

# FRICITION, CONVERSION, AND CONTENTION

## Prophetic Politics in the Tohono O'odham Borderlands

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*Abstract: As a consequence of US border policies that funnel migrants through the harsh Sonoran Desert, migrants since the 1990s have been crossing and dying in large numbers on Tohono O'odham lands. This article examines the spiritual and political journey of Mike Wilson, a tribal member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, who puts water out for migrants against the wishes of his tribal council. Wilson's road to human rights activism was a winding one. In the 1980s, he was a member of the US Army Special Forces stationed in El Salvador; politically, he was, in his words, "to the right of Attila the Hun." How did a Green Beret become an outspoken human rights activist? This article argues that religion provided the material and cultural conditions of possibility for Wilson's conversions and was an important source of "friction" that both enabled and constrained his prophetic style of activism.*

On a hot summer Arizona day in 2004, Mike Wilson drove his truck down a road outside of Tucson, on the land of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Wilson was waved down by a hobbling Mexican man, one of thousands of migrants who attempt to cross the Sonoran Desert in hopes of finding work in the United States. This man had been walking for two days and could barely stand. His paid guide or *coyote* and fellow travelers left him behind when his blistered feet made him too slow. Carrying a jug of brackish brown water that he had drawn from a cattle station, the man was tired and thirsty. When he encountered this border crosser, Wilson was refilling the water stations he has maintained since 2001, when he was a Presbyterian lay pastor in Sells, Arizona. Wilson gave the man a bottle of fresh water and asked him to sit on the ground so that he could treat the man's wounded feet. As he applied iodine to the migrant's blistered feet, he explained in Spanish: "I am a member of this tribe and I have permission, even if the tribe does not like it, to put out water. They say if I put out water, more migrants will come" (Wilson, in Levine and Van Soest 2005; my translation).<sup>1</sup>

It is a striking and almost biblical scene as Wilson, a tall Native American man with long braided hair, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a cross around his

María Elena García, Jeremy Levine, Jeff Rubin, David Smilde, Ben Junge, and the members of the Religion and Social Movements working group greatly improved this paper. Hannah Dolph and Marcus Johnson provided exceptional research assistance. MA students in the comparative religion symposium at UW were excellent interlocutors and teachers. A Mellon-LASA grant and research funds from the UW made this research possible. I thank Mike Wilson and Susan Ruff for their hospitality in Tucson.

1. This scene from the documentary film *Walking the Line* is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46oXdrYP1f0&feature=related&noredirect=1>.

*Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 49, Special Issue. © 2014 by the Latin American Studies Association.





Figure 1 Mike Wilson aiding a migrant in the desert as shown in *Walking the Line*, dir. Jeremy Levine and Landon Van Soest (United States, 2005). Photo credit: Transient Pictures, LLC. Reproduced with permission.

neck, washes the stranger's feet in the desert. Two decades earlier, Wilson would have cut a very different figure, as one might have seen him in the US Special Forces uniform he wore as a military advisor to the government of El Salvador during the late 1980s. By Wilson's own admission, he was a very different person then. "We were to the right of Attila the Hun, I mean we were reactionary right. We were the tip of the spear, the CIA's army. And so to come from that experience and come out, 'my brother, want some food, some water?' How do you move from that to that?"<sup>2</sup> This is the question that this article explores.

This conversion story speaks to the themes of this special issue. The road from Wilson's militarism to his human rights activism runs through various zones of crisis and is made possible by religious institutions, discourses, and imaginaries. As religious scholars have noted, conversion stories are never only about individuals; they are social texts that carry an "authorizing power" with which individuals speak for larger communities; or as Greer puts it, these stories "serve as a reliable index of the relationship between a self and larger cultures" (Greer 1995, 3). Conversion discourse serves "a socializing function, signifying that one had come into alignment with certain linguistic, behavioral, and cultural expectations" (Dorsey 1993, 8–9). Yet in Wilson's story, these alignments don't quite line up. In fact, Wilson's actions often rub uncomfortably against the expectations of the various worlds he inhabits: the Tohono O'odham Nation, the Presbyterian Church, the Arizona social justice community.

2. Mike Wilson, lecture, February 24, 2011, University of Washington, Seattle.



Wilson's membership in and struggles with these collectivities reveal the importance of taking seriously what Anna Tsing calls the "friction" of connection. Following Tsing, I argue that Wilson's life history reveals insights into the ways in which religion and borders constitute "zones of awkward engagement" that both constrain and enable activism (Tsing 2004, 6). Reading Wilson's oral history and other representations of his activism (especially documentary films) as a set of borderlands narratives shaped and haunted by histories of empire and colonialism, this article argues that religion provided key material and cultural conditions for Wilson's conversions. Approaching Wilson's history as a "contentious life" (Auyero 2003) where biography and sociology, politics and culture meet, this study sheds light not only on one individual's life but also on broad lessons about the tensions of activism and religion, as they are lived and emplaced in borderlands spaces.

#### BORDERLANDS FRICTION

Tsing's influential notion of friction offers a useful analytic language for speaking about how interconnections shape "movement, cultural form, and agency." As she puts it:

Friction is not just about slowing things down. Friction is required to keep global power in motion. It shows us . . . where the rubber meets the road. Roads are a good image to conceptualizing how friction works. Roads create pathways that make motion easier and more efficient, but in doing so they limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement. Friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing. (Tsing 2004, 6)

The road to Damascus is one such road, and this article traces it through the borderlands of Indian country, keeping our eyes open to what is enabled, excluded, and particularized. The idea of friction as a way to think about the tension and traction of globalization was in many ways anticipated by scholars working on the borderlands. In perhaps the most cited formulation, Gloria Anzaldúa describes the U.S.-Mexican border as "*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the third world grates against the first and bleeds." From the violence of that friction, she moves to its productivity, noting that as the wound "hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merg[e] to form a third country, a border culture" (Anzaldúa 1987, 25). There is a vast bibliography on borderlands that cannot be adequately discussed here. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Anzaldúa's metaphors suggest a central tension between the scholarly approaches to borders as hard and jagged or as fluid and hybrid. Sociologist Pablo Vila (2003) argues that Anzaldúa's poetic and liminal view has distracted us from noticing that reinforcing borders (and not hybrid border crossing) is actually the predominant mode of border politics.<sup>3</sup> Rather than arguing for either the analytical primacy of either the fluid or the hard politics of borders, I follow Geraldo L. Cadava (2011), Kevin

3. See Adelman and Aron 1999; Brady 2002; Blackhawk 2006; Cadava 2011; Gutiérrez and Young 2010; Meeks 2007; Truett 2006.



Bruyneel (2007), and others in calling attention to the unevenness of boundaries that are selectively enforced over time and space, and the “colonial ambivalence” of borders that situate indigenous nations as both inside and outside of the US colonial state.

The Tohono O’odham borderlands were virtually forgotten by official boundary makers in Mexico and the United States. Indian country was of concern to early twentieth-century Mexican and US elites to the extent that it provided the constitutive exterior of expanding imperial states. “Barbarous Indians” were the discursive and military tests of Mexican and US nation-states seeking to “civilize” their frontiers (Cadava 2011; Saldaña-Portillo forthcoming; Guidotti-Hernández 2011).

Lest we see political boundaries simply as colonial impositions upon Native peoples, it is important to recognize the friction of “colonial ambivalence”; it too constrains and enables Native resistance (Bruyneel 2007). As Bill Ashcroft (2001, 23) notes, “ambivalence is not merely the sign of the failure of colonial discourse to make the colonized subject conform, it is the sign of the agency of the colonized.” Native peoples are able to use the ambivalence and ambiguity of boundaries for their own political purposes.

This is especially true in the case of the Tohono O’odham, whose lands are quite literally “at the borders of empires,” having experienced the civilizing missions of Jesuits, Franciscans, Spanish colonial rulers, and Mexican and US governments (Marak and Tuennerman 2013). Through these encounters with outsiders the O’odham went from a loose collection of autonomous villages to a nation with a centralized government. Apache raids and new agricultural practices in the eighteenth century persuaded the O’odham people to make alliances with Spanish missions and armed presidios. After the 1853 Gadsden Purchase established a new border between the United States and Mexico that divided O’odham lands, new forces shaped O’odham politics. In 1937, the O’odham adopted a centralized government; ironically, they did so in order to preserve the autonomy of local villages (Dobyns 1972; Marak and Tuennerman 2013). While we cannot explore the long history of what, following Steve J. Stern (1987), we could call the “resistant adaptation” of the O’odham, the crucial analytical point is the following: the Tohono O’odham Nation did not exist until it was forged through the interaction of multiple O’odham and imperial forces in the friction of colonial nation building.

In addition to this historical lesson about the construction of the O’odham political community, it is helpful to examine what the social movement literature suggests about religion and resistance. At the risk of oversimplifying, there are least three possible ways to theorize the role of religion in collective action.

First, religion provides an interpretive lens that puts certain events in new light, spurring a person to action. This is one way to characterize the process Doug McAdam (1982, 51) calls “cognitive liberation.” As he writes, “before collective [action] . . . can get under way, people must collectively define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action.” Critics of this idea note that the call to action is not solely cognitive and rational; it is also emotional. Following James M. Jasper (1997, 106), we could argue that religion provides the context for an experience of “moral shock” or “an unexpected event or piece of



information [that] raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action, with or without the network of personal contacts emphasized in mobilization and process theories.” The transformative power of suffering is of course a very old theme in the theological literature (Brueggemann 1978). In religious and secular contexts, these kinds of experiences provide what Jonathan Flatley (2008) calls an “affective map,” an emotional and political orientation that converts a feeling of suffering into material for connection and expression, not isolation.

Second, scholars of social movements note that religion—as an institutional actor and as a repertoire of ideas and discourses—provides material and cultural resources (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008; Rose 2012). The pantheon of social movement leaders that have mobilized religious resources includes such towering figures as the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chávez, and Archbishop Oscar Romero. In the specific case of advocacy for (im)migrants who travel through Mexico, the religious ideas of sanctuary, the parable of the good Samaritan, and religious-based communities have often provided zones of refuge for border crossers who take on the nightmarish dangers of gangs, corrupt police officers, and thieves as they travel from Central America to the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008).

Third, religious actors can constrain activism, providing another example of Tsing’s notion of friction at work. A classic illustration is Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1963) “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” addressed to King’s fellow clergymen. Writing from his Alabama cell, King asks: “Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?” Nevertheless, he finds hope in those “noble souls from the ranks of organized religion who have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom.” It is in the friction of counterhegemonic struggles against existing power structures in the name of transcendent truths that a prophetic mode of action emerges, with which it is possible to argue against the church in the language of the church and transform faith into a public act.<sup>4</sup>

This prophetic form of politics, which Walter Brueggemann (1978) persuasively locates at the intersection of individual grief, radical criticism, and the imaginings of alternative communities, illustrates one way of describing the contact zone between social movements and religion. The prophetic, with its emphasis on grieving, inspired speaking, and call for new futures, also anticipates the political and spiritual journey in a death-filled desert, to which I now turn.

#### A TOHONO O’ODHAM BORDERLANDS JOURNEY

Mike Wilson likes to speak of his story as “a journey.” This is not an unusual metaphor for the O’odham, who, like Wilson, speak of the creator god *I’ itoi*, who is most often represented as the “man in the maze” in O’odham and Pima art, bas-

4. I am indebted to David Kyuman Kim for pointing out the importance of the prophetic in thinking about Wilson’s activism. The MA comparative religion students at the University of Washington pointed me in the direction of Brueggemann’s classic, *The Prophetic Imagination*.





Figure 2 “Man in the maze” on the unofficial O’odham flag. Image in the public domain.  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:O%27odham\\_unofficial\\_flag.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:O%27odham_unofficial_flag.svg).

kets, jewelry, and the unofficial flag of the O’odham Nation.<sup>5</sup> The labyrinth represents the choices one encounters along the journey of life. In some versions of the story, the labyrinth is also a map to or from I’ itoi’s home, located somewhere beneath the sacred Baboquivari Mountain on O’odham land. The image could also provide an apt metaphor for the twists and turns of the collective history of the Tohono O’odham people and nation.

The Tohono O’odham Nation’s government today includes a tribal chairperson, a legislative council, and various district governments. Yet, these lands and peoples are haunted by the legacies of previous moments of rule. Political and economic forces sometime unified O’odham people, but they also splintered Tohono O’odham lands. Some of the most powerful forces to divide O’odham land included eighteenth-century Bourbon reforms, nineteenth-century Mexican legislation, and twentieth-century US divisions of communal lands through the 1887 Dawes Act. In the wake of the splintering power of capitalism and colonialism, Cadava (2011, 366) notes, “some O’odham became ranchers and small farmers, while others sought off-reservation work alongside Mexicans in mines, on farms, and on railroads.”

Wilson spent his early years in Ajo, Arizona, where his father, José Vavages Wilson, was one of those O’odham men who, after returning from World War II, found work off the reservation, laboring in one of the open pit mines of the Phelps Dodge Company. Not only was the land fractured by copper mines, it was also divided by the racialized politics of the time. Mike and his family lived in what was called “Indian Village.”

5. *Man in the Maze* is also the title of a short documentary about Mike Wilson by filmmaker Laurie MacMillan. It is available at <http://lauriemacmillan.ca/?p=134>.



The village was one of the first housing areas in Ajo. It was where predominantly Tohono O'odham laborers that worked in the Phelps Dodge mine lived. At the turn of the last century—1916 and 1917—the copper company, then at the time, designed the township that would be built around the mine. Part of the planning was a separation of the races. This was during the Progressive Era. The national campaign was part of this “Cities Beautiful” campaign. . . . In this Progressive Era it also included a segregated housing pattern because that was the norm.<sup>6</sup>

In Ajo, Wilson and his five siblings experienced “the crush of poverty.” Eight people lived in a small one-room cement house. Wilson’s father was an alcoholic; the boys began to work at a very young age. When Wilson was still young, his father left the family and moved across the border to Sonora, though still on O’odham lands. Those early years were difficult ones, but Wilson remembers them with tenderness. He frequently visits Ajo even though his family is no longer there and the old family home is no longer standing. Wilson considers the land where he grew up as sacred. A stone’s throw from the cement foundation of his childhood home is St. Catherine’s Church, though today the building is a museum. Nevertheless, Wilson still calls that building “St. Catherine’s” and regards it as one of his “sacred sites.” The nuns at St. Catherine’s were his first and best teachers; “they loved me first and taught me second” (Wilson interview 2012).

Despite a difficult relationship with his father, Wilson recalls happy memories. After returning from World War II, his father would often extend his hand to his young son and say, “Shake the hand that shook the world.” Wilson credits his father with passing on the O’odham oral tradition of storytelling, especially stories of being a warrior. “My father was part of the North African campaign that chased Rommel across North Africa. . . . So my father was very proud—and rightfully so, justifiably so—of his role in World War II. Also, within the North American US tribes, veterans are honored, are esteemed in our traditions. My dad and all Tohono O’odham veterans are esteemed members of our society” (Wilson interview 2012).

It is perhaps no surprise that years later Mike Wilson, just out of high school and already himself a father, would follow his father’s example and enlist in the military. Indeed, Native Americans enlist in the US armed forces at a higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group (Miller 2007; Lemay 2012). Like many other Native American veterans, Wilson saw no contradiction for a Native man to serve in the US military. Indeed, like his father and his uncles and many of his peers, he saw it as an expectation, a duty, and part of “becoming a man.” Wilson spent almost twenty-two years in the US Army as part of the elite Special Forces. He served secure in the belief that he was on the right side of a global struggle: “I am a product of the 1950s and 1960s; during these decades I understood there was a global war. . . . The Soviets led the communist world and the US led what we used to call the ‘free world.’ You have to understand that this mentally made me who I was, during the 1970s and 1980s, as an American” (Wilson lecture, 2011).

Serving in various Latin American countries during the 1980s, Wilson was aware of the controversies regarding US foreign policy. When Wilson was sent to

6. Mike Wilson, interviews with author, April 27–29, 2012, Tucson, Arizona.



El Salvador as a military advisor in 1988, the Iran-Contra scandal of 1986 had already weakened the Reagan administration's ability to convince a skeptical Congress and US public about the importance of the anticommunist fight in Central America. Even if the effort to bring down Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government was weakening in the late 1980s, the effort to bolster El Salvador's right-wing government in its struggle against the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was strong. Militarily, Wilson was part of a limited force capped at fifty-five military advisors in El Salvador at any given time. But the United States provided El Salvador with \$958 million between 1985 and 1989 (US General Accounting Office 1990, 10). The United States provided this aid despite evidence that the Salvadoran military employed death squads to eliminate internal opposition that included Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980, and six Jesuit priests and their housekeeper, who were assassinated in 1989. Looking back, Wilson describes the Salvadoran military as a "fascist military dictatorship" and acknowledges that he was aware of the atrocities carried out by the Salvadoran National Guard. Through his Cold War lenses, however, it was nevertheless seen as a "necessary evil." After the war, he said, "it would correct itself."

In 2011, when Wilson traveled to Seattle at my invitation to speak at the University of Washington, he put his Cold War beliefs in historical context, as someone who had grown up "in the shadow of the mushroom cloud." Yet as he spoke, he stopped himself and asked my students if anyone was from El Salvador. A young woman raised her hand. Wilson addressed her and the class in Spanish and asked forgiveness for "the continuation of an unjust war that was American financed" (Wilson interview, 2011).<sup>7</sup>

But we are getting ahead of the story. How did Wilson go from being a cold warrior who saw only in black and white to a human rights activist who would go against the wishes of his own tribal government to defend his right to help Mexican and Central American migrants? That process takes us back to El Salvador and to the power of religion.

#### HEARTS, MINDS, AND MORAL SHOCK IN EL SALVADOR

During the year he spent in El Salvador (1988–1989), Wilson had many memorable experiences but none that stayed with him more than his encounter with a Salvadoran family who invited him to dinner. Using pseudonyms, Wilson told the story of a woman he calls María who sold *pupusas* in Sonsonate, El Salvador.<sup>8</sup> She had been very friendly with the US military advisors who had come to the country, including Wilson, who over time got to know María, her husband, and their three daughters. One day María invited Wilson to the family home to share a meal, and he quickly accepted. "As a Special Forces advisor one of our dictums is you have to win their hearts and minds."

7. In a strangely appropriate coincidence, the young woman who raised her hand told me later that her father had fought for the FMLN and had survived the war, but in terrible psychological health. She appreciated Wilson's talk, but told me that she could not forgive him.

8. Wilson interview, 2012, and lecture.



When the day to visit with this family came, Wilson had some time before dinner and decided to walk around town as he ordinarily did, with bodyguards, and stop at an ice cream store.

I remember paying what I thought was an exorbitant amount of money—I think I paid three dollars and sixty cents. And I felt very insulted. I thought they had jacked up the prices because they knew I was a gringo and they probably thought that I had money to burn. And I did. But that was not the point. So I was very insulted and annoyed and I was thinking to myself: ‘Don’t they know who I am? Don’t they know that I have come to save them from global communism?’ (Wilson interview, 2012)

This perceived insult stayed with Wilson for the rest of the day, until he arrived at María’s house. Her husband, José, did not arrive until very late from his shift as a rural bus driver, driving “one of those American school buses—when they die they go to heaven in Central America and are resurrected as part of the rural transportation system.” María, her daughters and Mike Wilson had all finished eating by the time José entered, absolutely exhausted.

He sat down and we were talking casually about whatever it was we were talking about, but I had noticed that he came in with a mason jar, with a screw lid. He set it on the table. Sitting right there, he put the mason jar in front of him as María served his meal. It sort of occurred to me that this was his salary. This was the man’s wages for himself, his wife, and his darling children.

José proceeded to stack the coins, “like poker chips,” sorting the denominations and counting his earnings. After the counting was done, Wilson came face to face with a terrible realization:

He began separating the coins and stacking them, at this table where we shared a meal, a table of universal justice, to my humiliation as American, as Special Forces, I had paid more for my banana split than he had made that entire day to feed his three children and wife. Something in my heart broke. How dare you sit at this table? At this table of justice, which side of justice are you on? Here are these people trying to feed their children, and we are supporting the military dictatorship that oppresses them. What side are you on?

Wilson describes his shame sitting at what he sees as “literally a communion table.”

I was embarrassed to the depth of my soul. That economic disparity became an economic injustice. I understood that my position at that table was a position of power. . . . I was trying to impose my power on them and my government through me on them. I was humiliated. I held on to that lesson. And I hold on to those tears. And I cherish that humiliation. I honor that humiliation because that was a Damascus moment.

Wilson refers to the road to Damascus where Saul of Tarsus, a man who had previously persecuted early Christians, encountered a blinding light and the divine voice of Jesus, and was transformed and became Paul. For Wilson, his Damascus moment in El Salvador (a country named after Christ, the savior) was a moment of “true justice. . . . It said to me, ‘why are you persecuting me? Why are you persecuting my people?’ That is what I got out of that. But most of us on the left don’t get that experience. We are caught in our own tyranny of right and wrong.”

It is not an easy thing to escape the tyranny of right and wrong. Indeed, Wil-



son's description of the abrupt change from the Manichaeism of the Cold War to the crisis of conscience that changed his journey probably simplifies the changes he experienced from the late 1980s, when he was a member of the US Special Forces, to the early 2000s, when he first decided to put water out in the desert. That journey is an uneven one that involved retirement from the army; divorce from his wife; and work as a teacher, a marketing director of a casino, a student at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, and a Presbyterian lay pastor in Sells, Arizona. Nevertheless, it was a crucial part of Wilson's journey, providing him with what he calls a "moral compass," and an experience that is inescapably religious in form and content. While this moment may have changed Wilson's life journey, it does not explain the precise choice of becoming an advocate for migrants and the more unusual decision of creating water stations in the desert. In order to comprehend those parts of the labyrinth, we must see how religion provides resources for and resistance against Wilson's change in direction.

#### THE RESOURCES AND RESISTANCE OF THE CHURCH

When Wilson returned to Arizona in the late 1990s, he found himself looking for a church. Though he had always been religious, the shape of that religiosity had changed since those days when he was a boy at St. Catherine's in Ajo. Wilson spent some time during his teenage years in the Pentecostal Church, but the "very conservative, very aggressive theology" did not appeal to him. Wilson had also spent some time in the Unitarian Universalist Church during the years he lived in Alabama and Texas. While that experience was positive in many ways, he describes it as "excellent from the neck up, very intellectual." Along with some cousins who had grown up Presbyterian, Wilson found himself joining the Southside Presbyterian church in Tucson. Under the leadership of Pastor John Fife, Southside has become famous for its central role in the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008, 144–145; Rose 2012). In 1982, Fife sent a letter to the US Attorney General informing him that he and his church would continue to defy US law and "extend the sanctuary of the church to undocumented people from Central America. Obedience to God requires this of us all" (quoted in Rose 2012, 29).

Given Wilson's Damascus moment in Central America, it seems appropriate that he would join a sanctuary church that had helped create an underground railroad for Central Americans fleeing violence fueled in large part by US foreign policy. Wilson became a youth pastor at Southside and became close to the key figures in the New Sanctuary movement that had created advocacy organizations including No More Deaths, Humane Borders, and Samaritan Patrol. These would later become important allies for Wilson. At this point, however, he did not immediately become involved in the immigration struggles in Arizona.

Instead, he continued his education at San Francisco Theological Seminary. This was a big decision, and as he had done before, he traveled to St. Catherine's in Ajo to pray and think about whether it was the right decision. Though he left seminary after a difficult experience, Wilson does not regret the decision, as it was part of his journey. What convinced him to leave seminary was a different



and unexpected “moral shock” that came when one of his professors took his class for a tour of the Memorial Chapel, known for elaborate stained glass windows that told the history of the church in the northwest (*Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 1957). Each of the students was asked to read from a description of each window. When Wilson’s turn came, he saw that the image he was beholding was of a white missionary standing over a Native American, which might have been shocking enough on its own. This particular representation depicted the kneeling indigenous person as almost demonic, complete with claws and horns. According to Wilson, that scene triggered a broad discussion on campus that eventually went to the seminary’s Board of Directors, who eventually made the decision to modify that particular image. Wilson made a tracing of that image to remember his encounter with the representation of religious manifest destiny. “I think that church was built in 1955. It was part of the post WWII triumphalism. You know, that we are part of the emerging world power. Part of our history from the church, Christianity, gives us moral authority to make us into heroic citizens. Part of our heroic legacy was the subjugation of Native Americans. We can subjugate them because they are the ‘demonic other’ and conversely ‘we’ are heroic pioneers” (Wilson interview, 2012).

If the military had sensitized him to the injustice of economic disparity and US foreign policy, his time in seminary reminded him of the colonial past that still haunts the church. Wilson speaks of the communion table in El Salvador as offering a kind of “mirror” that allowed him to see himself and the world in a new perspective. The stained glass representation of the civilizing mission of the church offered Wilson another mirror in which he saw his place in the church in a different light. He realized that the community he needed was not in California. From the terrace of the chapel, Wilson saw a breathtaking landscape of trees and ocean but a landscape that was haunted by the absence of Native peoples. He recalls staring out on this magnificent view and asking, “Where are my native peoples?” He says he could sometimes even hear crying in the woods, and feel what he calls “a sense of holocaust, a sense of a vanished people.” But of course, he knew that his people had not vanished. So he made the decision to leave seminary, and in 2002, Wilson returned to O’odham lands.

He learned that there was a church in need of a pastor. Soon after returning he became a Presbyterian lay pastor in Sells, Arizona, capital of the Tohono O’odham Nation. There, the immigration question was even more urgent than it had been in Tucson, as migrants were crossing in record numbers, mostly on tribal lands. In the mid-1990s, the US Border Patrol adopted a strategy known as “prevention through deterrence.” Emboldened by the perceived success of Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold the Line, which suggested that a greatly increased Border Patrol presence could discourage migrants from crossing at major urban centers, the new border policy left it to the dangers of the Sonoran Desert to complete the work of deterrence. Migrants did indeed stop crossing in major urban centers like San Diego and El Paso, but the Sonoran Desert became the main point of entry for migrants, many of whom came unprepared for the terrain, temperatures, and thieves that awaited them. As a consequence, thousands of migrants have died in what in Border Patrol geography is known as the “Tucson



Sector” but which is more accurately described as the Tohono O’odham Nation. Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas provides “warning posters” that graphically illustrate the alarming number of migrant deaths, most of them on Tohono O’odham lands.<sup>9</sup>

With migrants dying literally in view of his church, Wilson had another glimpse of violence and death. He saw that action was needed. He began putting water out on the ground in clusters of twenty-five to thirty gallons. As Wilson is a tribal member, he can put water on tribal lands, sometimes with the help of his friend David García, also a tribal member. Members of the social justice community who are not tribal members do not have permission to put water on O’odham land, but they have provided Wilson material support. Humane Borders in particular supports Wilson’s work, after its request to set up their own water stations on the Tohono O’odham Nation was turned down in 2000 (Ahtone 2008).

Wilson’s work is steeped in religious imagery and informed by biblical readings. His original one-hundred-gallon water stations were all named after apostles (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John). Later, he began to place the bottles in the form of a cross. This was done both to give migrants some confidence that the water was safe to drink and also to prevent people from destroying the water stations. The water stations have not fared well, as many people on the reservation fear that they will only attract more migrants. This view was held by the tribal leadership and by many in Wilson’s church.

Out of the eleven districts on the Tohono O’odham Nation, Wilson puts water out in two (Sells and Baboquivari) in addition to one water station on the Sonora O’odham side, in Mexico. Soon after Wilson began putting water out, the chairman of the Baboquivari District of the Tohono O’odham Nation signed a resolution prohibiting Wilson from continuing with this work.<sup>10</sup> To give this more weight, the resolution was sent to the governing council of the church, or session. Every Presbyterian church is self-governing. To Wilson’s surprise, the elders, or elected members of the session, voted unanimously to support the resolution and prohibit Wilson from leaving water in the desert. The session, in essence, asked:

Why was I aiding and abetting illegal migrant activity? The question came up to me—Pastor, why are you aiding and abetting criminals? . . . How can you do that? And so, my response to that was, Session Presbyterians, how many times have you heard the sermon that as your pastor if I must choose . . . if I have to decide between following two sets of law, US federal immigration law or a higher moral universal law, which you and I can agree, is called God’s Justice. As your pastor, which law must I be obedient to? As your pastor, I have no choice here—which one am I bound to obey? Which one must I answer to?

Wilson had no lack of biblical passages to support his position. He reminded his fellow Presbyterians of Matthew 25:45. Paraphrasing the parable of the sheep and goats, Wilson said: “As you have done for the least among you—meaning humankind—as you have done unto me. . . . Those that walk in the desert, those

9. Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas, warning posters, <http://www.humaneborders.org/warning-posters/>.

10. Resolution of the Baboquivari District Council “Disapproving the Placement of Water Stations and Water Jugs within Baboquivari District,” Resolution 02-B-23, June 15, 2002.



migrants that walk in the desert, the least among us, not only are the least among us deserving of the water and food, but Presbyterians, Christ walks with them." The response on the part of the session, according to Wilson, was silence. "Silence says a lot. Silence screeches. Silence bears a witness to an injustice. That's how I knew that I had to leave. I couldn't stay." Wilson resigned his position and moved to Tucson, and he continues to publicly take his tribal government to task for failing to live up to not only Christian ideals but also traditional O'odham values of hospitality.

Wilson also directs his critique at the social justice community, including his former pastor John Fife. In not criticizing the O'odham government's lack of humanitarian action, the social justice community is guilty of what Wilson calls a "deathly silence." Not criticizing Native peoples is not a sign of respect, argues Wilson; it is holding Native people to a lower standard. One can imagine a response from the social justice community emphasizing the importance of tribal sovereignty and respect for the decision of the tribal council and chair. Wilson's view on the matter of sovereignty is straightforward and damning: when Border Patrol has become an "occupying army" on tribal lands, at the tribal government's invitation, then sovereignty is nothing but a "myth" (Wilson interview, 2012).

The tribal government, of course, has another perspective, which is that the human crisis the tribe is experiencing was not of its own making; it was a direct result of US government policies (Levine and Van Soest 2005). Thus, in the tribal government's view, it should be the US government, in this case the Border Patrol, that should invest its resources in helping manage the massive problem of death on O'odham lands.<sup>11</sup> The moral responsibility, in this view, lies with the United States, not the tribe. The presence of the Border Patrol on the reservation, for the tribal government, is not a form of occupation but an appropriate and just reckoning for a problem that exceeds the tribe responsibilities and capabilities. While Wilson would see this as a failure of O'odham leadership, a case could be made that this is the tribe's way of holding the US government accountable, at least for some of the consequences of its policy (Madsen 2007).

This internal conflict, a tribe conflicted over what to do with the migrants dying on tribal land, has attracted much attention from the outside, and many find themselves puzzling over whether one should side with Wilson's call for justice or the tribe's defense of sovereignty. According to Greta Gaard (2001), this conflict can be described as one between an "ethical context" (a defense of sovereignty) and "ethical content" (the policy decision that the tribe makes within that sovereign space). Despite the challenges of the conflict and the overwhelming presence of the Border Patrol, it is worth noting that the main actors in this controversy are O'odham. Thus, even in the context of struggle they may be enacting what Bruyneel (2007, xvii) describes as the "third space of sovereignty." "Indigenous

11. There is a spiritual dimension to the crisis. Like other Native peoples, O'odham distinguish "good death" (when one has led a full life and is prepared for death) from "bad death" (which comes unexpectedly and leaves the soul unprepared). Bad death can lead to the return of soul to the living, not out of malevolence, but out of longing. And this can lead to *ka: came mumkiday*, or staying sickness (Kozak and Lopez 1999, 68).



political actors work across American spatial and temporal boundaries, demanding rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state while also challenging the imposition of colonial rule on their lives. This resistance engenders what I call a 'third space of sovereignty' that resides neither simply inside nor outside the American political system but rather exists on these very boundaries, exposing both the practices and the contingencies of American colonial rule." This is not a space of agreement or consensus but a zone in which O'odhams debate, discuss, and disagree over matters that are of importance to their nation. The tragedy is that this is performed in the context of gruesome desert deaths that take the lives of migrants, many of whom are indigenous people themselves on their own journeys, to whom this "third space" offers little comfort.

#### CONCLUSION

With his criticism of both Tohono O'odham leaders and activists, Wilson cuts a rather lonely border figure, standing outside of the communities to which he would seem to most naturally belong: the Tohono O'odham Nation and the social justice community. He seems to remain by choice a rather solitary activist placing water out in the desert, even as that water is confiscated by tribal police and the Border Patrol or absorbed by a thirsty desert. Wilson, though, sees his struggle as a calling: called to the seminary, called out of seminary, and then called to the desert. "This is my ministry" (Wilson interview, 2012).

Wilson is operating in the prophetic mode, appealing to large moral truths and practicing his faith publicly in the hopes of inviting others to engage ethically and politically. There is reason to believe that his strategy may be generating some results. Already the subject of three documentaries, a PBS News Hour report, and countless press and online articles, Wilson's activism has attracted many followers. It is likely that these "followers" are more familiar with that term from Twitter than from the New Testament, but that may itself be a new path through the maze. Since 2012, Wilson occupies a new position as policy director of the Border Action Network, a position that is perhaps ideal for his kind of prophetic indigenous politics. In the ongoing conversation over immigration reform, he is poised to make good use of many parts of his journey: as an army veteran in debates over border security, as a Christian in discussions of morality, as an activist in discussions of human rights, and as a tribal member in discussions of tribal sovereignty.

These multiple subject positions are not new within a broad view of O'odham history and politics. As religious, imperial, and state practices divided the O'odham people along multiple lines, they made the O'odham vulnerable to threats from many sides. Yet, like I' itoi's maze, these divisions created new paths for O'odham politics. The paths of Mike Wilson's journey illustrate broad lessons about the politics of religion, belonging, and self-making, lessons that underline the importance of friction as an analytic of connection.

First, religion functions in ways that enable and constrain activism. It provides a moral vocabulary, an affective map, and a set of institutional resources that can inspire and sustain political action. Yet, the terms, orientations, and resources



of the church can also function to place limits on what can be done within its boundaries. Religion may not define or encompass the entirety of Wilson's journey, but his prophetic mode of activism is unintelligible without understanding how Wilson's conversion takes place both because of and despite the presence of religion in his life.

Second, Wilson's experience in the Presbyterian Church, like his experiences in the military, seminary, and the Tohono O'odham Nation illustrate the power of what I call the traces of belonging and, with Albert O. Hirschman (1970), the voice of exit. Though Wilson describes his exit from each of these institutions, he never completely leaves. His memberships shadow and constitute a complex self. The discipline of the military, he says, shapes his activism; the calling of the church operates even after he leaves his Presbyterian post; he continues to invoke O'odham traditions even as he leaves the reservation. The difficult and even painful membership he experiences recalls Brueggemann's insight that "prophetic criticism is done not by an outsider but always by one who must embrace the grief . . . and know the pain of the criticized one" (1978, 95). Moreover, each exit also constitutes a dramatic performance of voice. In the decision to withdraw (to some extent) from each of these communities, Wilson makes a public call for others to see the injustice that he now sees. Each exit represents a border-crossing act that itself calls attention to the costs and the legitimacy of borders and their exclusions.

Finally, this story reveals how the self and self-making are deeply connected to how religion and citizenship are lived and embodied. As Wilson—especially as a subject of documentary film and media reporting—embodies Native authenticity, religious authority, and social justice, he connects self-crafting to broader political spheres. The friction of Mike Wilson's prophetic journey, as Tsing's work reminds us, enables his movement, constrains his connections to others, and particularizes universal themes of rights and justice into specific political acts. As he tells his story of conversion to university audiences, documentary filmmakers, and even social scientists, Mike Wilson continues to move.

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