

Humanity at the Border

By BethAnne Nelson

Nothing but experience can really capture the truth of the desert. It swallows people whole in its sands, under the relentless heat of the sun overhead. Clothes, photographs, bags of belongings are abandoned behind stones. Even when you seem alone in the vastness, you are surrounded by people. The echoes of those who have passed through, the spirits of those who never left, and the heartbeats of all those just out of sight hoping that we are not border patrol on the hunt. Some are returning to the only country they have ever known, having lived in the U.S. from infancy only to be deported in adulthood. Some are escaping the violence fueled by the drug cartels, or the poverty brought on by free trade. Whatever their reasons, these are our brothers and sisters, trying to find dignity and a fulfilled life in a country that is waging a war against their right to humanity.

It is an act of peace, a necessary act of justice, for us to provide care to them when they are in need. Experiencing the desert firsthand indelibly demonstrates to one on a hike, the intensity and desperation of one day for those who struggle under its conditions. A week's walk, a month's walk, or more tears at every part of the body of a person who has already suffered social and economic injustices below the border.



The writer joins other aid workers, crawling under bared wire, to bring water to immigrants on cattle-grazing land near the Mexican border.

Photo: Joe Italiano

Immigration reform is a term that has been bandied about in U.S. politics, without movement towards any sort of resolution, let alone progress. Poll numbers and talking points often reduce all human beings into hypothetical and moveable pieces of data. New legislation seeks to “humanize” the immigration process by offering a

path to citizenship over a period of 13 years, during which time applicants must pay for, but cannot access any government services. Registered Provisional Immigrants (RPis) would be required to pay full price for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act, without access to any of the tax credits or cost reductions. Female applicants may receive a reduction in their waiting period through the VAWA (the Violence Against Women Act), if they have been assaulted by a U.S. citizen and are willing to endlessly recount and relive their experience on applications and in front of deciding bodies.

And while immigrants to the U.S. come from many places across our vast globe, and even though the total migration from Mexico over the border reached net zero in 2012, just as many people leave the US thru the border as enter it. The dialogue has been vitriolic in dehumanizing people of Latino/Latina heritage. The current legislation, in order to pacify those who blame and fear migrants crossing in from Mexico, and to help sustain the military-industrial complex, will radically and unnecessarily militarize the U.S. border and increase the already excessive presence of law enforcement and border patrol.

During my time this past summer volunteering with the humanitarian aid group, No More Deaths, on the Arizona and Mexico border, these realities were part of our daily fabric. Many miles inside the U.S. border, checkpoints have been established to question any vehicle or person who passes through. The U.S. Customs & Border Patrol (CBP) has authority within 100 miles of the U.S. border (both land and sea), in a way that may limit any person's Fourth Amendment rights under the Constitution. Border patrol vehicles were a continuous presence throughout the town of Arivaca, AZ near our base. Anybody can be asked, and often are, her or his citizenship status, whether they are at a checkpoint or just going about their day. Additionally, a collection of research by No More Deaths, demonstrated that when people are taken into custody by CBP, the conditions are inhumane, abusive, dangerous, and that "many of them plainly meet the definition of torture under international law."

While in Arizona, most of my time was spent in the Sonoran Desert, providing food, water, and medical aid to those in need in the desert. However, even as dirt filled our shoes and we retrieved water bottles slashed and emptied of their life-saving water (hidden cameras have captured CBP agents destroying water bottles, although other people such as ranchers and vigilantes are also suspected), it was clear that a large part of the work for justice remained in the buildings of corporate and political powers. The prison industrial complex is greatly profiting from the current system of arrest, detention, and deportation. Groups such as the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and The Geo Group (GEO), posts annual revenue of over \$1 billion, each. These private prison corporations are hired by states to handle the prison population; a population that increases under the influence of these groups that profit from incarceration. In a 2011 article from the Justice Policy Institute, it was found that "the prison industry has invested over \$6 million in campaign contributions to state candidates since 2000 and at least \$1 million

annually in lobbying efforts since 2003.” Humans become bed fillers and profitable pocket liners for private corporations.



*Carrying life-saving water bottles.
Photo: Joe Italiano*

While we were witnessing a day in court under “Operation Streamline”, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, it was evident that these policies created to enable private profit were in full force. Since its institution in 2005, Operation Streamline has altered immigration prosecution from a civil deportation matter to an instigation of criminal records and prison sentencing. I, personally, witnessed over 70 defendants being tried in a single afternoon, with every person who could understand English or Spanish (those who cannot understand the interpretation of the legal proceedings are handled separately), receiving a prison sentence of at least 30 days, but more commonly upwards of 120 to 180 days. Many of those who were sentenced, were charged with “Illegal Re-Entry”, meaning they were found in the U.S. again having previously been deported. While Operation Streamline is purported to deter entry, this is clearly not the case, and it is being used as a money-making enterprise by those profiting.

Immigration is a peace and justice issue. Immigration is a feminist issue. The border is not just in Arizona or Texas, the border is everywhere. It is present in the collective consciousness of our entire population. The actions on the border, both by humanitarian aid workers and the border patrol, law enacted by politicians, and

profit schemes by corporations, affect everyone throughout our country. Legislation utilizing our tax money is rending families, communities, and our continent apart, while supporting those who profit from injustice. Different forces, histories, and motivations bring us all into the desert. We, migrants, aid workers, support volunteers, local citizens, feel the wind on our faces, the cholla spikes against our skin, the sun at our backs, and precious water fill our veins with life. We experience all these things together, because we are human together, and are entitled to be cherished and supported as a human community. Work must be done to allow us all to walk forward, from wherever our journey began, together with families, and together as one human family.

BethAnne Nelson participated in work with No More Deaths on the U.S.-Mexican border. She is a board member of Women Against Military Madness.