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Border Ghosts: Artistic Practices and Spectral Memories in Border Necropolitics

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Abstract

This paper examines the artistic project *Border Ghosts* (2018–2025) as a practice of material translation through which migrant presences—excluded from institutional records along the Mexico–United States border—become perceptible in artistic form. Situated within necropolitical regimes that produce structural vulnerability, the study draws on the work of Achille Mbembe, Ariadna Estévez, and Avery Gordon to consider how spectrality operates not as metaphor, but as a mediated mode of presence. Through brief interviews and three-dimensional recordings of bodies, objects, and temporary dwellings using 3D scanning and printing, the project transforms fragmentary traces into sculptural configurations that make precarious lives perceptible within exhibition space. The case studies show that even minimal testimonies, often absent from formal archives, can persist as material traces within aesthetic circulation. Rather than proposing a solution to structural violence, *Border Ghosts* approaches artistic practice as a way of engaging absence, mediation, and incompletion. In doing so, the project reflects on the limits of institutional recognition and on the conditions under which marginal lives may be encountered.

Keywords: necropolitics; haunting; affective memory; migration

1. Introduction

Border Ghosts is a long-term artistic research project initiated in 2018 in Mexicali by the author of this study. The project has developed through processes of encounter with migrant subjects, three-dimensional digital capture, and subsequent sculptural re-materialization within institutional exhibition frameworks. Its methodological concern lies in examining how migrant presences—often structurally marginalized within legal and institutional regimes—can be translated into material forms that transform the perceptual conditions of encounter. Rather than aiming to represent suffering, *Border Ghosts* is positioned as a methodological inquiry into the sensory and epistemological implications of materializing situated vulnerability. This study therefore examines the project not as a thematic exploration of migration, but as a methodological operation situated at the intersection of artistic practice and epistemological inquiry.

The methodological proposal of this study is grounded in the articulation between situated artistic practice and theoretical frameworks that enable engagement with forms of knowledge historically excluded from institutional registers. Rather than applying a preexisting theory illustratively, the research develops from a productive tension between experience and conceptual reflection.

The Foucauldian notion of subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1980) provides an initial point of departure. These are forms of knowledge disqualified or marginalized for failing

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to conform to hegemonic criteria of scientificity. Invisibility, in this sense, does not imply absence but epistemological subordination.

This perspective resonates with analyses of the necropolitical dispositif at the Mexico–United States border (Estévez 2018), which identify zones of legal suspension and abandonment. Within such contexts, certain forms of existence persist without full institutional recognition.

Avery Gordon's theory of haunting (Gordon 2008) introduces a complementary epistemological shift. Rather than focusing solely on structures of power, haunting directs attention to how excluded presences return within everyday life as perceptible traces. The spectral, in this sense, is not metaphorical but relational: it designates a mode of presence that challenges institutional regimes of visibility.

Taken together, these frameworks provide the conceptual foundation for understanding *Border Ghosts* as a methodology of material translation. The project does not illustrate theory but activates it within the sensory field of artistic practice.

This study therefore asks how artistic practice can function within contexts where institutional visibility is structurally uneven. More specifically, it examines how processes of encounter, three-dimensional capture, and sculptural fabrication reshape the conditions under which migrant lives become perceptible. The focus is not on representing suffering, but on how situated vulnerability is translated into material form.

By situating *Border Ghosts* at the intersection of artistic production and critical theory, the study contributes to ongoing discussions of research-creation in border contexts. It suggests that artistic practice may generate forms of knowledge that neither replace institutional archives nor merely supplement them, but instead redirect attention toward presences that remain unevenly recognized.

Situated in a Global South border city, Mexicali is a site where forced mobility unfolds outside formal refugee recognition systems. Although many of the individuals encountered do not possess legal refugee status, their condition reflects a refugee-like precarity produced by necropolitical border regimes. This structural ambiguity helps explain the project's emphasis on material translation.

Methodologically, this study combines brief field interviews, on-site 3D scanning, digital processing, and exhibition analysis in order to examine how precarious migrant presence is translated into sculptural form.

2. Results

2.1. Exhibition Context and Material Configuration

The works produced through this methodological process were selected for the 25th Baja California Art Biennial in 2025. They were first exhibited at CEART Tecate and subsequently circulated in Mexicali.

The sculptures were displayed on gray pedestals in a configuration that emphasized both their reduced scale and their spectral presence. At approximately 10 cm in height, the figures condensed bodily presence into a miniature format that simultaneously intensified and distanced perception. Miniaturization did not diminish vulnerability; rather, it concentrated it. The reduced scale required viewers to approach physically, generating an intimate yet controlled encounter distinct from the original field situation. What had been encountered at life scale under conditions of precarity reappeared as a contained and stabilized volume within the exhibition space.

The gray pedestal functioned as an institutional support structure. Traditionally associated with modern sculptural display, the pedestal isolated the object from its surrounding environment and granted it aesthetic legitimacy. In this configuration, bodies originally

situated within zones of abandonment were repositioned within a stabilized museographic regime (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Border Ghost, 2025. Three-dimensional scanning and 3D printing (SVS filament), Produced in Mexicali and the United States; dimensions: 9.0 × 14.8 × 10.8 cm, 6.7 × 13.5 × 8 cm, 11.3 × 2.4 × 15 cm, 9.1 × 14 × 24.9 cm; and printing invoice.

Read in relation to Estévez's account of the necropolitical dispositif at the Mexico–United States border, this recontextualization did not cancel the conditions of exclusion under which migrant lives are managed; rather, it displaced them into a different regime of visibility, where vulnerability could be perceived within the cultural infrastructure of the state rather than only within spaces of abandonment (Estévez 2018). The pedestal therefore did not erase precarity; instead, it framed it, producing a visible tension between vulnerability and legitimation.

Alongside the sculptures, the payment receipt for the 3D printing service was exhibited. Rather than serving as supplementary documentation, the receipt was integrated as a constitutive element of the exhibition dispositif. By making visible an economic transaction typically concealed within artistic production, the installation highlighted the chain of mediations linking field encounter, digital data, transborder fabrication, and institutional validation. The invoice materialized the economic and logistical conditions under which translation occurred, demonstrating that the movement from border periphery to exhibition space was inseparable from systems of circulation, outsourcing, and infrastructural dependency.

In this configuration, the exhibition space did not merely present finished objects. It operated as a site in which translation reached institutional visibility, rendering perceptible the structural tension between marginal origin and cultural legitimation (Figure 1).

2.2. Selected Cases

2.2.1. M.A.

M.A. was interviewed in downtown Mexicali, where he worked through handicrafts and car washing. Although he had family members in San José, California, he remained in Mexicali to avoid legal complications. At the time of the interview in 2017, he had lived in the city for eight years and seven months. When asked about returning to the United States, he replied: "Yes, I would like to go one day, but I do not know which day that would be" (M.A., personal communication, 25 August 2017) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Border Ghost: M. A.*, 2018. Three-dimensional scanning and 3D printing (SVS filament), 3.6 × 12 × 4.8 cm. Produced in Mexicali and the United States. (Author's photograph).

The interview was recorded on video, and his body was scanned on site. The digital file was later processed and sent to a U.S.-based printing service. The resulting object was intentionally shipped to an incorrect address before a replica was produced for exhibition. That exhibited version, presented together with the printing invoice at the Seventh International University Biennial of Visual Art at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México in 2018, shifted the encounter from a brief field interaction to a mediated sculptural trace shaped by transmission, displacement, and circulation.

In this case, what changed through the project was not the testimonial content itself, but its mode of appearance. A brief statement and an on-site scan were transformed into an object whose exhibition foregrounded distance, translation, and the unstable route through which presence became materially perceptible.

2.2.2. J.D.

J.D., originally from Chiapas, was interviewed at Parque Niños Héroes de Chapultepec in 2025. After being deported in 2009, he remained in Mexicali doing temporary jobs. At the time of the interview, he was living unhoused and had developed diabetes without effective access to healthcare. He also reported that his backpack, containing identification, money, and medication, had been stolen the previous day.

Regarding the possibility of returning to the United States, he stated: "I do not plan to return. . . given the situation with the new president, it would be a mistake to go back only to waste money foolishly" (J.D., personal communication, 19 March 2025) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Border Ghost: J. D.*, 2025. Three-dimensional scanning and 3D printing (PLA filament), 6.7 × 13.5 × 8 cm. Produced in Mexicali and the United States. (Author's photograph).

The interview was recorded on video, and his body was scanned on site. The digital file was then processed and fabricated through the same transborder production procedure described above. Presented later as a miniature sculpture within the biennial installation, the case shifted from an immediate situation of bodily vulnerability to a mediated sculptural presence shaped by displacement, scale, and exhibition.

Here, the work did not resolve the precarious conditions described in the interview. What changed was the form in which that presence could appear: no longer only as a brief field encounter, but as a material trace that carried the marks of mediation into the exhibition space.

2.2.3. J.

J., originally from Oaxaca, was interviewed at Parque Niños Héroes de Chapultepec in 2025. He had been deported approximately seven years earlier and remained in Mexicali because health problems limited his ability to secure stable employment. He stated that he preferred to remain in Mexicali rather than return to Oaxaca, citing lack of access to housing there (J., personal communication, 19 March 2025) (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Border Ghost: J.*, 2025. Three-dimensional scanning and 3D printing (PLA filament), 9.0 × 14.8 × 10.8 cm. Produced in Mexicali and the United States. (Author's photograph).

The interview was recorded on video, and a 3D scan was conducted on site. The digital file was later processed and fabricated in miniature format through the same production procedure described above.

At the time of the interview, his situation reflected prolonged residence without formal reintegration or return. Once translated into sculptural form, that condition did not become resolved or explained, but appeared differently: as a small, stabilized figure within the exhibition space, carrying into the biennial a trace of suspended and unfinished presence.

2.2.4. Temporary Community on Calzada James W. Stone

On a vacant lot along James W. Stone Street, four individuals were interviewed: R.S. and M.L.R. from Mexicali, and C.C. and D. from Colima, the latter two having been deported after six years in the United States. At the time of the interviews in 2025, they had been surviving through temporary jobs in Mexicali for approximately three years. C.C. described the limits of institutional support programs: "That's how the rules are. Fifteen days and that's it. . . During the stay, we are not allowed to work" (C.C., personal communication, 3 June 2025). R.S. reported threats from the landowner and repeated police detention, while M.L.R. expressed the hope of securing stable work and housing (Figure 5).

On the same day, several dwellings made from cardboard, plastic sheets, and salvaged materials were documented and scanned in 3D. Weeks later, one of the scanned structures was found burned. Although the physical dwelling had disappeared, the digital scan remained in the project archive.



Figure 5. *Border Ghost: Temporary Dwelling* (2025, in progress). Three-dimensional scanning (Polycam), produced in Mexicali. (Author's photograph).

What changed through the project was not the precarious condition itself, but the form in which it could persist. Once translated into digital and sculptural form, the dwelling no longer functioned only as a temporary shelter or as a destroyed site. It also became a trace that could reappear in the exhibition context, carrying with it the instability of a structure that no longer existed in the field.

2.3. Scanned Objects and Material Fragments

Various objects found near the border were selected and scanned in 3D, including segments of the border wall, a single shoe, a partially eaten ear of corn, and the body of a pigeon (Figures 6–8). Unlike the body scans, these objects were not linked to identified individuals or accompanied by recorded testimony. They were gathered from the surrounding environment during fieldwork and incorporated into the broader dataset used for sculptural production.

Each object appeared as a fragment rather than a complete or self-sufficient form: the shoe without its pair, the ear of corn partially consumed, and the pigeon's body motionless within an ordinary urban setting. In this sense, these scans extended the project beyond bodily presence alone and brought other kinds of residual trace into the work.

Fabricated at the same reduced scale as the body scans and exhibited within the same installation, these objects altered the texture of the exhibition. They did not represent specific biographies, but introduced a wider material field of abandonment, use, and remains. Once translated into sculptural form, they shifted from incidental findings in the border environment to perceptible traces within the same visual and institutional frame as the scanned bodies.



Figure 6. *Border Ghost: Pigeon*, 2025. Three-dimensional scanning and 3D printing (PLA filament), 11.3 × 2.4 × 15 cm. Produced in Mexicali and the United States. (Author's photograph).



Figure 7. *Border Ghost: Wall*, 2025. Three-dimensional scanning and 3D printing (PLA filament), 9.1 × 14 × 24.9 cm. Produced in Mexicali and the United States. (Author's photograph).

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Figure 8. *Border Ghost: Shoe* (in progress), 2025. Three-dimensional scanning (Polycam). Produced in Mexicali. (Author's photograph).

3. Discussion

3.1. Epistemological Orientation and Subjugated Knowledges

From this perspective, questions such as who is entitled to speak, which experiences count as knowledge, and which voices have been systematically disauthorized do not function only as theoretical inquiries; they also orient the method of the project. *Border Ghosts* can be understood as an artistic framework for attending to forms of knowledge that persist in everyday border life even when they remain outside institutional recognition.

These questions also shift the function of artistic practice. Rather than treating sculpture primarily as an expressive object, the project approaches it as a site where marginalized presence can be materially registered. What matters here is not simply adding new information to an archive, but altering the conditions under which certain lives become perceptible.

Accordingly, the methodology is not limited to technical description. It also provides a framework for understanding how artistic practice translates socially disauthorized presences into material form. The movement from testimony to object does not fix lived experience as stable knowledge; instead, it creates a threshold in which marginalized presence becomes perceptible without being fully absorbed into institutional categories.

From a Foucauldian perspective on subjugated knowledges, this procedure does not seek to convert migrant experience into knowledge validated by conventional scientific criteria (Foucault 1980). Rather, it suggests another form of inscription: a sculptural trace that works as a threshold. In this configuration, the artwork does not claim evidentiary authority. It does not verify experience empirically, but holds it in a suspended zone between visibility and indeterminacy.

Many of the individuals encountered in this project do not possess formal refugee status, yet they often live under conditions marked by legal precarity, territorial displacement, and limited protection. The sculptural translation does not redefine their juridical position; instead, it draws attention to the gap between institutional categories and lived vulnerability.

The significance of this procedure lies partly in its refusal of immediacy. Unlike documentary strategies that seek to minimize mediation, the project foregrounds the transformations linking field encounter and exhibition. Scale, surface irregularity, and even the display of the invoice make that mediation visible. What emerges is not direct

testimony, but a materially mediated form of presence. In this sense, the installation does not produce closure; it preserves incompletion as part of its method.

The distinction between institutional archive and sculptural trace is important here. Archives operate through classification, verification, and stabilization, turning lived events into administrable knowledge. The sculptural trace works differently. It does not aim to settle the subject's status within juridical frameworks; rather, it interrupts the logic of classification by foregrounding perceptual encounter.

This interruption does not reject institutional knowledge, but makes its limits more visible. A gap remains between lived vulnerability and its possible inscription within official categories. The sculptural work does not resolve that gap. It makes it perceptible. In doing so, it shifts the emphasis from asking whether this knowledge is valid to asking under what conditions this life becomes perceptible. In that sense, the project does not simply supplement the archive; it reorients attention toward what the archive cannot fully contain.

3.2. Necropolitics and Death-Worlds

The process described here may be read as a response to the spectral condition of migrant individuals who, in Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics, are "thrown into death-worlds" and treated as "living dead" (Mbembe 2003, p. 75).

This situation may also be read in relation to forms of juridical exclusion that leave subjects in conditions of vulnerability without full political recognition (Agamben 1998). In this context, vulnerability is not incidental but structurally produced by border regimes that distribute exposure unevenly. It is within this context that the project reconstructs bodies and traces in sculptural form in order to bring into view experiences that rarely enter institutional records.

The works do not dramatize suffering. Instead, they give fragile traces a form that can circulate within exhibition contexts. The movement from precarious field encounter to controlled installation space does not resolve necropolitical violence, but it changes how that violence may be perceived.

The reduced scale of the figures and their controlled presentation contrast with the instability of the field conditions from which they emerged. This contrast does not deny structural exposure; it makes visible the distance between spaces of abandonment and spaces of cultural legitimation. The exhibition thus becomes a site where necropolitical conditions are neither resolved nor spectacularized, but held in tension.

Necropolitical regimes do not only produce death; they also organize unequal exposure to risk. Some lives are secured through infrastructure, while others must navigate administrative delay, restricted mobility, and limited access to care. The individuals encountered in the field are not ungoverned; they are governed through precarious conditions.

The sculptural operation does not answer this regime through direct denunciation. Rather, it makes exposure perceptible in another register. Reduced scale, surface fragility, and controlled lighting do not simply aestheticize vulnerability; they condense it into a form that can circulate. What becomes visible is not suffering in itself, but the uneven structure that determines whose suffering is documented and whose traces remain unregistered.

3.3. Haunting and Material Translation

This project, structured around the notion of haunting, makes it possible to consider how excluded presences take form through specific material processes (Gordon 2008). Haunting here does not refer to the supernatural; rather, it names the persistence of unresolved histories within ordinary space.

The sequence developed in the project—encounter, scanning, digital editing, transborder printing, and exhibition—should not be understood as a merely technical procedure. It

also shapes how presence is transformed through mediation. Encounter creates proximity; scanning turns bodily presence into digital inscription; printing gives that inscription volume; exhibition places it within an institutional space where it can be seen differently.

In this sense, material translation differs from representation. Representation tends to assume a stable referent and a completed image, whereas translation involves displacement, incompletion, and change. What is translated does not remain intact. The sculptural object does not reproduce the lived encounter; it reworks the conditions under which that encounter becomes perceptible.

This movement can be described across three levels. First, scanning converts bodily presence into data, encoding vulnerability without neutralizing it. Second, printing condenses that trace into a small sculptural volume whose irregular surfaces resist full identification. Third, exhibition relocates what was encountered in a space of abandonment into a space of aesthetic recognition. At each stage, something is selected, transformed, and lost. For that reason, the project does not "give voice" in any direct sense; it creates conditions in which structural absence may appear as incomplete presence.

In dialogue with Gordon, this three-dimensional materialization can be understood as one form of haunting (Gordon 2008). The figures do not fix the subject once and for all. Their reduced scale, facial indeterminacy, and uneven surfaces maintain a certain instability. What appears before the viewer is recognizable, but not fully available; specific, but still unresolved.

Translation also introduces delay. The scanned body is no longer present when the object appears in the exhibition space, and this temporal gap prevents immediate identification. The viewer encounters a body that is materially present yet biographically distant. This distance does not simply aestheticize vulnerability; it makes mediation part of the experience of perception.

Haunting also has a temporal dimension. The sculptural figure does not present displacement as a completed past event. Instead, it suggests an ongoing condition whose effects continue to insist in the present. In this way, spectrality is not only a metaphor but also a way of registering duration: the figures refer back to a past encounter, remain present in the exhibition space, and point toward uncertain futures. Rather than framing migration as a single event, the work emphasizes extended precarity without resolving it into closure.

3.4. Institutional Reconfiguration

Within the context of the biennial, an inversion takes place: bodies that remain excluded from official records enter the circuits of contemporary art. This shift does not mean full inclusion. Rather, it marks a movement from juridical invisibility to a more limited form of aesthetic visibility.

This shift does not neutralize precarity, but it changes how precarity is perceived. The gray pedestal, controlled lighting, and curatorial framing separate the figures from the environmental instability of the field. In this setting, instability is recast as sculptural objecthood. The pedestal, in particular, works as a device of stabilization, lending formal legitimacy to figures whose origins lie in provisional and vulnerable conditions.

The exhibition space also produces a double tension. The figures remain corporeally recognizable, yet they do not yield fixed identity; they appear as singular presences while preserving anonymity. At the same time, vulnerability enters a state-supported cultural infrastructure without ceasing to be vulnerability. The movement from field to exhibition therefore does not erase the conditions in which these bodies were encountered. Instead, it produces a layered visibility: the object appears stabilized, while the conditions from which it emerged remain unstable.

In this sense, exhibition becomes an additional stage in the project. It is the point at which translated bodies become displayable within an institutional frame, without losing their incompleteness. *Border Ghosts* does not simply document what happened elsewhere; it reorients perception by placing these traces in a space where their instability can be encountered differently.

Material translation should therefore be understood less as representation than as a process of displacement and reconfiguration. Border experience is not reproduced in full; it is condensed, reframed, and made perceptible under altered conditions. What matters is not total knowledge, but the specific tension produced when fragile traces enter a space of cultural recognition.

The institutional frame also introduces a further paradox. Contemporary art institutions often present themselves as spaces of critique, yet they remain embedded in state and market structures. The inclusion of these sculptural traces within a biennial does not remove that contradiction. It makes it more visible by placing critique and legitimation in the same space.

The display of the printing invoice sharpens this tension. By exposing the transaction that made material translation possible, the work resists the idea of autonomous aesthetic production. The object is not separate from circulation; it is shaped by it. This does not resolve the contradiction between critique and institution, but it does make that contradiction part of the work's visibility. In this sense, institutional visibility appears not as pure inclusion or pure co-optation, but as a contested and unstable terrain.

3.5. Material Decisions and Formal Strategies

The formal decisions adopted in the sculptural process should not be understood as neutral aesthetic choices. They extend the project's theoretical concerns into material form. The reduced scale of the figures avoids monumentalization, resisting heroic representation and preserving vulnerability at the level of perception. Surface irregularities are retained rather than digitally corrected; thus, mediation remains visible instead of being concealed by technical refinement. The gray coloration also avoids expressive dramatization and maintains a restrained visual register that emphasizes form over narrative.

The inclusion of the printing invoice works in a similar way. By bringing an economic trace into the exhibition space, the project makes the conditions of production more explicit. Cost, circulation, and fabrication are not external to the work's meaning; they form part of how the work is understood. In this sense, sculptural decisions do not only shape appearance, but also frame the terms under which the translated trace is encountered.

The sculptural process therefore functions as more than fabrication alone. Scale, surface, material, and circulation work together to shape how the project is perceived and interpreted. Rather than serving as secondary formal details, these decisions are part of the work's critical structure.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Researcher Positionality

My position as a researcher-artist constitutes a methodological component of this project. I am a foreigner and have resided in Mexicali for sixteen years. This condition is not presented as autobiographical narrative, but as an explicit delimitation of the standpoint from which the research is conducted.

Prolonged residence in the city has enabled everyday familiarity with border spaces and with the socially normalized presence of migrants in situations of vulnerability. This proximity does not imply full integration or representation of those experiences; rather, it situates the researcher in an intermediate position—neither fully external nor belong-

ing to migrant communities. This location generates a tension between closeness and analytical distance.

Observation in this project is grounded not in exceptional events but in everyday repetition. The presence of bodies inhabiting conditions of deportation, waiting, and uncertainty forms part of the urban landscape. The methodological point of departure consists of attending to phenomena that, through repetition, have become naturalized.

This situated perspective enables attention to forms of social disappearance that persist within ordinary space, as discussed by Gordon (2008). At the same time, the condition of being a foreigner introduces reflexivity. My own experience of displacement—although distinct from that of forced migrants—precludes claims to neutrality. It does not authorize appropriation of others' experiences; rather, it requires recognizing the limits of representation and situating artistic practice as mediation.

Accordingly, positionality is not external to the method but constitutive of it. The methodology assumes its historical and geographical situatedness as a condition for engaging precarious forms of existence within the border context.

This positional stance does not function as autobiographical disclosure but as methodological delimitation. The condition of being neither fully external nor fully integrated generates an epistemic threshold similar to the sculptural threshold described later in this study. Distance and proximity coexist. Such tension prevents both identification and detachment from becoming total. The research perspective thus emerges not from neutrality but from negotiated situatedness. Positionality operates as a structural component of the dispositif: it frames what becomes perceptible and what remains beyond reach.

4.2. Field Access and Ethical Procedures

This project was conducted through direct engagement in border areas of Mexicali. The field was not mediated by institutions or formal intermediaries. Sites were identified through prolonged observation in the Centro Histórico, Parque Niños Héroes de Chapultepec, and along James W. Stone Street. These locations were selected because they allowed access to individuals residing in conditions of vulnerability and provided sufficient safety and space for brief interviews and 3D scanning.

Participants were selected opportunistically among individuals present at the field sites who agreed to participate voluntarily. The project did not aim to construct a representative sample but to document situated encounters within the everyday border environment.

At the time of fieldwork in 2025, many participants had previously been deported from the United States and remained in Mexicali without stable legal status. Several reported health instability and food insecurity. The research was therefore conducted within a context of political and material precarity.

Consent was obtained orally. Each encounter began with a formal greeting and a clear explanation of the artistic purpose in Spanish. The 3D scanning procedure was demonstrated using examples on a mobile device, and participants were informed of measures taken to protect their identities. Interviews lasted approximately three minutes and focused on place of origin, migration trajectory, current circumstances, and future expectations. In some cases, modest financial compensation or food was offered in recognition of participants' time.

Because the project was conducted in open public spaces with participants in situations of vulnerability, the ethical procedure followed a situational and process-based approach rather than a formal written-consent model. In line with discussions of ongoing consent in qualitative research and critiques of written consent forms in some non-elite field settings (Klykken 2022; Macdonald 2024), participation was requested individually at the site, the project was explained in accessible Spanish, and scanning and recording were demonstrated

in advance. Participation proceeded only when agreement remained clear throughout the encounter, and the interaction could be interrupted or discontinued at any moment.

Fieldwork took place in public spaces where safety conditions were variable. During certain sessions, third parties approached or attempted to intervene. In one instance (identified as J), the participant was experiencing health problems and had recently lost identification documents and medication. These situations required continuous assessment of risk and ethical boundaries.

The encounter in this study is understood as a situated interaction that involves both technical recording and ethical responsibility. Scanning was conducted with attention to participants' consent, comfort, and safety. Ethical considerations extended beyond formal approval to include decisions regarding approach, interaction, and withdrawal from the field.

Ethical procedure in this project extends beyond compliance with formal standards. It involves continuous evaluation of vulnerability within unpredictable public environments. Consent is not treated as a single moment of authorization but as an ongoing condition that can be withdrawn. The encounter is therefore understood as relational and provisional. The methodological emphasis lies not in extracting testimony but in sustaining a minimal zone of mutual recognition within asymmetrical circumstances.

4.3. Project Design and Phases

The project was structured in four operational phases. Field selection was guided by criteria of safety, accessibility, and the feasibility of conducting brief interviews and 3D scans. Three sites were chosen: (a) Centro Histórico near Parque Niños Héroes de Chapultepec (Figure 9); (b) a vacant lot along Calzada James W. Stone, characterized by improvised dwellings constructed from cardboard and discarded materials (Figure 10); and (c) an area adjacent to the border fence, symbolically associated with migrant crossing (Figure 11). Across these sites, eight interviews and six three-dimensional scans were conducted.



Figure 9. Parque Niños Héroes de Chapultepec, Mexicali (author's photograph).



Figure 10. Temporary dwelling inhabited by unhoused individuals on the vacant lot along Calzada James W. Stone (author's photograph).



Figure 11. Area adjacent to the U.S.–Mexico border fence (author's photograph).

The first phase consisted of systematic observation of migrant presence within the urban environment. Attention was directed toward sites of recurrent congregation and visible patterns of activity, with initial observations conducted at a distance prior to direct engagement. In the second phase, brief semi-structured interviews lasting three to five minutes were conducted and recorded on video using a smartphone. Questions addressed participants' names, places of origin, migration trajectories, length of residence in Mexicali, and future expectations. In the third phase, 3D scans were conducted of bodies, personal belongings, temporary dwellings, and selected material remains encountered at the sites. Scanning was performed using the free version of the mobile application POLYCAM. In the fourth phase, the scanned forms were translated into small-scale sculptural pieces through 3D printing.

The final pieces were produced at approximately 10 cm in height. This scale reduced the visual prominence of scanning imperfections while maintaining material legibility, and production costs were kept under ten U.S. dollars per piece. The modest size and low cost

were not incidental; they functioned as material parameters that echo the marginal position of migrant presences within formal systems of recognition.

The phased structure reflects the project's emphasis on material translation. Each stage marks a shift in ontological status: lived presence becomes recorded data; data becomes fabricated volume; volume becomes exhibited trace. The design is therefore not merely procedural but methodological, structuring transformation through mediated transitions rather than aiming at total capture. Fieldwork and interviews remain ongoing, and the dataset continues to expand. The limited number of interviews presented here reflects the exploratory and practice-based nature of the project, which prioritizes depth of encounter and material translation over statistical representativeness.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined how *Border Ghosts* renders migrant lives perceptible through artistic processes of encounter, 3D capture, and sculptural fabrication. Drawing on haunting and necropolitics, it has argued that even minimal testimonies and fragmentary traces—often absent from institutional archives—can persist within aesthetic form. Rather than reproducing narrative content, the project translates such traces into sculptural configurations that alter how precarious lives may be sensed within the exhibition space.

The study's principal contribution lies in showing artistic practice as a situated mode of mediation. The sequence from field encounter to exhibition does not produce full representation; instead, it sustains partial and materially mediated presence. In this sense, *Border Ghosts* does not resolve disappearance but works at its threshold, where instability, fragmentation, and reduced scale become formal conditions through which absence remains perceptible.

At the same time, the project does not claim to replace institutional archives or to overcome necropolitical violence through aesthetic means. The visibility it produces remains limited and contingent. Yet this partiality should not be understood as failure. Rather, it marks a shift in perceptual orientation and suggests that artistic research may remain critically effective precisely by refusing closure, totality, and fixed meaning.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the research involved non-interventional observation and brief voluntary interviews conducted in public spaces. No personal identifying information was collected, and all data were anonymized. According to applicable research ethics guidelines for minimal-risk studies conducted in public settings, formal institutional review board approval was not required.

Informed Consent Statement: Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews and 3D scanning. Participants were informed about the artistic and research purpose of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to protect anonymity. Written consent was not collected in order to avoid creating identifiable records for participants in vulnerable legal and social conditions.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access is restricted due to privacy and ethical considerations.

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