

Ni Dios ni dioses

I woke up startled and pissy from a nap last summer. That particular day, for no particular reason, I shifted from the hot static of afternoon sleep and thought, *No creo en Dios ni en dioses*. I don't believe in God or gods. I read the words as though they'd been printed across the insides of my eyelids. They stuck there, tucked into grey matter or the hollow of my ribs, and I didn't know what to do with them.

Almost a year later, I stood on a wide ledge overlooking the Altar Valley of southern Arizona, across the O'odham lands and the Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge. I'd crossed that stretch of Sonoran Desert with the help of sixty other people who were also completing the Fifth Annual Migrant Trail. We walked in protest of the hundreds of migrant deaths that happen along that corridor each year. We'd given ourselves a week, resting each afternoon and camping at night in warm tents. We walked along major highways and well cleared paths. Our last leg took us to Tucson; and our journey covered more than 75 miles from the border at Sásabe, Sonora. I do not know how anyone ever – *ever* – makes this journey on their own.

As an anthropologist, my business is the mystery of being human, for what is culture if not the collection of vast, wacky, stupid and divine ways in which we live our lives every single day? But on the Migrant Trail, I found thinking as an academic anthropologist to be clumsy. This was a dimension of experience and observation in which my soul, and not just my mind, was paramount.

I stood on that ledge after sunrise, in a circle with my fellow walkers. I listened to Maria's song and prayer. I breathed in sage as she made her way around the circle, blessing each person, and with my palms turned up, eyes closed, I felt her brush my hands with an eagle feather and fan sage smoke around me, from head to toe. I heard her whisper, "God bless you." And I held the white wooden cross bearing the name of Eugenio Guerrero Gutiérrez, age 39, who died in the desert the year before.

What I believe is that the Migrant Walk challenges the deification – the God and gods – of things that divide us from ourselves and from one another: borders, beliefs, and laws meant to criminalize the movement of humans across the globe. As a species, we've been moving around for a good while now, but the cost of that movement is paid for more dearly by some than by others.

A fact: The increased number of deaths in the Sonoran Desert are a direct, intended consequence of legislation that has redirected migration pathways to the most treacherous areas along the U.S.-Mexico border. Dead migrants are meant to be examples for others who wish to cross.

Another fact: Many women preparing to make the border crossing start taking contraceptives ahead of time. Most of them will be raped during their journey.

I visited Sásabe with friends the weekend before the walk, and we happened upon what I think of as a kind of a depot. On an *ejido*, a plot of collectively owned land set back from the main road, buses from Altar arrived to drop off migrants ready to cross to the other side. At least 100 people came and went while we were there. More buses came in, trucks left again with people standing in the back.

The girls were the ones who caught my eye at the time – before I’d done the Migrant Walk, before I’d heard about the contraceptives. I didn’t expect to see them. I’m not sure why. I expected to see men, even young men, but not girls of 16, 18 or 20. Two of them wore matching blue blouses. They looked like school uniforms. Their hair was tied back in tight, smooth ponytails.

Our first night camping, it turned cold. Really, really cold. A cold that woke me up, and as I burrowed deeper into my sleeping bag, I thought about those girls, who still could have been in the desert somewhere, and who carried no packs, no sleeping bags, no jackets. It was warm and sunny, a perfectly temperate, blue-sky day, the day I had seen them.

Two additional facts: (1) The border fence at Sásabe is new – a 2007 Christmas present to the desert, 12 feet high, with bollard posts four inches apart and sunk deep into concrete. The local paper specified that the fence would form “an impenetrable barrier for humans and large mammals but allow water and small animals to pass through” (<http://www.azstarnet.com/sn/border/197790>). My friends’ nine-year-old son stood on the Sonora side and wedged his little face between two posts, sticking his tongue out as far as he could. “My tongue is in America!” he said.

(2) The Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge hosts a monster camera on an enormous scaffolded post. Flanked by satellite dishes, it swivels and turns all day and all night. Someone, somewhere, is watching the images it captures. It’s creepy. It is a Sonoran Eye of Sauron. And it’s not the only one, my precious.

More facts: People keep crossing the desert. When their guides get them to the border, they point to distant lights and say, “See that there? That’s Chicago. That over there’s L.A. A few hours of walking, and you’ll be with your family.” Instead, they walk for days and quickly run out of water, and suffer crippling blisters on their feet. Like I said, it’s 75 miles to Tucson. In the meantime, *bajadores*, or bandits, might attack, take anything they have,

and leave them for dead.

A quick note: Bodies turn black as they decompose in the desert.

An O'odham man went out to get firewood one day and found a boy's charred body near his woodpile. He and his family found us walkers on our sixth day. He'd brought a prayer staff, a stick two feet long wrapped in red ribbon with a dime-size pouch of tobacco, also wrapped in red and tied to the top of the staff. This was for the boy he had found. He hadn't been able to sleep since finding the body, and he wanted us to carry the boy with us so that he could complete the journey he'd started. The man stood by the back of his truck with his daughters next to him. Each one of us shook each of their hands as we passed. The littlest girl's hand folded completely into my own. She was maybe three.

Finally: Migration is a business.

The woman my friends and I talked to in Sásabe the Saturday before the walk complained that her restaurant business had gone down drastically since the people in Altar had started including food and water in their transportation package. (I had seen the people waiting in the *ejido* depot carrying single white grocery bags and two one-gallon jugs of water. A week later, I knew that this was not nearly enough to get them through the desert.) At her restaurant, the woman said, she used to prepare food for people to take with them, and she also used to sell them everything they might need for the journey, including *sueros*, serums for dehydration. (I saw *suero* bottles strewn along the paths we walked, along with empty water jugs spray painted black to avoid detection at night by Border Patrol lights.) The woman was considering closing her restaurant. The point of supply had moved up the road, and demand for her products had bottomed out.

A friend of hers told us that her husband worked as a guide for people crossing the border. She spoke in such a matter-of-fact way that it was hard to believe she was talking about moving people, not just stuff, from one place to another.

One of the leaders of the *ejido* told me they'd taken over that plot of land so that people couldn't just cross freely, as they used to. "Now everything is organized," he said. "All the buses from Altar come here, then the passengers pay their fees and we take them on up." He and his colleagues had seized a business opportunity. At the bottom of that little hill, flanked by junk cars, they had created a mandatory stopping point for those moving north, and a lucrative arrangement for themselves.

There are, of course, drugs moving north, as well. The week before the walk began, a Border Patrol agent was arrested for smuggling marijuana into the U.S. He, too, had seized a business opportunity.

We got up early each morning on the walk. On the day of our longest trek we were up at 3:30am to take advantage of the cool morning. We drank coffee, ate cold bagels with peanut butter, and packed our gear back into the support vehicles. Anyone who took too long at a potty break or whose blisters ached too much was asked to ride in one of those cars till they caught up to the line or till their feet healed, till their dehydration was remedied.

We'd been advised at the start to find a "pee buddy" in the group, someone we could report to on the amount and color of our urine everyday. Pee buddies were a preventive measure for dehydration and a rich source of bathroom humor.

Headphones and ipods were not allowed while we walked, and at first I thought this would make for a painfully boring 75 miles, much of it completed in single file for safety on busy roads. What I found was that for days after the walk ended, songs came to my head on their own. I did not turn on the radio in the car or at home. The TV stayed off. I sang. I remembered the Quaker song Robin taught me, Andrés belting out "De Colores" off-key, Rubén's "El Rey," and Tom's "Good-night Eileen." Tom had the music going in his truck at every water stop: corridos, rancheras, Civil Rights protest songs, and gospel.

We walked in silence at times, or we roll-called the names on the crosses we carried. "¡Eugenio Guerrero Gutiérrez! ¡Presente!" I found a roadrunner feather along the way and tied it onto his cross.

It was hard to write during that week even though I'd brought my journal with me and had intended to do some deep reflecting on my experience. But I think the desert sucked all that out of me. It was impossible to be anywhere but there, walking, eating, sitting, talking, sleeping. The desert demands humility above all, and remembering the dead does, too. So I found myself jotting notes, just so I wouldn't forget what had happened. On Wednesday, my notes read:

Seizure
Vomiting
3 people go home
3 people lost

We'd set up camp, and people were dozing under the shade tents when we woke to the ragged heaving of a fellow walker. With the heat and exertion, she was suffering an epileptic fit. They drove her out of the wildlife reserve to the hospital, and eventually she was fine, but there was a lot of puking that day. Fear of a stomach bug made hand sanitation before meals compulsory from then on.

That same afternoon, three people wandered off, and a panicked search committee fanned out to go look for them. The desert, as we discussed later, was not at all safe – see the bit about the *bajadores* above, and add to that a cocktail of sunstroke, snakes, Border Patrol, and maybe Minute Men.

On the day the two migrant men reached our camp, I'd gone to try to take a nap in my tent, but I woke up in a pool of sweat and opted for lounging under the tarps outside. I was still sleepy, but I noticed them and thought I knew who they must be. They sat with a few of the walk organizers, hunched over plates of food, clearly hungry. They wore long sleeves and long pants, dark grays and

blacks. They'd left their companions five miles back: two women whose feet were too blistered and who were likely too dehydrated to walk to meet us. Some of the organizers went to check on them. If their condition was bad enough, an ambulance could be called, and they could be admitted to the hospital, but the men would be deported without similar care. If they decided to tough it out, well, they took their chances with the desert. No ambulance was called.

We maintained a steady clip as we walked, and we got stronger as we went. The longest day of almost 16 miles was not by that time the most challenging one. It was the second day that wore me out, when we were still fresh, before the puking and intensive hand sanitation had started. I slept soundly every night after that, which is almost never the case when I camp. The campsite was a chorus of snoring after sundown. 60-plus tired bodies make a racket.

We talked as we walked, about migration and border policies and how to bring attention to their deadly absurdity. I was with people who are dedicating their lives to make sure this happens. I was with two clear-sighted high school students, recent college graduates, teachers, activists, lawyers, historians, pilots, immigrants, writers, and retirees. Among us was a chief of police, a Franciscan friar, and a Buddhist monk. Our talks raised lots of questions, mainly: How do we get people to listen? How do we demilitarize our lives, replace that roving camera and the Border Patrol's dog-catcher trucks with something more humane? How do we stop the killing?

As we began walking along Highway 286, motorists honked and waved in support. The O'dham man and his family stopped to give us the prayer staff. Another family, all piled into their SUV, followed alongside us for a while, smiling and waving, then circled back and did it again. Others weren't so happy to see us. A shiny blue pickup went past. The driver laid on the horn, and I turned to see an angry middle finger pressed up against the window. A guy on a motorcycle rumbled by going the other direction and shook his bandana covered head gravely, as if to say, "No. No. No." No what? I thought. No, people don't die in the desert? No, we shouldn't care about them? No, the walk is wrong?

What stuck with me was how he wouldn't make eye contact with any of us. He looked straight ahead, but his reprimand was meant for us. I believe there was also fear in that *indirecta*, and I think I might understand why. I think I hold similar fears, of not being right, of being proved wrong, of being on the wrong side when you thought you were on the right side – the righteous side, the side that would make the world a better place.

The Migrant Walk presented me with the challenge of uprooting myself from neat academic argumentation, of implicating myself in the contradictions of feeling and thinking, and reminding myself of how I rationalize my distance from others. I underestimated a friend on this walk. And I learned to trust another. I felt my mind spinning in its hamster-wheel. I was humbled. And I got pissy – again. I did not expect to feel the walk through and through like that. I could not make

rational sense of the feeling that Eugenio Guerrero Gutiérrez, age 39, walked beside me. Indeed. And I could not tell you now, even, why I could feel my heart chameleon its way along that valley, then disappear...

In Sásabe, it was dust, grit, and dry wind.

In the wildlife refuge, it was caked in thick, cracked clay.

The next day, it was a swirl of bloody purple and red. It sloshed in my chest.

And the day after that, it pulsed bright green and yellow with the aorta sticking up and the ventricles opening, closing, opening, closing.

Then after that, nothing. Just one step after another, offered up.

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Review

This a well-groomed text. The author took the explosive forest of a very vivid, physical experience and trimmed it down to a careful garden of measure. It slides between the realms of essay and a more lyrical literature with ease, providing at the same time with a human, emotional telling of an event along with interesting facts about the main topic, a hot topic, a topic doused in gasoline and in flames: Mexico-U.S.A human migration.

Although sprinkled with the tired, overused “poetics of the desert” here and there, thankfully the chronicle stays its course as a report of various significant instances in the duration of a movement from A to B; the human encounters, the description of states of mind and the terror of statistics.

Perhaps guilty of feeling a spiritual tourist in the Desert of the Dead, the main voice or character legitimates the authenticity of their cause through this trip through Hell. The cleansing flames of the sun, the rolling noise of vomit and the numbing reality of exhaustion purify the bourgeois ways of the average Civil Rights Activist in the United States. It is a rite of passage needed for a clear conscience and a medal of honor in display only for oneself, for to keep our inner demons at bay, to stop their mockery: “you over-privileged bastard, what do you know about suffering?” The answer to this is normally: “let’s re-create suffering. And pour myself into it, like some sort of holy honey.”

This mysterious, archaic feeling of righteousness, although an invention of a modern, rationalist mind, still carries out and serves a greater and just purpose: to unveil and attack the unkind, asinine policies against human migration into the United States. Because indeed,

this text is pregnant with politics, and it's so much an essay and a weblog post that it even has a link to a website. But it blooms at the end, when the landscape, along with the conscience of the narrator, turns into a violent flower of carnage and saintly gore. Just like the one harvested from the chest of a prisoner of the Flower Wars, a long time ago, when everything was alright, when our parents were like children, naked, and eating little song-birds in the evening.

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