

Clash on the Border of the Tohomo O'odham Nation

"A woman was driving her truck –and a lot of roads that come off of the main highway towards the reservation, like dirt roads, was one that she was on –and she had to stop because she saw a large tree laid across the road, which was unusual... so she couldn't cross. So she stopped and these people came out of the desert and they were all illegal immigrants and they didn't hijack her but they took her truck... and that was one way of making sure she stopped by putting the tree there. So that made it in the local tribal paper and people are warned of things that are unusual to come across. Trees in the road."

Ofelia Zepeda, professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona, refers to an incident in which migrants crossing into the United States from the border of Mexico disturb the lives of a Native American group, the Tohono O'odham, who reside on the border.

Currently migrants who attempt to cross the United States border from Mexico and avoid Border Patrol are channeled into a strip of the Tohono O'odham Nation's hazardous desert land. Stricter national security increasingly causes migrants to cross through the reservation, which attracts various actors onto the nation's land, consequentially altering O'odham way of life as well as O'odham attitudes towards undocumented migrants.

Eddie Brown, a professor of Arizona State University and a member of the Tohono O'odham tribe, discusses some of the issues that Tohono O'odham tribal members face because they live on the border of Mexico and Arizona.

"You have O'odham living in villages close to the border and many times their houses are robbed, their cars stolen, their homes broken into. So many times you have O'odham that are afraid sometimes to go into town to buy food, to leave their houses alone never knowing what is going to happen. And then of course you have the drug trade and this is where it gets even more complicated: Illegals coming across have dollars that pay people so you have O'odham that do not have jobs and are looking for some way to earn a living; that becomes a very easy way as well."

Brown reiterates the concerns that the U.S. government has with migration across the border:

"The drug trade has been on the O'odham nation for a while; it is the major corridor in which drugs are being passed as well as other nationalities coming across the border and there's some concern about terrorists that potentially could enter through that corridor as well."

The Tohono O'odham nation was divided between the United States and Mexico with the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. O'odham, uninformed of the official division, frequently crossed

the artificial border regardless of not being given dual citizenship in order to visit their families spanned from north to south of the land. Because of this, the Tohono O'odham's official website states that the "U.S.-Mexico border has become an artificial barrier to the freedom of the Tohono O'odham. . . to traverse their lands, impairing their ability to collect foods and materials needed to sustain their culture and to visit family members and traditional sacred sites. O'odham members must produce passports and border identification cards to enter into the United States."

The current chairman of the nation, Ned Norris, disapproves of permanent division of O'odham land, having stated publicly that a 15- to 20-foot iron wall would be built "over my dead body."

Although migration is part of the O'odham life, members are reluctant to share their experiences, attitudes, or stories about undocumented migrants trekking through their land. Tohono O'odham government employees respond to questions regarding migrants with silence. Yet the O'odham government has much to say about the daily interaction with migrants – their governmental officials discuss migration issues constantly. The government hears from residential tribal members who, according to protocol, Zepeda says, report any kind of encounter with migrants.

Zepeda is also a poet and O'odham member who shares her thoughts freely:

"Yeah, even if they're not threatening it doesn't matter if they're illegal, unfortunately. There are all kinds of people that come through—indigenous people that come through and O'odham people have a long history of knowing migrants coming through; this is nothing new. The only difference is there are more of them and also more are coming through for... a variety of reasons. There are some who are quite organized and trafficking illegal drugs and a lot of that goes on on the reservation."

O'odham people report to their government and also to national governmental employees like Border Patrol.

The relationship that O'odham natives have with Border Patrol is not completely positive.

"They were scary," recalls an O'odham member as she describes life on the reservation as a child: "I lived on the nation when I was little. They were everywhere, the migrants... and Border Patrol. I remember being very scared and confused." This receptionist for an O'odham governmental official mirrors the insecurities that other O'odham have with Border Patrol:

"You have those (O'odham) who, you know, want them (Border Patrol) here but [there's] the culture issue also and you get these people (Border Patrol) who come from all over the

United States. They show up from California and a lot of them don't want to be here, a lot of them are young, a lot of them don't understand, a lot of them don't care. A lot of them don't understand sovereignty issues, they don't understand reservations, they don't understand any of it so they come out here thinking that they, you know, pretty much are untouchable," explains O'odham police officer Sergeant Aaron Brown, son of Eddie Brown.

Sergeant Brown has been working for the nation's police force on the reservation for the past 14 years and has alternated between on-the-ground work and office work during his career.

"They start to be resented," Eddie Brown explains, "when Border Patrol stops tribal members to see if they are illegal immigrants. We're both brown. We look a lot alike."

Eddie describes how some tribal members are Mexican citizens. Mexican members are raised in the O'odham culture yet exposed to Latino culture. Their identity is multicultural, fluid, and connected to the identity of Latino migrants.

The shared identity between O'odham people and migrants is not only ethnic. Migrants cross the border to escape poverty, low class status, and marginalization. They face difficulties when the American government categorizes them as criminals. Likewise, O'odham and Native Americans living on reservations across the states suffer from poverty, marginalization, and inattention from the American government.

Referring mainly to undocumented Latino migrants, Mike Wilson, a former Christian pastor, proclaims, "They are our brothers and sisters. This is a humanitarian crisis, leaving border crossers out to die."

As an adamant activist for the humane treatment of undocumented workers, Mike Wilson puts out food and jugs of water near typically travelled paths that migrants follow through the reservation.

Border crossers are not always migrants of Mexican descent—a fair amount are from South America and other continents. Regardless, ethnic profiling that is based on typical Mexican appearance is a popular technique Border Patrol has used for seeking out undocumented migrants.

"Border Patrol has improved thanks to diversity training," Sergeant Brown notes, yet he also admits: "When Border Patrol does come down they're kicking in doors surrounding houses. Sometimes it's people who are just upset and they have nothing to do with anything and they're just looking for help yet they're being treated, you know, as criminals. And then you have others who definitely are criminals who are upset because they're blocking their money and their way of life coming into Mexico in the United States."

Sergeant Brown explains that he and many O’odham feel conflicted about Border Patrol presence:

“There’s a lot of Border Patrol out there that, you know, push the boundaries. They shouldn’t be doing some of the things they do and you know once they do that turns up. They’re written up, or turned in or something’s done about it; those situations get corrected. But at the same time there’s just so much going on right now along the border and so many people getting across that it’s just a constant fight—let alone between the manpower we have in our police department but also with the manpower that Border Patrol has. So a lot of the time the [message] that Border Patrol has coming across people’s houses [is that] we have to send [for] Border Patrol at certain times. So the resentment is that Border Patrol shows up and they think they can come in—they think they can do this when, in actuality, they’re there to keep the people here safe, not only on the nation but the United States also.”

Some migrants are poor parents who want to financially support their families by working in the United States. They are not aggressive and they are not drug dealers. Some well-intentioned migrants, out of desperation, steal food, water, and trucks, leave their trash on the land, and use medical resources when passing through the O’odham nation. Employees like Gary Olson, manager of waste maintenance for the O’odham government, reduce the negative effects of migration by cleaning up litter.

“Some of my employees have had their homes broken into. Migrants raid their fridges because they’re starving after a long journey. Trashing homes and leaving dirty clothes behind negatively impacts the environment,” Olson expresses.

Yet according to Olson, the amount of litter on the reservation decreased due to reduction in border-crossing and help from larger environmental safety bodies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

“Immigration has significantly decreased because Border Patrol has buckled down. It’s a cat and mouse game, and now there are more cats than mice. Another factor is just the little job opportunities in the States now. With unemployment gone up there is less of an appeal to come to the United States,” Olson explains.

Views vary. Zepeda believes that migration is on the rise.

“A lot of times the migrants will want, especially in the summer time, water or food. In the past it wasn’t a problem but let’s say in the last ten to fifteen years it has gotten pretty dangerous, where there are more people crossing and they want more than water and food—for example your truck or things on your lawn—and to that extent, Tohono O’odham

people are not open to helping because they don't know who they're helping and that might cause further problems. Because of the influx of more movement across the O'odham nation Border Patrol is very visible out there so there's that conflict as well for jurisdiction and so on."

Evidently every party involved, whether they are legal or illegal, Tohono O'odham, American, Mexican, or from another country, contributes to the internal conflict on the nation regarding attitude towards migrants. Public attitude is shaped by conversation between O'odham, by local newspaper articles, by national government discourse and Border Patrol discourse, and by silence.

"They don't want to talk about an issue that involves human beings dying on tribal lands because if you don't talk about it, it's not happening right?" Wilson exclaims when referring to the lack of attention given to dying migrants from his former Christina O'odham congregation. No matter how often he discussed the issue during a sermon the congregation refused to react in a way that immediately helped migrants.

"If it's not happening, nobody cares." Wilson reasons, illustrating the importance of speaking about an issue in order to build support. Unfortunately, talking about an issue has occasionally backfired for Wilson.

"If you're talking about it, you are a troublemaker," he concludes.

Wilson was rejected by the Presbyterian Church during a vote to consider his services for migrants on the nation because of his efforts to do something to prevent migrant deaths.

"I left the Church. I could not stand the hypocrisy. They let human beings die in their backyard," Wilson bluntly states.

Words are powerful devices. Sharing information about the interaction between Tohono O'odham people and migrants sheds light on the reality that although two groups share similarities as neighbors and as candidates of historic mistreatment, attitudes and communication swing on a wide pendulum between positivity and negativity. To understand the situation from a more objective standpoint helps explain why migrants are sometimes called aliens and sometimes called brothers.