

Empathy Beyond US Borders

How do middle-class Americans become aware of distant social problems and act against them? US colleges, congregations, and seminaries increasingly promote immersion travel as a way to bridge global distance, produce empathy, and increase global awareness. But does it? Drawing from a mixed methods study of a progressive, religious immersion travel organization at the US-Mexico border, *Empathy Beyond US Borders* provides a broad sociological context for the rise of immersion travel as a form of transnational civic engagement. Gary J. Adler, Jr. follows alongside immersion travelers as they meet undocumented immigrants, walk desert trails, and witness deportations. His close observations combine with interviews and surveys to evaluate the potential of this civic action, while developing theory about culture, empathy, and progressive religion in transnational civic life. This timely book describes the moralization of travel, the organizational challenges of transnational engagement, and the difficulty of feeling transformed but not knowing how to help.

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Empathy Beyond US Borders

The Challenges of Transnational Civic Engagement

GARY J. ADLER, JR.

The Pennsylvania State University



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*For Selena and Samuel,
my two brightest “California stars.”*

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Preface: Are You Ready to Be Transformed?

I recently had the chance to see Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in concert. That night, he walked onto the stage, said “Hello,” then growled, with a sly grin: “Are you ready to be transformed?” Across the crowd, thousands yelled – screamed – “Yes!” Three and a half hours later many of us seemed to feel transformed from this musical immersion. Despite how impossibly naive this sounds, my life felt focused and reenergized. I promised myself that I would carry the feeling and authenticity beyond the moment. I suspect thousands of fellow hip-shakers felt similarly. I suspect, too, that you, the reader, may have had a similar experience; perhaps not Springsteen, but rather with Alicia Keys, Lady Antebellum, Drake, U2, a Broadway show, or the latest K-Pop band instead. But what do I – you – have to show for our moments of feeling transformed? I would be hard-pressed to point to anything that was different about my beliefs, behaviors, or commitments as a result of that concert. It was only a concert, after all, so who cares?

But what if, instead of a concert, the transformative experience was a trip to meet with distant others suffering from living amid extreme inequality, economic instability, structural violence, or political failure? How, if at all, might you or I be changed? What could we do with our new awareness? What if our lives had nothing to show for it?

These are the questions that are confronted by an increasing number of people in the United States as they travel abroad to broaden their horizons, meet distant others, and become global citizens. Relatively unnoticed beside the large presence of professionalized humanitarian organizations that operate around the globe, an array of small nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) produce transnational engagement and

personalize global civic life for millions of travelers each year. The names for these organized attempts at global civic engagement have proliferated in recent decades: short-term mission trips, alternative spring breaks, solidarity trips, short-term study abroad, alternative tourism, justice tourism, volunteer vacations, and more. I call them all immersion trips.

Immersion trips are a pragmatic way for congregations, colleges, and other civic organizations in the United States to activate ideals of being involved, being aware, and doing good. The same sort of organizations that fostered increased *domestic* civic engagement in the 1990s now promote a wave of direct, civic engagement by Americans with “the globe.” Make no mistake: traveling to engage with suffering *somewhere* in the globe has become a mark of cosmopolitan concern and civic character.

Immersion travel is posed as a means to an ideal civic end, but, as this book will explore, it is a complicated means to unclear, hoped-for ends. Along the way, we will uncover the invisible organizational work that enables transnational civic engagement, pull apart the cultural processes that structure travel, catalogue the emotions that emerge, trace the influence of progressive religion in global engagement, and observe earnest but problematic attempts by travelers to produce personal connections with suffering others.

Maybe you have been on an immersion trip. Or, maybe you had a travel experience like this and came back wondering why others made such a big deal of their own experience. Maybe you have wondered about the bubbling group of excited travelers with matching T-shirts proclaiming “Mission to Mexico” that you once passed in the airport. Or, maybe you have worried whether your school, congregation, or college should spend so much time and money to send privileged people so far away when they could just as easily learn about global problems at home, sending the monetary savings abroad as donations. Or, maybe you have wondered whether this phenomenon is “good” for international communities, for individual travelers, or for global justice writ large. I invite all of these potential readers. For all, this book looks at immersion travel as the latest imperfect practice in a centuries-long attempt by people and organizations in privileged, Western countries to understand and address distant suffering.

Acknowledgments

The research behind this book would have been impossible without the advice and encouragement of my dissertation committee at the University of Arizona. I tried out the idea for this research as part of a graduate course with Jeff Sallaz and my familiarity with civic action at the US-Mexico border grew from research work with Kraig Beyerlein. Joseph Galaskiewicz encouraged me to see the distinct organizational processes involved. Ronald Breiger indulged my initial attempts to make sense of my extensive data, pointing me toward the fundamental cultural processes at play.

BorderLinks, the thirty-year-old immersion trip producer located in Tucson, Arizona, which this book revolves around, was gracious in providing access to its space, participants, staff, and immersion trips. The director of BorderLinks at the time, Delle McCormick, was extremely helpful in supporting the project. The staff, who remain anonymous throughout, were patient with my intrusion into their lives. I was welcomed and treated with respect by the groups and travelers on the six immersion trips that I joined. Some travelers have provided comments that have strengthened my thinking. One traveler who spent seven days with me – and joined me in scrounging for coffee at every turn on the trip – gave me what I consider the highest compliment. In saying goodbye, he said, “I now know what motivates sociologists: conscience and caffeine.” The latter has certainly motivated my writing; I can only hope my contribution to his self-understanding and the sociological understanding of transnational civic engagement reflects the former.

For a portion of my research time, I lived 500 miles away from Tucson. Many people supported my return trips for fieldwork. Thanks are due to

Dan Martinez, Jessica Hamar Martinez, Garrett Schneider, A. Joseph West, Lorenzo Gamboa, and Sister/Dr. Katie Hoegeman for the assistance they provided in this regard. Throughout the project, I received invaluable feedback about how to sharpen my questions, to understand my data, and to tell the story of immersion travel in a way that captured the feel of participants but also revealed underlying social mechanisms. Those who have provided helpful comments at various stages include Nancy Ammerman, Mary Jo Bane, Kelly Bergstrand, Kelly Bohrer, Tricia Bruce, Matt Carnes, S.J., Nina Eliasoph, John Evans, Michael Evans, Roger Finke, Richard Flory, Kim Greenwell, Janet “Lucie” Luce, Donald Miller, Brad Nabors, Steven Offutt, Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrens, Brady Potts, Joel Robbins, Rebecca Sager, and Grace Yukich. Jerome Baggett, Caroline Lee, Paul Lichterman, John McCarthy, and three anonymous reviewers read and provided feedback on large portions of the manuscript. Richard Wood, an early pioneer in tracing religious processes in progressive social action, provided invaluable encouragement and advice for my ideas. I thank him, his fellow series editors, and Sarah Doskow at Cambridge University Press for seeing a place for this book.

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Living in Arizona during the mid-2000s, less than seventy miles from the US-Mexico border, exposed me to the inhumanity of failing political

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policies, the brute power of economic forces, the din of nativism, and the inspiring work of many for the just treatment of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants. Immigration continues to be a symbolic battleground with real costs in US history. One of the puzzles I have tried to understand through this project is what people with resources, voice, and conscience do once they are aware. This research was part of my answer to that puzzle. I dedicate this to all those who refuse to turn their eyes, bodies, and imaginations away from suffering but struggle with knowing what to do. A model in my life for how to do this with integrity has been my fabulous wife, Selena E. Ortiz, PhD. The challenging conversations with her and the personal experiences she has shared with me have sustained my work, my curiosity, and my hope.