



### **A94 Humanitarian Science in the Texas Borderlands: Incorporating a Sociopolitical Perspective to the Forensic Investigation of Migrant Identification**

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The goals of this presentation include an appreciation of the need for: (1) coordination, collaboration, and consistency among various stakeholders during large-scale humanitarian science efforts; (2) knowledge of how the local work of migrant identification connects local issues with global systems and history; and, (3) understanding that forensic science in a humanitarian crisis context requires balancing neutrality and engagement in novel ways.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating how sociopolitical conditions and processes shape the work of forensic scientists in this context and how they navigate and transform social relationships and power dynamics circumscribing their work by highlighting identification efforts made by forensic anthropologists since 2013. This presentation proposes these forensic anthropologists are actors in the political economy of forensic science in the Texas Borderlands as they position themselves within a complex set of interactions. This allows them to garner the resources necessary to continue their work, as well as provides them the position to tell the stories of the dead. This presentation pulls from critical reflections of forensic anthropologists working in the Texas Borderlands to illustrate the complexities of operating within the current system, highlights the novelty of this approach, and contemplates how a sociopolitical approach to migrant death can be incorporated into the future of this work.

Forensic anthropologists are often consulted by law enforcement and medical examiners to assist in the recovery of human remains from various contexts and analyze those remains to address questions regarding the death and identity of the individual. While the majority of cases analyzed by forensic anthropologists involve a single individual, practitioners are increasingly becoming involved in mass disaster and mass death situations that unfold in relation to, or as a consequence of, processes of public policy and governance. For example, forensic anthropologists were first formally utilized in politically charged humanitarian efforts in 1984 in Argentina to assist in the identification of individuals “disappeared” during what became known as the Dirty War. The unique skillset of forensic anthropologists to locate and excavate graves as well as analyze skeletal remains positioned them to contribute to the work of identification, as well as the work of witnessing and legitimizing claims of human rights abuses.

In more recent years, forensic anthropologists have utilized their skills in humanitarian efforts in South Texas to exhume and identify migrants who perished crossing the southern United States border. With virtually no resources and deaths at mass disaster proportions, many South Texas counties made the decision to bury unidentified migrants in pauper’s areas of county cemeteries until they obtained the resources for costly forensic investigations. Unfortunately, little documentation survives detailing exactly where the burials are positioned and exactly how many burials are located in each cemetery. Local officials invited forensic anthropologists from several universities to locate, remove, and preserve the context of the burials through proper documentation. Once exhumed, scientific tools were utilized by forensic anthropologists during the investigation into personal identification, including osteological, histological, dental, isotopic, and genetic analyses; however, these scientific practices were implemented in a broader political economic context that formed and was shaped by politics and processes of social justice and human rights.

This presentation, from the view of a visiting volunteer forensic science team, illuminates migrant identification efforts in South Texas as a critical vantage point from which to understand the sociopolitically charged nature of humanitarian forensic science in a contemporary globalized society. Migrant identification requires cooperation, communication, information sharing, and resource coordination between a variety of local, national, and international stakeholders that may each have different missions, motivations, and goals. Thus, many forensic anthropologists working on migrant identification operate as part of a larger, sometimes fragmented and contentious, initiative toward social justice and human rights. As such, forensic investigations in this context are positioned in such a way as to spotlight particular public policies, practices, and social processes that lead to inhumane treatments in life and in death. Forensic scientific practice offers a window into the dynamic and global nature of this crisis and the response mechanisms currently in place and must be viewed through the interconnected lenses of history, power, and scientific practice.

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#### **Forensic Anthropology, Humanitarian Science, Migrant Death**