



The Border Wall Runs through Our Home

Raven Lewis

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Share what you know about the border wall.
2. Study the map on the next page. What does it say about how shifting borders have affected the O'odham people over time?

No Word for Wall

The Tohono O'odham people don't even have a word for wall. And yet now we have a 27-foot-tall, 62-mile-long border wall cutting right through the middle of our land. This border wall divides our families, imperils plants and animals, and cuts off our access to water and resources. It has also caused rampant trespassing on sacred tribal lands by construction crews and border patrol. These lands have been damaged beyond repair.

Verlon Jose, Vice Chairman for the Tohono O'odham nation, says that having the wall on our land is like being cut in half. He asked the United States to feel empathy. "America," he said, "let me divide your families, let me get an iron blade and drag it across your heart, then maybe you'll know what we feel."¹

The Border Crossed Us

For thousands of years, the Tohono O'odham people lived on land with no borders. But then, Spanish colonists from Mexico and English-speaking colonists from the U.S. fought over our territory and put a border through our land. That's why we say, "The border crossed us; we didn't cross the border."² The Tohono O'odham reservation is

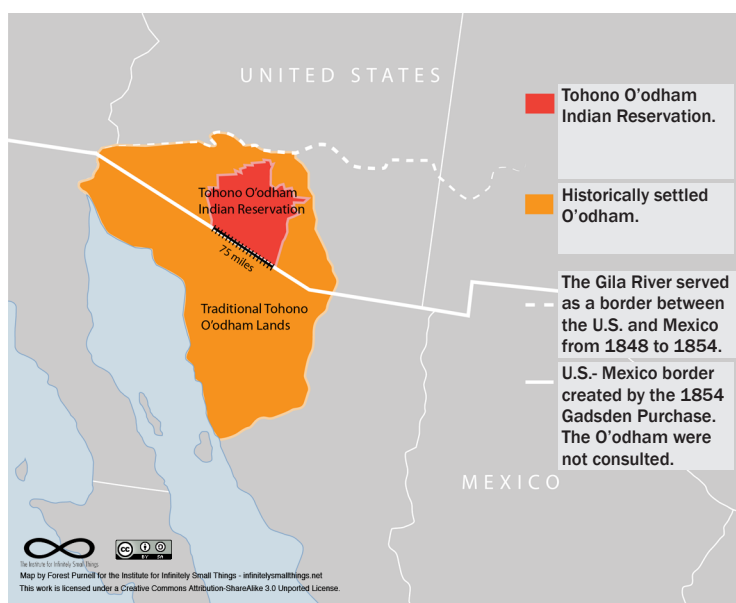
* Two versions of this article are available: [advanced intermediate](#) (pp. 36-38) and [advanced beginner](#) (p. 39).

in Southern Arizona and extends 62 miles into northern Mexico.

In the past, some areas had low-rise barriers to mark the border, but these were nothing like the current border wall. I remember as a kid going through the reservation and seeing these barriers off to the side. It was not our choice to have this “border,” but it wasn’t overwhelming. We could still easily visit our relatives on the other side of the border.

Now We Are Separated from Our Families and Our Land

But today, we face a major separation. This separation has made a huge negative impact on our tribe, people, and culture. The U.S. government built the wall, and it separated families from one another. Many lost connections to culture and sacred lands for ceremonies. When you separate families, you also destroy culture and native traditions. For Native



Source: https://i0.wp.com/native-land.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/oodham_map_revised.png

Americans, families provide the support system for our community.

Not only do we face the loss of family connections and culture, but also religious traditions and ceremonies. We O’odham people are also experiencing the loss of local plants and animals. Our ancestors relied on some of these plants as a source of food, shelter, and healing. Our elders have passed on these traditions. But the wall is disrupting our land. Our plants are being uprooted, such as the Arizona Saguaro Cactus, some of which are hundreds of years old, along with other sacred native plants. We O’odham people see ourselves as caretakers of the land. The homeland gives to us, so we give back to our homeland. We regard plants as a sacred connection to our ancestors. We understand that the land belongs to plants and animals, and we are all part of this earth together. We depend on one another. If one is destroyed, the rest will suffer.

Border Wall and Genocide

This wall makes us feel unwelcome in our own home. These are our homelands. They are supposed to be protected. We O’odham people have



“Both sides of the border are home,” says activist Amy Juan.



O'odham activists protest the border wall. One sign reads, "Amber is innocent." Amber Ortega, a member of the O'odham nation, was arrested in September 2020 for occupying a bulldozer to stop the building of the border wall. In January 2022, she was acquitted. Her lawyer argued that she was acting to protect her religious freedom.

dealt with a lot of tragedies, including genocide. This border wall is part of that genocide because it is destroying our land and culture.

Construction is at a standstill since Trump left office. But the damage has been done. For example, the sacred site of Monument Hill and the lands around it have been irreparably damaged by the wall. This represents an incredible loss to the O'odham people and the rest of the world. When will the government stop taking what is not theirs?

We Stand Together

How should we respond? I spoke with a couple of O'odham activists about this question, and I learned that no matter where you are or who you are, you must always stand together as a community to protect the land, water, plants, animals, people, and traditions. Amy Juan who works with the International Indian Treaty Council and is a cultural activist, told me, "We are the roots of America."³ We have indeed been here for thousands of years. We belong here. We are still here.

Amy went on to say, "We O'odham have existed in these lands before America and Mexico were created in name and country. Both sides of

the border are home, and our traditions and culture will live on through the teachings of our ancestors. We will continue to move across borders for sacred and ceremonial purposes, and because we have a right to, as caretakers of our land and *himdag* (way of life)."⁴

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, why is the border wall a problem for the O'odham people?
2. Based on the text and the photo (and caption) above, what are the O'odham people doing about the wall?

Sources: 1. Verlon Jose, Vice Chairman for the Tohono O'odham is interviewed by Arizona Public Radio, We Are the Water Missing Home, <https://youtu.be/iAhNqoFPanY>; 2. Shannon Rivers, Civil Dialogue Series – "The People's History: An O'otham Perspective," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roMEIEC83IU>. 3. Amy Juan, interview with Raven Lewis on April 9, 2020; 4. Ibid.

Raven Lewis a GED student at the Gila Crossing Community School FACE program. She is a recognized tribal member of the Tohono O'odham Nation. She lives on the Gila River Reservation where she grew up. She has big plans to be a leader who positively impacts her community and her child's future.

