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## Cruzando Fronteras, Crossing Phoenix

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By *Kristin Koptiuch.*



My head spun as I caught sight of the new billboard on a corner in my central Phoenix neighborhood. I immediately made an unauthorized U-turn and drove home to get my camera. Better snap a photo, pronto – the sign wouldn't be there very long. Sure enough, within a couple of days *Cruzando Fronteras* had vanished, its mundane replacement swiftly covering over its lightening-flash disclosure that the US/Mexico border cuts right through my city.

It was January 2003, and anti-immigrant sentiment was beginning to heat up in Arizona. That year, over 200 migrants lost their lives attempting to cross the Sonoran desert from Mexico into my adopted state. More than 2,000 have perished since, according to the [Arizona Recovered Human Remains Project](#).



Over the next few years, self-styled Minutemen vigilantes patrolled the Arizona/Mexico border and billions were spent on border surveillance. Sheriff's posses staged workplace roundups across the city, capturing unauthorized migrants who had "endangered America" by taking low-paid jobs as restaurant dishwashers, hotel housekeepers, and housing-boom construction workers. State legislators launched a raft of bills targeting migrants, culminating in the infamously mean-spirited SB1070 (recently declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court). In their infinite wisdom, they also banned teaching Mexican American history and culture in the public high school curriculum of nearby-city Tucson, as if such knowledge in and of itself renders Latino youth seditious.

Migrants' rights advocates responded at each step, adapting an international discourse on human rights to local social justice activism. They marched an unprecedented 100,000-strong through the streets of downtown Phoenix. They countered law enforcement with lawsuits, and encouraged new citizenship and voter registration, flexing a growing Latino political clout. They formed barrio defense committees to reassure the city's anxious Latino population, many of whose families include both citizen and unauthorized members. For them, *cruzando fronteras* was an everyday occurrence right in their own living rooms.



All this was yet to happen when the billboard conjured its evocative sign of the border in my urban neighborhood, 180 miles from the nation's literal edge. Ostensibly, it pitched a hugely popular Spanish-language morning radio program, dec-jayed by Mexican-born broadcasting personality and migrant rights supporter Eddie "Piolín" Sotelo, here depicted larger-than-life. But the sign's perilous truth, the reason for its abrupt disappearance, was a message too dizzying for the city's locals to acknowledge: Phoenix had been transnationalized.



The billboard made clear, if only for a flickering moment, that it was already too late for those whose Nativist mindset sought to bulwark "our" borders, be these at the edge of the nation, their gated community, or their front yard. Economic integration already intimately linked the US and Mexico through trade agreements like NAFTA, that was, in large measure, responsible for the displacement of Mexican farmers from their country to ours. The irrepressible demographic insurgency of Latinos, who now make up over 40% of the Phoenix population, would dash all efforts to stave off the inevitable challenge to Arizona's historical white supremacy. Much like the Great Migration of African

Americans from the erstwhile Confederacy to the northern cities in the first half of the 20th century, this second great migration from a deeper south had definitively transformed "American" urban culture. Arizona, the Juan Crow Mississippi-in-the-desert, had already been changed.

As for the “Dreamers,” those undocumented youth brought to the US as children who currently struggle for legal legitimacy, had they been ordinary commodities, the “value added” to their social-psychological “production” by schooling, popular culture, and other formative US institutions would indisputably qualify them as “Made in the USA.” With few such goods manufactured in the US these days, one might think Americans would seize this rare opportunity to claim these made-Americans as their own, rather than deport them to homelands they do not know. But to do this would be to accept the billboard’s truth, which many are not yet willing to face.



These days, evidence of the transnationalized urban landscape is everywhere, boldly looking urban vertigo in the eye. The signs are abundantly clear to anyone willing to read them: the border has already crossed Phoenix.

*About the author:*

*Kristin is an urban ethnographer researching urban culture and social space in Phoenix, where she has lived for 20 years now.*