Perception of danger in the southern Arizona borderlands

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The mainstream paradigm of the US-Mexico borderlands is that the undocumented migrants are posing a serious threat to the area, yet who or what is actually in danger at the border and what is the danger? This paper explores, through a phenomenological participant-researcher approach, the tension and different perceptions of danger connected to the southern Arizona borderlands. By joining the humanitarian aid group Ajo Samaritans as a volunteer, the borderland is both experienced and observed on the ground through active participation. In closing, it is observed that different actors convey different, and at times even direct opposite, dangers that elevate tension in the area. Under the surface, however, there are similarities and while this study argues that there are many threats as well as endangered entities in the desert, the undocumented migrants are the group most threatened and the desert itself poses the greatest danger.

Keywords: undocumented migrants, borders, US-Mexico, perception, danger, phenomenology

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Introduction: changing perception

In 1993 Romero (1993, 36) wrote, "Very few places have been subject to as much verbal abuse as the border between the United States and Mexico." If it was true in 1993, before the North American Free Trade Agreement, Operation Gatekeeper, 9/11, and President Donald Trump, it is certainly true today. Although perceptions of the border have changed and at times been positive (Cadava 2018), the post-9/11 era multiplied the interest in border security. The attacks also changed attitudes towards the border almost overnight (Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014). On June 11th, 2001, TIME Magazine came out with a special issue. On the cover was a picture of two small children and a text that read, "What's happening on the border is amazing. Come see how it's changing your world. Welcome to Amexica", with Amexica placed in the middle of the page with capital letters in the colors of both the Mexican and US flag.[1] With the front page, the magazine actively portrayed the border as an integrated place with a positive effect that extends beyond the border area. This idea of a thriving, bi-cultural borderland is not new (Dear 2013; Cadava 2018). Yet, by inviting people to come and experience the border, TIME also accentuated that the border is a place many people are not familiar with, thus as a place that before 9/11 was out of the mainstream media's spotlight. Exactly three months later, all of that

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changed and the obvious positive take on the border – and border culture – started to wither away in the aftermath of 9/11. On September 20th, 2004, TIME Magazine came out with yet another issue highlighting the border. This time the theme was a special investigation with the following text, "America's border | Even after 9/11 it's outrageously easy to sneak in." The background was a photo of the US flag with two hands tearing a hole.[2] In three years, the borderland perception changed from a positive place in which cultures meet and interact progressively, into a dangerous place that requires control and separation from the invasive other – a narrative that persists until today.

In recent years, border scholars such as Brunet-Jailly (2007a) and Jones (2012, 2016) have been focusing on security and safety along the US-Mexican border in the post 9/11 era. Despite their considerable influence in their academic fields, their analyses of the centralized border policies as failures and the idea of a perfectly closed and secure border as unrealistic, they have largely been ignored by policy makers. Instead, the border reappeared on top of everyone's agenda due to very different events unfolding. A new narrative stirred a negative perception during the summer of 2015, when political newcomer, Donald Trump, entered the race to become the Republican Party's Presidential candidate and subsequently the President of the United States of America. In his presidential announcement speech, Trump addressed the US border with Mexico by saying:

> They are not our friend [Sic], believe me… When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best… They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [Sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists… we have no protection… I would build a great wall… I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. (TIME 2015)

A rhetoric of fear is gaining a footing in US politics (Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014) and it is more often than not against the backdrop cited above that perceptions of the border are produced, regardless of the realities unfolding along the US-Mexican border. Németh (2015) argues that media and film can have a strong influence on people's perception and Staudt (2008) observes that people and media in the United States have been susceptible to believing the worst about Mexico, thereby providing fertile ground for reinforcing negative perceptions. Fictional books and movies regarding the border are often centered on drugs/cartels and violence, hence supporting the perception of a dangerous border (Staudt 2008; Arreola 2010). Violence in Mexican border cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana have been alarmingly high post 9/11 and US politicians, media, and the public have raised concerns regarding it spilling over into the US. Even though Ciudad Juárez and El Paso are only divided by a wall and a river and San Diego being very close with Tijuana, FBI crime figures show that San Diego and El Paso – along with other Texan border towns – are relatively safe compared to other US cities (Solomon 2015; Robertson 2016). The overall crime rate has also dropped in the same period as it peaked on the Mexican side (Correa-Cabrera 2012; Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014), which seriously brings into question whether any significant spilling over has taken place. Yet, while people are familiar with the political, mediated, and fictional discourse of the border, few (outsiders) understand and/or are familiar with the reality of the borderland and the people living there.

In a post-truth era, with border security and walls in the center of the political debate, this paper examines one of the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas along the US-Mexican border to uncover the different perceptions of danger connected to the southern Arizona borderlands. Via a phenomenological participant-researcher approach, the area is both experienced and observed on a local level to determine who or what is actually in danger at the border and what the danger is. As the borderland is in rapid change, this research provides a view from the ground into the complexities of the US-Mexican border from which further research and discussion, both academic and political, can grow.

Border security

An effort to 'secure' the borderlands has been visible and often is equated with the building of barriers along the US border with Mexico. It is, however, just one policy and the barrier is not a single connected barrier following the border from the North Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. The border is porous and diverse – like it has always been – as it is in its nature (Brunet-Jailly & Dupeyron 2007; Dear 2013) and consists of pieces of wall, fence, and other barriers both natural and manmade.

9/11 is recognized as the turning point in bordering and security (Arreola 2010); nevertheless, it has been argued that 9/11 was not the reason so much as it was an excuse (Coleman 2007; Winders 2007). It was under the Clinton administration (Coleman 2007) that the most influential border operations in recent times took place. In 1993, the same year that Romero wrote about the US-Mexican border, the US Border Patrol instigated Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, Texas, followed by Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, California and Operation Safeguard in Nogales, Arizona in 1994, and Operation Rio Grande, Texas in 1997 (Dear 2013). The operations aimed at putting an end to undocumented immigration by emphasizing security in urban border areas. This was done for two reasons. First, most people crossed in the urban area, as it was easy to blend in both before and after crossing. Secondly, the United States Border Patrol wanted to utilize the desert as a natural boundary/border believing the dangers of the desert would discourage people from crossing (U.S. Border Patrol 1994; Warren 2019). The outcome, however, has been the opposite. The border "… fence itself has contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust, and elevated levels of fear and hostility along its length" (Dear 2013, 70), while the desert, instead of deterring people from crossing and serving as a boundary, has become a funnel and a graveyard for undocumented migrants trying to cross the border; this is especially noticeable in Arizona (McGuire 2018).

The mistrust and fear are amplified when the border hinders the development of social relations (Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014). Arizona – especially the Tucson Sector – remains a popular point of entry (Johnson 2015). The sector had the highest number of border agents as well as apprehensions in 2010 and 2011 according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protections fiscal reports. Furthermore, it had the second highest number of apprehensions from 2011–2018. At the same time, Arizona has the most pedestrian and vehicle barriers of any state.[3] The argument that stopping undocumented migrants from coming in is a necessity in order to have a safe borderland is often heard. Yet Brunet-Jailly (2007b) argues that the key reason earlier attempts have been unsuccessful is the lack of understanding of the borderland and its context; to grasp the issue of danger in the borderlands and its impact on the local area, we must first understand who or what is actually in danger in the borderland and what the danger is.

Phenomenological exploration of the Southern Arizona borderland

This research employs a bottom-up ethnographic phenomenological approach that is used to explore the perceptions of 'danger' in the Southern Arizona borderlands. Data collection is centered on participant observation of naturally occurring data in the borderlands as it is the cradle from which the information that feeds the political and media discourses originates. Phenomenological methods are well suited to explore the human interpretation and experience of spaces and places (Relph 1981; Rendtorff 2004). The data collected in this study has emerged grounded in experiences and, in this specific participant observation method, the researcher functioned as a research-participant not only taking on the role as an observant researcher of the group/phenomenon, but also as a participant in the group/phenomenon itself (Robinson 1998). By actively embedding in the spaces where the phenomenon unfolds, the researcher uses all senses, including the body, as an instrument to uncover and comprehend the knowledge that exists in the space (Casey 2001). This is what Merleau-Ponty (1964, 5) considers "pure knowledge". The research-participant approach also creates an opportunity to relate to the actors and their discourse, which strengthens the interpretation of the phenomenon (Sayer 2000). The context is often overlooked or misunderstood when only relying on numbers or second- and third-hand information.

> As geographers, we combat this simplification [loss of context] by continuing to go into the field, to visit observe, ask questions and seriously contemplate the evidence on the ground not simply that information available in an archive or online. Should we cease doing that duty, we compromise our own methods and thereby surrender our obligations as explorers to those who prefer to see from a distance with all the distortion that can bring. (Arreola 2010, 345)

Phenomenological methods are not aimed at having an immediate effect on society or public policy. Instead, the objective is to have a more profound impact, by making people reflect themselves, through raising awareness and forcing individuals to challenge what they believe are facts (Relph

1981; Sayer 2000). In fact, reflection along with a first-person point of view is the crux of the matter and includes the researcher's own reflection (Smith 2006; Ferretti 2020).

The data are accumulated over a six month period and includes several visits to both sides of the border, with formal as well as informal interviews conducted on both sides. The primary data collection, however, is centered around a five-day trip to Ajo, Arizona and the surrounding Sonoran Desert. The trip was organized in connection to a geographical methods class at Arizona State University and practically carried out with the help of No More Deaths/ No Más Muertes, Humane Borders, Tucson and Ajo Samaritans – Ajo Samaritans is a local chapter of Tucson Samaritans – who provided vehicles, experienced facilitators, and training. Despite being individual organizations, these organizations are similar in their structure and aim. All of them are Arizona and faith-based humanitarian organizations aiming at ending death and suffering at the US-Mexican border. Humane Borders, established in 2000, is the oldest while Tucson Samaritans was founded in 2002 and No More Deaths in 2004. They are run by volunteers and one of the practical ways they work is by putting out water in the desert and offering medical assistance to all they encounter, not only undocumented migrants (see Squire 2014; Johnson 2015 for more about the humanitarian aid groups).

Each day smaller groups consisting of two experienced facilitators and two to three students would fill up a truck with water and food and drive further into the desert, to locate people in need of food, water, and/or medical assistance. Due to the inhospitable terrain, it was necessary to leave the truck and continue on foot to try and locate the undocumented migrant's routes. The primary data thus comes from field experience from camping in the desert and working as an aid worker, aid training by Tucson Samaritans, fundraising and informal conversations with various people such as facilitators, volunteers/students, Border Patrol agents, police and forest rangers, and locals encountered inside and outside of the border area.

The phenomenological method is an explorative approach that requires an open mind, free of pre-constructed theories and beliefs. Therefore, this research has been approached without hypotheses and theoretical prepositions to avoid theory-bias as much as possible, and the theoretical reflections have occurred post-fieldwork. Consequently, the paper is structured the way the research has been conducted. It first discusses Ajo and the surrounding area in order to contextualize Ajo's geographical, political, and to some degree cultural position within the larger paradigm of undocumented migrants. It then goes on to account for the different perceptions of danger encountered in the area before presenting theoretical thoughts on borders and fear, a discussion of the different actors, and their view on danger ending with a summary.

Ajo and the border zone

Ajo, once the home to one of the largest copper mines in the world, is today a small struggling community of approximately 3,300 people located in the Sonoran Desert, Southern Arizona. Located half an hour's drive north from the US-Mexican border and two hours south of Phoenix, Ajo finds itself in a small pocket surrounded by the Tohono O'odham Nation to the east, the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument to the south, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge to the west, and Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range to the north. The Tohono O'odham Nation and the Air Force Range have certain restrictions regarding movement on their land. In some areas, the latter even requires you to obtain written permission, by watching a video and signing some documents stating your business, as well as phoning in when you enter and leave the area. The National parks do not have the same rigid control but do have certain rules as it is federal land (Fig. 1.). Furthermore, Ajo is located within the established US border zone, known as the 100-mile border area running all along the US borderline and stretching 160 km (100 miles) inland (ACLU 2012; Dorsey & Díaz-Barriga 2015). As a result of the border zone, there are now two checkpoints, one between the border town of Lukeville and Ajo, around 25 km south, and one 8 km north from the center, even before reaching the US-Mexico border crossing at Lukeville. It leaves Ajo in a pocket and makes it practically impossible to get to without passing through checkpoints regardless of which direction you are coming from.

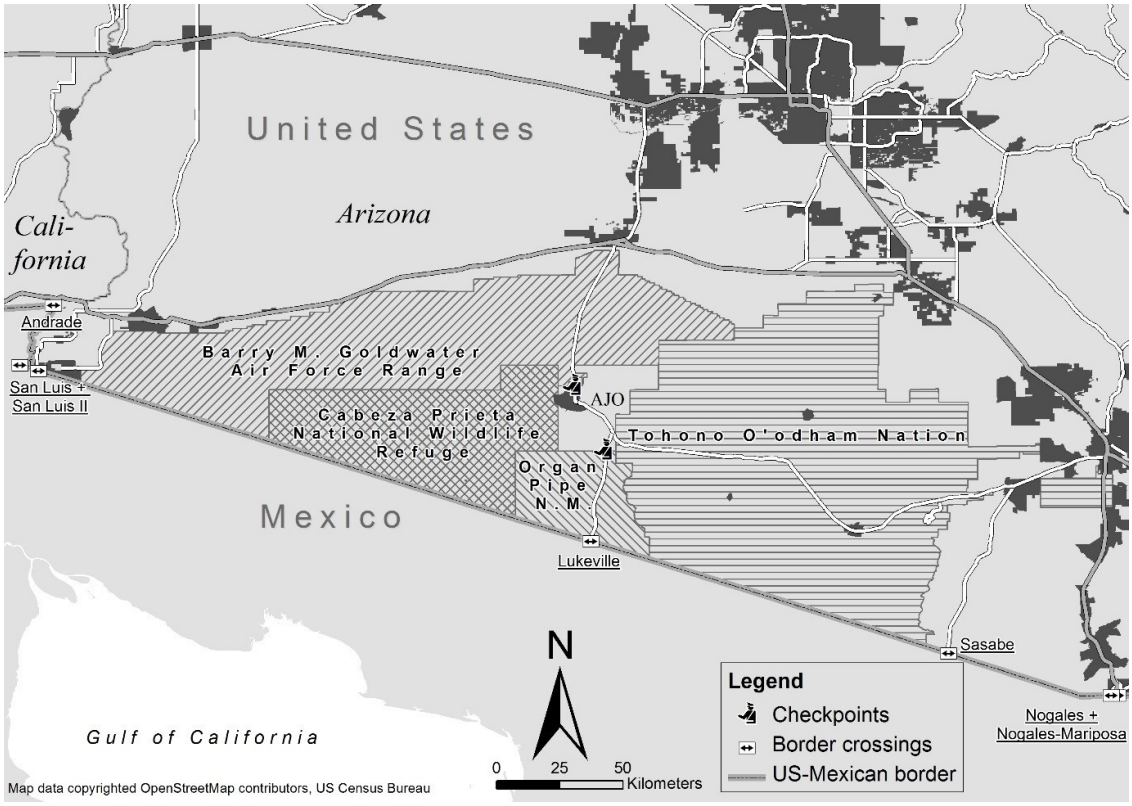

Fig. 1. Ajo and the surrounding area.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been very critical of the border zone. In 2002, they presented a statement on human rights violations at the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly, where they addressed it as a constitution-light or even constitution-free zone (ACLU 2012) since the Border Patrol can – without a warrant – enter and search private property based on reasonable suspicion. This evades the fourth amendment under the Bill of Rights in the American Constitution which reads:

> The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.[4]

As a higher standard is required to establish probable cause than reasonable suspicion, it could be argued that the change is a watering down of the amendment. Former director of policy at U.S. Customs and Border Protection Seth Stodder commented that "What the courts and the political authorities need to find is the right balance between security and respecting privacy and civil liberties" (Prabucki & Jeunesse 2014). What ACLU, Stodder, and others are pointing out is the ironic dilemma that in the struggle to secure freedom and liberty the US is compromising those exact values. The people in Ajo are very aware of the zone, while others in, for example, New York City and Chicago are unaware they live within such a zone. Although the border zone only covers a small part of the US land area, it affects all but 13 states and some, like Florida, are completely within the zone. Furthermore, two thirds of Americans live within the area, yet the reality and impact of the zone is emphasized in Ajo and other towns along the US-Mexican border where border control and checkpoints are a part of everyday life, unlike in cities and towns on the East coast where there are no checkpoints. In his 2012 book, *Border Walls*, Jones calls the term constitutional-free zone inaccurate.

Yet, he argues that the rules regarding when the Border Patrol can claim 'reasonable cause' are so wide-ranging that anyone at any time can be stopped and searched – something that happens quite frequently along the US-Mexican border.

The fourth amendment is not the only, or the most severe, point brought forward by the ACLU, however they also claim several incidents in which the Border Patrol have used deadly force and suggests that there in general exists a "cruel culture" within the agency (ACLU 2012). The Southern Border Communities Coalition (SBCC), a coalition made up of 60 different organizations from all four states sharing a border with Mexico, supports the ACLU and claims that from 2010 to March 2016, at least 50 people have been killed by Border Patrol agents.[5] The abuse that the ACLU, SBCC, No More Deaths (2011, 2014) and others (Boyce *et al*. 2019) say is going on is not only hurting undocumented migrants, but also US citizens have reported abuse committed by the Border Patrol (Christiansen 2014). The part of the border zone, which follows the US-Mexican border, is also called the militarized zone by people who live within it. Another example of why that is is found in the REAL-ID Act of 2005. The Act gives the Secretary of Homeland Security the right to waiver federal laws when constructing the border wall and other barriers in relation to the wall and not only in close vicinity of the US-Mexican border (Jones 2012; Squire 2014).

The people and spaces of Ajo

The rise of undocumented migrants traveling through the Ajo area has led to a massive increase in Border Patrol agents, which is very visible in and around Ajo. In the desert, there are many items such as black water bottles and carpet shoes – both typically used by undocumented migrants as the water bottles do not reflect the sunlight and carpet shoes leave no footprints – that remind visitors of the existence of undocumented migrants. Likewise, the small town of Ajo appears to have a very disproportionate number of law enforcement agents compared to similar towns located outside the border zone. The Border Patrol Station, located 16 km south of Ajo, has undergone several expansions since it was built in 1987 (Fig. 2). Back then it could accommodate 25 agents, but after the latest expansion in 2013 it can now accommodate 500 and has currently more than 300 Border Patrol agents working at its 30 acres' site.[6] It is today one of the busiest stations in the southwest, equipped with training areas, a helipad, full-service auto station, and more than 750-vehicle parking in addition

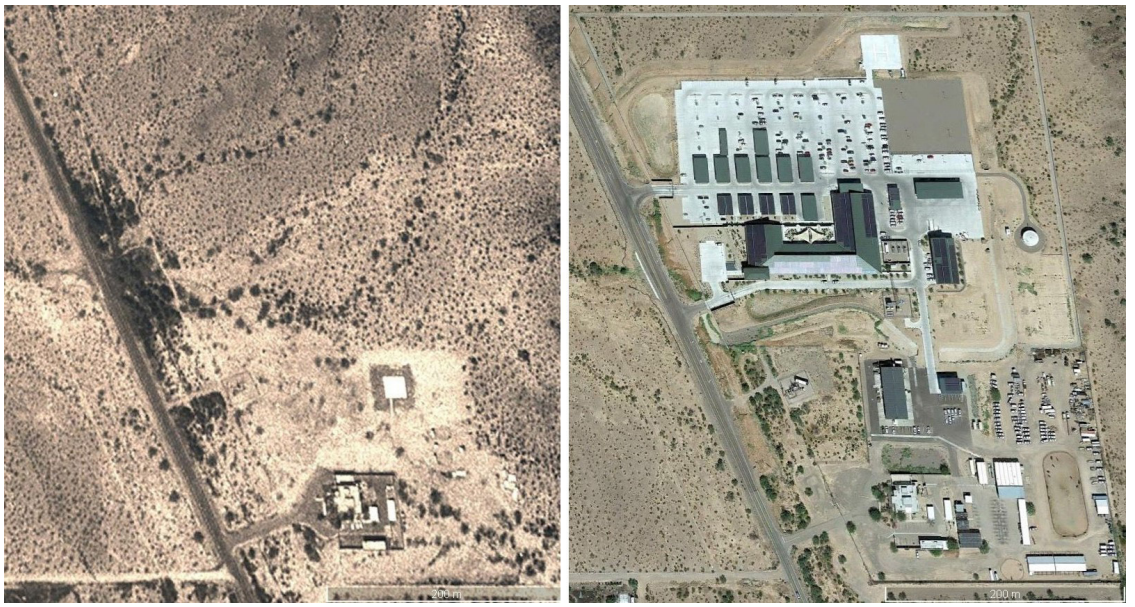

Fig. 2. Ajo Border Patrol Station in 2013 on the left and after the expansion in 2013 on the right.

to the 5,000 m^2 of administration and detention space.[7] The $28.5 million investment is a clear sign of increasing federal funding to secure the 11,000 km^2 of desert, including 103 km of border – yet it also functions as a testimony to the transformation of the area from a meeting place – a third nation – to a frontier as illustrated by TIME Magazine.

In the wake of the exploding number of Border Patrol agents, the federal government has made an additional investment of $12–15 million to develop 21 new homes for the agents to rent in Ajo. Several local residents have voiced their concern and anger that the federal government spends six times as much money per home to build than it would have cost to buy and renovate – or rebuild – already existing vacant homes in Ajo (Sterling 2013; Ortega 2014). The new construction of houses has created a small segregated neighborhood of Border Patrol agents and while some are excited about the influx of young families with purchasing power, others are concerned that it will create a gap between the agents and other parts of the local community. The combination of different interest groups living and working in the same border space creates a very interesting and very tense atmosphere that is impossible not to feel.

Tension in the Ajo borderland

Tensions can be experienced all along the US-Mexican border (Whitaker 2009). The small, secluded community of Ajo, with its many actors, is no exception – on the contrary. With Border Patrol agents, Sheriff officers, Forest Rangers, aid workers, locals, and, of course, undocumented migrants, who in some capacity all operate in the vicinity of the border, it seems difficult to avoid tension. On an early morning walk through the outskirts of Ajo, I was unable to shake the feeling of being watched, as Border Patrol agents passed me. Several volunteers expressed the same feeling on other occasions. Naturally, the anxiety is amplified when the Border Patrol agents and the Ajo Samaritans meet. Although the co-presence of these groups, with different agendas, are the main source of the tension, they also cooperate when, for example, human remains are found in the desert.

Part of the tension is related to litigation and most people encountered outside the border zone believe putting out water is illegal. Even the individuals who volunteered with the Samaritans, during my fieldwork, all initially asked “are you sure it is legal?” The dominating discourse is that by putting out water and food, they are helping or even encouraging people to come illegally into the US, thus committing a punishable act. There have been several lawsuits against the volunteers and the aid organizations and, while the aid work itself has been acquitted every time, there have been cases in which volunteers have been fined for littering when they put out water in the desert. The issue of littering has been discussed in Ajo amongst the Park Rangers and Samaritans; yet still unresolved, it creates tension and awkward moments when the two groups meet in the desert. In general, I experienced the volunteers aim of giving as little information as possible to any law enforcement agents due to the fear of getting the water bottles slashed, as on several drop sites water bottles cut open with knives to prevent undocumented migrants from drinking were found, giving up undocumented migrants’ positions and getting fines. The Park Rangers, on the other hand, aim to get the Samaritans to admit putting out water, thus making it possible to issue a fine for littering. Despite the awkward encounters in the desert, which also included encounters with locals, some of whom expressed their disagreement with the Samaritans’ work, the tone generally stayed respectful between all parties.

Although their aid work has been determined to be legal, the groups struggle with perceptions that their work is illegal, which has resulted in a continuous effort to emphasize the legality of their activities. Yet, the perception still thrives, especially outside the border zone. Even amongst people who know it is legal, it is criticized as encouraging and helping undocumented migrants to cross. The latter perception I encountered several times outside the border zone and was also told by Ajo locals as well as law enforcement agents. In addition, on a No More Deaths sign, under the phrase “Humanitarian Aid Is Never a Crime”, someone had written “but it is wrong” (Fig. 3). The contrasting perceptions of the aid work add to the felt and experienced tension. Whether it was at the local grocery store or out in the desert, locals would approach us and utter their support or disapproval, which easily made you anxious as you never knew what to expect.

Fig. 3. Example of a sign put up by No More Deaths. Note the handwritten comment.

The general perception seems to be that the work encourages people to cross. It seems very irrational, however, that people from Central America would be encouraged to leave their lives behind and travel 3,500–4,500 km because they have heard of Samaritans putting out water in the desert. Instead, it has been suggested that US labor needs have been the primary force behind the migration (Whitaker 2009). In recent years, pressure on the humanitarian organizations appears to have been building. Giving out fines for littering is one way of trying to discourage the volunteers, yet other and more serious charges have been considered and the number of volunteers ending up in jail has been rising. One of the most publicized cases is that of geographer and No More Death volunteer Scott Warren. Warren faced 20 years in prison and although the trial ended with a mistrial, prosecutors declared that they want to retry him (Jordan 2019). The true effect of the water drops remains unknown. The water and food put out is both limited and irregular making it impossible to rely on. In reality, it is the Samaritans who are trying to put out the water on routes that the undocumented migrants use – based on the concentration of human remains discovered and other physical evidence – and not the other way around (Squire 2014). Even so, only a very small percentage of undocumented migrants will come across any supplies as they are easy to miss, especially at night when most undocumented migrants travel – to avoid the heat and detection.

What most people do not know is that instead of encouraging people to cross, the Samaritans have actively warned people about the danger by distributing flyers in some northern Mexican towns, which are considered hubs for migrants crossing the desert (Ferguson *et al*. 2010). In the 2010 book, *Crossing with the Virgin*, Samaritan volunteers Ferguson, Price, and Parks share narratives about working and meeting undocumented migrants in the desert and also the migrants' stories. In one of the narratives, Ferguson writes about how a male relative of a Mexican friend of hers said that people must be both crazy and desperate to try and cross the desert – two years later he himself crossed the border through the desert. Stories like this illustrate that despite popular narratives, undocumented migrants are not necessarily drawn to the US but, in some cases, more are pushed by unemployment and violence in their home countries (Whitaker 2009).

(Re-)constructing the perceptions of the borderland

The legal struggles are also fights to influence the public's perceptions and in this larger context the landscape plays a significant role. The checkpoints, the substantial number of different law enforcement agents working in the area, combined with helicopters in the sky, create an atmosphere of being in a dangerous place, in which the undocumented migrants are the threat. Yet, many locals do not see it that way; instead, they feel that the heavy presence of armed law enforcement agents and checkpoints is what makes them feel insecure and criminalized due to the securitization. The extended legal power given to the Border Patrol adds to the feeling of insecurity and some expressed the idea that Ajo feels like a militarized zone. Both sides try to make their mark on the landscape by putting up signs and painting murals. Especially in the National Parks, there are signs with the word *caution* written on them, followed by a warning not to travel alone and "be aware as smuggling and illegal immigration is common in the area." As most of the land around Ajo and in Arizona in general is federal land, warning signs were the only signs encountered outside the town. In Ajo, the signs – especially around the town plaza and in the alley located just behind the plaza – are very different. Here people, including some professional artists, have expressed support for the work done by the Samaritans, as well as shown their dislike for the border wall for example by comparing it to the Berlin Wall. Also, the slogan, "Humanitarian aid is never a crime" is featured. In August 2019, the Ajo Samaritans opened the Ajo Humanitarian Aid Office behind the plaza, which further visualizes their presence in the area.

While the murals in the alley contain clear massages, the more easily seen signs/paintings, hung around the plaza, are subtler, for example one features two peace doves while another features two different colored rabbits next to a lizard out in the desert with the text *harmony* written in capital letters above. In a different setting, these paintings would perhaps be given a different connotation, yet considering Ajo's geographical location, these messages of peace and harmony – hung around the Spanish inspired plaza – are difficult to detach from the ongoing situation along the border and in the desert surrounding Ajo.

Beacons of differing perceptions

The perhaps most significant illustration of the tension that exists between especially Border Patrol and the Samaritans is found in the rescue beacons, which are positioned in various locations throughout the desert (Fig. 4).

The beacons are meant for the undocumented migrants crossing the desert and display an illustration that if you press the button – located on the beacon – and wait, someone will come with water for you. The text on the beacons reads, in English, Spanish, and O'odham: "If you need help push the red button. Rescue personnel will arrive shortly to help you. Do not leave the area." When seen in person, it is possible to make out the outline of a red cross underneath the text. This is because there used to be a large red cross on the beacons; however, the Red Cross organization requested that the symbol be removed as the organization is not associated with the beacons. Instead of the Red Cross, or any other humanitarian organization, the beacons are actually erected and maintained by the Border Patrol, thus if you press the button the Border Patrol will come and arrest you – given that you are an undocumented migrant. The different aid organizations feel, especially when the red cross was on the beacons, that they served as a tool for entrapment rather than as an actual rescue beacon. Consequently, the Samaritans leave water next to the beacons, so that the undocumented migrants do not need to press the button. The Border Patrol then removes the water and so the cycle continues; the feeling of interfering or even sabotaging each other's work undoubtedly adds to the friction. On the way to a water drop, we came across a beacon that had been activated. The Border Patrol had already arrived and was searching the area for undocumented migrants, but after 10–15 minutes, they left without finding any. While they searched the area, we stood in the background, however, after they left some of the volunteers started to call out in Spanish, identifying themselves as humanitarian aid workers. At that point, the mistrust and tension between Border Patrol and volunteers were so profound that I could not help wondering if the

Fig. 4. Rescue beacon.

agents had left the area or if they just pretended to. In general, the Samaritans are, like the ACLU and the SBCC, critical of the law enforcement agency's handling of undocumented migrants, including providing water and medical attention. Therefore, whenever they see law enforcement agents having apprehended undocumented migrants, they also approach to ask if they can give water and assist in any other way. Most often they are given permission to do so, which is another example of the cooperation that does exist.

In many ways, the beacons symbolize the tension that, although it can be felt in Ajo, becomes even clearer out in the desert when Samaritans, law enforcement agents, and locals meet. On several occasions locals would engage and express their opinion about why the undocumented migrants are dangerous or why they – the locals – always pour out the water left by the Samaritans if they come across it. A Border Patrol agent also told us that he used to slash the water bottles left by the Samaritans to deny undocumented migrants from drinking it and that he knows of others who still do it. Although he described the ones doing it as young and stupid, as the act was denounced by a Border Patrol spokesman (Carroll 2018), it is in fact written in the Border Patrol Act of 1994 that they seek to make it as difficult as possible for the migrants by eliminating anything that might help them to cross the desert (U.S. Border Patrol 1994). Furthermore, several videos of Border Patrol agents destroying water, food, and blankets meant for undocumented migrants has surfaced in the media and No More Deaths called the arrest of volunteer Scott Warren, only hours after the organization revealed new videos, an act of retaliation (Associated Press 2018).

For this reason – and because of the fines for littering – the Samaritans are very skeptical and cautious when encountering and interacting with law enforcement especially in the desert. They prefer not to disclose any information on why they are out there, who they are or where they are headed. The approach is understandable given their experiences, yet it also seems pointless to a certain degree as it most often is evident who they are and what they are doing, which again is

paradoxical considering that they also work together – as mentioned earlier. However, during an encounter and following conversation with two Park Rangers it became clear that communication between the different actors is lacking or even deliberately not prioritized when it comes to the safety and health of undocumented migrants. I experienced the latter when a volunteer – during a water drop in a remote area of the desert – collapsed. The area was unapproachable by vehicle and without cellphone coverage resulting in one of the volunteers having to run back to the jeep and drive approximately 12 km to get a signal and call for an ambulance. Being without jeep and phone, the undocumented migrants are often left to die in situations like these. Should they, somehow, be able to call for help it might not even come. The person who escorted the collapsed volunteer in the ambulance back to Phoenix told me afterward that one of the ambulance drivers had said that they had almost not come because they thought it was "just another migrant."

Contradictory perceptions of danger and endangered

The question at hand is not so much of whether the US-Mexican border area is dangerous, as it has been examined in several studies (Doty 2011; Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014). Yet, fueled by, for example, politics and media the danger is argued to be exaggerated in the public's perception (Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014). Perhaps this is the reason that the perception of what/who is in danger and what that danger is varies vastly even amongst actors of the borderlands. This is no surprise, however, given the different agendas that are played out in the borderlands. Perceptions need not be based on 'facts' or experiences, as human beings are often inclined to believe the facts and opinions that already support their perception of the world and their political or personal agenda. That does not mean that they can be dismissed as irrelevant; in fact, they are essential yet should not be left unchallenged. "Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out and is presupposed by them…" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, xi).

During this research, five relevant groups have been encountered – and following the terminology used throughout this paper – they have been identified as the US Border Patrol, Samaritans, human/civil rights groups, locals and outsiders. While Samaritans are a human/civil rights group, they have a very specific focus unlike, for example, the ACLU, thus the distinction. Similarly, the Park Rangers and the local police could be grouped together with the Border Patrol. Nevertheless, both groups have different primary tasks that are not directed towards undocumented migrants. Despite having to deal with many of the same issues as – and co-operating with – the Border Patrol, neither the Park Rangers nor the local police have been part of the expanding law enforcement allocation provided by the federal government. Locals and outsiders are both broad and general groups, but in lack of a better terminology, the labels are in this context used to refer to the residents living in Ajo and those living outside the area and who have been encountered in connection with this research.

The dominating national discourse is that the undocumented migrants are the danger and all the students that signed up to be volunteers had the same two questions before committing to participate. Besides asking whether it is legal, they also asked if it is safe, showing just how common the perception of a dangerous borderland really is. For people not familiar with the border region and the specific border culture, the media is the only source of information (Dear 2013). Through their power as opinion makers, the dominating media will either support or create the dominating discourse. Thus, it can come as no surprise that most outsiders are aligned with the idea that the undocumented migrants pose the danger in the borderland. Border Patrol agents officially support the discourse as do parts of the local community in Ajo. On the other hand, the Samaritans, Civil and Human Rights Organizations (CHRO), and parts of the local population believe that the policies and, in extension of that, the Border Patrol are the real threat. Despite their differences, everyone agrees that the environment – meaning the desert itself – is a very dangerous place, due to its extreme temperatures, remoteness, and wildlife.

When it comes to what/who is in danger, the two sides have equally different views as illustrated in Table 1. The outsiders, Border Patrol, and parts of the local community believe that the locals, as the ones living in the dangerous area are first in line – thus most at risk – but also that the threat extends to the rest of the US as undocumented migrants trickle north. They also argue that the desert is being

destroyed by the undocumented migrants as they litter, contaminate the animal water troughs, and destroy the flora. The Samaritans, CHRO, and parts of the local community agree that the desert is at risk but argue that it is the Border Patrol that destroys it when driving around in their vehicles. They also claim that building of the wall hinders animals from moving freely and getting to their water holes. Furthermore, they argue that the undocumented migrants, instead of being the danger are the ones in danger and in connection to them, civil and human rights.

Table. 1. Perceptions of danger.

	Who/what is the danger?	**Who/what is in danger?**
Outsiders, Border Patrol, and locals	Undocumented migrants and the environment	Local residents and the environment
Samaritans, CHRO, and locals	Border Patrol, (border) policies, and the environment	Undocumented migrants, civil/human rights, and the environment

Arizona's border and fear

It would be an oversimplification and political (Winders 2007) to point out one single threat in the Southern Arizona desert, just as it would be to point towards one entity as the only endangered one. The border itself "...is an ideology that is believed in..." (van Houtum 2011, 51). It has become much more than a border; it has become a symbol of a Manichean political divide much like abortion or climate change despite its complexities. Table 1 reveals a diverse and almost reverse perception of the danger and the endangered. The difference largely can be explained by political beliefs and the human ability to rely on the news that supports our beliefs, but also to manipulate them to fit our world view (Coronel *et al*. 2020). The situation, however, is far too complex to identify a single culprit, as the reasons behind the dangerous situation go far beyond the State of Arizona. However, in the context of Arizona, it is necessary to mention that there is a history with a strong anti-Mexican undercurrent dating back to the US-Mexican war in the 1840s before Arizona became an independent state and kept alive today with laws such as SB1070, also known as the racial profiling law, and HB2281, a law banning ethnic studies (Rodriguez 2011, 2013).

All mentioned threats are real threats to the people expressing them, whether they are felt, experienced, or believed. As perception is individual, what is perceived as reality and truth by some, may be perceived as fiction and lies by others, thus creating a space with many truths and realities existing side by side (van Houtum 2011; Collins 2013; Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014). The difference lies very much in the eyes of the beholder who, motivated and influenced by one's own experiences, political conviction, and/or narratives, chooses to emphasize one entity. The issue regarding the US-Mexican border is, as mentioned, that the perception of danger most often is created outside the border area.

> ...American public officials use their perceptual judgements for the formulation, adoption, and execution of border security policies that impact the people in the region which, in turn, also affect the perceptions of publics outside of the US-Mexico border areas. (Correa-Cabrera & Garrett 2014, 243)

In general, a lack of geographical knowledge and experience is a problem as it leads too incomplete and flawed policies and misconceptions about the border region (De Blij 2012; Madsen 2018). Practical experience not only precedes a more comprehensive understanding, but it is also able to change perception (Johnson 2015) because "When confronted with otherness, a reflective process occurs between the self and the other..." (Szytniewski & Spierings 2014, 340). The Border Patrol Act of 1994 can be seen as a flawed policy as it aimed at deterring people from crossing, but has just relocated undocumented migrants from more populated areas into more remote and dangerous areas. In fact,

Doty (2011, 600) claims that the strategy is responsible for the high number of deaths and the landscape is merely used as a "moral alibi" for not taking responsibility. Studies conducted in the time after the policy was introduced have dismissed the notion that higher fences and harder borders work on deterring crossers (Dear 2013; Jusionyte 2018). Golunov (2013) states that the number of undocumented migrants has almost tripled in the decade following the act. The increasing securitization is spurring the tensions and (perception of) danger in the area as vigilant, aid, and nationalistic groups rally to the border (Squire 2014; Jones *et al*. 2017). The border is a desire to create a separation with what lies beyond it and, if the border becomes difficult to cross through increased securitization or/and militarization, it becomes more unclear what is on the other side. As the uncertainty grows so does the perception of the dangers beyond (van Houtum 2011).

In Southern Arizona, the border is not a narrow line. The official borderland stretches 100 km inland on the US side and similarly on the Mexican side (Arreola 2010). The introduction of the 100-mile (160 km) border zone and other policies have since then expanded the area in practice. As the border moves inland, the uncertainty that precedes the perception of danger follows as it is tied to the area. The warning signs, which can be found all around Southern Arizona, checkpoints, a considerable number of law enforcement officers, and armed locals are all supporting the perception and acting as a threshold for people to come to the area. Van Houtum argues that the border limits not only mobility but also freedom for the individual by transforming the space beyond the border into a space of fear, contrasting the safe space within the border (2011). Yet, again the fear, lack of freedom, and even mobility has moved inland. The argument that the border is moving inland is backed by the fact that:

> ...there has been a marked increase in immigration policing operations away from borders in the interior... pushing border enforcement inwards towards the municipal scale and away from the margins of the state... new spaces of immigration geopolitics suggest that the border – and border enforcement – is increasingly everywhere. (Coleman 2007, 64)

Arguably, Ajo and the surrounding area has never been a familiar space to the general public. Still, with the border moving inland the threshold (for example checkpoints and negative perceptions) for going to Ajo has become increasingly difficult to cross, resulting in the border area becoming further distanced both mentally and physically from the rest of the country. Several scholars, including van Houtum (2001) and Spierings and van der Velde (2013), argue that the unknown, despite creating fear, can attract. Yet the Ajo/border area seems to be too unfamiliar and unknown to attract outsiders, reinforcing the fear of the area (Nielsen 2019).

Discussion

There is one danger that stands out and is recognized by all - the desert. The idea behind the operations launched under President Clinton was to use the dangerous desert as a natural border, discouraging people from crossing. The Border Patrol has recognized and responded to the danger by extending the training to include a focus on helping those at risk (Squire 2014). Another example is the creation of the Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue, launched in 1998, which operates with the main goal of reducing death and increasing safety for undocumented migrants (Doty 2011). While the Samaritans recognize the danger by being present in the desert, the number of bodies recovered also speaks of a dangerous desert. Although the causes of death range from gunshot wounds to various illnesses, even drowning, exposure to the heat and terrain is by far the greatest killer.[8] Pima County, where Ajo is located, covers approximately one-third of the Arizona borderlands. Since January 2001 the aid organization Human Borders has reported more than 3,000 undocumented migrant deaths in the county alone.[9] Another humanitarian organization, No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, reported that at least 6,000 undocumented migrants have died (not just in Arizona) between 1994 and 2011 trying to cross the US-Mexican border (Hesson 2011). These numbers only account for the bodies that are found, bearing in mind that it only takes a few weeks for a body to decompose or be eaten and scattered by animals. Furthermore, it only encompasses for the bodies found on the American side, well knowingly that many undocumented migrants already start their journey through the Sonoran Desert days before entering Arizona, and the actual number is likely much higher (Doty 2011).

In terms of the undocumented migrants being the threat, none of the aid organizations, their volunteers, or encountered locals have experienced incidents in which an undocumented migrant had been armed or deemed a threat. Worth mentioning in this regard is that the aid groups are always unarmed – unlike the law enforcement agents and encountered locals – and mainly consist of younger women and retired people.

There seems to be a tendency amongst law enforcement agents to label all undocumented migrants as drug smugglers. In one incident, we encountered a group of Border Patrol agents who in the distance had spotted a handful of undocumented migrants. Before even determining their exact location, the agents already talked about "drug guys". Obviously, there is drug trafficking taking place across the border and none of the encountered actors claimed that undocumented migrants do not play a part in that. The drug related violence has been evident on the Mexican side of the border and claimed thousands of lives including those of law enforcement officers. Yet, on the US side the situation is different. According to the US non-profit organization, The Officer Down Memorial Page, in the State of Arizona 12 Border Patrol agents have lost their lives on duty from 2001–2020. This makes Arizona the state with the second most deaths after Texas (18) and in front of California (8) and New Mexico (3).[10] The causes vary from accidents and heat exhaustion to gunfire. Across all states (41 deaths), vehicular accidents represent around half of the deaths and the environment (drowning, heat exhaustion, and other medical emergencies) is responsible for almost one in five deaths. No cases describe undocumented migrants as dangerous, though some are difficult to determine. For example, in Texas a hummer-style vehicle had crossed the border from Mexico and was being chased by Border Patrol when it hit and killed an officer before escaping back into Mexico.[11]

In Arizona, one officer died from a gunshot inflicted by a group of people trying to rob undocumented migrants crossing the border, one died from friendly fire, and the remaining ten were killed in vehicular accidents. Thus, friendly fire has caused more direct deaths amongst Border Patrol agents than undocumented migrants – as have people preying on undocumented migrants. This underlines the dangers of the desert; with high temperatures and inhospitable terrain it claims several hundred victims each year.

Naturally, the number of deaths is not the only measurement of danger. General crime rates in Ajo are high, however some of Arizona's safest cities are located close to the border,[12] which supports the figures from Texas and San Diego. Also, general crime rates do not offer any specific insides into who commits the crimes.

Summary

Reaching a consensus on who is in danger and what that danger is does not seem likely. Where some experience a checkpoint as a positive safety precaution, others experience them as threats towards civil rights and inconvenient. Even amongst the locals in Ajo, there is no consensus and the divide is a big part of the tension that can be experienced there. The reasons for the different perceptions can be many, but considering the current national political debate over the border, in which perceptions and political affiliation often go hand in hand, it seems likely that ideology is one of the reasons.

Seeing and talking with people in the desert it is evident that there is tremendous respect for the danger of the desert where the temperatures range from over +50 degrees Celsius in the summer to zero in the winter. Enough water, food, and the right clothing are essential for surviving even just a day's hiking trip. Even in broad daylight, not twisting your ankle or stepping on cactuses that easily penetrate your shoes is a challenge.

This study came across several people believing that the undocumented migrants pose a great danger in the borderland, thus they only venture into the desert armed. Despite numerous narratives of encounters with undocumented migrants, none of them contained any experiences of an armed or otherwise dangerous undocumented migrant. Also, the numbers do not support the statement that undocumented migrants are dangerous. Instead of being the threat, this study argues that the environment – the desert – is the greatest danger, while the actors most at risk are the undocumented migrants. They are preyed upon by criminals on both sides of the border and exposed to the inhospitable terrain for several days while trying to evade the Border Patrol.

Notes

[1] <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20010611,00.html>. 5.9.2019.
[2] <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20040920,00.html>. 5.9.2019.
[3] <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/media-resources/stats>. 8.6.2020.
[4] <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/fourth_amendment>. 5.9.2019.
[5] <http://soboco.org/border-patrol-brutality-since-2010/>. 5.9.2019.
[6] <https://www.spl.usace.army.mil/Media/News-Stories/Article/477170/usace-completes-ajo-border-patrol-station/>. 9.9.2020.
[7] <http://www.humaneborders.info/app/map.asp>. 9.9.2020.
[8] <http://www.humaneborders.info/app/map.asp>. 5.9.2019.
[9] <http://humaneborders.info/>. 5.9.2019.
[10] <http://www.odmp.org/search?agency=border%20patrol&from=2001&to=2017&filter=nok9&o=25>. 10.2.2020.
[11] <http://www.odmp.org/search?agency=border%20patrol&from=2001&to=2017&filter=nok9&o=25>. 10.2.2020.
[12] <http://www.neighborhoodscout.com/az/crime/>. 5.9.2018.

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