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The Desert of the Ethical

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In Levinas’ essay, “Exclusive Rights,” from *Difficult Freedom*, we find these comments on the concept of the city:

The dawn of truth comes up, and the first gesture of universalization is made, when I become aware of the coherent discourses that are different from mine and stand alongside my own, and when I search for a common language. The life of truth and its expansion can thus be conceived as a life in the City, like a politics. To respect the Other is, before all else, to refer to the Other’s opinion.¹

This concept of the city is framed by what Levinas refers to as the heritage of a Graeco-Roman process of freeing oneself from one’s particularisms by way of confronting my certainty with the certainties of others, a process he designated as war. This account of the rise of city-states takes shape as the expansion of a Hegelian discourse that proceeds inexorably through *demanding recognition and accord* by the vanquished one in its successive imperialist confrontations.² But Levinas also proposes another sort of city and that is the messianic city of refuge, the place where human communities form that are open to welcoming and embracing the stranger, the orphan, and the widow—or those violently dispossessed of their former homes and possessions by fascist policies, a Hobbesian state of nature of the war of all against all, or, simply, the relentless and impersonal expansion of capitalist-fueled globalizations with its inexorable monopolization of environmental resources.³

As far as I can tell, the concept of “desert” in Levinas’s thought seems to retain its familiar associations, namely, as an environment that can be empirically characterized as inhospitable, barren, and destitute of the kinds of material resources necessary for the growth of the autonomous and autochthonous subjective self. It also seems plausible that a relevant extension of desert conditions to human community in Levinas’s
topography would be the “cities” of concentration camps of the Holocaust. In other words, there is a correlative interior type of desert that, with Levinas, can be intuited as what I am calling a desert of the ethical. In what follows I would like to refer to both of these conditions—the ontological and the ethical deserts—as a way to better understand why humans in general move from such desert regions to areas that promise what seems like greater fecundity and the possibilities of growth and expansion of family and tribe. I would like to modify each of these depictions in consonance with what I take to be a Levinasian ethical horizon for my reflections.

Today’s reflections originate out of my grappling with the issue of Mexican and Central American migration into the United States. At this point, I should note that what I have to say here is not directly about Levinas but is none the less an appropriate Levinasian adventure. It is appropriate because I concern myself with an issue that Levinas took up as central to his task, namely, concern for the plight of the other in their exilic movements, that is, their unwilling and often-times violent displacement from their traditional land of origin, home and family life. In accentuating my intentions in this way, I mean to direct attention to the plight associated with the stream of Mexicans and other Latinos who cross the border by the thousands on a daily basis within miles, and perhaps even less than a mile, from where I live in El Paso, Texas. Latinos are on the move and have been on the move in mass numbers away from their former homes in their desert communities to the beckoning call of an Emerald City—El Paso, a city of hope and possibility, to reclaim their home-life.

As the wicked witch cackles to her flying monkey, “and now my beauties, something with poison in it, I think … poppies will put them to sleep,” Dorothy and her friends do not know the poison of the poppies that will put them to sleep. However, their sleep is innocent and a fiction whereas the heroin that comes from the poppy fields of Mexico and Columbia that the migrants find in Juarez do not just put them to sleep, it murders them. And the sickness is fed by the massive profits that can be made from plants into drugs. For example, just in the U.S. alone, the profits are estimated to be in the billions every year:

- $37 billion on cocaine
- $34 billion for marijuana
- $11 billion for opiates
- $18 billion for amphetamines and MDMA, commonly termed “Ecstasy.”
- (2013 figures from the Office of National Drug Control Policy)4

Alarmingly, use is no longer just limited to the U.S. but is increasingly plaguing many Latinos across the Americas, but especially Mexicans. And, the consequences of such extraordinary drug use and drug trafficking for public health issues should be readily apparent.

El Paso is not merely representative of other U.S. cities that have taken shape as modern cities of refuge. Paradoxically, it has become a quintessential city of refuge because of its status as the safest city for its size in the U.S., while Juarez became one of the most dangerous cities in the entire world during the drug cartel wars, from 2008-2011.5
But it is in this environment that I work and dwell and enjoy my being with others. I have flourished here and have experienced the flourishing lives of others. But taken together with the phenomenon of migration, drug wars, femicides, and NAFTA-engineered exploitation of Mexican laborers, it is also a desert environment, both ontologically and ethically. It is, significantly, as the desert region of the ethical—where the lives of many thousands of humans are daily subjected to environmental conditions, geographical, and socio-political, that frame and thereby anchor their choices to lead unhealthy and dramatically non-flourishing lives. These are conditions that give those of us with the luck or luxury to practice philosophy and science, right here and right now on the border of El Paso/Juarez, pause to reflect.

Consequently, my reflections here continue a series of earlier reflections on the issues of immigration and political integration and segregation that I began in a previous work reflecting on the policies having to do with “illegal aliens” as their destinies continue to play out on the border of the USA and Mexico, a phenomenon also unfolding along the borders of other developed and developing countries throughout the rest of the world. In that earlier work, I used the philosophies of Locke, Hegel, and Levinas to reflect on what precipitates and what challenges the sorts of inclinations that result in legal policies meant to exclude others.

This paper is really not about the troubling effects that the drug war and drug use has on public health. Rather, I am going to talk about water and my neighbors. I begin by elaborating on a line of thought that has to do with a phenomenology of the dialectic of “exile and community,” reflections inspired by an acquaintance with those sorts of empirical events when humans are moved, either violently or out of need, from the material and spiritual scarcities of their desert environments—said otherwise, it is the phenomenon of humans being moved from their deserted socio-economic conditions to what seems to them to be the fertile and thriving cities of refuge along the border and the margins of their lives, cities like El Paso. I often come face to face with these exiles as my students or as the children or relatives of such immigrants, sometimes characterized as first-generation college students. These include relatives of the many immigrants and migrant workers such as those being taught basic levels of communication and assimilation in a GED program by a former student of mine, Andres Muro. They are also those whose genealogical heritage is the desert. While desert environments may at first glance seem bleak and inhospitable, the communities that emerged in those regions adapted to the land and the resources that it provided and the support that their fellow humans provided for each other. Contemporary examples of such thriving communities imperiled by industrial modernization are the Bhil and the Bishnoi cultures that have coexisted in the Rajasthan desert of central India for many centuries or the Menatawai of Indonesia. The combination of techno-industrial growth and modern forms of totalitarianism have disrupted the fragile balances of these communities with their lands while simultaneously producing the attraction of immense wealth and productive capacity in the more fertile, forested regions of the world. Humans who have gathered in these lush regions formed complex cultures and highly developed technologically advanced civilizations.
Indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century, anthropological research attests to the fact that desert peoples develop differently than forest peoples. That includes developing radically different social and environmental ethics as well as religious and political organizations. Desert dwellers are more apt to be monotheistic, militaristic, and nomadic with hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian social orders while forest and river dwellers tend to be polytheistic, pacific, and stable with multicultural, multilingual, and often matriarchal social orders—largely, it seems, because of the lush abundance of their environment and ecosystems. Unlike the desert peoples who have to contend with environments that provide few resources, are harsh and unforgiving, and that demand highly parsimonious economies, forest and valley regions allow for the development of generous spiritualities. Unsurprisingly, the peoples who have migrated from desert regions of the world—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—brought with them their desert ethics, politics and lifestyles, and have become dominant economically and militarily with their centuries of training in survival tactics. Even less surprising, then, they have tended to return to the undeveloped, apparently deserted regions of the world in order to fuel the growth of their “fertile communities,” creating emerald cities and a meta-narrative that on the one hand justified the ongoing violation of the desert-dwellers while on the other hand paradoxically provided the only welcoming place for those forced into exile. While Levinas had the modern city of Jerusalem in mind with his reference to a “city of exile,” it is clear that other cosmopolitan cities have actually come to play the role of messianic goal for the poor and dispossessed of the world.

As before, I frame my reflections within the Levinasian context of “ethics as first politics,” a context that guides my questioning the phenomenon of “illegal aliens.” It seems clear to me that the ongoing event of Mexicans crossing the border some few dozen miles from El Paso where I dwell, is not merely political but is and should be prioritized as essentially ethical. Therefore, I will continue to redirect the attention being paid to this issue from the political to the ethical in order to foster more convincing and empirically transformative acts of judgment. In this task, I find Levinas’s philosophical guidance helpful and so I again take up a Levinasian thread. Towards the end of my “illegal alien” essay, I pointed out that responsibility emerges in what Levinas refers to as a “time before community.” As I noted then, that which emerges “prior to my awareness of being in community is that which alerts me to a call from and for the other.” Levinas calls this a call to “anarchic responsibility” that occurs as extreme separation and non-fraternity such that I become aware of my “responsibility for my neighbor, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner.”

I pointed out that in so far as I experience such “anarchic responsibility,” it arises within me as I dwell within the desert in how I have come to experience the sensibility of other desert-dwellers. I experience that sensibility as both desert-dweller who has experienced the unforgiving harshness and fragile balance of this world’s desert environments but also as one who works on the other side of the border of the desert, teaching and writing at a university in the “welcoming” metropolis of El Paso/Juarez. Like many others, this metropolis was born out of the politics of the expansion of the language of commerce, in this case, the commerce of oil and agribusiness and of low-wage factories and maquiladoras. Its turn to murder and mayhem (from 2008-2011)
and the increasing health problems associated with drug trafficking and abuse along was only the tip of spiny cactus however, whose hostile external spines are rooted in an environmental collapse contingent on overpopulation encouraged and supported by ethically challenged engineers and politicians. In fact, El Paso’s status as an end-goal has always been ambiguous since many of the humans in flight are merely passing through the region to other cities throughout the United States for refuge. Seen from the more intimate perspective of my office window, less than a mile from the border, El Paso represents other U.S. cities and is the actual goal for exiles, while the Mexican city of Juarez is merely the staging platform. Most strangely of all, though, this great unified city divided by two languages, two cultures, two states, and two countries is still a city of the desert. I would like to use Levinas’s philosophy to help us to better understand the motivations and intentions behind the phenomenon of several thousand Mexicans and Latinos crossing the border from one geographical desert to an ethical desert.

First, consider topography. Deserts currently cover at least one quarter of the world’s land surface and they are increasing at an alarming rate. For several millennia previous to the twentieth century, indigenous communities successfully negotiated the continuity of their lives with the fragile eco-system of whatever desert within which they lived. This life of balanced dependence is no longer the norm, however, which has led to a global crisis in the possibility of viably sustaining human communities on the already very limited resources that remain available. The cause of this crisis is the accelerated desertification of our already dry lands based on what I am calling the desert of the ethical that has developed in the concentrations of humans in the major city-states of the world, led by those of the United States—including El Paso. What do we know of the phenomenon of ethical desertification that has occurred in Mexico over the past decades which, arguably, has directly contributed to violence forcing the Mexican people to move across the border from one formerly hospitable desert to the apparent welcome of the city of another desert? We should know that it is the expansion of the city itself—El Paso/Juarez—that has precipitated the movement, based on an inversion of a kind of metaphysical expansion of the subjective self that I learned of through reading Levinas.

A brief glance into the politics of the desert that is Mexico serves to illustrate my point. Several years ago, John Ross of the San Francisco Bay Guardian, alarmingly noted that more than half of Mexico is arid, desert environment and that, according to the National Commission on Arid and Semi-arid Lands, that area is becoming an uninhabitable wasteland at the rate of two percent per year. Both subsistence farmers and indigenous native peoples have fled the lands as more and more aquifers were drained and the soil that was once used for farming and small-herd grazing became the dust blowing an ever-burgeoning wave of billowing migration from the deserts to cities. It is evident that the desertification has been caused by agribusinesses such as Eduardo Trico Hara’s giant dairy conglomerate Lala, which supplies the Mexican national milk distribution agency Licona with the bulk of its milk products. When he was in office, Vicente Fox helped to direct the National Water Commission (via Clemente Jaime Jarquez and CONAGUA; he was also former CEO of Lala Corporation) to tap the northern Mexican aquifers to quench the thirst of the cowherds. The
granting of permits to drill new wells continues as the old, existing ones dry up.\textsuperscript{11} Other corporate entities sucking the desert dry are the Bachocho corporation in the Sonoran desert, which is the major chicken supplier for Pepsico’s KFC, and the Coca-Cola Corporation, whose grant to draw millions of gallons of Mexican desert water resulted from policies initiated by Fox as a sweetheart deal for the work he once did as chief Coca Cola rep in Mexico. "In San Cristobal de las Casas Chiapas, ‘La Coca’ sucks up five liters every second from the Huitepec aquifer where the rebel Zapatista Army of National Liberation…installed an encampment to protest the selling off of precious water."\textsuperscript{12} Finally, clear-cutting practices by big timber companies in places such as Zacatecas result in the yearly loss of more than 150,000 hectares to the growth of sand dunes instead of forests or crops. Should we be surprised that what were once healthy desert communities are now ghost towns as residents flee for mere survival to the homogenizing cities of the North, such as El Paso? Even more alarming, as many of us know, desertification is a global phenomenon. Twenty percent of the planet is already desert and forty percent more is in danger, “directly impacting 250 million people and threatening 1.5 billion more, according to numbers presented by Doctor Zafar Abdeel at the 2005 United Nations conference on the degradation of arid lands. Some 60 million sub-Saharan will be forced off ancestral lands in the next twenty years and migrate in search of work and water as the desert takes over.”\textsuperscript{13}

How do Levinas’s cues help us to make sense of these distressing dynamics? Let us begin with a Levinasian phenomenology of the desert dweller. Beginning with desiring the invisible, those who dwell in deserts enact the metaphysical desire of yearning to leave the unbearable of the desert of their current physical suffering. That is, s/he desires to change the physical condition that threatens to undermine his or her sensible life of living from the land that initially helped to meet his or her needs, secured his or her home and allowed him or her time to desire the enjoyments of a spiritually rich life of separation and interiority. As Levinas teaches, however, such enjoyment and fundamental security is troubled by an insecurity initiated with a “concern for the morrow” and the dawning of “the primordial phenomenon of the essentially uncertain future of sensibility.”\textsuperscript{14} This Mexican living in a small town in northern Mexico, which is now without an aquifer, faces the sort of poverty from which he and his forbearers had liberated themselves. While having detached himself from the world from which he nourished himself—and thus afforded himself thereby time and consciousness to enrich himself and his community—he now struggles with the immanence of need not being able to be met. He suffers a loss of self-possession, suffers a loss of stature (of height) and is thus humiliated. The home he built as dwelling within which to recollect and represent his actions to himself is no longer the source of nourishment and enjoyment. As an exploited victim of the global hunger for transnational goods and commodities, he is no longer able to experience the gentleness of intimacy.\textsuperscript{15}

Instead, the ruthless logic of the dialectic of war and aggression, fueled by the expanding market forces of city communities around the world, forces him from the dwelling he once inhabited. The ethics of the ethical desertification of the city over the desert results from the burgeoning overflow of the concretization of the consciousness of our world that has become insensitive to the optics of the other. Given such politically sanctioned (through war and government policy) economic conditions, what
hope can there continue to be for a phenomenon of desert dwelling that occurs as that event of recollection that experiences home as refuge and a source of expectant hospitality? Instead, these desert dwellers, ethically deserted by their fellow humans, are thrown back into the throes of struggling with the natural elements, impotent in regard to their life of labor and the accumulation of property and movable goods. The former desert-dweller is forced into exile and to migrate from what was his home because of the loss of the ground of nourishment presupposed by the initial act of building his own home. A distortion of the Levinasian sense of metaphysical order occurs because what has happened is the loss of the experienced fact of the domination of things in one’s environment through removing the possibility of even working at all with one’s hands.

As readers of Levinas know, this discourse of possession is the propadeutic for the discourse of contestation of possessions and the introduction of the actions of command and word and thus of the absolute resistance of the face of another. This dialectic of dispossession further opens up the possibility of violence and murder. Since the renewable elements with which to nourish oneself have been extracted from the desert environment, there is no longer the possibility of building homes and communities and thereby delaying (postponing) the inevitability of death. For upon what can the body labor? Distance and time and the interior life of spirituality that makes generosity possible all collapse because of the loss of the freedom of the home, a freedom of and for self-possessession which forestalls the future and gives itself time. In venturing forward to grasp the tool by which the body could secure its goal, the groping hand returns with nothing. No longer at home with himself, the Mexican desert-dweller is forced to realign his goals and aim for the border city that beckons with the promise of work, often tragically dying at that border between deserts.16

In closing, a few words about the city on the Rio Grande that I inhabit. Like many other dwellers of this and other U.S. cities, I engage in the violence of military maneuvers to secure the resources to satisfy my desires. For you see, uncannily paralleling the forced migration patterns of throngs of Latinos pressing to illegally cross the border into the United States, El Paso has become a city that mirrors the militarism and commitment to an imperialist war mentality referred to in my opening lines. Most pointedly, the El Paso region is “home” to Fort Bliss, Holloman Air Force Base, White Sands Missile Range, and for many years a contingent of the German Luftwaffe, as well as, most recently, the happy recipient of recent escalations of tens of thousands of soldiers (and their families). The University of Texas at El Paso, where I work, has instituted several academic programs impacting many levels of the curriculum that grant its recipients with the distinction of having done academic course-work that better qualifies them to work in military intelligence. In this way, many more thousands of former desert dwellers will be awakened to the threat of terrorist desert dwellers threatening their good opinions of themselves.

In essence, we must not forget the Levinasian self-accusation. I am responsible for the responsibility, or lack of responsibility of the other. I live in the ethical desert of the city dweller whose appetite is fueled by a metaphysical desire that is infinite and expands beyond into the exploitation of the place in the sun of the other. It is desire unchecked and thus unjust because it is insensitive to the vulnerability of the
flesh of the one before me, unchecked by any third presence. Consequently, I find myself more often than not sleeping through the nocturnal knock at my door of the tired and hungry migrant who has crossed into my city from afar, traumatically appealing to me in my flesh to recuperate the possibility of sharing in healthy desire.

NOTES


2. G.W.F. Hegel, The Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1956). Hegel questions: “But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of the States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized—the question involuntarily arises—to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered.” (21) And he then answers himself: “It must further be understood that all the worth which the human being possess—all spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State…. Thus only is he fully conscious; thus only is he a partaker of morality—of a just and moral social and political life. For Truth is the Unity of the universal and subjective Will; and the Universal is to be found in the State, in its laws, its universal and rational arrangements. The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth” (39).


7. Andres Muro coordinates the GED Program at El Paso Community College and has studied phenomenology with me. He worked with another former philosophy student of mine, Minerva Laveaga to publish two collections of first-generation, first-person accounts of the experiences of migrant workers in El Paso county: Memorias del silencio: Footprints from the Borderland, edited by Minerva Laveaga (El Paso, Texas: BorderSenses, 2005) and Memorias del Silencio: Footprints from the Borderland Vol. II, edited by Minerva Laveaga (El Paso, TX: BorderSenses, 2006). At University of Texas at El Paso and El Paso Community College, many who need basic literacy and math skills are granted access in order to cultivate excellence—their arete.

8. See: Jean-Phillipe Soule, “The Desert Dwellers of Rajasthan: Bishnoi and Bhil People,” Native Planet: Preserving Cultures, Empowering People, Feb 2003, Web. <http://www.native-planet.org/indigenous/cultures/india/bishnoi/bishnoi5/shtml>. For centuries, the Bhil and the Bishnoi cultures have coexisted in the Rajasthan desert of central India. Though they live diametrically opposed lifestyles and have vastly different philosophies, they are drawn together by
a bond much stronger than their differences: the struggle to survive in this harsh and unforgiving
land. They are committed to living by the principles of a classless society, pro-active agricultural
development, and a passive approach to the environment that entails converting desert land to
arable conditions and preserving existing resources, especially trees. When this article was writ-
teen in 2011, they were threatened because of a three-year draught. Pankaj Jain describes their
different approaches to religious-inspired conservation practices in his book, *Dharma and Eco-
80-94 but also the whole book). He notes how the Bishnoi are much more likely to be inspired
to actively work towards preserving the integrity of the environment in general while the Bhil
focus more narrowly on just preserving the natural environment within their sacred sites, based
on his assessment of their differing religious orientations.

9. See a fine discussion of these distinctions by Robert Sapolsky, “Are the Desert People

10. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 83-84.

11. In “An American Sahara: Mexico is Milking its Northern Deserts Dry” by John Ross:
“Cuatro Cienegas water is precious. The biosphere was once under the sea and its secrets date
back to the Jurassic age. Indeed, microorganisms native to the region’s land and water are so
unique that the biosphere has been dubbed Mexico’s Galapagos by scientists. Last July, UNAM
biologist Valeria Sauza discovered that since the water agency authorized the drilling of Lala’s
wells, 70% of the aquifers in some valleys have vanished and the geology of the region, which
for 35,000 years remained unaltered, is turning into desert.” (John Ross, “An American Sahara:
Mexico is Milking its Northern Deserts Dry,” San Francisco Bay Guardian Online, 15 May

12. “Perhaps the most disturbing reason for the immense consumption Coke is the lack of
potable water. Some 12 million people in Mexico have no access to piped water and 32 million
have no access to proper sewage. This resource monopolization simultaneously creates a scarce
water supply and a conveniently abundant Coke supply. Mexico is now the number two con-
sumer of bottled water in the world, a large percentage of which is sold by Coca-Cola, ironically
enough.

The process of making Coca-Cola utilizes two liters of water to make one liter of Coke. However, some studies cite the ratio as high as 5:1. Thus it is easy to see how important it is for a
large corporation like Coca-Cola to secure water resources. Due to this immense water demand,
FEMSA literally drains the country of its resources. Since 2000, Coca-Cola has negotiated 27
water concessions with the Mexican government which gives them the right to extract water
from 19 aquifers and 15 rivers, many of which are found within indigenous territories. They
have also acquired an additional 8 concessions allowing the company to dump waste in public
waters. These concessions mark a major step toward the complete privatization of water in
Mexico. However, despite its great resource wealth, the country receives relatively little in
compensation. In 2003 FEMSA paid a mere $29 thousand (USD) for their water concessions in
Mexico, while in 2004 their profits at the San Cristobal bottling plant alone reached $40 million
(USD). A quick calculation shows that Coca-Cola spent 0.072% of their 2004 San Cristobal
profits for the rights to use their entire water supply of 2003 in all of Mexico.” *Coca-Cola and
casacollective.org/story/newsletter/coca-cola-and-water-resources-chiapas>.

13. Of course, it does not have to be this way.

Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 150.

15. Ibid.