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Today Needs Another Name

by Quince Mountain

This Columbus Day, the spirit of 1492 is alive and well.



“They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance ... They would make fine servants ... With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

– Christopher Columbus, in his log book

Since today is the bullshit holiday honoring Christopher Columbus—and, by extension, his legacy of slavery, disease, and genocide—I’d be especially remiss not to share some of the stories Ofelia Rivas told my sustainability students and me last week. Rivas, at age 54, is a young elder of the O’odham people, a people whose land has officially straddled the Arizona-Sonora border since 1853.

All Tohono O’odham are supposed to be US citizens, but citizenship comes with some extra requirements in Arizona—at least if you have brown skin and a tribal ID. The US government now requires documents for the O’odham to cross *their own land*. Around a reservation the size of Connecticut, Border Patrol officers and checkpoints are everywhere.

At these checkpoints, officers try to intimidate O’odham into presenting passports, which many of them simply do not have. In fact, many of them do not have social security numbers or even birth records.

Rivas spoke of border officers following O’odham elders from their homes to the grounds where they gather saguaro fruit, a traditional practice which the O’odham believe is necessary to keep the land in balance. The officers interrogate the elders and demand to see ID proving their citizenship, even though the patrollers just followed them from their homes.

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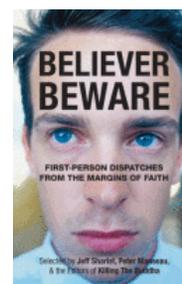
- C Street* Reading, NYC, 11/1/10
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She noted that it's hard to participate in a sacred ceremony when you're harassed by border patrol on your way into the grounds. You've cleansed and prepared yourself for a traditional O'odham ritual and, instead, you're the unwitting participant in another kind of ritual altogether.

*

Rivas lives in an adobe building with no running water and cooks her meals outdoors over burning wood. She tells the stories of her people, and occasionally she tours with a punk-metal band called Resistant Culture. Earlier this year, she flew to Bolivia for the World People's Conference on Climate Change. She also travels to meet UN representatives, who cannot visit Tohono O'odham land. (An official visit by a UN representative requires an official invitation from the US government, a government no doubt disinclined to acknowledge its own human rights violations¹.)

In all this work, Rivas strives to defend the O'odham *Him'dag*, or O'odham Way of Life. The practice of the *Him'dag* has been threatened as long as Rivas can remember. As children, she and her brothers were separated and sent to other states where they lived in boarding schools that forced assimilation. More recently, a Mexican company tried to build a commercial toxic waste dump near the ceremonial site of Quitovac.

In response to the proposed landfill, a cultural and environmental justice coalition called O'odham Rights emerged. While the organization was successful in expiring permits for the hazardous site, their work to protect the *Him'dag* is far from over. Recent O'odham Rights work seeks to educate a people whose land is occupied by Border Patrol, non-O'odham Tribal Police, military, FBI, US Customs, and special rescue forces, among others.

OR recently published a pamphlet called *Know Your O'odham Rights*, which reminds readers that their ceremony grounds and ceremonies are protected by law, and that handling sacred items or shining spotlights on a ceremony constitutes obstruction and is a violation of O'odham rights.

The pamphlet implies that O'odham ceremonial leaders and medicine people are more likely to face interrogation and (illegal) vehicle impoundment. Of course, the US government has a long history of criminalizing indigenous spirituality, and I can't help but recall a crackdown on a certain Ghost Dance leading to the slaughter of hundreds of unarmed people along Wounded Knee Creek—and to twenty Medals of Honor.²

² Earlier this year, a National Guard chopper attempted to land on the Wounded Knee site and was rebuffed by people who stood blocking its intended LZ.

Since Native Americans contribute more soldiers per capita than any other racial group, you'd think that at least the military would respect their traditions. But recent militarization of the US-Mexico border is precisely what justifies invasions that would've been illegal a few years ago.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was only one of many laws waived (yes, *waived*) to hasten construction of the US-Mexico border wall. But it's presumably the one that would've stopped Boeing from removing O'odham ancestral remains from their resting place and hiding them in a shipping container.

Rivas still seemed to be in a state of shock when she looked across the table Friday and told us in the sparsest of language what happened in 2007.

"They dug up our people."

Indeed.

And after a three-year fight, the O'odham were able to recover the remains of their people for reburial. But it's tough to discern the appropriate blessings and burial ceremonies for an act that's hardly familiar to the O'odham Way of Life.

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Joe Joaquin, an O'odham repatriation coordinator, noted in a 2009 AP article dealing with a different group of stolen remains, that there simply is no traditional ceremony for handling exhumed bodies. O'odham "don't do that."

Rivas also noted that, though the ancestors dug up inside reservation borders may have been returned, many were not able to be reburied in the communities of their families because of new border protocols. Also, other O'odham remains may have been disturbed elsewhere along the 330-mile US-Mexico border. The ancestors traveled well outside the borders of what is currently recognized as O'odham land.

*

Though the current US-Mexico border was established across their land more than a century ago, O'odham people haven't felt the bisection keenly until recently. 9/11 terrorism has been used to justify the steep ramp up in border policing, but Rivas claims that Border Patrol presence on her land began increasing before the attacks. Even then, officers were aggressive toward O'odham.

"The followed us. Tailgated our vehicles. Tried to run us off the road."

My friend Lefty, who I spoke with over the phone yesterday, agrees that the ramp-up began before 9/11. She grew up in New Mexico, and she remembers the 1990s when police began patrolling small high school parties with massive overhead searchlights and other military gear. Lefty links these invasions to Operation Desert Storm, claiming that much of the high-powered gear was military surplus that was sold to local police in border states.

Living a transnational life isn't easy for many traditional people. Ofelia Rivas lives only a quarter mile into the US side of the border. Her father's village is on the Mexican side, and her mother's family lives on the US side.

My students sat slackjawed when Rivas told us of a journey home from a ceremony she had attended with her young daughter. A Border Patrol officer pulled them over and was frustrated because Rivas refused to tell him that she was from the US or from Mexico.

"I am O'odham," she said.

The officer drew his gun and held its muzzle to Rivas' head.

"I'm gonna put you on the ground and handcuff you, and you're gonna be deported."

"Where are you gonna deport me to?" Rivas answered.

*

Many people can't visit family without crossing the border that bisects the land. Even though their tribal ID is supposed to suffice, Border Patrol demand to see passports. Neighborly visits can be dangerous, and Rivas describes elders who told Border Patrol that they were going shopping and were made to submit grocery lists to the officers.

"Why are you carrying ice chests?" the Border Patrol demanded to know.

Rivas, who responded to these incursions by forming a group called O'odham Voice Against the Wall, was quick to highlight absurdity of certain actions taken in the name of homeland security.

She talked about a young girl who rolled up in her school bus while the Border Patrol was harassing her father. The officers brandished guns and surrounded the bus full of elementary school students. When the little girl tried to get off the bus, the Border Patrol had their guns drawn and began yelling, "Fuck you—get back on the bus!"

Finally, the bus driver opened the door and said, "But this is her stop."

*

In addition to the weapons carried by law enforcement, Rivas describes jets and live missiles flying through the Barry Goldwater Firing Range, which forms part of the northwestern border of the federally-recognized Tohono O'odham land.

"It's like they're children. Someone gave them guns and vehicles and said, 'Go play on our land.'"

If guns and jets and Border Patrol detention cages aren't enough to make O'odham homeland sound like a warzone, consider the corpses of border crossers—hundreds of which are found every summer. Construction of the US-Mexico border fence began in cities far to the east and west of Tohono O'odham land, and as wall-building progressed, migrants were funneled toward this most dangerous place.

This so-called "Prevention through Deterrence" policy was a deliberate effort to divert migrants toward the treacherous desert mountains where they'd be most likely to die of heat, thirst, or injuries. This way, other migrants would be less likely to try to follow.

Or that's the official justification. But many are undeterred. Some illegal border crossers claim that while they may have a twenty or thirty percent chance of dying along their journeys, they have a 100% chance of dying if they stay.

Rivas spoke well of the humanitarian organization, No More Deaths, which documents abuses and also provides water and first aid to suffering border-crossers. Activists have documented incidents of migrants who have been without water for days being stripped down to their underwear and sent back and released just over Mexican side of the border to face the treacherous Sonora heat without water or shoes.

Many of the illegal border crossers, according to Rivas, are indigenous people who come from tropical Central America and are not equipped to handle the parched conditions O'odham have adjusted to over millennia. She also noted that in return for some small favors, the US successfully pressured Mexico to remove indigenous protections from its constitution.

Some illegal border crossers are O'odham attempting to smuggle drugs. In a community with a unemployment rate above 95%, people find ways to survive.

Rivas goes to lockup and tells these incarcerated O'odham youth, "It's not your fault that you're here."

She claims her people are trying to live in spite of a system of genocide. And she notes that racism is systemic throughout Arizona.

This year, after SB-1070 infamously mandated racial profiling in Arizona, HB 2281 criminalized ethnic studies programs. Arizona Public Instruction Superintendent Tom Horne (himself an immigrant whose parents narrowly escaped Poland and whose lost much of his extended family in the Nazi Holocaust) is targeting a particular program in Tucson, where he claims Latino students are being taught wrongly that they are an oppressed minority. Among other provisions, the vaguely-worded new law prohibits any classes that "promote resentment toward a race or class of people." Holocaust studies courses are specifically exempt.

*

Increased militarization is the current problem, but Rivas links that problem to the tribe's earlier negligence toward its own US soldiers. She believes that the land is out of balance because the Tohono O'odham failed take care of soldiers returning from Vietnam. In protest of that war, traditional people refused to perform cleansing rituals for the returning vets. They called them "baby-killers" and left them to try to heal without support.

Rivas says that in every other war, returning soldiers have been cleansed. This is *Him'dag* practice: all warriors returning from war must be cleansed. Now, she claims there is much blood on the land.

"Mother Earth is crying to hear our songs," she says.

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Quince Mountain is a senior editor for *Killing the Buddha* and is featured in *Believer, Beware*, where he reveals his sexploits as a teenage cowgirl for Christ.