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Blood and Sand

Making the victims visible

There are many deserts, and many deserts within each of them. The desert I write about here is both physical and subjective, of flesh and spirit, and it is the reason I wound up living in the Mojave: the desert of drugs and the "drug war."

I have spent the last several weeks working with the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (MPJD) (Movement for Justice with Peace and Dignity), led by Mexican poet, essayist, and novelist Javier Sicilia. Upon the cartel-related murder of his 23-year-old son, Juan Francisco, in March of 2011, Sicilia became the most-prominent public figure who has suffered the loss of a loved one to question the entire premise of a war that has claimed some 60,000 lives—with up to 10,000 disappeared and 160,000 displaced. Since his son's murder, he has led dozens of mass marches and caravans across Mexico, "visibilizando víctimas," as he puts it, making the victims visible.

The MPJD is a bona fide force in Mexican politics today, and it has greater moral authority than any political party. Sicilia and his fellow survivors met with former President Felipe Calderón on more than one occasion, held an unprecedented public dialogue with all four major presidential candidates shortly before the July 1st election, and helped to win passage in the Mexican legislature of the Ley de Víctimas, which will create a national registry of the dead as well as offer recompense to survivors.

Yet Sicilia and the MPJD know that any comprehensive solution to the bloodshed cannot possibly be enacted by Mexico alone. By the time you read this, a caravan led by Sicilia will have crossed the border at San Diego, passed through Los Angeles headed east along the borderlands, toured the Deep South, and curlicued through the Midwest before arriving in Washington, D.C. The goal: to place on the American political agenda the idea that the "drug war in Mexico" is an international problem—globalization gone awry through a tangle of legal and illicit market forces in collusion with state power—and that its end can come about only through international solutions.

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Mexican poet and peace activist Javier Sicilia at Our Lady Queen of the Angels Church in Los Angeles.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTO ARCOS.

What does all of this have to do with what Mary Hunter Austin famously called the "land of little rain"? The most enduring American imaginary of the desert is the Western: cowboys and Indians, the Big Empty that must be crossed before arriving in the Canaan of California. Modern denizens of coastal California think of the desert as an escape from the urban edge—the ancient aura of the desert as a place of healing or spiritual encounter. It is hard to reconcile these notions with the experience of today's desert borderlands, which are a place of blood and sand. Northern

Mexico and the southwestern United States, after all, are the corridor of drug and human trafficking (thoroughly linked now, since cartels have expanded their portfolios far beyond cocaine and marijuana). The Big Empty, in other words, is filled with an increasingly phantasmagorical scene of violence and addiction. Migrants crossing the desert are given methampehtamine (produced in ever-larger quantities in Mexico) to push them across the deadly trails. Native American reservations in the borderlands have seen a sharp rise in rates of drug use.

Adding surreal irony to the tableau is the 800 miles of new fencing along the border mandated by the Secure Fence Act of 2006, which ran roughshod over dozens of environmental and historical preservation regulations (and hideously slashed the sublime and iconic vistas of basin and range country). It is a wall in name only. It doesn't stop drugs from flowing north and weapons from heading south, the latter mostly via illegal trafficking but some through official channels, such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives' "Fast and Furious" operation, which absurdly and tragically funneled weapons to cartels for the sake of intelligence gathering.

While the horrific mutilations associated with cartel turf battles have remained south of the border, extortion and kidnapping are increasingly playing out on this side of the line. I can attest to this. The day after returning to Los Angeles from our annual family trip to Mexico last year, we received a "fraud alert" call from our credit card company. We were asked if we'd made a $10,000 purchase in Mexico, which of course we hadn't. Within an hour of that call, the phone rang again; a male voice spoke in Spanish and addressed me as "Señor Martínez." He asked me if I knew who he was. I didn't. Then he asked if I knew of the "Familia Michoacana," the infamous cartel that at the time held much of the western Mexican state of Michoacán under seige and was responsible for several acts of public terror, such as the deadly grenade attack during an Independence Day celebration in the capital of Morelia. The utterance of the name stunned me, although I managed to stutter a lame response: "No, what family are you referring to?" Then the line went dead. The fraudulent charge and the phishing phone call indicated how far the tentacles of cartel "business" reach. We'd used the card only at well-known eateries in Mexico City—one of which apparently employed someone funneling card numbers to digital racketeers. The credit card company let us off the hook, and there were no more phone calls.

Of course, my experience was just a mere brush with the darkness. In California people whose lives have been ravaged by it live all around us in the immigrant barrios. They mostly suffer in silence because they fear that by going public, they will endanger their missing loved ones (if indeed they are still alive) or themselves. In Mexico there are many stories of people who demanded justice and then became victims themselves (the assassins could just as easily be connected to the military or corrupt government entitites as to the cartels).

But with Javier Sicilia's example, and his call for making the invisible visible, more and more family members of the victims are losing their fear. During Sicilia's visit to Los Angeles last spring, dozens turned out to accompany el poeta at Our Lady Queen of the Angels Church, popularly known as La Placita, at the site of the original pueblo church downtown. Standing alongside the poet, they held enlarged photocopies of their loved ones, precisely as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina had done during the Dirty War and precisely as refugees from the wars in Central America had done here at La Placita in the 1980s, when the late Fr. Luis Olivares declared it a sanctuary for undocumented migrants and those fleeing political persecution.

And so the desert arrives in the city: both its modern-day horrors and its ancient symbolism as a place of restorative power. I was baptized at La Placita, as was my father before me. For well over a century, it has been known as the church of the immigrant poor, the unwanted, the desperate (dozens of homeless sleep on the streets surrounding it). It once again receives those traumatized by violence, an oasis in the desert that soothes with the waters of solidarity.

As a young man I returned to La Placita and was baptized in political activism by Fr. Olivares and the crew of radical organizers he led. But even as I was fighting the good fight, I was struggling in a personal desert—long before I lived in the Mojave. It's a typical story. Young adult child of an alcoholic not-so-innocently experiments with ever more volatile combinations of alcohol and proscribed substances, all in the name of bohemianism, "experience" (ostensibly, to fashion into literature), only to destroy relationships with the people I most loved. Broke and broken, I moved

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTO ARCOS

to Joshua Tree in the late 1990s not because I thought of joining a hip art colony (that would come later) but because it was cheap, and one of the last friends I could count on lived there. I also believed I could heal in the desert, which made eventually falling off the wagon there all the more devastating.

And so it was that this recovering addict felt summoned to the cause of the MPJD and organized Sicilia's visit to Los Angeles. I'd spent a good part of my adult life consuming the drugs that were among the major factors for the violence in Mexico and Central America today—the drugs moved by the cartel gangsters who took the life of Javier Sicilia's son.

I spoke at length with Sicilia during his days in Los Angeles. He is a poet who no longer writes poetry, having penned his final verses as an ode for his son a few days after his murder.

> El mundo ya no es digno de la palabra
> Nos la ahogaron adentro
> Como te (asfixiaron)
> Como te desgarraron los pulmones . . .

(The world is no longer worthy of the word / they drowned her inside of us / like they (suffocated) you, like they shredded your lungs. . . .)

Most of the poetry Sicilia had written before his son's death was about the desert, the mystical one where flesh meets spirit, and which finds its metaphorical contours in the vast otherness of the arid lands. In a profound way, the poetry continues in his caravans and marches, which are themselves desert rituals tracing primeval paths and summoning the ethics of hospitality—Sicilia, like Gandhi, like César Chávez or Martin Luther King, is calling for, as he puts it, a "spiritualization of our politics."

What unites Los Angeles to Cuernavaca (Sicilia's hometown and where his son was killed) is the desert—its silence and our apprehension upon being immersed in its dense darkness, the human horror enacted there; the koan of reconciling its sublimity with its psychic and corporeal nightmares. The desert by definition is a borderland, both separating and uniting distinct realms. Ocean and savannah . . . turmoil and peace.

I am following Javier Sicilia, like many years ago I did Fr. Luis Olivares, deep into the desert. It is a mournful, terrifying pilgrimage—and unavoidable. The desert tells you to pick up and move on, no matter how heavy your heart or body feel. It tells you to keep walking to the other side. **B**

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