The Undocumented Migration Project

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URL:
https://dal.ucla.edu/backdirt/2025/news_notes/ump/

Citation (Chicago):
De León, Jason. “The Undocumented Migration Project.” In *Backdirt 2025: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Annual Review*. Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2026. https://dal.ucla.edu/backdirt/2025/news_notes/ump/.

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The Undocumented Migration Project

Jason De León

The last two years have been quite busy for the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP). We have continued our longstanding exhibition work, begun new field projects, andcelebrated accomplishments and milestones by our students, staff, collaborators, and director.

HOSTILE TERRAIN 94

In 2025 the UMP celebrated its sixth year of sponsoring the participatory art exhibition Hostile Terrain 94. The exhibition is composed of more than 4,300 hand-written toe tags representing migrants who died trying to cross the Sonoran Desert of Arizona between the mid-1990s and 2024. This year, the UMP worked with 11 new hosting partners to bring the exhibition to universities, museums, and other cultural institutions across the country. To date, Hostile Terrain 94 has been installed on five continents and at more than 170 locations around the globe. More than 600,000 additional tags have been filled out by thousands of exhibition participants. In the winter of 2026, the exhibition was installed locally at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga and at Cal State Dominguez Hills. Hostile Terrain 94 is also on display at the Museum of Us in Balboa Park, where it has been since 2021.



Hostile Terrain 94 being installed at Colgate University, winter 2025.

UMP AND THE SLOVENIAN MIGRATION INSTITUTE

This past summer, the UMP was invited to join the Slovenian Migration Institute (SMI) for a site visit, a lecture, and a conference in Italy. The conference, titled The Game: Walking the Balkan Route, included a multidisciplinary walking seminar with European border scholars and former migrants. For three days, members of the UMP (including two undergraduate students) walked on a migrant trail through the Karst Mountains, from Croatia across Slovenia and ending in Trieste, Italy. The UMP highlighted parallels between migrant material culture found on the Balkan trail and objects found on the Arizona–Mexico border. The SMI and UMP are currently collaborating on an interdisciplinary project comparing the Balkans and U.S.–Mexican border. We hope to host a border walking tour in California and Arizona in 2027.



Members of the UMP on a walking tour with Jure Gombač, a professor of history at the SMI.



Members of the UMP and Jure Gombač visit a storage facility housing migrant material culture.



UMP researcher Nicole Smith (left) with Jure Gombač on the Balkan migrant trail.

OUTREACH: HOLLYWOOD FOREVER



People fill out toe tags at Día de los Muertos at Hollywood Forever.

For the third year in a row, the UMP presented Hostile Terrain 94 as part of the annual Día de los Muertos event at Hollywood Forever. Thousands of community members attended the event and hundreds participated in an interactive workshop, filling out toe tags that represent migrants who have died in southern California. Through this public art event, UMP brings awareness to and honors migrants who have lost their lives while attempting to cross the U.S. border.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENTS

Congratulations to Karla Hernandez, a PhD student in Chicano and Central American studies at UCLA, for earning her MA. Karla's research focuses on the impact of violence along the U.S.–Mexican border, particularly against women. Undergraduate Victoria Gutierrez completed her Lemelson Anthropological Honors Program thesis in 2025 with a paper focused on climate change and community building in Slab City near the Salton Sea. Victoria presented her thesis in November at the

American Anthropological Association meetings in New Orleans. Undergraduate students Nicole Fentzke and Elizabeth Petrick conducted fieldwork with the UMP in Slovenia in the summer of 2025, and along with Nicole Smith, they also presented their work at the American Anthropological Association meetings.

NEW HIRE

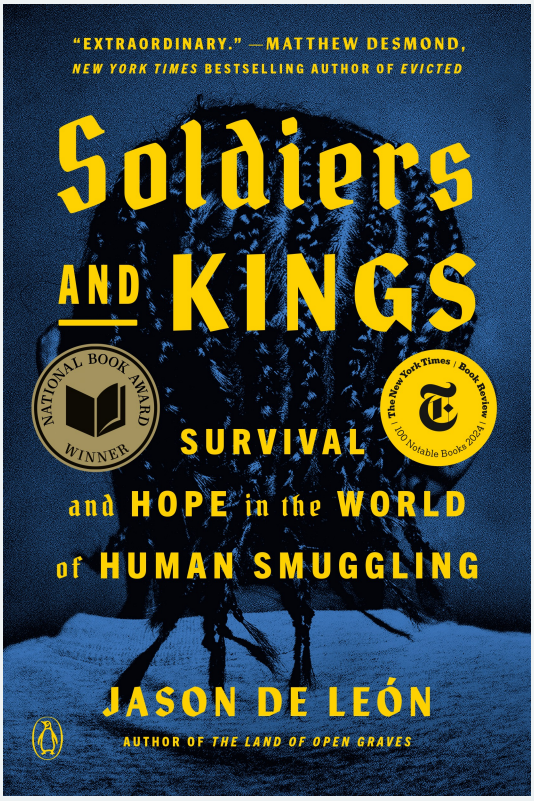


UMP program manager, Perla Torres.

Perla Torres was hired in early 2025 as program manager for the UMP and as outreach coordinator for the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. Her dedication to migrant rights started in 2016, when she focused on social services as a case manager for the Office of Refugee Resettlement, working on the reunification of unaccompanied minors at U.S.–Mexican border. She continued her work as a children's protection specialist for the border protection team of the Guatemalan consulate and as family network director for the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, helping identify more 300 remains found at the border. She continues to build solidarity, community, and a movement among families who have experienced loss at the border through UMP outreach efforts, research projects, and community engagement.

UMP DIRECTOR ACTIVITIES

UMP Director Jason De León stayed busy these last two years with his work running the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, developing new research and outreach projects in the U.S. and Europe, and promoting his 2024 book "Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling." Jason gave dozens of lectures about the book across the U.S. and internationally over the last twenty-four months including visits to Mexico, Denmark, Germany, Scotland, and Slovenia. Since its release in 2024, Soldiers and Kings has received several awards and recognitions including the 2024 National Book Award for Nonfiction.



Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling.