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From Distance to Concern

> When confronted with suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action. . . . But what form can this commitment take when those called upon to act are thousands of miles away from the person suffering?[1]

When the travelers from Eastern College landed at the Tucson International Airport in 2009, seventy miles north of the US-Mexico border, months of meetings and fundraising drives had finally come to fruition. These eight students and two professors had traveled two thousand miles to begin a weeklong immersion trip focused on undocumented immigration.

Immigration, especially undocumented immigration, had once again become a prominent public topic. In the previous year, more than 150 dead bodies of immigrants were found in this section of the US-Mexico border.[2] Drug-related violence in border cities was increasingly in the news. One student's first question to me as I introduced myself at the luggage carousel to join the group was, "Have you heard of the beheadings?," a reference to the mysterious, violent deaths of women in Juarez, Mexico.

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[1] Luc Boltanksi, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1993]), p. xv.

[2] Daniel E. Martinez et al., "Structural Violence and Migrant Deaths in Southern Arizona: Data from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990–2013," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 2, 4 (2014).

This small group had come to Tucson to travel through BorderLinks, a faith-inspired organization with roots to the 1980s Sanctuary movement. Over twenty-five years, BorderLinks had become well known to colleges, universities, churches, and seminaries for producing a progressive, religious form of immersion travel. In a nonpartisan, nondogmatic tone, BorderLinks' goal was to "raise awareness" and "inspire action" about undocumented immigration for about a thousand such travelers a year. In the week I spent with Eastern College, I rode for hours with travelers crammed into the back of a van on the way to meetings with local clergy, discussions with US border protection officials, and visits with undocumented migrants. One night, we divided into pairs to eat, talk, and stay with a Mexican family in a border town. On another day, we walked in the remote desert along trails where immigrants crossed the forbidding desert. In formal reflections and informal conversations, the group discussed the discomfort of hearing immigrants' problems that they could not immediately resolve; their admiration for the activists they met; their opinions of federal agencies that arrested immigrants; and the urgent sense of wanting to "do something" when they returned home, far from the borderlands.

Six months later, I spoke with the travelers, now returned to their normal lives. During an interview with the group's leader, she told me that she "never expected it [the trip] to be so transformative" for her or the students. One of her students explained to me that the trip was "emotionally wrenching" and gave her "a new level of personal experience with the [immigration] issue." Another student recounted his "haunting experience" of walking in the desert and being "in the tracks of people" trying to cross into the United States. He commented,

I really felt like I had been through a very transformative experience. . . . I think it was transformative in the fact that I feel like I went through a significant experience in my week there. I felt like my eyes were opened to a lot of different things that I had never really been exposed to before.

To the ears of civil society organizations like BorderLinks that organize immersion travel and those that send travelers to be immersed, these sentiments are evidence of the power of using travel to generate moral concern for distant injustice. They suggest that encounters with distant suffering can lead to empathy, that Americans' circles of moral concern can expand to be cosmopolitan in their reach, and that spiritually meaningful experiences can lead to new social commitments.

But alongside these feelings of connection and transformation, my travel with BorderLinks revealed other pieces of evidence that call into question comfortable assumptions about what this type of transnational engagement accomplishes. Many BorderLinks travelers had been progressive and proimmigrant to begin with, making it unclear what such travel was meant to achieve. Direct interactions with immigrants often went poorly, challenging an ideal of personalized connection. Upon returning home, travelers struggled – sometimes intensely – with not knowing how to turn their sense of transformation into action back at their churches and colleges. As Kate, a seminary student, explained with an air of frustration many months after her immersion trip,

[I'm] trying to see how all this knowledge is going to work into my ministry and what God is calling me to do. I don't know what that looks like. . . . [I've been] asking God to show me how my concern for the border and for Hispanic immigrants can work. . . . It's been hard to live up to how I felt like I needed to change my life.

These problematic interactions, confusing feelings, and unclear futures are the other side of immersion travel. But far from being unique to immersion travel, they evoke the ethical and theoretical quandaries that have long characterized a prominent problem of modernity: awareness of suffering at a distance and the difficulty of addressing it by residents of the "developed" West and the Global North. Immersion travel like that offered by BorderLinks has provided the opportunity for many travelers to be firsthand witnesses to what Luc Boltanski calls "distant suffering": the social problems and circumstances of people separated by physical, social, and cultural distance.[3] For much of the twentieth century, middle-class Americans addressed distant suffering primarily through supporting large, specialized organizations that did work "over there." Today, through immersion travel, an expanding portion of middle-class America personally witnesses and directly engages distant social problems and suffering. The face-to-face relationship pattern so often associated with the *absence* of distance in social relations is increasingly promoted as an effective way to motivate concern *across* great distance. This is a striking

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[3] Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*. Western modernity has tended to treat suffering as a social fact, something that is morally repulsive, caused by nondivine forces, and able to be changed. See Iain Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman, *A Passion for Society: How We Think about Human Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

historical shift in the way Americans can engage with humanitarian and social problems outside the United States.

But, as the epigraph that begins this chapter suggests, discovering distant suffering and acting against it are not one and the same. The space between concern and action involves complex social processes of interaction, interpretation, and evaluation. The moral resonance of distant suffering, as well as the willingness to act, are social accomplishments, not inevitable outcomes. This book illuminates these organizational, cultural, and religious aspects of transnational civic engagement by investigating the assumed possibilities and invisible problems of a new way to enact distant concern: immersion travel.

THE REACH OF IMMERSION TRAVEL

If your college promotes "alternative spring breaks" to foreign countries, if your congregation sponsors short-term mission trips, if your university has doubled down on short-term study abroad, or if you know someone who was changed by a similar trip, then you have witnessed the wide-ranging emergence of immersion travel.[4] Travel organized by small groups, often outside the structures of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), is used as a way to discover distant social suffering and to accomplish civic and political ends. Diverse immersion travelers distribute charitable aid, create transnational political identity, support distant advocacy campaigns, provide medical care, share religious faith, and support alternative trade networks. While the exact scope of immersion travel is difficult to pin down given its heterogeneity, a few statistics help to show the embrace of immersion travel by mainstream civic organizations in the United States, as well as

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[4] Brian Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); Shaul Kelner, *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Sally Brown and Alastair M. Morrison, "Expanding Volunteer Vacation Participation: An Exploratory Study on the Mini-Mission Concept," *Tourism Recreation Research* 28, 3 (2003); Nancy Gard McGehee, "Alternative Tourism and Social Movements," *Annals of Tourism Research* 29, 1 (2002); Robert J. Priest and Joseph Paul Priest, "'They See Everything, and Understand Nothing' Short-Term Mission and Service Learning," *Missiology: An International Review* 36, 1 (2008); Jill Piacitelli et al., "Alternative Break Programs: From Isolated Enthusiasm to Best Practices: The Haiti Compact," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 17, 2 (2013); Kevin J. Sykes, "Short-Term Medical Service Trips: A Systematic Review of the Evidence," *American Journal of Public Health* 104, 7 (2014).

the number of people with the opportunity to directly engage foreign communities through such travel.

In 2012, more than one-quarter (27 percent) of all religious congregations in the United States reported organizing an international trip in the previous year to provide aid to those in need.[5] That translates to roughly 100,000 congregations *a year*. Over the last three decades, the popularity of these short-term mission trips among religious organizations drastically increased.[6] By the mid-2000s, more than 1.5 million US church-going adults were traveling overseas each year with their religious congregations.[7]

Immersion travel has also increased in popularity among US-based civic organizations more generally. Allison Schnable reports that "the number of new American aid organizations registering annually with the IRS quadrupled from 2000 to 2010, compared with only 19 percent growth for other 501(c)3s."[8] Many of these organizations use travel to facilitate direct connections between people in the United States and foreign communities, thereby supporting work-camps, educational projects, and other forms of short-term civic service.[9] According to the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey of households conducted by the United States Census Bureau, about half a million "individuals in the United States reported volunteering each year internationally from 2004 to 2014" for time periods of less than a month.[10] Scholars of tourism have documented a similar trend over the last twenty years, with greatly increased interest in "volunteer tourism" among global travelers, leading to a rise in tourism organizations that facilitate volunteer

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[5] Gary J. Adler Jr. and Andrea L. Ruiz, "The Immigrant Effect: Short-Term Mission Travel as Transnational Civic Remittance," *Sociology of Religion* 79, 3 (2018).

[6] LiErin Probasco, "Giving Time, Not Money: Long-Term Impacts of Short-Term Mission Trips," *Missiology: An International Review* 41, 2 (2013); Priest and Priest, "'They See Everything, and Understand Nothing' Short-Term Mission and Service Learning."

[7] Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[8] Allison Schnable, "New American Relief and Development Organizations: Voluntarizing Global Aid," *Social Problems* 62, 2 (2015), p. 311.

[9] Amanda Moore McBride et al., "Civic Service Worldwide: Defining a Field, Building a Knowledge Base," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33, 4 Supplemental (2004); Margaret Sherrard Sherraden et al., "The Forms and Structure of International Voluntary Service," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 17, 2 (2006).

[10] Benjamin J. Lough, "A Decade of International Volunteering from the United States, 2004 to 2014," (Saint Louis, MO: Center for Social Development, Washington University, 2015), p. 1.

experiences, environmental projects, and cultural exchange.[11] As these examples show, many organizations promote short-term, face-to-face, pragmatic involvement beyond the United States, leading to a large, but decentralized, mobilization of transnational civic engagement.

This form of engagement has been accompanied by new visions of service and citizenship. One root of these visions came from the rapid embrace of experiential and transformative learning theory among US higher education institutions since the 1980s.[12] As theorists connected a processual understanding of learning with a humanistic vision of learners' social obligations, educators increasingly promoted new pedagogies beyond the traditional curricula, such as service-learning and community-based learning.[13] With roots to William James, John Dewey, and Maria Montessori, experiential learning advocated for using new experience as an input into "a process of learning that questions preconceptions of direct experience . . . and extracts the correct lessons from the consequences of action."[14]

The rise in experiential learning dovetailed with the 1990s lionization of civil society and voluntary participation in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse.[15] That historical moment saw reawakened philosophical interest in cosmopolitanism and social interest in global connectivity.[16] The curricular and cocurricular offerings of secondary and tertiary

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[11] Stephen Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* (New York: CABI Publishing, 2001); Mary Mostafanezhad, *Volunteer Tourism: Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[12] David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014 [1983]); Jack Mezirow, "Understanding Transformation Theory," *Adult Education Quarterly* 44, 4 (1994); Thomas E. Smith and Clifford E. Knapp, *Sourcebook of Experiential Education: Key Thinkers and Their Contributions* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[13] Sam Marullo and Bob Edwards, "Editors' Introduction: Service-Learning Pedagogy as Universities' Response to Troubled Times," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, 5 (2000).

[14] Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, p. xxi.

[15] Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Eric Hartmann and Richard Kiely, "Pushing Boundaries: Introduction to the Global Service-Learning Special Section," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 21, 1 (2014).

[16] Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, "Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism," in *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*, ed. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

educational organizations showed a dramatic embrace of global citizenship and engagement ideals. In 1997, only thirty-two secondary programs in the United States had global engagement curricula; by 2012, 4,400 did.[17] In a 2015 Campus Compact survey of higher education institutions, 64 percent reported tracking outcomes related to "global learning" and "social justice orientation," while even higher percentages reported tracking outcomes related to civic engagement.[18]

These developments yoked together an organizational commitment to engagement with a widened field of moral vision (the globe), finding a visible and popular vehicle in the form of immersion travel. In higher education, immersion travel has been used in many ways: for alternative spring breaks, as part of study abroad, and as part of global service-learning.[19] In 2010, more than 150,000 students from American higher education institutions enrolled in short-term study abroad trips, engaging with international communities and social issues.[20] In 2016, nearly one-quarter of all study abroad by college students was for a period of less than four weeks, with volunteer work often a component of the experience.[21] Immersion travel has long since reached the institutionalized acclaim of a "best practice" for civic engagement.[22]

In each of these different streams, in congregations or colleges, immersion travel tends to reflect patterns of civic action in American life more generally. The group basis of immersion travel evokes an American

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[17] Jeffrey S. Dill, *The Longings and Limits of Global Citizenship Education: The Moral Pedagogy of Schooling in a Cosmopolitan Age* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[18] Campus Compact, "2015 Annual Member Survey," (Campus Compact, 2016).

[19] Hartmann and Kiely, "Pushing Boundaries: Introduction to the Global Service-Learning Special Section."; Catherine Fobes and Tera Hefferan, "Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century: Using Praxis Projects to Teach about Global Learning in Mid-Michigan," *Michigan Sociological Review* 23 (2009); Piacitelli et al., "Alternative Break Programs."

[20] Patricia Chow and Rajika Bhandari, "Open Doors 2011 Report on International Educational Change," (New York: Institute of International Education, 2011), as cited in Matthew J. Stone and James F. Petrick, "The Educational Benefits of Travel Experiences: A Literature Review," *Journal of Travel Research* 52, 6 (2013).

[21] Institute of International Education, "Detailed Duration of U.S. Study Abroad, 2005/6–2015/16," in *Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange* (New York, 2017); Mostafanezhad, *Volunteer Tourism*.

[22] Ken Crane, Lachelle Norris, and Kevin Barry, "Mobilizing Communities through International Study Tours: Project Mexico Immersion and New Immigrants in the Midwest," *Human Organization* 69, 4 (2010).

cultural and religious preference for small groups to achieve civic goals.[23] The brief duration of immersion travel incorporates the short-term packaging of civic engagement that has become common in the United States, a trend that has accelerated in the past twenty years as nonprofit organizations provide "drop-in" opportunities for people to achieve a tangible end in a short amount of time.[24] The nonspecialized skills required of travelers encourages participation by an expansive pool of participants, bypassing the time- and resource-intensive commitments associated with traditional transnational roles, such as missionary or Peace Corps volunteer. The emphasis on face-to-face interaction with foreign locals and immersion into their life contexts ties together an American civic preference for relational social assistance with a valuing of "authentic" cross-cultural experience.[25] And the mixing of personal growth with civic action continues a long history of intertwining personal and social reform in American life.[26]

Immersion travel's widespread popularity suggests exciting newness and uniqueness for those that embrace it. But, to understand immersion travel requires seeing it as a practice whose processes, meanings, and appeal are rooted in, respond to, and illuminate central tensions in global civic life.[27]

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[23] Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

[24] Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare's End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Erica Bornstein, "Volunteer Experience," in *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, ed. Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[25] Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Nina Eliasoph, *The Politics of Volunteering* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013); Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*; Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith*; Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[26] Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*; Rebecca Anne Allahyari, *Visions of Charity: Volunteer Workers and Moral Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Paul Lichterman, "Beyond the Seesaw Model: Public Commitment in a Culture of Self-Fulfillment," *Sociological Theory* 13, 3 (1995); Eliasoph, *The Politics of Volunteering*; Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[27] For debates about the origins, measurement, and theory of global civil society, see Gordon Laxer and Sandra Halperin, *Global Civil Society and Its Limits* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Mary Kaldor, Sabine Selchow, and Henrietta L. Moore, *Global Civil Society 2012: Ten Years of Critical Reflection* (New York: Palgrave

DISTANT SUFFERING AND ITS ENCOUNTER

Historically speaking, immersion travel is best understood as an emerging practice for producing and managing a relationship between humans in the global core (e.g., the United States and Europe) and humans in the global periphery (e.g., Third World countries, developing nations, or the Global South). This relationship has been a central religious, political, and sociological question in the course of the past three centuries as the sufferings and social injustices of people living in other countries became a relevant concern for Westerners.[28]

The very idea of "the social" as a category of people with shared characteristics and reasons for suffering developed at the beginning of the modern period, gaining steam in the late eighteenth century.[29] In tandem, "human" became a moral category, rooted in assumptions of universal rationality, the common ability to feel pain, and the experience of personal subjectivity.[30] This turn in cultural life, which socialized the causes and consequences of suffering while emphasizing the experience of individual persons, was pushed along by a range of institutional developments that expanded Western contact and knowledge beyond the borders of Europe.[31] For example, Norbert Elias showed how increasing cross-national interaction and interdependence among European elites transformed social life in a widening "civilizing" ripple, restraining violence and fostering sympathy toward a wider circle of people.[32] Similarly, historian Thomas Haskell has shown how capitalist expansion widened

Macmillan, 2012); Helmut K. Anheier, "Reflections on the Concept and Measurement of Global Civil Society," *Voluntas* 18, 1 (2007); Manuel Castells, "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, 1 (2008); John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[28] Wilkinson and Kleinman, *A Passion for Society.*

[29] Wilkinson and Kleinman, *A Passion for Society.*

[30] Lynn Avery Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013); Thomas W. Laquer, "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of 'Humanity'," in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[31] Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires, and Advocacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[32] Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation* (Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press, 2012).

the circle of Western sympathy, a development pushed along as readers of new mass-market novels encountered suffering fictional characters with whom they could emotionally identify.[33]

Even if the suffering of distant others was becoming known to Westerners, however, the conclusion that there was a moral obligation to do something about it was not yet widely shared. Adam Smith, writing in the late eighteenth century, argued that sympathy tended to arise primarily and most intensely for those who were near and dear.[34] Long-distance sympathy might arise through imagining the feeling of distant suffering, Smith argued, but he was suspicious about the moral implications of such awareness given that people were unable to do anything about it. He famously wrote in the late 1700s that, if we learned of humans suffering at a removed distance, "to give ourselves any anxiety upon that account, seems to be no part of our duty."[35] As Fonna Forman-Barzilai explains, Smith "found it absurd and cynical to extend duty to actions that were better suited to saints and beyond the capacities of ordinary eighteenth-century people" who were oriented toward local, personal attachments.[36]

One of the ironies of history is that, at the moment Smith was writing, the first organized attempts to address distant social suffering by ordinary Westerners were already well underway.[37] Peter Stamatov has shown that, by the seventeenth century, religious activists within European colonial powers created long-distance advocacy networks to critique and address the social conditions of colonized places and persons.[38] During Smith's own time and within his geographic orbit, the slavery abolition movement was already in motion.[39] Describing the 1790s British sugar boycott and its use of narrative to publicize the scourge of slavery to a

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[33] Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1," *The American Historical Review* 90, 2 (1985); Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History.*

[34] Fonna Forman-Barzilai, "Sympathy in Space(s) Adam Smith on Proximity," *Political Theory* 33, 2 (2005).

[35] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1759]), p. 161.

[36] Forman-Barzilai, "Sympathy in Space(s)," p. 202.

[37] Peter Stamatov, "Activist Religion, Empire, and the Emergence of Modern Long-Distance Advocacy Networks," *American Sociological Review* 75, 4 (2010); Fonna Forman-Barzilai, "And Thus Spoke the Spectator: Adam Smith for Humanitarians," *The Adam Smith Review* 1 (2004).

[38] Stamatov, "Activist Religion."

[39] Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).