

“A Desert Oasis and Border Walls”

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For generations, residents in the Mexico-U.S. borderland have offered humanitarian aid to migrants who cross the desert. In the 1980s, people in Ajo, Arizona organized relief to the survivors of an El Salvadoran refugee group who suffered tragedy when they attempted to cross the desert on foot in July. In the 1960s, Ajo organized a search and rescue group that tracked down and rescued a migrant who had been without water for five days in the Growler Valley west of town. Privately, residents have regularly given food, water, and a place to sleep to the migrants and refugees who find their way to the doorsteps of local homes.

In January of 2018 I was arrested by the U.S. Border Patrol in Ajo and accused of “harboring” for having given, in the agency’s words, “food, water, clean clothes, and beds” to two men, José and Kristian. José and Kristian had left Central America and traveled for several months across Mexico and then for days across the desert. They found their way to the “Barn,” a property used by humanitarian groups and volunteers that operate in the desert surrounding Ajo. Some days later, Border Patrol Agents entered the property and arrested the three of us.

José and Kristian were held in detention for several weeks, deposed as material witnesses in the government’s case against me, and finally deported to the countries from which they had originally fled. My case finally went to trial in June 2019. After eight days of trial and three days of deliberation, the jury failed to reach a verdict and the case ended in a mistrial. In July 2019 the government announced they would seek a new trial against me. This trial is scheduled to take place in November 2019, where the government will again argue that my actions constituted the crime of “harboring.”

I am not from the borderland. I was pulled to the region as an academic, researching the ways that borders of all kinds—geopolitical, social, economic—had been constructed and reconstituted over time in southwestern Arizona. After I moved to Ajo in 2013, this research led me to volunteer with groups that provide humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees. There are now several volunteer and civilian groups that work in the Ajo area, putting food and water in the desert, providing first aid and medical care, and searching for those who have become lost and those who have died while crossing.

The humanitarian aid work that I do with these groups is not new to Ajo, as generations of residents who have provided food, water, and hospitality can attest. But the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Ajo is new. In the early 1990s the Ajo Border Patrol station was small, housing some 24 agents. But today the Ajo Border Patrol station is enormous, with at least 400 agents and the capacity to house 900. This growth is but one measure of the “prevention through deterrence” strategy, in which the U.S. government intentionally pushed migrants into remote and rugged areas of the border such as the desert that surrounds Ajo.

The Border Patrol called these remote and rugged areas “virtually uninhabited” and “better suited for enforcement” and imagined using them as a solution to the problem of unauthorized border crossings. But those “virtually uninhabited” and “better suited to enforcement” areas were, in fact, rural communities, small towns, farms, ranches, wildlife refuges, national parks, public lands, and designated wilderness areas. Above all, these were also native lands. Ancestral and sacred places, native territory claimed and struggled over, and federally-recognized reservations.

In Ajo, it is the territory of Hia C-ed O'odham and Tohono O'odham. But it has been further cast as an enforcement space by the militarized language that describes place and region. It is not called O'odham homeland, but rather the "West Desert." It is not known as Hia C-ed O'odham territory, but rather the "Ajo Corridor."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has now begun building a 30 foot high wall across Hia C-ed O'odham territory. To expedite construction, the government has proposed transferring management of these lands to the military. This taking could include Quitobaquito Spring, a desert oasis located in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and an important Hia C-ed O'odham historic community and ancestral village site.

O'odham people at the Quitobaquito oasis were, no doubt, the first humanitarians of this place. They welcomed generations of travelers to the desert spring and shared the water and food that was grown there. Now, Hia C-ed O'odham resistance to the wall is growing. In Ajo, local residents have begun protesting and monitoring construction of the wall. Much more will need to be done, and you can learn more about these efforts and ways to support the Hia C-ed O'odham Movement on [Victor Garcia's Go Fund Me page](#).

Meanwhile, the humanitarian tradition continues. Despite the "prevention through deterrence" policy and the assault on native land and life that it represents, local residents of Ajo and other border communities continue to welcome the traveler on their doorstep and share what food and water they can. Migrants and refugees, people like José and Kristian, will continue to risk much in crossing the militarized desert, perhaps finding their way to these modern oases of humanitarian relief.