

**Miles from Civilization:
A Conscientization in the Borderlands**

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There's a photograph of me in the University Daily Kansan. When you look at the photo, you'll see me sitting in front of a lonely shrine in the Sonora Desert. When I look at the photo, I see the image that was burned in my mind as I sat there: a pair of red shoes. Those shoes filled my imagination with the story of one, lonely death.

When volunteers found the body of this fourteen-year-old girl at the end of nowhere, her shoes pointed them in the right direction. The shoes sat on the trail, bright red, distinctive. She was found in the gorge where I now sat. She was shoeless, her bare feet in the water.

The image of her dying in the desert as she tried to cool her burning feet snapped something inside of me. I had come to Arizona as a student volunteer for an alternative spring break. I now stood with other volunteers, silent as we heard her story. I had come wanting to understand the experience of thousands of migrants who attempt to cross the desert in search of a better life. Suddenly, I knew in detail how she had spent her last few hours. I was in a desert gorge, miles away from any semblance of civilization and I wanted to scream at the circumstances that led to this lonely death. What kind of world forces a fourteen-year-old girl trying to join her parents in California to die alone in the desert?

Overwhelmed with emotion, I turned to the cross and sat down before it. The photojournalist took my picture there, in front of the shrine.

That morning was my initiation into the border conflict. It was my first day volunteering for *No Mas Muertes*, an organization that provides humanitarian aid to

undocumented migrants crossing the US/Mexican border. Before, the border crisis had seemed wildly remote. But now, we lived in a desert camp and we walked the trails delivering food and water. We spoke to migrants and long-term volunteers; we spoke to Border Patrol agents and deportees in Mexico. The week ignited our conscientização, or conscientization in only the way that personal experiences, encounters and memories can. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire writes, “*Conscientização* represents the development of the awakening of critical awareness.”¹ For me that critical awareness has become a desire to act, to raise that same awareness in others. In this essay, I will present you with the facts and the stories that caused my conscientization in hopes that you, too, will be inspired to act. I had entered the desert a naïve 21-year-old; I left changed. How could I not? I had more than just statistics. I had faces and voices to haunt me at night. I had images burned into my memory.

We are sitting around a campfire, and I am looking at the light dance over a soft, smooth, impossibly young face. His name is Miguel and he is 16. He sits with us and tries to act tough, lighting up a cigarette while glancing around for approval, then smiling nervously at us. He spent the night in our camp, as his fellow traveler received aid in our medic tent. The next day he left, back into the desert, bound for Tucson. I'll never know if he arrived.

These stories illustrate the need for *No Mas Muertes* as well as the facts do. Its existence is a response to a humanitarian crisis. Compared to the early nineties, a migrant is three times more likely to die during the border crossing. This year, 50 bodies have

¹ Paulo Freire, “Education as the Practice of Freedom,” in Education for Critical Consciousness (London: Continuum, 2005) 15.

already been found in the Tucson sector of the Arizona desert.² But people continue to make the journey—it is estimated that more than 400,000 undocumented migrants cross each year³.

They come to look for jobs and to join family already working here because this labor structure has existed for most of the twentieth century, if not before⁴. Recently, NAFTA has integrated markets across the Americas. Yet in a blatant contradiction, while our markets now reach across borders, we do not allow our workers to do so.

The crossing itself has changed. It used to be relatively easy to cross. You would sneak through a border city, more often than not Tijuana-San Diego or Juarez-El Paso, so-called ‘traditional crossing points’ where in 1987, around 70 percent of all border crossings occurred⁵. The amount of money allocated to border security increased rapidly over the next decade—by 2001, Border Patrol’s budget was 10 times its budget of 1986⁶. The government built fences, added checkpoints, and hired more agents—1500 agents patrol the Tucson sector alone⁷.

Policy also changed as border security became known as an issue of “national security”⁸. Policy aimed at “prevention through deterrence”⁹ was made part of the official strategic plan for 1994. Under this strategy, also known as Operation Gatekeeper, crossings in San Diego, El Paso, Nogales and other urban points of entry were cut off.

² “No More Deaths,” 2008 <<http://www.nomoredeaths.org>>.

³ Douglas S. Massey, “Backfire at the Border: Why Enforcement without Legalization Cannot Stop Illegal Immigration,” *Trade Policy Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: The Cato Institute) 2.

⁴ Massey 5.

⁵ Massey 6.

⁶ Massey 5.

⁷ Luis Alberto Urrea, *The Devil’s Highway* (New York: Back Day Books, 2004) 19.

⁸ Massey 4.

⁹ Massey 4.

Instead of curbing illegal immigration, policy simply pushed migrants into more remote regions. By 2002, 64% of migrants passed through ‘non-traditional’ sectors—the most remote areas¹⁰ of the Sonoran desert. Thousands continued to make the crossing each year. In fact, despite government efforts at border security, 49% of undocumented Mexican migrants now in the country have entered since 2000. The numbers continue to rise.¹¹

I learned this by looking at what they couldn’t carry.

Hiking out on the trail in search of an injured migrant, we took a wrong turn. We were soon hiking up the side of a ridge, along a rocky trail etched in the stone by thousands of weary feet. We climbed and climbed, seeming, to me, to enter a forgotten realm in the universe—we were miles from our camp, which in turn was miles from the nearest small town. But this place was anything but unknown to humans. All around lay the vestiges of human existence—discarded clothes, stained wrappers, dirty maxi pads, used glue bottles sniffed to dull the ache of hunger. Garbage accumulated, making each opening in the jagged rock a stinking orifice. We saw more and more as the trail led us to a cave cut in the ridge’s side. The cave had, perhaps only nights before, served as a camp for a huge group of migrants. All around were remnants, but if you looked ahead, you saw a breathtaking view of the desert’s expanse. As I looked out over the desert, I imagined what the migrants must have thought in seeing miles and miles of an environment so harsh you can die of hypothermia at night and heat exhaustion during the day. It is an environment void of the necessary component to human survival—water. I

¹⁰ Massey 6.

¹¹ Haeyoun Park, “Recession’s Toll on Hispanic Immigrants” New York Times 24 March 2009
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/03/21/us/20090321_immig_hispanics.html>.

cursed the system, the laws and economics that cause so many people to enter this remote place, pitting them against an uncompromising nature.

The terror of the policy of “prevention through deterrence” is that it pushes humans into a place where they should not be. The desert nicknamed Desolation¹² stretches for miles, an expanse almost entirely void of potable water. The only water rots in stinking cattle ponds. Your own urine is cleaner to drink. It is physically impossible for a human to carry enough water to cross the desert. The desert is a frightening, scary beast. As the author Luis Alberto Urrea writes, “in the desert, we are all illegal aliens.”¹³

This beast hides its face. It is not how I expected it to be. The Sonora is filled with ocotillos and flowers, cacti and mountains. Its beauty is deceiving. It can overtake you in an instant. I learned this on the trail.

We stood on the top of Jalisco Ridge in an intense discussion.

‘I want us to decide as a group’, Darby, our group leader, said. ‘No one should feel pressured.’

Still, my stomach dropped. One wrong turn had led us away from the main path and into the bowels of the ridge. If we wanted to complete our search for an injured migrant, we needed to rejoin the right trail. Time and water were running out, the sun was baking down, and to retrace our steps would have been too time costly. Looking at each of us in turn, Darby suggested ‘bushwhacking,’ cutting a diagonal from this path to that one.

¹² Urrea 4.

¹³ Urrea 120.

I didn't want to say yes—leaving the path petrified me. But I didn't want to be the one in the group to say no. We were out here to save a life, I told myself. Darby had experience out here, he had a GPS. We would be okay, I repeated.

We all said yes. And we left the path.

As we cut over the top of Jalisco Ridge, my mind descended into the darkest depths of fear. Terrified, my eyes flitted between Darby's back and the rocky ground. I couldn't lose him. If I separated from him, I was without phone, without GPS, and as good as dead. But as we walked, my trust faltered. Why had I placed my life in his hands? It was a sense of paralyzing dependency on someone I had met only a few days before.

The sun was hot, the climbing was hard. I stumbled onto a cactus and pulled my hand away, stinging and bloody. Climbing down the ridge was worse than climbing up ever could have been. I slipped on loose stones. I almost fell. When I looked out across the horizon, I could see desert for miles.

Finally, Darby called to us—he had found the path.

When we reached the trail, we were giddy. We laughed, smiled. But we were also on the path again, saved from the wilderness.

That day, I felt a fraction of what each migrant feels when crossing the desert. But my story has a happy ending. I had a few hours on the trail, instead of days. But the memories of desperation and of being at war with the desert won't leave me.

The regions of the Sonoran desert now traveled by thousands of migrants are regions so remote that Border Patrol can't access them, except by air. Since people began to cross in the worst part of the desert, the likelihood of catching a migrant en route has

dropped from 30% to 5%¹⁴. At the same time, dying in the desert has increased by three-fold. Many enter unprepared: carrying soda instead of water or wearing flimsy sandals.

Many who cross are abandoned, left to die by their guides, the notorious *coyotes*.

Still, the declining chance of being caught convinces some to make the crossing. Some just won't give up.

My last day on patrol, we stumbled upon a man by the side of the trail. Roberto was in his fifties, overweight and exhausted. He was out of water. His legs were dotted with painful, bleeding sores. He had walked for an entire day across the mountains. We had to tell him that he was another three days from Tucson. "They told me ten hours," he kept repeating. We gave him water and food and offered to walk him to a water station. He staggered to his feet. Every few minutes he had to stop. He could barely walk, but he wanted to continue. As I followed him, I realized he was never going to make it. I began to calculate his chances of being caught by border patrol. I wanted that to happen. I wanted it so badly. But I realized Roberto was in a region so remote that there was little chance Border Patrol would ever catch him. Moreover, he was proud—he wouldn't want to get caught. He believed in what lay ahead. He was going to walk until he reached Tucson, was caught by Border Patrol or died. When I left him on the trails, I feared his fate would be the last one.

The hardest part was returning home. As I walked across campus, everything I saw seemed surreal. Images flashed in my mind, dreams came at night. It was hard to focus on my courses when my heart focused on Roberto's fate. I was angry at the lack of

¹⁴ Massey 6.

awareness of everyone around me. Not long ago, I had been like that. No longer. I now knew that the people in the desert are people, irreducible to the label ‘illegals’.

Long-term volunteers told us that women are raped on the trail. Utterly dependent on their guides across the desert, how can they refuse? Evidence is left in the form of underwear trees, savage displays of the victim’s bra and underwear. All along the trail, I had seen crumpled bras and underwear. Each one provoked a sickening lurch within me. However, in a state of cognitive dissonance, I reasoned that they could have been abandoned because of the heat.

Then, I saw it-- a bra, clearly on display.

‘Take it down,’ one of my group members choked.

I was closest to it. I approached it, tried to take it down with clumsy fingers. Everything was in slow motion. It became stuck in the tree. Finally, I untangled it. I held it, unsure what to do with it, finally, placing it on the ground with a rock over it. As I bent down, I saw a piece of paper. I picked it up: a Wal-Mart receipt from a Wal-Mart in Mexico. The Kotex on the bill made clear it belonged to a woman; a woman who had stopped to purchase a few things before her desert trek. She was probably the same woman whose bra had dangled in front of me. I glanced at her list. I, too, had gone to Wal-Mart to buy a few things before my trip. Yet our trips were completely different. I was a privileged volunteer. And I was standing here where she had been raped. It was then that I began to cry.

Confronting my memories and overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation, I had to find something to do—some way to make a difference. While at the camp, I was

active—busy. I was part of an on-the-ground humanitarian response. Returning to campus meant facing the huge, systemic and structural issues that create this situation.

When a migrant dies in the desert, you could blame the wicked *coyote* who failed to prepare him for the journey; who abandoned him to a fiery death. You could blame the evil desert itself. You could blame corrupt Mexican politicians or networked drug cartels. All are factors. But I blame U.S. policy. Everything revolves around that central point.. You can look at the small number of working visas we give out in contrast to the number of jobs we offer. You can look at the way NAFTA policies and border policies clash with labor realities: though pushed into the desert, people still come in pursuit of the myth of *El Norte*. Yet more than ever die.

The desert crossing is an impossible journey—as I saw first hand. It is also an increasingly expensive journey—the cost of a guide has tripled since the early nineties.¹⁵ A migrant who makes it is more likely than ever to settle in the United States. While the government funnels money into border security, more are dying and those who make it are more likely to settle here in order to make the journey worthwhile. As we leave Mexico behind economically, there is no end in sight to a population in whose best interest it is to move north.

I don't know what the solution is but I know people need awareness about what is happening. If we have any hope of a new effective policy we must educate people about the situation at the border. What keeps me going since my return is that, as a journalism student, I am training myself to tell stories like those that I witnessed.

¹⁵ Massey 8.

I wrote all the way home and kept writing when I reached home. I wrote with purpose. It was a mission that truly began as I walked away from the little girl's shrine. After the photo was taken, I felt weak, powerless to help. Now, I write in her name. I owe it to her and I owe it to the *No Mas Muertes* volunteers to educate about what occurs at our borders.

After all, I immersed myself in the border wars. I know the situation intimately. I understand, if not all of the factors, much of the impossible web of circumstances that lead to deaths in the desert. I went to Arizona and learned so much—I spoke to those on the trail and those already deported, I passed through a border patrol checkpoint and spoke to people who attended the sentencing of deportees. I saw deportees dropped at the Border. I absorbed, for a week, the stories of long-term volunteers. I walked the migrant trails.

I was able to return home to Kansas from my week in the desert as easily as Dorothy, when she clicks her red shoes. But my heart was still there, in the desert, with the body of the little girl whose shoes couldn't bring her home. When I emerged from the desert, I was covered in grime and saturated with stories, experiences and resolve. Now I know the facts, even if I don't know the solution. It has become my responsibility to tell the stories of those who have no voice. And to pray that the knowledge I spread fuels action. (2952)