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Walking Toward Juárez

I am what most would consider a risk-adverse person. I avoid trampolines, Ferris wheels, and really any carnival-adjacent locales. I scoff at paragliding, hot-air ballooning, bungee-jumping, or recreational activities that involve long cords, fire, or the wind. I floss vigorously to fend off the long-term damage of plaque buildup. I lather any exposed skin with sunscreen each morning and go to bed with retinol under my eyes to prevent wrinkles. I try to mix in various forms of cardiovascular and weight-bearing exercises each week to maintain circulatory health and bone density, fending off my body's inevitable decline for as long as possible. On my recent flight to El Paso, I read the plane's emergency instructions, making sure to confirm the closest exit. In truth, I had already looked at the airplane's seat map days before and found that my best chance of surviving a crash was probably a swift departure out the slides over the wings. So when I settled into my home on El Paso's Nevada Avenue, making a trip across the border to Ciudad Juárez, once billed "the murder capital of the world" and a "failed state," seemed absolutely out of the question. It just wasn't in my nervous constitution to consider it.

I made up lots of reasons why it would be irresponsible of me to visit. I read horror stories online about mass shootings and mass graves and murders at church masses. I imagined walking down Avenida Juárez and being unceremoniously kidnapped, some grizzled criminal hustling me down the sordid streets of a dystopian city straight off the pages of Mad Max. The internet fueled my fanciful imagination, and I assured myself that there was nothing on the other side but a day of dodging bullets and hoping to live to tell the tale. It was just simpler to write it off and look forward to exploring the more familiar streets of El Paso.

As our NEH Borderlands Narrative course began at UTEP, we immediately conversed about the need for challenging "master narratives," the stories we tell ourselves and others about the world we know, or at least the world we think we know. Our leaders and experts spoke compellingly about the importance of listening to the multiple truths of a place, not just the one that gets the most noise or media coverage.

Certainly the master narrative of Juárez thrives off its legacy—and present reality—of brutality. And the violence in Juárez is real. Last year there were over 500 murders in the city of 1.3 million people; this year it is on track to have even more. Workers in maquiladora plants producing exports face exploitation, rape, and murder laboring in an industry that does not protect them. Such cruelty disproportionately affects women and the disenfranchised, and many of the city officials charged with cleaning up the violence are beholden to the very drug cartels that proliferate it.

So Juárez has real problems, but resigning myself to believe that Juárez is a city separate from me is all part of the easy story. The American thirst for illegal drugs and inexpensive goods propels much of the viciousness across the border. It's convenient to say that all of this is a Mexican problem, as if those smuggling drugs or producing my t-shirt are doing it solely for themselves. Americans—whether we recognize it or not—are intricately connected to this border system and its consequences, even if our televisions in Denver or Omaha or Green Bay make it feel like a world away.

As I've gleaned so clearly from this national program, borders bring communities together as much as they tear them apart, and I hesitatingly acknowledged last week that seeing the border solely from this side was limiting my capacity to acknowledge multiple perspectives. If I wanted to commit to challenging my own assumptions, I would need to see the Rio Grande from the South. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, the protagonist Janie exhorts her friend Phoebe with this adage: "You've got to go there to know there." Each year when I teach this novel to my students, I urge them to follow Janie's advice and venture into life with an audacious spirit. I imagined giving this speech next year, knowing I'd stayed home myself, sitting on the porch like the very people Janie criticizes. And so I went.

Walking towards Juárez from my El Paso neighborhood of Sunset Heights, I was at the Paso del Norte Bridge in about twenty minutes and in another country five minutes after that. I crossed alongside an elderly woman—her hair recently coiffed—making her way to church or to see her family, I imagined. I cringed with embarrassment at fearing this commute, the first of many moments I would get the story of Juárez all wrong. Once across, I ambled down Avenida Juárez and exchanged $20 USD for some pesos, peering behind myself every so often at the *cambio* desk to ensure my safety, my master narrative fears still somewhat hard to shake. Of course, not even the stray dog had an interest in approaching me. Couples walked arm-in-arm and taxi drivers politely asked if I needed a ride. With $300 pesos or so, I made my way to the main plaza, where vendors had just begun setting up for the day and the faithful

were convening at Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral. I spotted joggers in bright green neoprene jerseys getting their morning jaunt in before the Chihuahuan desert sun baked away any opportunity to do much more than eat a *paleta* in its presence.

After meandering my way through the cathedral and taking plenty of selfies in the square, I hopped into Café Central for a hearty Mexican breakfast. Art Deco tile decorated the walls and patrons squeezed in tight for room at the bar. I was lucky to find one seat available as I watched bigger groups wait patiently for a spot. Practicing my limited Spanish, I ordered a *jugo de naranja* and some *chilaquiles rojos*, not to mention the essential *café con leche*, which is really more like coffee *and* milk, rather than coffee *with* milk. When the orange juice arrived, I recoiled with doubt as I tasted a swig. Ick! It didn't taste right. Immediately I imagined all the dangerous possibilities: contaminated water and E. coli swam in my glass, and I pushed it aside, certain I would be spending the rest of the weekend in the bathroom, my just desserts for ordering anything other than bottled water in Mexico.

Turning around in my disgust, I spotted three gigantic pallets of freshly picked oranges, stems and leaves still attached to the plump fruit. My juice was simply fresh-squeezed, straight from the source, unadulterated by factories or packaging, something my grocery store oriented taste buds could not have anticipated. I had been expecting Tropicana from a box, but I had gotten the real thing—my master narrative frame of reference just wasn't ready to listen to (or taste) it yet.

After another reflective cringe, I struck up a conversation with Eddie, my neighbor at the bar. In the best Spanish I could muster, I asked, "*Que son sus platos favoritos*?"

"*Me gusta los hotcakes*," replied Eddie, "*pero las patatas no mucho*." Apparently Café Central did not have hash browns up to Eddie's standards, but they knew how to make a mean pancake. A discerning customer, Eddie had also brought in his own bread from a *panaderia* nearby, and he insisted that I try it. We munched on *pan de manzana* and sipped our coffees between moments of shared silence. "*Trabajo las noches,"* he then explained, splitting his time between several different state agencies; I gathered he did security of some kind. Switching to English, Eddie proclaimed, "I came here for my son. There was nothing in Mazátlan." Mazátlan, as I would later learn, is a city in Sinaloa, one of the Mexican states most affected by violence at cartel abuse; it is, after all, the very namesake of one of the largest trafficking organizations in the world. Eddie was happy to call Juarez home. He had gotten a job and provided for his family; Eddie had run *to* Juarez and not *from* it.

It was the first time that I had conceived as Juárez as a destination in and of itself. I've spent so much time focusing on those who want to cross the Rio Grande into the USA, but not on those for whom Juárez is the final stop on their migratory journey, not simply a waystation to the other side. My master narrative voice unfairly assumed that most of those in Juárez must be desperate for a chance at life in the USA, but obviously millions elect to call Juárez home, and not just for the hotcakes.

My breakfast with Eddie (and obligatory selfie) complete, I wandered through the square and into *El Museo de la Revolucion en la Frontera*, where I sidled up next to Pancho Villa's firearms and banners extoling the virtures of *tierra y liberdad.* The sun rising steadily, I munched on a *paleta* and watched families move toward the church, the rows of vendors now fully in swing, hawking *aguas frescas* and other sugary staples of a Sunday morning stroll.

As I crossed back into the USA, the customs officer asked me what I was importing back home. "Nothing," I replied, showing her my canvas tote with only a crushed plastic bottle inside. This was a lie, however; I had quite a lot in tow. I'd picked up a new tale about Juárez, and though I couldn't declare it on a form, I will declare it with my students and those who scoff at Juárez as a city mired entirely in entropy. I would be lying to say I would return with complete certainty for my safety, and the truths of violence still buzz in my brain as I imagine heading south on the Paso Del Norte bridge again. My brief visit certainly doesn't discount the thousands of lives lost in this city's past traumatic decade, but I'm hopeful to once again hear more of stories like Eddie's, stories that complicate and enrich the tapestry of narratives about the city I can see from my porch in El Paso.

I'm eager to go back, as long as there's not a carnival in town.

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