Violence and Militarization: Undocumented Migrant Strategies for Navigating the Arizona-Sonora Border

This paper is about understanding undocumented border crossing between Sonora, Mexico, and Southern Arizona in an era of hyper violence and mass militarization. The study is based on an ethnography conducted at a migrant shelter during the summer of 2014 and 2015. The migrant shelter provides temporary refuge for migrant deportees and prospective migrants in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. The study has two purposes. First, it aims to paint a picture of the migrant experience by comprehending the strategies undocumented migrants employ to survive in a perilous militarized zone. Second, the study intends to offer a counter perspective of undocumented migrants to the one we often hear about in the media. Because undocumented border crossings are highly dynamic, adapting to changing state policies, I draw on structural violence to illuminate the lives of men, women, and children who negotiate these spaces.

In 1994, the Clinton Administration adopted a federal border enforcement policy known as Prevention through Deterrence (PTD) (Government Accountability Office [GAO] 1997, 64-65), with the intentions of stopping illegal migration through the U.S.-Mexico border. PTD functioned by concentrating high levels of border security in certain traditional urban points of entry such as in Southern Arizona. Moreover, PTD attempted to shift migration through the Sonoran desert and use this space to deter undocumented migrants and encourage them to return to their location of origin. Through the use of thousands of new Border Patrol agents, the construction of a ten-foot-high border wall, motion-detecting sensors, infrared technology, and other forms surveillance systems, the PTD strategy heavily militarized the US-Mexico border. Most importantly, the PTD strategy funneled migrants through the Sonoran desert, creating inhumane conditions where migrants have to walk over 60 miles of desert landscape known for its extreme environmental risks (e.g., summer temperatures reaching 115° F).

My position as a volunteer at the migrant shelter, in addition to my investigative role, allowed me to gain further insight when engaging migrants in conversations about their experience crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and the Sonoran Desert. My field observations explain how undocumented migrants employ specific strategies to maneuver and survive in the environmental conditions and hyper militarized landscape of the Sonoran desert. Similar to the findings of other immigration scholars, the migrants I spoke to describe creating instinctive solutions as they marched through the Sonoran Desert. Migrants, for instance, describe cutting their empty water jugs in half and using the bottom half as a container to collect water from cattle tanks. Moreover, migrants tried to use their clothing to filter as much dirt and bacteria from the cattle tank water. The predominant strategy migrants employed to survive the conditions of the desert, however, occurred in moments of desperation, which was usually during the fourth and fifth day of the journey. At this point, migrants felt largely disoriented, heat fatigued and exhaustion. They resulted to screaming for help and lighting trees on fire in order to alert authorities about their presence. One migrant in particular explained how, after being separated from the group of migrants he was traveling with and finishing the only food and water he had, he grew very desperate and climbed a mesquite tree and shouted as loud as he could but received no answer. He eventually pulled out a lighter and set the tree on fire, which helped Border Patrol find him.

Although border crossings are highly dangerous, what is mostly portrayed in the media is a spectacle that tends to justify policies of death and militarization. My field observations shed light on the complexity of this issue. Migrants implement certain strategies to mitigate different structural constraints that are presented as a result of a hyper militarized landscape.