

On the Road to Arivaca: A Prose Reflection on a Meeting

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Abstract: This prose is an account of a desert meeting between a social work professor volunteering as a human rights worker and an unauthorized traveler trying to reach his home in California. Framing the prose is an overview of the organizational and geographic setting, followed by a discussion on the social context noting the similarities and difference between the primary actors attributed to their respective social locations. The poem is followed by a discussion on “where are we now” and concludes with a reflection.

Keywords: humanitarian support, unauthorized immigrants, immigration, border crossing, justice, borders, Samaritans, rescue, privilege, Border Patrol

The Timing and Setting of this Prose

It was in late July 2009 that I spent several days along the Arizona/Mexican border investigating the border and issues related to immigration. After visiting organizations on both sides of the border, traveling into Mexico and staying with a Mexican family in a colonia in Nogales, Mexico, I was able to volunteer with a church based humanitarian group, Samaritans of Tucson, Arizona. The organization’s website describes their purpose as, “Since July 1, 2002, Samaritans has been a voice of compassion, a healing presence in the Arizona desert. It is an organization comprised of people of conscience and faith who render humanitarian aid to migrants in distress in the Tucson Sector of the Arizona/Mexico border. Samaritans is a mission of Southside Presbyterian Church” (Tucson Samaritans, n/d.). Daily, this group sends at least one and often two teams of at least three people into the Sonora Desert to drop gallon jugs of water, packets of high energy food and socks and other clothing items at locations where it is believed there has been high immigrant traffic. Each team of three has one person who is trained in first aid, a Spanish speaker, and a support or observer. On a typical day volunteers hike at several locations, maintaining copious notes of signs of foot traffic and marking these findings on hand-held GPS devices. Hikes are along migrant trails and range from a few hundred feet to two miles. At least once a week, a Franciscan Brother leads an overnight patrol traveling the same routes as migrants, who typically travel at night to avoid the heat and take advantage of reduced visibility.

July 31, 2009 was the first desert hiking trip I made with two other men, a nurse and person who had ties to the Guatemalan Consulate in Phoenix. That day we hiked several miles in various locations carrying

gallons of water by hand and in our backpacks, along with food and socks packs. Both men were gracious enough to teach me valuable lessons, about the Samaritan organization, the migrant treks through the desert, and how to “read signs” of recent foot traffic. Not infrequently, volunteers meet immigrants on the trail, and occasionally locate a body. The Guatemalan volunteer had been involved in several “rescues” and many “recoveries”; the nurse, although having volunteered for many months had not yet met a traveler in the desert, which is the typical experience of the average Samaritan volunteer.

Arivaca is a rural town, 11 miles north of the US/Mexican Border and the closest town to our desert hikes that day. I have become quite fond of the place in the four or five trips I have taken to the desert since I started volunteering in 2009. A place with a very wonderfully unique cast of characters that inspire one’s imagination, the town was originally a ranching and mining town, and now boasts a population of 700 residents nestled about 3500 feet into Guijas Mountains. Some joke that the residents are a combination of ranchers, artisans and old hippies. Probably its most famous artisan is children’s book author Bryd Baylor, whose property south of Arivaca hosts the No Mas Muertes camp, a medical clinic founded by “... A coalition of lawyers, professors, anarchists, and radical religious figures made up of nuns, pastors, and parishioners, many of whom were involved in the sanctuary movement of the ‘80s, came together to found the group that has become a pesky bug that won’t go away for Border Patrol”(Villarreal, 2014). The camp, demarcated by yellow caution tape around the parameter, has a rope gate that displays several private property signs, thus requiring any intruders such as Border Patrol, to have a Search Warrant to enter. On the site are several temporary structures and tents that serve as medical clinics for

migrants lost, sick, or injured. Once in the camp travelers typically are safe from Border Patrol for about 72 hours, the approximate time required to obtain a search warrant.

Arivaca, it seems has been “ground zero” in the immigration issue. As Brian Wolf (n/d) stated, “The Clinton Administration introduced the more aggressive ‘prevention through deterrence’ immigration policy in 1994. This plan sought to deter immigrants from crossing by cutting off the traditional crossing routes in the Southwest and funneling border-crossers into harsher terrain.” Traversing this inhospitable terrain with an experienced coyote or guide takes a minimum of five days, about a 40 mile trek from border crossing to highways considered suitable for safe passage. Temperatures in the summer reach as high as 115 during the day, and following monsoonal rains in the afternoon, temperatures can drop into the 60s or lower. Dehydration is the most common source of death among the travelers, but snake and scorpion bites, falling down mountain cliffs, or drowning in flash floods raging through arroyos following sudden rain storms, are among other life threatening encounters facing travelers. Snow frequently falls during the winter months, so migrants crossing face both heat related illnesses in the summer, as well as hypothermia after the rains, and at night, or in the winter. Rape of women is common, and expected. Forensic anthropologists I have hiked with told me that women crossing the desert will plan for it by initiating birth control planning weeks before their travel. Robbery and murder are also not uncommon. This stretch of territory in southern Arizona is essentially lawless. It is not only the travelers that eschew laws, but also Border Patrol agents who occasionally operate outside the law as humanitarian and immigration rights groups routinely report stories of agent abuse, and even murder in the desert, for which no agent has ever been held accountable.

Arivaca is situated in the middle of what the ACLU (2015) calls a constitutional free militarized zone. The main road to the town is an east-west intersect of the desert. Once used by coyotes, families, and friends as a meeting spot for migrants crossing, it is now heavily patrolled by Border agents, so it is no longer considered a safe pick up or meeting spot for travelers. Checkpoints are permanently located on the east and west parts of the single road leading in

and out of the town. Traffic does not flow freely in and out of Arivaca. Rather, it requires passing through a heavily guarded checkpoint reminiscent of entering a Soviet Bloc country back in the days of the Cold War.

On this day, July 31, 2009, we volunteers conducted the rescue at the end of a long, tiring day. As rescues went, it was uneventful. We followed organizational protocol, which had been worked out over the years by human rights lawyers designed to protect volunteers from prosecution. For the two other volunteers the rescue was in some ways a reward for the hard work they had been doing for many months. The mood was almost festive that we had saved a man from possible death. Although that point of celebration was not lost on me, I nonetheless could not fight off an empty happiness somewhere deep in my soul. I turned therefore to writing my existential angst, deciding to put this story in prose form so as to capture its essence. Now as I sit preparing to share publically this angst, I feel no closer to a resolution than I did seven years ago. Sure, we did the right thing according to protocol. But, I know in my heart of hearts the journey for my friend did not end that day. And, neither did my journey of wondering about the difference between correct and just action.

On the Road to Arivaca: The Social Context

Set in the Sonora Desert, this prose captures the dilemma that is often at the core of the ethic of helping within real or perceived boundaries. This prose reflects on a moment in time between two men, caught up in the cross-purposes of the dysfunctional US Immigration policies. Two men both of Mexican heritage, meet in the Sonora desert: one a sojourner, lost and scared and trying to find his way back home into the US to be with his family; and the other a professor volunteering in the desert providing food, water, first aid and clothing support for migrants on their journey.

Both men share in common: cultural heritage as they are both of Mexican descent; marginalized in their own respective ways; familiar with immigration encounters; and, love for family. But despite their commonalities, their social location, places them worlds apart.

Each is marginalized, but in different ways. One lacks resident documentation rendering him a “non-person,”

an “illegal alien” in a land that historically belonged to his ancestors. The other man although privileged in many different ways, a person of mixed heritage, traverses between cultural borders, that of his identity and his profession. As a professor, he walks in the holy temple of the master narrative, academia; a foreign culture really, where his voice is quintessentially an alien one.

Both men are motivated by love for family. One man motivated by love for his daughters, a desire to work and provide safety for the family with whom he has built a home, braves the dangers of the summer desert heat, with little food or water, and no direction. Traversing the treacherous terrain, he also encounters the soul numbing humiliation of running like a wild animal from humans and beasts who view him as little more than a target for prey. The other, motivated by love for an immigrant father long passed on, and a daughter-in-law, who also suffered as an “alien” in the “land of the free.” He is also fueled by anger toward anti-immigrant sentiments, resonating with Univision journalist Jorge Ramos’ (cited in Linthicum, 2015) words, when he suggested there are many social and political concerns Latinos are interested in, but immigration is a defining issue of existential nature that lines up those who are with us and those who are not.

In an act of solidarity and defiance he sets out with other volunteers to drop water, food and clothing in the desert to aid travelers on their journey. Nearing the end of the day and a week of volunteering the professor and companions happen upon this lost sojourner ready to give up his journey of returning to his family and home in California.

What transpires between the two men results in the professor’s reflective prose, an internal struggle of idealism and reality; speculating and acting, and a confrontation with the reality that choices are not choices.

On the Road to Arivaca

Three driving
Tired
Hot
Dirty
Thirsty

Back to Tucson

Walked miles today
Dropped water, and food packs
Picked bags of trash
Sojourners’ artifacts
Litter on the path to dreams

Stop!
Turn around
Back there
Bent over
In the *arroyo*
Check it out

U-turn now

Walking away
Back into the dessert
Two jump out – calling out
Stop, *alto*

Volunteer: *Señor! Agua! Comida! Medico!?!*

One drives on
Decoys *la migra*

Traveler: *Si agua por favor!*

Volunteer: *Señor, we are volunteers*
Are you ok?
Do you need assistance?
Can we help?
How far have you come?
How many days?
Are you by yourself?
Are you hurt?
Sick?
Are there others?
Do they need help?
Are you hungry?

Traveler: *Si I go back to Mexico.*
Today *la migra* came by the camp
There were four of us
Others ran off – left me asleep
La migra didn’t see me – walked right by
I can’t find the others
I see the road

The journey is over

Traveler: Eight days walked
Two days no water
No food
Too hot
Shoes ripped
Feet hurt

The journey is over

Volunteer: Here – new socks
A packet of food
More water

Traveler: I hurt all over
Can't go on
Want to go home

The journey is over

Professor: *Donde es* home?

Traveler: Bakersfield
Two daughters 8 and 7
Mother, sister, brother
Got to get to the girls
Wife alcoholic – can't care for girls

The journey is over

Professor: Are you sure *Señor*?

Traveler: *Sí*

Volunteer: *Señor* drink more aqua
Eat some food
Think about it

Traveler: Tired
Lost
Two women
Two days back
Dead

Volunteer: *Donde*?

Traveler: There in mountains
Two days from here
So bad
No one will ever find them
We see them sitting – like asleep
Arms crossed chest

We touch –
Wake up
Walk with us
Nothing – cold
Eyes shut
No breath
Dead

Volunteer: See anyone else?
Anyone injured?
Sick?

Traveler: No – but many bones

Professor: People?

Traveler: *Sí*'

Volunteer: *Donde*?

Traveler: Elephant Mountain
The stone steps
Very steep
Must climb
Very slippery
Many fall
Dead now
Saw their bones
It's bad out there

The journey is over

Volunteer: Do want us to call *la migra*?

Traveler: *Sí* – I go back to Mexico

Volunteer: Are you sure?
Could be arrested
Put in detention

Traveler: *Sí* – I know
The journey is over

Volunteer: Walk to the road?
Only if you are sure
Amigo back soon
Call *la migra* then

Traveler: *Sí*
It's bad out there
So many problems

People fight
Steal
Kill
Gangs
No good
Two women dead
Can't sleep
Scared

Volunteer: *Pinche* phone
No signal

Professor: Compadres go to call
I'll stay with you

Traveler: *Gracias*

Professor: Are you sure *Señor*?

Traveler: *Sí*
So many problems
My girls
Got to get to my girls
Deported June 2
My little girl call me
Papa come home for my birthday
Promise – on my way
Eight days ago

Carry tortillas,
Canned tuna fish
Water

No *coyote*
Meet three others
Travel together
Today – they ran off
Don't know *camino*
Can't find my way
I hurt all over
My shoes are all ripped

My girls
Mi mama too old to care for them
Ask her to get girls passport
Bring them to Mexico
Mi primo has trailer in Tijuana
We live there

I have job in Bakersfield
Eight years work the fields

Lots of work

Professor: Out there?
What did you eat?

Traveler: *Napoletes*
Picked them
Made fire
Roasted
Good
Two days – no food

What's this?

Professor: Canned *chorizo*
Comer

Traveler: So many problems
It's bad out there

Professor: Did you bring anything for sleep?

Traveler: No
Sleep on ground

Professor: What about clothes?

Traveler: No – *muy frio en la noche*

Professor: Many people out there?

Traveler: *Sí*
One group *muy grande*
53

Professor: *Cincuenta y tres?!!*
For real?

Traveler: *Sí*, many families, old men
Mothers, children
Five maybe *seis anos*
Crying
Fathers carry
My daughters
Desert no place for kids

The journey is over

Waiting for *La Migra*

What to say?

No words
Only pain
Confused

FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

La Migra

I want to scream
Run back *Señor*
Keep the dream!
You're so close
I-10 is just over that mountain

The journey is over

Border Patrol: Is he OK
Are there others?

No – can't do that
He could die

Volunteer: Yes
No

Or,
Señor hide
Wait here
Tonight – I return
Take you with me to LA
Tomorrow

Border Patrol: Is he sick?

Volunteer: No

Take him to his home
To see kids
Work
Love his family
Shelter them from harm

Border Patrol: Seems OK

Where did he come from?

The same as I want
Love
Family
Work
I too am a father!

Volunteer: Mountain over there

Border Patrol: Any one back there?

Professor: Two dead women

What to say
What to do?
Confused
FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Border Patrol: Where?

Traveler: Two days from here

Border Patrol: Heading up there today
Look for them

What does he think of me?
Does he think I could help him?
Does he wonder why I won't help him?
Does he know he could take my money?
Buy a bus ticket to home

Border Patrol: *Señor*
You ready?

Traveler: *Si*
Gracias

Volunteer: Good luck

Professor: Go with God

Am I just some kind of liberal do-gooder?
Big on words—but—only safe actions
Shall I stand by and watch *la migra* haul him off
Is this what I have taught my boys?
And teach my students?
All of this is so much easier on paper
FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Traveler: *Gracias*

The journey is over

Driving to Tucson

Did good today
Saved a life

What about the dream?
Broken?
Delayed?

Confused
Conflicted
Torn

Nogales

Leaves the bus
Phone call
Beans, rice and tortillas
Bus ticket nowhere Mexico

Next move?

The journey is over?

Bakersfield

Little girl waits
No papa
Jumps into bed
Covers head
Cries—alone
Birthday without papa
How many more?

Reflecting in hotel

My head
It was right
He is alive
Be glad

Journey over

My soul weeps

I ask
What was his sin?
Wanting to work?
Care for his family?
Protect his little girls?
What terrorist threat does he pose?

What freedom has to be walled?
Is this democracy?
America's promise:
Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

What a crock of fucking horse shit!

Mr. Reagan's party:
Tear that wall down
Damn you all!

Invaders of this land
With your manifest destiny
And your manifest history

The journey is over?

For whom?

Manifest karma
Manifest justice
Never forgets

On the Road to Arivaca: More Than a Half a Decade Later— Contemporary Context & Reflection

While a lot has changed since 2009, much remains the same. The vitriolic debate over immigration rises with each political seasons. Hate and fear mongering among those on the right and benign neglect and platitudes of those on the “so-called” left dominate the political debate, as the Latino Narrative Threat (Chavez, 2013) rises to a crescendo pitch. In our own profession of social work we have failed to prepare a workforce and fill curricular gaps to effectively work with the largest minority group of color in this country (Baek & Ortiz, 2015; Ortiz, 2007).

For Latinos, immigration remains a wedge issue. Although there are many social issues Latinos as a group are concerned with – such as health care, education, and climate change – Univision journalist Jorge Ramos stated it well (cited in Linthicum, 2015), in saying that for Latinos “the immigration issue is the most pressing symbolically and emotionally.” For good or for ill, immigration is a litmus test many Latinos use to determine whether you are for us or against us.

Unauthorized immigration has plateaued over the last

five years (Pew, 2015). Despite spikes in certain populations, such as the 63,000 women and children who flooded the border in 2014. There are many reasons for this trend: the slow economic recovery has reduced the demand for unskilled, low paid earners; policies of the Obama administration, which has earned the President the dubious title of “Deporter-in-Chief,” because of the aggressive and constant deportations throughout the years of his presidency; and PEW reports that large numbers of people are voluntarily returning to their countries of origin, converting to legal visas, or in a small percentage of cases, dying, have also contributed to the stabilization of unauthorized residents in this country. The numbers of unauthorized entries have also changed with many more Central Americans passing through Mexico to reach the US. Fewer Mexicans are crossing now; in part this is due to Mexico’s economy being more stable and its infrastructure less fractured than Central American countries (PEW, 2015). Those countries are suffering from a complete collapse in their economies and governmental infrastructure, resulting from the aftereffects of post-NAFTA treaties and the collapse of CIA installed dictators following the Reagan proxy civil wars of the 1980s, whose pro-American policies destroyed the social political and economic infrastructure for generations to come. Central Americans fleeing to this country are in a desperate situation, more akin to refugee movement than migration.

On the border things have changed as well. Funding for “border security” has increased tremendously and greater technology has led to increased surveillance. Travelers into the US have been squeezed into an ever shrinking geographic corridor, and forced to take increasingly treacherous routes, traveling “commando” style stealthily and at night. There are two implications here: one, is the demographic of the successful traveler is younger and the leaders are more skilled and often more ruthless. In fact, passage through the desert is almost entirely an enterprise of the Mexican drug cartels. Generations of coyotes are now obsolete. Costs for crossing have increased dramatically, and safe passage often ends in “shakedowns” from families of travelers for more money, while travelers are held hostage or enslaved in the sex trade, or in some situations, killed. Hence, older travelers and those crossing with families are more vulnerable to the

risks of crossing alone or being left behind. Two, while the number of border crossings have decreased, the number of deaths during the same time has remained the same, according to my volunteer colleagues.

As hate mongering has reached an art form in states such as Texas and Arizona, governors of those states have either tacitly or openly encouraged vigilante groups to “hunt down” immigrants. This has resulted in increased violent confrontations between everyone in the desert including Border Patrol agents and travelers alike as victims. For example, in my most recent trip to the border in January 2015, my group observed widespread slashing of water jugs that had been left by Samaritan volunteers. On one recent hike I observed at least half the bottles that had been placed previously were slashed with its contents fully drained. We simply left more water.

The Samaritans as a volunteer group have gained momentum. Two trips almost every day, college and other volunteer groups participate regularly, several books have been written by volunteers, and journalists from all parts of the world have written articles and documented the work in film and other art forms. Led by local artist Alvaro Enciso, individually crafted crosses are planted at the site where a traveler has died. Using data from the Pima County Forensic Science Center, Enciso and his team use GPS tracking coordinates to find the site where remains have been found. In the six years that I first became involved with Samaritans, over 1100 bodies have been recovered. There is no reliable estimate of the percentage this number represents of total numbers of deaths in this geographic sector. Sometimes listed in the print out is a name, sex, approximate age, nationality and cause of death. Most of the time there is no information, not even a name. On weekly and sometimes bi-weekly water drops, volunteers led by Alvaro, hike to locations carrying an artfully constructed cross, shovels and other digging tools, and water and concrete for planting these memorials. Jugs of water, food and socks are also planted at high trafficked sites. With Alvaro’s team I have hiked as far as two miles each way to locate the spot of a fallen traveler, with the purpose of memorializing their life, and bringing closure so the spirit can move on.

Migration is not simply an issue in the US. African and Middle Eastern migration to Europe is a huge

issue and equally as treacherous. Although in general the European stance toward immigration is not as vitriolic as in the US, there is increasing political resistance and a reassessment of immigration policies by many countries. Immigration from south Asian countries to the island countries in the Pacific are probably the most treacherous of our times as the violence against immigrants in passage and upon landing is exceedingly high and often state endorsed. Global economics and political, ethnic and religious divides, are all a part of the equation that helps to explain these immigration patterns.

My reflections seven years later

Whether it is Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Mexican/US borders, one thing the imperialists never seemingly considered is the fallacy of arbitrary borders. Ortiz (2014) suggests that the US/Mexican border is a function of failed treaties and US greed, that for generations many Mexicans considered a mere inconvenience to cross. Hence, until the immigrant became racialized, post 9/11 (Ortiz & Jani, 2010), many people crossed between countries with little consequence. I find myself thinking continuously about the border, seldom a day goes by that I don't think about both the travelers and the volunteers in the desert. To me the border is not simply a geographic place arbitrarily drawn as a trophy of war, but it is also existential, a part of my identity, because as a mestizo, a person of mixed race decent, the border runs through me, in the words of Gloria Anzaldua (1994). At all times my identity and life straddle borders.

I have been drawn back to volunteer a few times over the last six years, but not often enough. From time to time I actually find myself wondering if I should relocate to Tucson so I can volunteer in the desert weekly. I reflect on the day I met my traveler friend, and wonder: Did he make it back to Bakersfield? Was he apprehended and detained? What about his girls, was he able to relocate them to Mexico, like so many other families whose parents get stuck in Mexico, similar to my daughter-in-law's family? If so, what is life like for the girls as they immigrate to Mexico, and are faced with learning a new culture, and quite likely, also having to learn a new language? And, of course the worst case scenario crosses my mind. Did he try again but

instead of getting caught or succeeding, succumb to the life threatening conditions of the desert? Could his remains have been those recovered at the site of the cross I, and others on Alvaro's team, planted in the desert this past January? Where the Coroner's print out simply read:

Name: Unknown
Age: Unknown
Sex: Unknown
Nationality: Unknown
Cause of Death: Unknown
Date of Death: Unknown
Place of Death: Pima County AZ
Latitude 35° 35' 21.1875"
Longitude W 111° 13' 32.1094"

I reflect on privilege. Asking how do I use my privilege to give voice or agency to others? And at some point I wonder why him and not me? Realizing that privilege, a function of social location, even among outsiders and within marginalized groups, dictates choices, hence creating a chasm within groups of people who share more in common than not. I reflect on the meeting and realize that in the end, we both left with our own pain: his pain is rooted in the mix of fatigue, hunger, thirst, and the humiliation of giving up his journey. My pain is existential in nature, rooted in questions of identity, right actions, duty, and unending "what ifs."

And, I still weep.

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