlands, I was still eager to hear Alex’s stories about life on the frontlines. On what we call “slow” days, between station duties and vehicle check-offs, we would spend hours talking without being interrupted by dispatch. This rhythm—alternating between action and boredom—was familiar to me. Trained as an EMT, paramedic, and wildland firefighter, before I came to Arizona I had spent several years volunteering as an emergency responder in Florida. As far as fire departments go, Nogales Suburban was on the quieter end of the spectrum. The number 74 written on the board in the day room meant that, about five months in, we were only waiting for the seventy-fifth call of the year. Unlike during my rookie years, I was no longer anxious to run with lights and siren

to structure fires, rollovers, or cardiac arrests—I had learned to appreciate the absence of emergencies. Slow days were good for ethnography.

It looked like we would have another one of those: there was still no sign of the brushfire.

Once we started heading back, we spotted a Border Patrol vehicle. The agent did not notice us immediately. “We must have tripped off one of their sensors when we got off the road making a turn,” Alex reasoned. We drove slowly and watched the agent head toward the area where the fence cut across the dry riverbed, then pause and inspect it. He probably heard our engine because suddenly he made a U-turn to face us. As the fire truck approached him, Alex raised a hand to greet the agent, but neither of us saw whether he waved back. Sometimes they do.

In the vocabulary of the Border Patrol, the Sonoran Desert is known as “hostile terrain.” It is an obstacle course that migrants have to complete in order to enter the United States. Those crossing near Nogales or Sasabe will walk for three days until they reach Green Valley or Three Points, the first semi-urban settlements north of the checkpoints; Tucson is about five days away. But that’s only if they go straight. Abandoned by their guides, thirsty and disoriented, people get lost and walk in circles. It’s a cruel and prolonged game at wilderness survival, where improperly equipped human beings try to avoid being lethally wounded by the sun and the ecosystem. Ever since the government constructed the new taller fence (hypothetically a more effective barrier against unauthorized crossing) and adopted cutting-edge technologies of surveillance, human traffic has rerouted from border towns to the desert—a grueling terrain that precludes taking life for granted. Since 2001, nearly 2,500 human remains have been recovered in the Border Patrol’s Tucson Sector alone.<sup>5</sup> Most of them were unauthorized migrants from Mexico and Central America. But nobody knows how many more have died, their corpses yet to be found and identified. And nobody knows how many have survived, but must deal with debilitating effects of traumatic injury or illness caused by the journey.

The “killing fields,” “a neoliberal oven,” and “a massive open grave” are the images that capture the cruelty and tragedy of this desolate stretch of the earth.<sup>6</sup> “Gorgeous despair rattles the land like a great serpent’s tail, warning of the deadly bite behind the greeting-card sunrises,” Luis Alberto Urrea wrote of the treacherous beauty of the desert landscape.<sup>7</sup> This is the homeland of thorny plants—jumping chollas, nopales, saguaros. Rattlesnakes and scorpions, javelinas and wildcats inhabit the rocks and ravines, invisible at

night. I know a paramedic who once treated a migrant attacked by a mountain lion—he had deep lacerations on his neck left by the animal’s claws. But it is the weather—temperatures that rise to over 110°F during summer days and fall to below freezing on winter nights—that hurt most border crossers taking the route through the desert.<sup>8</sup> Security strategies, from fences to checkpoints, superimposed on the perilous landscape have turned terrain into a weapon that maims or murders those who commit the civil offense of entering the territory of the United States without proper documents.

“I can’t even begin to count how many people we picked up in the desert,” Alex tells me.

One time he hiked for six hours looking for a toddler who wandered off when his exhausted mother fell asleep under a tree. Desperate, the woman gave herself up to the Border Patrol, pleading them to help find her son. Border Patrol brought in a signcutter—an agent who specializes in detecting and interpreting disturbances in natural terrain that indicate the passage of people, animals, or vehicles, and after hours of arduous hiking in the hills following footprints, they were able to locate the child.<sup>9</sup> “They found him without a scratch. Six hours alone in the desert and nothing was wrong with him, no medical need,” Alex said. Rare luck. Migrants who get lost may never be heard of again or, if they are, they may be in grave condition. Alex saw people so severely dehydrated that their bodies shut down. “Once we found a woman over here and, when we were helping her out, we noticed ants inside her mouth. The ants got inside the mouth because it was still moist. They were looking for water. It was bad.”

Alex has collected men’s fingers and limbs either cut off by the wheels of the freight train that undocumented migrants caught for a ride north to Tucson or amputated by the sharp edges of the border fence. He has participated in rescue and (more often) body recovery attempts when people across the line got swept away by the turbulent waters of the Nogales Wash. Tossed around with such force, they hit their heads on the rocks or heavy debris floating downstream, and by the time they reach this side of the border, they are either unconscious or dead. “Most of them, they were coming to work,” Alex said, and we rode in silence for a while.

Firefighters along the Arizona-Sonora border are routinely dispatched to save people in the life-threatening situations that Alex describes, often with the coordinates of “out there in the middle of nowhere.” But they have also performed other tasks that are unusual elsewhere. The presence of the border adds peculiar dimensions to the work of emergency responders, already

equipped to manage the most extraordinary of scenarios. For example, customs officers habitually asked Nogales firefighters to use powerful rescue saws to open gasoline tanks, rims of vehicles, or tires stacked with marijuana. Sometimes, as the saw cut into the metal, sparks ignited the pot. They wouldn't be wearing airpicks and, back in the day, nobody cared about filling out exposure forms. "We laughed our heads off," a captain later told me about one such incident. "We had the munchies." Not everything was funny, however. When Alex started working at the Nogales Fire Department in the mid-1990s, he found bulletproof vests strapped to the seats of the ambulance and was told to wear a Kevlar helmet on calls to the border. "We used to get shot at, thrown rocks at." Incidents related to drug trafficking posed danger to emergency responders, who, when providing care on scene, were easily mistaken for law enforcement. "They didn't care much who was who. Government is government."

Back at the station, Alex called our chief to report that we did not spot any fire on either side of the border. We finished the morning routine: inspected and washed the trucks, checked the equipment. The rest of the time passed slowly in this isolated building on the edge of the desert, beige like its surroundings, with a flagpole in the front and a basketball hoop in the back. When they blasted the solid rock to make room for the construction of the station, the soil was not pressed hard enough and now cracks were appearing on the floor: the firehouse was slowly sinking. We were not allowed to stay inside overnight.

Later in the afternoon, as the day was winding down and the heat was more bearable, we stood at the open bay and watched an occasional vehicle pass by on Highway 82. The place was so serene, the webs linking it to state violence and the criminal economies south and north of the border imperceptible to the naked eye. But we knew better. Smugglers, migrants, and federal agents have all dropped by the fire station: smugglers requesting to make phone calls to arrange pickups; migrants seeking water and directions; agents passing time while monitoring the road. On our last shift, a DPS-led task force used the station to stage an operation. They stopped and arrested a suspect right in front of where we were now standing, and I was relieved when the lead officer changed his mind about questioning the man inside the firehouse. They left, nine unmarked vehicles in single file. Alex, whose brother worked in a similar interagency task force, was not surprised by what we witnessed. Nothing on the border seemed to surprise him.

“They have asked me to hide drugs in the truck,” he confided. Some years ago, a man came to the station to recruit Alex. The plan was to set a brushfire in the Buena Vista Ranch and, when Alex came to put it out, they would load the fire truck with drugs. Alex said no. But not everyone could resist. The appeal of the drug economy, at an arm’s length, was strong and the use of official insignia as a disguise for trafficking seemed easy. It was common practice.<sup>10</sup> Police officers and firefighters from the local communities were logical targets for recruitment. Even Border Patrol agents have been charged with taking part in such camouflage operations.<sup>11</sup> Formal duties tangled up with side hustles; law meshed with crime.

The border put some lines into focused and blurred others.

### TREACHEROUS TERRAIN

In the US-Mexico border region, sovereignties are easily unsettled. Here, political topography competes with other claims on the landscape: indigenous forms of governance, neoliberal networks of profit-making, criminal economies, desert ecosystem. After the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the US-Mexican War in 1848, the Joint United States and Mexican Boundary Commission spent more than seven years trying to survey and map the new jurisdictional divide. The borderline not only cut through territory that was previously claimed by Mexico, but also split the homelands of the Tohono O’odham, Pima, and other peoples who had lived there before the Europeans arrived and took over.<sup>12</sup> Even the environment rigorously resisted the commission’s attempts to inscribe one nation’s victory and another’s defeat onto the surface of the earth. The survey report mentions “the bleached barrenness” of the region, where both Mexican and American teams endured temperatures of over 100°F, shortages of food and water, and rough terrain.<sup>13</sup> Imposing “state definitions on the ground” was no easy task.<sup>14</sup>

More than 150 years later, national territories carved out of the contiguous physical landscape remain a fragile achievement. In recent attempts to strengthen their titles against rival rights to this space, the US and Mexican governments declared it a zone of two militarized conflicts—the “war on terror” and the “drug war” (*narcoguerra*)—justifying legal exceptions and the deployment of lethal weapons that ended up targeting migrants and refugees.



As if that wasn't enough, this vicious cycle of security buildup and accumulating atrocities unfolds under volatile environmental conditions. With temperatures in the area steadily rising, extreme weather events have become more frequent.<sup>15</sup> Even when reinforced with steel and concrete, the arbitrary boundary cutting across the desert does not prevent intensified wildfires or flash floods, nor does it stop toxic chemical spills. These are the times of multiple emergencies; yet they are all subordinate to the primacy of homeland security. To speed up the construction of the wall in the aftermath of 9/11, DHS was authorized to waive thirty-seven federal laws, including the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, as well as regulations preserving clean air, migratory birds, national forests, and rivers.<sup>16</sup>

Such an inauspicious misalignment of politics and ecology, compounded by warfare and lawfare, keeps the border in a perpetual state of alert. Emergency can result from any combination of potential threats: a migrant may suffer a heatstroke while taking a remote route through the desert in hopes of avoiding checkpoints; a train carrying hazardous materials to the copper mines may derail, polluting the washes that supply water to communities on both sides of the border. Or a security barrier put in place to prevent trespassing may exacerbate the destructive effects of summer rains. In 2008, without notifying the International Boundary and Water Commission, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) installed a 5-foot barrier inside the underground tunnel that runs perpendicular to the border and connects Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona. When the monsoon arrived that July, and the runoff from the heavy rain rushed downstream from Mexico toward the United States, the concrete barrier formed a bottleneck. Water pressure kept rising until a thousand feet of the tunnel collapsed, inundating the streets in Nogales, Sonora. Mexican authorities declared flooded part of the city a disaster zone, and cited damage to 578 homes and forty-five cars.<sup>17</sup> Two days after the flooding, US officials recovered two bodies from the wash, suspecting the dead were unauthorized migrants who were trying to get through the tunnel when the flood began. Despite calls for investigations and reparations, the federal government's only concession to the mayors of the split city was to grant permission to lower the concrete barrier by a foot and a half. Accidents like this reveal that topographical forms have political implications. We see how the materiality of terrain—its texture and volume—is weaponized to serve the ends of security.<sup>18</sup> We can discern the physics of terrain underlying the politics of wounding.



The Border Patrol uses the concept of “tactical infrastructure” to refer to the assemblage of materials and technologies that both impede and facilitate movement. It aims to stop trespassers while creating a smooth surface for enforcement operations. The agency calls it a “force multiplier.” Infrastructure is “tactical” in both senses of the term: as relating to small-scale actions serving a larger purpose (in this case, national security), and as “being weapons or forces employed at the battlefield.”<sup>19</sup> The question is therefore how space and law enmesh on the border to produce injury. Achille Mbembe suggests seeing space as “the raw material of sovereignty” and a vehicle of violence, underlying the “terror formation.”<sup>20</sup> It is operationalized and molded into the practices of the security apparatus.<sup>21</sup> This move requires stripping off any competing discourses of territory and place, leaving its physical qualities exclusively meaningful for national politics. Writing about the sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Allen Feldman noted how attempts to transform the material fabric of the social order took the form of topographic violence because space in Belfast functioned “as a mnemonic artifact” for storing historical narratives.<sup>22</sup> Urban terrain was not merely the stage where violence was performed. Rather than a passive setting or the location, it was fundamental to the very performance of violence—the source precipitating action, the condition of its possibility, and its ultimate target. Technical language, commonly associated with war operations, allows the Border Patrol to detach terrain from additional layers of signification: if it is tactical, then it is not ecological or historical. Binational trajectories and communal practices sedimented into the built environment are irrelevant. The border does not even mark the perimeter of the tactical field—it is enclosed within it. Despite the government’s attempts to portray the area as a zone of reversible violence, where the Border Patrol tries to outmaneuver the enemy—drug traffickers and human smugglers—it is almost exclusively unilateral. Tactical space does not have an interface outside of the state’s imaginary.

Terrain acts as a mechanism of injury. Its form underlies the kinematics of trauma. When a human body collides with an object, such as when a border crosser falls off the wall—the transfer of energy upon contact produces injury that varies in severity depending on the height of the fall, the part of the body struck first, and the type of surface on which it lands.<sup>23</sup> Kinetic energy is a function of an object’s mass and velocity ( $E_k = 1/2 mv^2$ ). But this is more than physics. To understand how terrain is made tactical and used as a weapon I will use the frame of “field causality.” Eyal Weizman proposed this

term as a counterforensic technique, a method for interrogating the built environment to uncover state violence. Field causality traces linkages that he describes as “multidirectional and distributed over extended spaces and time durations.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it can be employed to capture indirect, slow, and diffuse forms of violence, prescribed by policy, operating through laws, and carried out by human and nonhuman agents.<sup>25</sup> Field causality expands the ecological milieu to bring into focus the threads and relations that formal parameters of legal investigations preclude. It shows how built environments “actively—sometimes violently—shape incidents and events.”<sup>26</sup> This approach requires abandoning the linear path between cause and effect: federal agents did not build the barrier inside the tunnel to flood the town and drown the border crossers. These emergencies resulted from a juncture of security policies, urban infrastructure, and natural forces. The field, Weizman writes, is “a thick fabric of lateral relations, associations, and chains of actions” that “connects different physical scales and scales of action.”<sup>27</sup> Establishing field causalities entails acknowledging multiple agencies and feedback loops, including those factors that are ordinarily absent from public discussions of violence, such as kinetic energy, Newton’s second law of motion ( $F = ma$ ), and the force of gravity mobilized as instruments of extralegal punishment for trespass. Kinematics of trauma reveal political tactics disguised in the form of the material.

### FIRST DUE TO THE BORDER

The task of mitigating threats to human life, whether accidental or deliberate, falls to emergency responders. Firefighters, also trained as EMTs or paramedics, have a pragmatic, hazard-oriented disposition toward the border region that many people know only from sensational and politicized media coverage.<sup>28</sup> Previously called “smoke eaters” and associated with untamed bravery, by the beginning of the twenty-first century firefighters had evolved into a highly skilled, all-hazards response task force—the embodiment of what Mark Tebeau described as “the melding of men and technology into an efficient, lifesaving machine.”<sup>29</sup> Their performance hinges on competence—practical types of knowledge, an understanding of the city and the country, acquired through repeated encounters with the dangers presented by urban and natural landscape.<sup>30</sup> Rescuers are uniquely attuned to the characteristics of physical space and to the temporality of uncertainty.

But this focus on accidents, as unexpected events, and practical engagement with material surroundings obscures the politics and law that enable the use of the environment to perpetrate violence. Many emergencies along the US-Mexico border result from the state's attempt to impose a legal grid over the region's rebellious topography. Dispatched to correct the deleterious consequences of the narcoguerra in Mexico and immigration policies in the United States, Alex and his peers witness and experience the most palpable effects of border militarization. They rescue injured border crossers who fall off the fence and those who are hurt in the desert; they discover drug loads hidden in containers carrying hazardous materials; they fight wildland fires started by migrants in distress as well as those that are used as a diversion for smuggling.<sup>31</sup> More times than any of them would have liked, they were called to the overcrowded Nogales Border Patrol station to take undocumented minors with seizures, fever, or heat illness to the local hospital. But it is not only migrants and refugees that they are called to rescue. Though it happens less often, paramedics also help federal agents—when they get shot, bitten by a service dog, or crash an all-terrain vehicle. Last year, an off-duty Border Patrol agent engaged in recreational target practice started a wildfire that burned over 46,000 acres and required a crew of over six hundred firefighters to contain.<sup>32</sup>

Rescue operations—corrective practices that hide injurious consequences of violent state actions—reveal contradictions inherent in statecraft. Rather than being “accidents”—unanticipated occurrences that happen unintentionally and result in damage—emergencies on the border are deliberately caused by government policies. The adoption by the Border Patrol of the infamous “prevention through deterrence” strategy in 1996—which involved increasing the length and the height of the border fence in urban areas—significantly expanded the number of wounded migrants.<sup>33</sup> Along the US southern fringe, border-related trauma became so common that it no longer surprised anyone or made it to the news. It was evident that the shifting design of the border fence produced particular forms of injuries. The sharp edges on the top of the previous fence, made of corrugated sheet metal leftover from the Vietnam War, amputated limbs; the tall slatted steel wall we have today fractures legs and ankles. In Douglas, Arizona, fire department personnel have been dispatched to care for patients with orthopedic injuries—they call them “fence jumpers”—with such frequency that they began referring to the cement ledge abutting the international wall as “ankle alley.”

The Border Patrol's plan correctly predicted that, as a direct consequence of border security buildup in Nogales, Douglas, and other border towns,

“illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement.”<sup>34</sup> “Prevention through deterrence” purposefully pushed migrants further away from populated areas, rerouting them through remote rural corridors, where border crossers often need medical treatment for dehydration, kidney failure, or heatstroke. To bypass checkpoints permanently installed on all northbound roads, they walk across the vast expanse of the Sonoran Desert, where they become exposed to extreme environments. Firefighters and paramedics in southern Arizona have also responded to multiple deadly accidents involving pickup trucks and vans, sometimes carrying over a dozen unauthorized migrants, when these rolled over during pursuits by the Border Patrol on roads with dangerous curves, often at night. Migrants who walk along the Nogales Wash through the tunnels still get swept away by turbulent waters; every year somebody drowns. Joint Mexican and American rescue teams walk the entire length of the wash to search for their bodies. In 2015, they recovered five corpses.

These injuries do not work the same way as wounds linked to other histories and geographies of violence. When trauma happens abroad, especially in places governed by regimes accused of having a dubious human rights record, scars of torture and other bodily imprints of force become evidence of victimhood and vulnerability—a corporeal marker of persecution that entitles the individual to asylum.<sup>35</sup> But border wounds—whether a leg fracture or kidney failure—caused by policies of the same state that the injured was trying to reach, without permission, do not warrant mercy. On the contrary, their wounds, rather than making border crossers qualified to receive care and protection, are read as proof of crime. A broken ankle or an amputated finger serves as evidence of an illegal entry into the country, which US law classifies as a civil offense. In the court of public opinion, it alone may not be enough to justify condemning unauthorized migrants to harsh treatment. But in the popular imaginary this rather mild violation of the law—crossing the border through a clandestine passage—precedes and substitutes for a possibly more serious one: suspected trafficking, which would be a criminal offense. An injured border crosser is recast as a drug mule or a gang member, a violent subject and a security threat. When an accident, such as a fall from the fence or drowning in a flooded arroyo, is treated as a potential crime, the state assumes the right to exercise force against the survivor.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, instead of exposing their wounds the way asylum seekers do, border crossers must hide them. In the global economy of wounds, their injuries lack

legitimacy and political value. In the eyes of the government, unauthorized migrants are always already implicated as criminals. They stand in for the narcos and the “murderers” and “rapists” that conjure up fear in the nationalist political rhetoric.<sup>37</sup> But wounds tell more than one story. Iraqi physician-turned-anthropologist Omar Dewachi calls them “the interstitial tissue of the social,” which reveals shifting ecologies of violence and care.<sup>38</sup> On the US-Mexico border, the same injured body can be read as evidence of several layers of crime: it bears the scars of political violence committed by more than one state, marks of wounding left by multiple institutions and policies.

“We all have the same red blood,” Chief Mario Novoa said the morning he invited me for a ride along “ankle alley” in Douglas. “We help everyone. It’s human nature to want a better chance of life.” A firefighter in Nogales made a similar comment: “We are not in the business of law enforcement or immigration enforcement. We are in the business of helping people.” Yet the traumatic injuries they witness, read as evidence of a crime, made the blurring of emergency medical services and border policing possible. The erosion of legal and ethical boundaries between care and enforcement takes various forms. Most often, fire and rescue departments in small rural communities, struggling to make ends meet, are forced to report injured migrants to the Border Patrol in order to cover the costs for ambulance services. But there are times when 911 calls from migrants in distress never even reach local first responders because the sheriff’s department transfers them to the Border Patrol. Their advantage of manpower and resources, including Black Hawk helicopters suited for the rugged mountain terrain, is bolstered by their claim to righteousness. Echoing the humanitarian turn in the European security regime, where the rescue of migrants in danger of drowning in the Mediterranean provides the moral and political grounds for interception, the Border Patrol expanded the scope of its work to include the prerogative of saving lives.<sup>39</sup> At first glance this seems like a reorientation of border enforcement toward the provision of care, but it is merely a humanitarian “bandage” that allows for bare survival.<sup>40</sup> In 2017, Tucson Sector had over two hundred Border Patrol agents trained as EMTs who were qualified to provide basic life-saving care.<sup>41</sup> Descriptions of spectacular rescue operations in remote canyons circulate in the press under headlines that hail their heroic efforts. The CBP agent, carrying both an M-4 assault rifle and an emergency first-aid kit, becomes a superhero in the border-turned-war zone.<sup>42</sup> Rebranding border enforcement officers as benevolent rescuers improves the agency’s public image and deflects persistent criticism for mistreatment of migrants.<sup>43</sup> But

this facelift obscures the causes of life-threatening trauma: the Border Patrol made the injuries that agents are now helping to stabilize.

This fusing of violence and aid should not be surprising. As a field of expertise, emergency medicine developed within the military.<sup>44</sup> It was none other than Baron Dominique Jean Larrey, chief surgeon of Napoleon's army, who invented a "flying" ambulance—a light horse-drawn carriage for evacuating wounded soldiers from the battleground to the field hospital. The Civil War in the United States prompted the introduction of forward first-aid stations to rapidly administer medical care to combat casualties, while medical personnel discharged from the military established the first civilian ambulance services. The history of EMS winds through the fault lines of twentieth-century conflicts: during World War I and World War II, enlisted men with first-aid training were assigned to companies on the frontlines, where they provided treatment to injured soldiers on site, controlling bleeding and splinting fractures right there in the trenches; Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals (MASH) were built in Korea before the US military used them in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, reducing deaths from hemorrhage due to vascular injuries and limb amputations; wars in Afghanistan and Iraq allowed the military to improve tactical combat casualty care, using tourniquets and hypotensive resuscitation. In the early twenty-first century, EMS in the United States is a civilian practice shared between public and private providers, but its links with the armed forces have not been severed: even today, cutting-edge life-saving techniques such as the use of hemostatic agents to control bleeding or needle decompression in chest trauma are tested on the frontlines before they are adopted on the homefront. As knowledge moves from the battlefield to the street, so do people: after their deployment, combat medics often find work with ambulance companies. Or they join fire departments.

In their early days, fire departments in the United States were neighborhood associations staffed by volunteers from the community who knew how to "put the wet stuff on the red stuff," as the old-timers like to say. But over the last few decades the institution has undergone significant changes. Following the creation, in 1966, of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and the adoption of the first federal standards for emergency medical services, large metropolitan areas started developing advanced field emergency medical care programs using firefighters. Today, many urban fire departments even in smaller towns like Nogales and Douglas, run their

own ambulances and consider EMS to be an integral part of their work, a trend that is spreading to the rural districts, albeit at an uneven pace.<sup>45</sup> Also recently, these traditionally community-centered organizations began to be systematically incorporated into the operations of the federal state.<sup>46</sup> The process of folding local emergency services into the national security apparatus started in the latter half of the twentieth century, at first under the banner of civil defense and preparedness during the Cold War, but it rapidly accelerated after 9/11.<sup>47</sup> The role of firefighters in responding to the 9/11 attacks, when 343 of them died under the collapsing towers in New York City, solidified their symbolic status as national heroes in the “war on terror.”<sup>48</sup> With the creation of DHS, fire and rescue departments across the US were swiftly absorbed into the political and administrative system of emergency management. Tasked with handling an evolving list of threats to national and global security, firefighters and paramedics are prepared to respond to incidents involving “all threats and hazards”: from industrial waste spills to terror attacks involving biological, chemical, radiological, and other WMDs to epidemic infectious disease. Not everyone in the municipal emergency service agrees with this expanded mission: some are nostalgic for the days when all they did was fight blazes. But, in concert with the evolution of new threats to public safety, strict building codes and other regulations have reduced the incidence of structure fires; in order to avoid becoming obsolete in matters of public safety, firefighters had to adjust.

## **BINATIONAL SECURITY**

In the early twenty-first century, vectors of injury on the border converge: new technologies and infrastructures of fencing meet changing environmental conditions, and intensification of violence related to drug trafficking in northern Mexico meets counterterrorist tactics on the American side. The range of possible event structures and scenarios that lead to unexpected and dangerous situations stretches beyond what emergency responders have ordinarily been trained to do. On the one hand, this happens because the clustering of politics, weather, infrastructures, legal regulations, economic projections, and terrain increases the chances of their collision at potentially lethal angles. On the other hand, however, more types of events are now coded as threats and thus become the prerogative of risk management.



As parameters that define an emergency change, so does the meaning of security. In the borderlands, public safety cannot be contained within the contours of the state. Arizona is downstream, downwind, and downhill from Sonora.<sup>49</sup> “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. What happens in Nogales, Sonora, doesn’t stay there—it comes and affects us,” says Louie Chaboya, former emergency manager and the coordinator of the EPA’s Border 2020 program. I stopped counting how many times and on what diverse occasions he insisted: “When we are helping Mexico, we are helping ourselves.” It’s not only wildfires and flash floods that spread north into the United States, but also chemical spills involving the release of sulphuric acid from derailed Ferromex and Union Pacific trains. Government officials at federal, state, and local levels have long been aware of this situation. In 1983, to protect the environment in the border area, presidents Ronald Reagan and Miguel de la Madrid signed the La Paz Agreement, which obliges both countries to notify each other about emergencies that occur within a zone of 100 kilometers (about 62 miles) on either side of the international boundary. The US Forest Service and the National Forestry Commission in Mexico have an agreement allowing agencies to combine resources to fight wildland fires within 10 miles of the border: US helicopters do water drops in Sonora, while Mexican hand crews come to work in Arizona. In the early 2000s, split cities—Nogales/Nogales, Naco/Naco, Douglas/Agua Prieta, San Luis/San Luis Río Colorado—formalized municipal mutual aid agreements to assist each other in emergencies that threaten the public health, safety, and welfare of residents on either side of the international boundary.

Such cooperation makes sense. The bifurcated towns of the desert are the products of the border.<sup>50</sup> Since their founding in the late nineteenth century along the railroad that transported copper, silver, and cattle, binationalism has been embedded in the urban landscape of Ambos Nogales—“both Nogales,” as the split city is called. Back then the boundary line between the two countries ran along the middle of a wide thoroughfare known as International Street (in Arizona) and Calle Internacional (in Mexico); today, the parallel streets are on opposite sides of the border wall. But the logistical infrastructure of Ambos Nogales is intermeshed, both on the surface and underground: the roads and train tracks link Arizona and Sonora, circulating commodities; the wash and the pipes cross the border south to north collecting runoff water and carrying raw sewage. There are talks of creating a binational electric grid. In a binational city built on contiguous terrain, trying to disentangle the two communities according to the jurisdictional

boundary conflicts with the pragmatics of public utilities and with the operational logic of emergency response.

Municipal fire departments in Ambos Nogales have a long history of sharing resources. For one hundred years—or as long as the border fence has existed—firefighters have been crossing from one side to the other to help with structure fires, search and rescue operations, and, more recently, hazardous materials spills. Since Nogales, Sonora, has few hydrants and its water pressure is low, firefighters in Nogales, Arizona, have for decades supplied their counterparts with water, sometimes by hooking hoses to hydrants on the US side and passing them through the gaps in the fence to their peers in Mexico. When the Hotel San Enrique, located steps away from the border in Nogales, Sonora, caught fire in 2012, firefighters in Nogales, Arizona, parked their brand-new fire truck on the American side and extended its 100-foot ladder over the fence into Mexico, directing a powerful water stream at the roof of the burning building down below; they didn't need to cross the international divide at surface level. At the request of emergency responders in southern Arizona, the United States government has helped train over thirty Mexican firefighters in Nogales, Sonora, as hazmat technicians, and many more in the region are now at least operational-level responders. NORTHCOM and EPA, working through local partners, provided them with equipment, such as hazmat kits and the fully encapsulated suits required to contain leaks during chemical and biological emergencies.

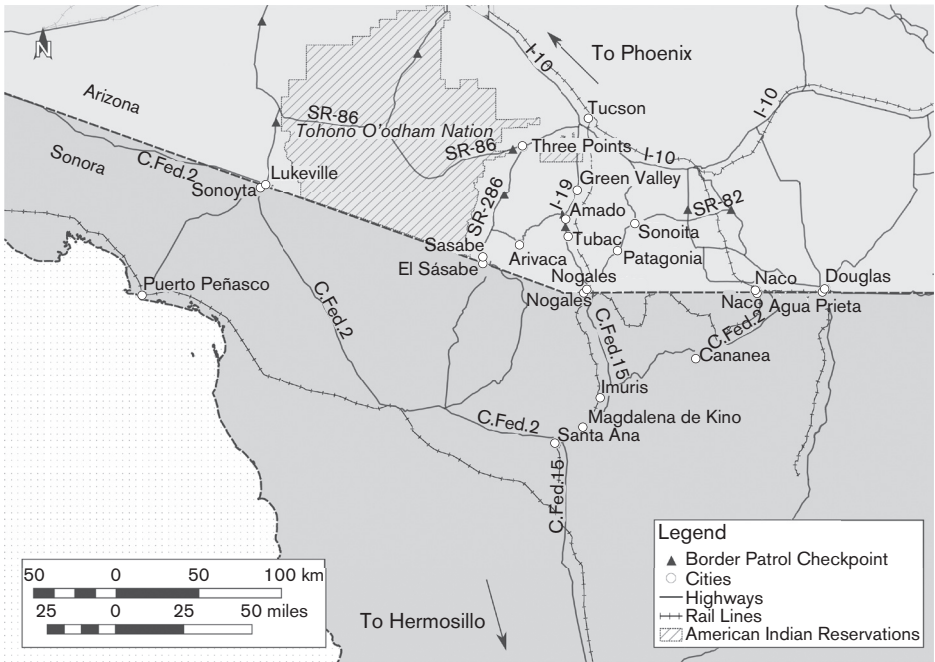
Security concerns in the border region, traditionally focused on disease, drug trafficking, and unauthorized migration, have expanded to include more diverse threats, such as fires, floods, and hazardous materials, but this shift has occurred unevenly across the branches of the state apparatus.<sup>51</sup> While city governments have long worked together, and the Forest Service and the EPA recently extended their mandates to areas south of the border, stretching emergency management into Mexican national space and downplaying the significance of the boundary between the two countries, other government units continue to build barriers and highlight territorial divisions. This work is not limited to adding reinforcements along the jurisdictional line; it entails the thickening of the border by creating zones of legal exception.<sup>52</sup> Within 100 miles of US external boundaries, federal regulations give CBP authority to conduct searches without warrants for “aliens” in “any vessel, [. . .] railcar, aircraft, conveyance, or vehicle.”<sup>53</sup> This “Constitution-free zone” is wider than the 100-kilometer radius established by the La Paz Agreement, a detail that highlights how the DHS definition of security

supplants the ecological perspective of threats underlying the priorities of the EPA. At this disjuncture, it is less surprising that the security infrastructure assembled on the US-Mexico border ends up further exacerbating the intrinsic natural hazards of the desert terrain, and local emergency responders are often the first to palpate the deleterious effects of these constructions.

Nogales exemplifies the misalignment of two security paradigms with different approaches to space. The first, enacted by the CBP, is territorial. It is based on the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states codified in international law; it is anchored to a piece of land, endowed with nationalist imaginaries, and circumscribed by political boundaries; its operative principle is the defense of this enclosed space, hence the importance of fortifying the barrier—the border wall—as “tactical infrastructure” deployed to control undesirable flows. In recent decades, as the category of risk has expanded to “all threats and hazards,” security tactics adapted to the logic of anticipation and preparedness, and adopted practices of pre-emption, including mitigating potential threats outside of the territorial boundaries. Yet this approach continues to rely on a purely legal definition of defensible space. A different paradigm, in this case represented by the EPA, works on scales both smaller and larger than sovereign states. It is anti-territorial, but not anti-spatial: it takes the materiality of terrain very seriously. Rather than considering it as a blank screen on which political aspirations are projected or a physical site of an emergency that randomly falls into one jurisdiction or another, this paradigm acknowledges that the environment, both built and natural, actively produces disastrous events, contingent not on national laws, but on such parameters as the density of particles in the atmosphere.

Emergency responders are caught up in this tension between two paradigms of security. On the one hand, fire and rescue departments across the United States have been integrated into the operations of the national security state, and absorbed into the political and administrative system of federal emergency management. On the other hand, however, their work requires pragmatic engagement with built and natural environment that depoliticizes space and allows for temporary erasure of legal boundaries. On the US-Mexico border, the jurisdictional line brings the disjuncture of these two security paradigms into focus. It is here that we must account for the role of law in deliberately modifying the environment to cause harm. Yet it is also here that we see how in emergency situations the politics of space can be suspended and supplanted by the primacy of terrain.

[MAP 1]



Southern Arizona and northern Sonora border region (by Bryce Davenport).

## TOXIC STATECRAFT

Emergency responders work at the splintered space of what Pierre Bourdieu called the “bureaucratic field,” where “the left hand” of the state is remediating the negative effects resulting from the actions of “the right hand.”<sup>54</sup> They provide rescue services and prehospital health care under conditions of increasing border militarization, precipitated by the “war on drugs” and the prevention of unauthorized migration. In the borderlands tensions and informal compromises between official doctrines and vernacular cultural forms have always been acutely present.<sup>55</sup> But after September 11, 2001, as fire and emergency medical services became ever more tightly integrated into the national preparedness and homeland security apparatus and invested with political and symbolic functions of state authority, their professional and ethical mandates have been put further at odds. Today emergency responders find themselves caught between the imperative of the counterterror state, or “security logic,” and their

obligations of rescue and medicine, or the “humanitarian reason.”<sup>56</sup> On the frontlines, where they operate at the point of friction between law enforcement and social-humanitarian policies, making choices between order and compassion, firefighters and paramedics simultaneously enact this duality of the state and lay bare the violent impulses at its foundation.

The state is a template. It is an institutional blueprint and a legal form that comes into being through practice, animated by its agents and the social effects of what they do. Max Weber proposed that, like other social collectivities, the state must be studied through “particular acts of individual persons” who orient their action based on the premise that it exists and that it is endowed with normative authority.<sup>57</sup> More recently, Didier Fassin suggested a similar approach to understanding the state as “what its agents do under multiple influences of the policies they implement, the habits they develop, the initiatives they take, and the responses they get from their publics.”<sup>58</sup> Like other “street-level bureaucrats” mandated by municipalities to ensure basic public services, emergency responders interpret the letter of the law, fine-tuning the rules to the situation on the ground, and vice versa. “Shot through with the contradictions of the State,” as Bourdieu phrased their predicament, they experience the tension between its two hands as “profoundly personal dramas.”<sup>59</sup> Many firefighters and paramedics in towns along Arizona’s southern fringe, including Nogales, are Mexican Americans who are regularly profiled and questioned at interior Border Patrol checkpoints, sometimes by agents with Hispanic last names. In an incident in 2015, the police in Tucson followed two firefighters from Nogales, Arizona, suspecting that they had stolen the fire truck they were driving. “No wonder! One of you looks like Chapo Guzmán, the other—like Pablo Escobar,” joked their colleagues, referencing two notorious drug traffickers. Their own fire chief used to tell these Spanish-speaking emergency responders that they were “just a bunch of overpaid tomato pickers.” Although, as Josiah Heyman has shown, officers of Mexican or Mexican American descent who work for federal immigration agencies tend to see themselves and their relationship to immigrants through the prism of their US citizenship instead of experiencing solidarity along ethnic lines, Nogales firefighters, who are local to the binational border community, have a more nuanced position in the American social hierarchy.<sup>60</sup> They call their town, where 95 percent of the residents are Hispanic, “Nogales, Arizona, Mexico.”

Their families are scattered across the territories of two countries, but now these firefighters rescue people who, just as they or their parents once did, are

coming for the “American dream.” Instead, these border crossers get to live their worst nightmare. Alex’s Mexican father crossed the border to enlist in the Vietnam War and, in exchange for his service, became a legal US resident. Years later, surplus panels used as portable touchdown pads for military helicopters operating in that war were repurposed to erect a metal fence that new generations would scale in order to join their kin up north, and Alex had to bandage fingers amputated by its sharp edges. In the vernacular of Ambos Nogales, two popular colloquial phrases—“across the line” and “*al otro lado*” (on the other side)—refer either to the United States or to Mexico, depending on where the speaker is at the time. The sayings imply relativity and arbitrariness, and mark the border as the anchor for making meaning and value. They don’t warn that one’s position vis-à-vis this border can have fatal consequences.

Because emergency responders have such intimate knowledge and deep experience of the physical qualities of the landscape and the effects it has on human bodies, their perspectives are particularly helpful for exploring entanglements of statecraft and violence on topographies dissected by political-legal boundaries. Firefighters and paramedics embody and wield the two hands of the state. Their routine work of saving lives requires them to transcend national jurisdictions as the outer limits of knowledge and action, and to overcome the notional contradictions between their ethical mandates as medical professionals and their political-symbolic functions as agents invested with government authority. Yet, from their position on the frontlines of the state, where they deal with its injurious effects, emergency responders also reproduce the dual modality of governance—the split between order and benevolence, or the optic of security and the ethics of rescue.

A threshold is a point of entry. In common usage, the term “threshold” refers to a sill, or a strip of wood, metal, or stone forming the bottom of a doorway crossed to get into a building. But in the past the word had a more nuanced meaning. In Old English “to thresh” was to separate the grains of cereal from the husks and straw by rubbing, shaking, trampling, or beating with a flail. It could also mean to “to beat by way of punishment,” to flog with a stick or a whip.<sup>61</sup> As a noun, “threshold” was sometimes used to indicate an obstacle or a stumbling block.<sup>62</sup> The Spanish term *umbral* has a similar meaning, but it is derived from *lumbral*, a combination of Latin *limen* (entrance) and *lumen* (light), literally, an entrance through which light passes.<sup>63</sup> But its closeness to *umbra*—“shade,” or “shadow”—is noteworthy.<sup>64</sup> Depending on where the source of light is positioned, the thick beam that

holds the arch of the doorway—the *umbral*—also casts a shadow; *subumbrare* is to “to put on shade.” Today, scientists talk about “threshold” or “umbral” as the magnitude or intensity that must be exceeded for a certain reaction, phenomenon, or condition to occur.<sup>65</sup> In hazardous materials manuals that emergency responders use, “threshold” refers to “the point where a physiological or toxicological effect begins to be produced by the smallest degree of stimulation”—the moment when exposure to carbon monoxide begins to cause symptoms of headache and nausea, or when nitric acid vapor burns the eyes.<sup>66</sup>

The border is a quintessential threshold of the state. It looks like a margin, both spatial and social, but, as anthropologists have shown, it acts as the core, where political authority is perpetually remade, its legitimacy renewed.<sup>67</sup> At the edges of polity, Begoña Aretxaga wrote, “power is experienced close to the skin.”<sup>68</sup> Passport control at ports of entry, metal fences cutting through neighborhoods, x-ray machines above railroad tracks, surveillance cameras, and other minute practices of national governance, as well as its subversion—from tunnels to ultralight aircraft, from guns smuggled into Sonora to drugs trafficked to Arizona—form a mesh that makes the state, in its post-9/11 form, visible and palpable in Ambos Nogales. The border conscripts practices into security logic, pulling more and more actors and things into this all-encompassing project. It is here, as it starts producing noxious effects, that the state reaches its threshold: when the desert ceases being a landscape and becomes a killing field; when the fence stops being an infrastructure of protection and turns into an amputation machine; when an injured body is read as an index of trespass and a sign of potential crime; when rescuers hand their patients over to punitive immigration enforcement authorities.<sup>69</sup> Threshold denotes the juncture between territory and terrain, when an otherwise innocuous constellation of policies and materials achieves the level of toxicity that is harmful to humans. Violence, Jacques Derrida argued, is “not an accident arriving from outside law.”<sup>70</sup> The perspective of emergency responders brings this into light: it allows us to locate the moments the state shape-shifts, exposing violence as the central method by which its power operates. This shape shifting is never complete: biopolitics is not replaced by necropolitics. At the threshold, the state is teetering. Indetermination allows it to use both law and force as tools that coexist at its disposal. The state may still adhere to its normative ideologies of governance enshrined in the Constitution while simultaneously engaging in practices that negate those foundational principles. It both wounds and cares.



As if one state weren't enough, emergency responders on the US-Mexico border operate at the edges of two states, where their physical and legal contours are sharply defined and policed, yet where their social effects ooze across jurisdictional boundaries. They are at the very center of this splintered bureaucratic field, where the state's two hands are enmeshed in a struggle over the matter of public goods: who has the power to define what they are and who is worthy of receiving them. But theirs is a field inflected by the border, which distorts the balance of power even further. While the state's right hand wages wars, the left hand is tied behind its back. The security apparatus swells and sometimes reaches out across the territorial boundary, but social-humanitarian functions abruptly end where rusted steel punctures the surface of the earth: the other side is somebody else's problem.

#### **POLITICS OF WOUNDING AND OF RESCUE**

As a paramedic intern at the Jacksonville Fire Rescue Department, I spent hundreds of hours on an ambulance that covered a poor, predominantly African American neighborhood bisected by the train tracks and I-95. It was 2013, when Duval County was called “the murder capital of Florida,” and Jacksonville held some of the highest rates of reported rape and assault.<sup>71</sup> There, on one of city's busiest paramedic units, I learned how to identify arrhythmias, insert IVs, calculate drip rates, and place endotracheal tubes into the throats of patients who had stopped breathing. Injuries that I saw were physical as well as social.<sup>72</sup> There were shootings, car crashes, overdoses. There were people suffering from diabetes, asthma, and mental illness. We ran over a dozen calls a day and throughout the night, snacking on energy bars that hospital staff would leave for us to grab when we brought a new patient to the emergency room. Sometimes, on a rare quiet evening, when sirens paused, we would sit outside the fire station and smoke cigars. These moments of calm never lasted, which may be why I remember them better than the vehicle accidents and the strokes. By the time my internship ended, it had changed how I taught about violence and urban marginality in my anthropology classes. Death from a gunshot wound becomes less abstract once you try to stop the bleeding from a femoral artery.

This book bears the marks of the five years I volunteered as an emergency responder: first an EMT, then a paramedic and a wildland firefighter. Through training, I learned to embody an intimate, pragmatic approach to

space and the environment, which changed my relationship with urban terrain. I remember how, in my early days, we practiced forcible entry on a metal prop, using axes and Halligan bars, and then walked up and down the neighborhood discussing techniques for breaking down different types of doors. When I joined the Micanopy Fire Rescue Department, I learned to drive a fire engine through the narrow streets that bore strange names from the Seminole past: the firehouse was on Chokolka Boulevard and by the end of your rookie period you had to know the fastest route to Wacahoota, Eestalustee, Tuskawilla, and Okehumkee. We learned our territory like a grid—by memorizing each street with two cross streets. Most shifts were slow in this quaint historic town, but a stretch of I-75 ran across the swamps and the prairie that belonged to our jurisdiction and Chief made us cut up a lot of cars to prepare for vehicle extrications on the highway. Cars were dropped off behind the station, and we practiced different ways to use hydraulic tools and hi-lift jacks, do cribbing and roll the dash. Pileups on the highway, especially those involving heavy semi-trucks, stalled traffic for hours.

Emergency responders are attentive to the materiality of terrain, aware of its role in creating emergencies. They listen to the weather forecast: temperature, precipitation, wind speed and direction alter the physical qualities of the landscape in which they work. Rain makes the surface of the road slippery, wind ignites fires and spreads flames, excessive heat strands helicopters on the ground because the air is not dense enough to allow liftoff. This concern for the material properties of the environment is also important for safety. On scene, emergency vehicles are always parked upwind and uphill from a potential hazardous materials incident. Looking at space through the lens of threats—both natural and manmade—is a perspective that I wanted to bring to this book.

But my experience as an emergency responder left another, more profound, mark on this narrative: the mode of storytelling inflected by the language I was taught. Through several revisions of the text, I eliminated unnecessary medical jargon and technical vocabulary, leaving just enough to give the reader a sense of how firefighters and EMTs talk about what they do. However, I could not change what may appear like a cold, detached tone: a methodical description, not soaked with anger or empathy.<sup>73</sup> I didn't do it to avoid sensationalizing trauma, though it serves this purpose well. Rather, it is a consequence of being familiar with the pragmatic approach that EMTs and paramedics need in order to work in emergencies. A life-threatening injury must be treated immediately, but—as in the case of internal bleeding

or spinal fracture—it is not always evident. Therefore, the initial response is structured according to algorithms that guide action without the need to pause and think. It's automatic. It's also scripted. First come the ABCs: airway, breathing, circulation, sometimes preceded with an X for exsanguination. We check for DCAP-BTLS in rapid trauma assessment; we ask about OPQRST to evaluate pain; SLUDGE helps identify organophosphate and nerve gas poisoning.<sup>74</sup> Critical interventions in the field happen before emotions seep in. This systematic approach reduces errors in messy situations and provides vocabulary to describe the patient's condition in a way that everyone understands. It's supposed to be accurate and objective. Banished from the scene, emotions may not resurface until days or even years after the event. There is an acronym for that too: PTSD. Recent studies show that the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder among firefighters is comparable to that of combat veterans.<sup>75</sup>

It is not until later, when they tell stories about what happened, that emergency responders try to put it in their own words. I recall the evening, when standing around the kitchen counter at the station in Nogales, firefighters talked about the incidents that had made them cry. They remembered the New Year's Day when a ten-year-old girl who lived in a house near the border was shot in the head. The drive-by shooter was aiming at her father, but the bullet ricocheted and killed the sleeping child. They spoke tenderly about a little girl who was chasing after a packet of M&Ms when it rolled under a car—the driver didn't see her, backed up, and the wheel crushed the girl's head. There was nothing they could do. I understood. I still can't forget the numbness I felt as a paramedic trainee the night we could not save a three-week-old baby who had stopped breathing. It was not sorrow or anger. I didn't cry. I couldn't feel anything, as if my nerves had been severed.

Recounting accidents and describing injuries in their graphic and gory details is the vernacular through which those on scene process their experiences. Sometimes, if you read between the lines, their stories begin to approach social critique. Emergency service espouses heroic sacrifice and an ethics of anti-politics. The Star of Life on their uniforms, like the red cross on medical tents in war zones, signals service to humankind and impartiality in conflicts. But every time they splint a fractured leg in “ankle alley” or run fluids to rehydrate a hypovolemic border crosser, emergency responders experience the disagreements between the state's two hands—the one that enforces order and the one that provides care—in the most immediate way possible, creating a dissonance that may produce moral injury.<sup>76</sup> They don't

take sides in the struggle between powers vying to define and allocate public goods. Their anti-political stance is a matter of survival. Firefighters have to rely on each other; in emergency situations their lives are literally in the hands of their peers. Despite their leadership's historical entanglement with local elections and their current placement in a militarized zone, topics that could splinter the brotherhood are taboo. Politics is not discussed at the station. Nor, for that matter, is religion or race.<sup>77</sup> Thus, while these disturbing narratives about amputations and dehydration don't assign blame, they form a record that can be used to reconstruct the chain of events leading to the incident, framed as an accident. Sometimes the stories point to individual responsibility; other times they hint at policy failures.

This difference in how scholars and emergency responders approach violence and social suffering was an important motivation for why I decided to write this book. While the former outline structural forces, focusing on conflicts over politics and the economy and explaining how the government marginalizes certain groups of people and pushes them into adopting criminalized and sometimes brutal survival strategies, the latter find themselves on the frontlines, where policies impact the human body and where action precedes analysis: on the US-Mexico border, they treat the wounded in what Timothy Dunn calls "a low-intensity conflict."<sup>78</sup> Their encounters are with individuals—always a singular, particular case. Yet through years of experience they have noticed patterns, accumulating knowledge of social trends that have had direct effects on the well-being of people in the communities they serve.

When it comes to politics, my goal in this book is twofold. First, I explain the depoliticized stance adopted by emergency responders as a precondition for rescue work. Then I question it. I follow emergency responders to the threshold, where anti-politics becomes unviable. How much trauma is too much? When does it exceed the level that those whose daily job it is to respond to heart attacks and drownings stop considering it "normal"? When do they start recognizing border infrastructure as a weapon? What is the threshold of politics in emergency response?

The structure of this book reflects the effort to capture this ever-fleeting threshold—almost there but not quite yet. A 911 call can be for anything: first responders don't know what they will find on scene. Sometimes, compounded by an unfortunate constellation of forces, emergencies are scaled up. Other times, the run is for nothing. The work of firefighters and paramedics consists of a practiced reaction to surprise. Configurations of events to which they respond are unlimited and they don't follow a logical sequence. A call

for domestic violence may be followed by a fire alarm followed by an overdose followed by a quick stop to get teriyaki chicken followed by a bomb threat. The narrative, which stitches up episodes from my fieldwork, replicates this pattern of rescue work. If some stories are incomplete, it's because encounters are often abruptly cut off. Tidy storytelling would obscure the fragmentary nature of emergency work. It would also conceal the surprise element of events as they are experienced by those on the frontlines. The strange, unsettling, occasionally bizarre qualities of the situation do not register until after it's over. Or never at all. What would be an adequate explanation of the run to help a customs agent we found lying flat on a parking lot floor after he ingested crystal meth while scraping the ceiling of a trailer pulled over for inspection? Or another call, for a woman who broke both ankles when she fell off the border wall but asked the paramedic for her shoes? Some stories convey more when left in their raw form, unprocessed. Still others could not be included—it was impossible to do so without risking HIPAA violations—but nevertheless left their imprint on these pages.<sup>79</sup>

To do this research, I went back and forth between the United States and Mexico, sometimes crossing the border several times a day. I also spent many hours on the road, driving between Arivaca and Nogales, crossing the two Border Patrol checkpoints now permanently set up in Amado and Tubac, and regularly going to Tucson, Sonoita, Douglas, Sasabe, and other towns. The field of emergency expands and contracts depending on the site from which the events are experienced, yet—as my shifting perspective between these sites will show—they cannot be understood in isolation from one another. The threads that entangle these localities are central to rescue work. I begin in Nogales, Arizona, which remains my anchor point as I move across the line to Nogales, Sonora, and beyond the urban perimeter to remote, sparsely populated communities. The book is divided into three parts, held together by the narrative that continues through all of them. Part 1 focuses on tactical infrastructure on the border and the bodies caught up in its traps. It is about bisection. In contrast, Part 2 examines security, understood through a spatial and ecological lens, and the operational landscape of emergency response, which straddles the line. It is about entanglement. Finally, Part 3 looks at how terrain refracts laws and ethics, and their competing claims over vulnerable bodies. It is about survival.

In 2015, when I arrived at the border to start fieldwork, firefighters told me: “You are part of the family.” My relationship with Mexican and American emergency responders began even before I met them, thousands of miles

away, when I first put on a helmet and rolled hose, and this shared background has helped strengthen our bonds ever since. We shared spatial, hazard-oriented thinking and the habits of pragmatic, functional engagement with the human body and with the physical environment—dispositions acquired through coursework and training exercises as well as real emergency situations. As a member of the first responder community, I accepted my share of the duties. During my time in Arizona I volunteered at the Nogales Suburban Fire District, where, besides staying on shifts at the firehouse, I served as the instructor for medical training. I also accompanied the Tucson Samaritans to provide first aid at the Kino Border Initiative’s migrant aid center, known as “el comedor,” in Nogales, Sonora. Being there, wearing the navy-blue uniform with the insignia of a fire department and clutching a stethoscope, gave me a more nuanced view of what it was like to provide care on both sides of the line.

Though my experiences in fire and emergency medical services have left a mark on the narrative that unfolds in the following pages, the center stage in the story belongs to the firefighters in Arizona and in Sonora. *Threshold* is about them. They live on the frontlines, where my presence was temporary.