

Hostile Terrain '94: The suffering and sacrifices of undocumented migrants

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Hostile Terrain '94: The Undocumented Migration Project. Exhibition of the journeys and testimony of undocumented migrants who attempt to cross the US-Mexico border. By Jason De Leon, Michael Wells and Austin Ella Shipman at the LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, Los Angeles, California, September 17, 2022—July 9, 2023

The *Hostile Terrain '94* exhibition records the journeys and testimonies of undocumented migrants who attempted to cross the US-Mexico border and traveled through remote and depopulated regions on foot from the Central American jungles, through Mexico and into the Sonoran Desert. The exhibition documents the immense dangers migrants face as a result of the immigration enforcement strategy known as “Prevention Through Deterrence,” established in 1994 by President Bill Clinton.

The exhibition tells the stories of migrants through the utilization of a photographic narrative of those crossing the border, showing the objects they left behind in the desert and in film and testimonials. There is also a recording studio for the public to share their personal immigration stories and a 20-foot participatory memorial wall map of the Arizona-Mexico border in observance of the deceased.

The first thing that a visitor will see upon entering the exhibition is a collection of empty water jugs, one of which has “God bless the border patrol,” cynically scribbled on the side. One wonders if it was a Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agent who wrote those words or an immigrant with a particularly dark sense of humor. Nevertheless, it exposes the cruelty and indifference to life of the CBP and the US government.

The exhibition demonstrates a powerfully humanizing approach to the suffering and dangers faced by migrants who trek thousands of miles on foot.

There are photos of migrants traveling on top of trains and across rivers on makeshift rafts. Among the exhibits was a map of the Sonoran Desert, displayed on a large wall, showing where human remains have been found, identifiable or otherwise. These are tacked with toe tags showing where each body was found.

According to the National Park Service, the Sonoran Desert is approximately 100,387 square miles, stretching between southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico, including the southern half of Arizona, southeastern California and most of the states of Sonora and Baja California, Mexico.

The Sonoran Desert’s climate is subtropical, receiving about 3-15 inches of rain per year. It is the hottest desert in North America; summer air temperatures can exceed 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius) and often reach 118 degrees Fahrenheit (48 degrees Celsius). Temperatures may drop into the 50s within a matter of minutes after a violent storm during the monsoon season, between July and September. In the winter months, between December and January, temperatures can get into the 40s at night.

According to the UCLA Newsroom, 7,800 migrants have died between 1998 and 2019, with at least 3,800 of those deaths occurring in Arizona. The majority of those deaths were caused by exposure to the elements, including dehydration. A *USA Today* investigation found that federal agents and local police fail to report immigrant deaths. The exact number is unknown, because officials bury immigrants in mass unmarked graves.

On top of the suffering faced by migrants is the anguish their family members experience, not knowing what happened to their loved ones and never hearing from them again. The exhibition displays videos of

family members crying in despair about their missing family member and how their entire family has been affected by depression and other health issues.

Another part of the exhibition includes glass cases filled with discarded or lost personal items, clothes, shoes, medicine bottles, water bottles, backpacks and toiletries. The heaps of dirtied personal effects recall similar exhibits from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. The sheer quantity of the toe tags is enough to convey something about the scale of the crisis, while the display of personal items puts a human face on it.

Lastly, the exhibition contains some notable documents from the Government Accountability Office showing how immigration enforcement has caused immigrant deaths in the desert to skyrocket. The name of the exhibition is derived from some comments in these documents. “Hostile terrain” is originally a military term, after all, and that conception colors the state’s handling of immigrants.

The testimony in *Hostile Terrain* '94, both of those who made the journey and of the friends and family of those who were lost, is invaluable. It is also necessary, however, to probe the deeper reasons for this tragic history. The deaths of immigrants are the direct result of government policy, by both the Democratic and Republican parties, representing the capitalist ruling class, implementing a long-term anti-immigrant strategy.

An examination of the record of the last three US presidents proves this. President Barack Obama, a Democrat, was known as the “deporter-in-chief,” because under his administration more immigrants were deported than all administrations combined between 1896 and 2000. President Donald Trump based his campaign on anti-immigrant xenophobia, and during his presidency he used Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to terrorize and intimidate undocumented immigrants with roundups and deportations at their homes and workplaces.

The Biden administration has intensified the anti-immigrant policies put in place during the Trump administration with the continuation of Title 42 of the US Code, which prohibits the entry of non-citizens into the country if it is believed there is a “serious danger” of the introduction of a communicable disease into the US. Title 42 will expire on May 11 and, most observers

believe, will result in an increase in the number of migrants trying to cross the border and their accompanying persecution by Mexico and the United States.

As living standards deteriorate, climate change increases and wars induce dislocation, more people will flee their countries to seek safety and a better life for their families elsewhere. The only solution to the immigrant crisis is a world free of borders forced upon them by capitalism, so that the needs of humanity are the priority rather than the needs of the capitalist oligarchy. This can only be won through a struggle for a socialist program based on the international working class.



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