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Emplotting Immigration: The Rhetoric of Border Narratives

Most everyone in the U.S. knows the stories told about illegal immigration, whether or not they subscribe to those stories. Right-wing narratives explain how ‘illegals’ or ‘aliens’ invade our country to ‘steal our jobs’ and ‘smuggle drugs’. Liberal narratives justify the illegal entrance of ‘desperately poor people’ who come here to feed their families. Patrick Hogan, in *Understanding Nationalism*, reveals the national and psychological purposes of such stories and explains how they are formed. This essay addresses the relationship between these national narratives and migrants’ actual experiences. As long-time volunteer of a humanitarian aid organization on the U.S./Mexico border, the author has heard stories about and witnessed the violence and death caused both by the desert and law enforcement. The more familiar narratives frame and consequently limit debate about the nation’s border enforcement policies, which force people to the most isolated desert areas where these atrocities occur. Through personal anecdotes about motivations for crossing and experiences in the desert, migrants offer critical stories that challenge standard emplotments, providing a new perspective on an apparently familiar problem.

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No More Deaths is a Tucson-based organization that provides humanitarian aid – food, water, and medical attention – to people crossing the deadliest section of the US Mexico border. After joining the organization in 2007, on one of my first patrols, I encountered a sixty-one year-old man lying on his back in an arroyo a little way off the trail. He had with him only a cotton sweatshirt and a gallon of yellow cow-tank water. ‘Hola. ¿Cómo está señor? Somos voluntarios de la iglesia y traemos comida y agua. Me llamo Corinne’. Sitting up, he answered in perfect English and told us his story. Enrique – I have changed a few facts about him, including his name, to protect his identity – has lived for the past forty years in Phoenix, Arizona, where he owns a company that builds pools. His son lives there; his ex-wife lives there; all his friends live there. He was stopped at one of the ‘random’ checkpoints (which tend to be anything but arbitrary in terms of both the people they actually check and the parts of town the stops are set up in); they checked his papers and, as a result, he got deported to Mexico. Mexico, for Enrique, is a foreign country where he ‘has nothing and knows no one’. After you are deported, you have a criminal record and it is nearly impossible to return legally, so his only option was to walk home.

Enrique’s story is more than just an isolated anecdote. There is, or should be, an important relationship between the immigration stories debated on a national level and migrants’ personal testimonies. The ability for a migrant to tell her own story, let alone determine the outcome, is compromised by national immigration stories. Enrique’s story is important, in part, because it resists the

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common paradigms we use to understand immigration and, by extension, the assumptions we make about immigrants. When imagining an undocumented person, how often does anyone, regardless of political orientation, picture someone like Enrique: an older man who owns his own company, speaks fluent English, and has all his relatives in the States? How well does his story fit the narrative prototypes that shape our political debates on immigration? The answers seem clear: not often and not well.

In the following pages, I will examine the ways in which the national debate over immigration is emplotted, isolating the main structures and considering their impact on actual migrants. Specifically, one can identify three anti-immigrant or ‘national’ story structures that follow an ‘invasion’ prototype: the national security story, the economic story and the drug story. In opposition to these, one can also identify a pro-immigrant or ‘humanitarian’ story. Interestingly, these stories have some fundamental assumptions in common, despite their perceived difference in political stance. An examination of these story prototypes will lead to three points about the effects of these stories and our ethical obligations as citizens. First, the people whose stories *do* fit one of these plot structures – usually the humanitarian economic strand – become merely characters in other people’s arguments. For instance, because Enrique continued walking and is probably, due to documentation issues, reluctant to share or correct his story, I can manipulate his story for whatever rhetorical purpose I want; ironically, I use it to argue that it is unethical to do so. Second, these national paradigms prevent us from hearing the stories, like Enrique’s, that do not fit and from fully knowing the other horrors and atrocities that occur in the desert. As one sees how Enrique’s story can be made to fit – but actually resists – national prototypes, one realizes how disconnected one is from individuals’ actual stories. Last, and most important, these national stories are so strong that they usually create migrants’ stories for them; even when they don’t determine the trajectory of their experiences, they force their actions. In other words, the three invasion stories, by motivating and justifying the increased militarization of the border, create the circumstances in which Enrique and others make the decision to cross the desert. The fear that this creates – either of crossing again or getting sent to detention centers – silences people from sharing their experiences.

1. “ALIEN INVASION” — NATIONAL PROTOTYPES

In *Understanding Nationalism*, Patrick Colm Hogan argues that, if one accepts Benedict Anderson’s famous assertion that nations are ‘imagined communities’, one can also understand the cognitive processes that facilitate this imagination. For Hogan, narrative is the prime tool that organizes and prioritizes emotions, even in political contexts. He explains, ‘emplotment helps to specify our understanding, imagination, emotional response, ethical evaluation, and, most important, concrete actions with respect to the national in-group and national out-groups’ (Hogan 2009: 200). Historical and current events, unlike traditional stories, have no clear beginning, middle and end; they have no identifiable

author, narrator, reader, or even single text for that matter – they are complex, interconnected, and very often contested. Hogan explains that people impose narrative structure onto these events in order to make them coherent, rationalize their emotional significance and use them as justifications for actions – often towards nationalist ends. As Hogan (2009: 168) points out, the emplotment of nationalism is ‘deeply consequential for our social and political lives’ because it organizes legitimate emotions into concrete actions. He writes:

Insofar as they involve strong emotions, our spontaneous attributions of causality may remain at least partially impervious to our knowledge about actual causal relations. In other words, our emotion systems may continue to spontaneously project a single, absolute, malevolent origin to conflict, even when higher cortical systems have inferred that this is not the case (Hogan 2009: 183).

Organizing our emotions into stories helps us not only to imagine our national collectivity, but also to identify public responses to common experiences.

Hogan identifies three common prototypes that people have repeatedly used to emplot social and political events. The most relevant here is the invasion/heroic prototype. The basic plot structure of this prototype begins with the threat of an invasion that incites national fear and implies a narrative ending of aggressive defense in order to protect the in-group. Hogan explains how this sort of emplotment emerges through different genres in a variety of media; he draws examples from the Bible as well as popular films and presidential addresses. He suggests that the frequency of invasion/heroic plot structures in our common literary history allows politicians like Bush – or F.D.R. – to fit national events such as September 11th, or Pearl Harbor, into this structure in a way that justifies war: i.e., aggressive defense. He uses *Independence Day*, a blockbuster film in which the United States defends itself from an alien invasion, as a popular example of this prototype. He writes:

Obviously, fictional space aliens are the culprits in the film. However, films such as this encourage us to model real and contemporary events on such a fiction – and on the historical events of the Second World War. They create a context in which it is easier to see, for example, the September 11 bombings as an invasion, thus the initiation of a war / the beginning of a heroic plot, rather than, say, a criminal act (2009: 236).

Hogan explains how, in the film, the imminent extra-terrestrial invasion presents a threat that unites national sub-groups – people of different races, classes, and sexualities – against a common enemy that they must defend themselves from and eventually punish. Hogan suggests that Bush similarly used September 11th as the beginning of a story that implies and requires a specific ending: that is, ‘domination of the out-group, specifically the devastation of the group that engaged in the bombings’ (Hogan 2009: 242). He discusses in depth how this emplotment helped lead to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to *Independence Day*, a number of movies follow the heroic/invasion plot structure that cast aliens as the invading threat and an aggressive defense as the appropriate response. *War of the*

Worlds and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, for instance, are stories of alien invasions that have been retold multiple times in the past century. *War of the Worlds* is a good example of a film that sets the stage for the immigration emplotment. It centers on aliens who invade because they desire our resources. Although the extraterrestrial threat remains the same – mysterious, violent, and seemingly invincible – the role of the protagonist has shifted in the past fifty years. Everyone, from the local California sheriff to the secretary of state, turns to Dr. Clayton Forrester (Gene Barry 1953) to understand and conquer the invasion, while Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise 2005) is just another divorced dad who happens to have his two kids the weekend the aliens invade. While this seems like a minor discrepancy, it actually reveals a lot about how the invasion/heroic prototype has shifted. Although Dr. Forrester is a renowned scientist, his genius does not help him stop the aliens; Earth's bacteria kill them. Ray Ferrier, on the other hand, has no special qualifications to help him stop the aliens; in fact, he has trouble even managing his children. He actively and aggressively defends himself and his family even though resistance seems hopeless. Ray Ferrier's actions offer a model for what individual Americans should do in the context of an invasion when a heroic figure – particularly a heroic governmental figure – does not step up. The government presumably has initial responsibility for the welfare and protection of the people. In this amended narrative prototype – one may call it the *Ferrier Variation* – the government does not fulfill its obligations, and an ordinary citizen must heroically shoulder the responsibility. One can see just how many anti-immigration speakers argue that they are responding to an invasion the federal government is failing to deal with. Ultimately, in the 2005 version, even with Ray Ferrier's heroics, biology again stops the aliens, suggesting that humans have a natural right to inhabit the Earth. A similar shift occurs in the *Invasion of the Body Snatcher* movies, where the method of invasion is infiltrating and taking over human bodies via pods or bacteria. While both the 1953 and 1978 versions end inconclusively – the invasion is not thwarted – the heroic actions of Carol Bennell (Nicole Kidman 2007), an ordinary divorced mom, make possible complete inoculation of the alien force. These emplotments have interesting, albeit subtle, repercussions for the immigration issue: they contribute to the idea that immigrants are less than human (illegal aliens) and that their deaths due to natural causes (the many people who die in the desert borderlands) are a consequence of the fact that, unlike us, they do not have a natural right to live in this place.

Interestingly, *Avatar* follows an almost identical plotline except the roles are reversed: this time humans are the malevolent force invading another planet, Pandora, in search of resources. Although Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is initially trained as an Avatar to serve as bodyguard for a scientist, he is soon recruited to spy for the private military that wants to conquer Pandora. This half-hearted attack dissolves as Jake, of course, falls in love with a Na'vi woman. The military quickly turns to the *War of the Worlds* kill-and-conquer approach in order to take the planet's essential resources. The stories of these invasions (*War of the Worlds*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Avatar*) suggest that the native population

deserve to defend themselves, and one wants them to succeed. In the case of *War of the Worlds* and *Avatar*, the fact that the nature of the planet itself – bacteria and tree energy respectively – is the saving force for the native population suggests that they have a natural right to that place. As many critics have pointed out, *Avatar* has a liberal tone: it is decidedly anti-imperialist, pro-environment, and anti-war (think of the aggressive invasion of Iraq). Even in light of these progressive gestures, *Avatar* nonetheless contributes to the same prototypical emplotment of border-crossing-as-invasion. Some of the more politically correct critiques question the white man's role as Na'vi saviour (see Brooks' *Messiah Complex*) and imply that a more appropriate hero would belong to the native ethnic group. This ironically, and unintentionally, suggests more conformity to the invasion/ heroic prototype: the hero should belong to the in-group. In this way, *Avatar* may contribute to the national emplotment of immigration, even if that is directly contrary to the filmmakers' intent.

I am not arguing that these films are anti-immigrant propaganda; rather, they contribute to a certain cognitive structure that understands an aggressive defense as the appropriate and natural response to perceived threats. Political figures and others implicitly use these structures to organize people's pre-existing fears into coherent immigration narratives. For instance, the first statement on the Federal Reform and Enforcement Coalition's website reads 'simply put, the FIRE Coalition is about solutions to the largest invasion in the history of the world happening right under our noses; that is the invasion and occupation of the United States by illegal aliens from foreign nations'. In the same vein, the Americans for Legal Immigration declare on their website that because of illegal immigration, 'our nation's very survival and identity are being threatened along with our national security'. This way of framing the story is not limited to extreme right-wing groups; Colorado's former House Representative, Tom Tancredo, has said:

Massive immigration into this country both legal and illegal when it combines with this cult of multiculturalism that permeates our society, this philosophy that we have to battle with every bit as much as we have to battle with illegal immigration. We have to battle with this philosophy of extreme multiculturalism that tries to tear Americans apart, divide us into little groups.

Of course, the invading forces in the movies represent real threats to the characters: the aliens are violent and intent on total domination. Needless to say, their counterparts – undocumented people or 'illegal aliens' – do not represent such a malevolent danger, despite what these right-wing groups would have one believe. Why, then, is there such intense fear? Among other things, action-movie rhetoric organizes pre-existing emotions – terror around September 11th, anxieties about the economy, and confusion about drugs – into illogical fear of illegal 'aliens' articulated in threats bearing on national security, economics, and drugs. By discussing the national immigration debate in the same terms and using the same narrative structure as these invasion movies, politicians, the media, extremists, and others channel emotional responses into a particular and narrow form of action: increased border security. In analyzing the three

perceived threats, I hope to show both that the purported solution of increased militarization is illogical (and ineffective); and that, if the real problems are taken seriously and thought through, logical responses are not that complicated.

The first threat – terrorism – uses September 11th as the opening chapter for an intensified rhetoric of fear that justifies not only the wars in the Middle East but also increased *homeland security*. Hogan explains how Bush, in his remarks on 14 September 2001, framed September 11th as the beginning of the War on Terror plot, which casts Al Qaeda specifically, and militant Islamists (or sometimes just Muslims) more generally, as the antagonist. In his 2002 State of the Union, Bush connected his aggressive response abroad with the need for territorial defense:

Time and distance from the events of September the 11th will not make us safer unless we act on its lessons. America is no longer protected by vast oceans. We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad and increased vigilance at home. My budget nearly doubles funding for a sustained strategy of homeland security, focused on four key areas: bioterrorism; emergency response; airport and border security; and improved intelligence.

Having not mentioned border enforcement in either the 14 September remarks or the address he gave on the 21st, which introduced his plan for homeland security, Bush, four months later, included securing the border as one of the four central focuses of homeland security. Although the mission of the department focuses exclusively on prevention of and dealing with terrorist attacks, much of the work of the department has concentrated on securing the U.S.' southern borders. In these 2001 attempts to fulfill this heroic plot – that is, to defend from aggressors locally while punishing them abroad – Bush connected the extreme Islamic terrorist enemy far away with the people crossing the southern border. Consciously or not, he expanded the enemy group, seemingly based on their common skin color.

Although Bush failed to secure the U.S.' southern borders, he established the rhetorical imperative so strongly that today – nine years into the story, so to speak – politicians and lobbyists must respond to, rather than explain, that need. This specific emplotment of fear of immigrants as national security threat is powerful enough that, in addition to evading our collective logic, it crosses party lines. Both Obama and McCain's campaign platforms included 'comprehensive immigration reform' that featured a 'secure our borders' component. In a similar gesture, 'strengthening our commitments on border security and interior enforcement' is one of the four 'pillars' of senators Schumer and Graham's suggested plan for immigration reform. The invasion story has been so firmly established that many simply assume it. Rather than establishing the invasion story as Bush worked to do, current conservative government officials and politicians simply cite the need to secure U.S. borders and point to the Obama administration's perceived failure to do so. Arizona Governor Jan Brewer recently signed SB1070: a controversial law that makes federal immigration standards into state laws so her state police force can enforce them. As she signed it she said, 'we work to solve a crisis that we did not create and the federal

government has refused to fix'. Sarah Palin said, in her endorsement of the bill, 'it's time for Americans across this great country to stand up and say "we're all Arizonans now!" and in clear unity we say "Mr. President do your job – secure our border!"' Brewer and Palin are capitalizing on familiarity with the 'Ferrier Variation' of the invasion/heroic prototype; in the context of an invasion where the presumed hero (the Federal government) does not step up, ordinary Americans must take it upon themselves to defend the nation. Rather than explaining – as Bush used to do – the potential threats the U.S. needs to protect itself against, Sarah Palin, Jan Brewer, and others simply reference Obama's perceived failure to fulfill the heroic plot.

Increasing militarization of the border does offer a strong symbolic response to the fear and panic caused by September 11th, but it does not make sense, as Hogan says above, in our 'higher cortical systems'. Under the DHS, the Border Patrol has nearly doubled in size; 670 miles of wall have been built; virtual fences have been constructed; and Constitutionally questionable programs such as Operation Streamline have been implemented to deter people from crossing. This border enforcement strategy is accompanied by intense internal policing and raids that target undocumented people across the nation, through Federal agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Border Patrol, and now through local laws along the lines of SB 1070. Ironically, the argument that the openness of the southern border makes the U.S. more vulnerable to terrorism underestimates the ingenuity of potential terrorists and ignores the recent patterns of terrorist strategies. According to the Border Patrol fact sheet from 2005-8, 99.3% of all apprehensions have been of people coming from Latin America, not the so-called 'Axis of Evil' countries. In fact, none of the countries that Bush identified as evil are named in the document; the remaining 0.7% come from China, Canada, and other countries. The people picked up are poorer Latinos seeking work – not potential terrorists. All of the recent terrorists have entered the country legally with proper documentation. The September 11th hijackers and the Christmas Day bomber had visas. Furthermore, despite these discourses of 'otherness' targeting the Middle East, US citizens, too, can be and have been terrorists. If we are really concerned about national security, the solution lies not with our immigration enforcement strategies, but with our intelligence agencies.

The second threat is economic. Fears inspired by the recent economic crisis and passions during the healthcare debate become articulated in accusations that undocumented workers come here to 'steal our jobs' and 'suck up our social services'. Recall, for instance, how Congressman Wilson shouted 'You lie!' when President Obama assured the nation that illegal immigrants would not be covered by health care reform. In saying this, Wilson showed that he did not realize how uniform most mainstream politicians are in their anti-immigrant sentiments. Regardless of how much the government excludes undocumented people from social services or how many troops the president sends to the border, extreme right-wing groups such as the Tea Party and Minute Men still demand more. Insofar as the names of these organizations are reminiscent of how the colonists took their welfare and protection upon themselves in

the context of governmental failure, they frame the ‘Ferrier Variation’ as a fundamentally patriotic gesture. They condemn both Republican and Democratic politicians for their failure to protect American jobs. William Gheen, the head of the Americans for Legal Immigration PAC, articulated the economic threat at Houston’s Tax Day Tea Party:

Americans are being systematically replaced in our jobs, in our schools, in our universities and in our healthcare systems and if Barack Obama and his team pass comprehensive Amnesty and turn fifteen million illegal aliens into voters they’re going to replace all of you at the ballot box and the borders of the United States will be irreparably destroyed.

Gheen not only illustrates the ways in which he fears this perceived invasion threatens American life; he also makes clear that the current politicians – he includes McCain and other Republicans, as well as Obama – are not fulfilling the appropriate narrative ending of defending the nation. He concludes his speech with imagery that would work better, perhaps, in one of the invasion films above: ‘our nation is in a twilight and whether it’s the setting sun or whether it’s the rising dawn is up to us. We’ve got to be brave’. Gheen evokes the ‘Ferrier Variation’, as Palin and Brewer did to defend SB 1070; he argues that, in the context of institutional failure, citizens are left to defend themselves.

The fears themselves, as in the case of potential terrorist threats, are the result of valid concerns. Systematically blaming the current economic crisis on undocumented labor, however, is just as illogical as looking for terrorists on the southern border. According to a study published by the Migration Policy Institute:

Illegal immigration’s overall impact on the US economy is small... If we exclude these immigrant [s’ losses] from the calculus, however... the small net gain that remains after subtracting the US employers’ gains is tiny. And if we account for the small fiscal burden that unauthorized immigrants impose, the overall economic benefit is close enough to zero to be essentially a wash (Hanson 2009: 1).

From this study, it seems the amount undocumented workers contribute to our economy via the work they do and the taxes they pay compensates for what little they ‘take’ in terms of social services. The study continues: ‘unless the next \$10 billion in enforcement is much more effective than the first \$15 billion, it is difficult to see how one could justify a pure enforcement strategy to address illegal immigration, at least in terms of standard cost benefit analysis’ (Hanson 2009: 12). Not only is the economic security story illogical, the projected solution to it is inordinately costly.

The final threat was clearly articulated by an acquaintance from a small ranching community close to the border; he is not concerned about the ‘innocent illegals seeking work and a better life’, but about the ‘drug traffickers who are tearing apart American families through meth and heroine rings’. The drug threat and associated crime is more complicated than the national security threat, because while there are no terrorists coming across the U.S.’ southern borders, many drugs *are* trafficked through these deserts. The majority of crime blamed on undocumented people is drug related. The projected solution to this

threat is, unsurprisingly, the same as the previous two: increased militarization and policing. When Jan Brewer signed SB 1070 she argued: ‘we cannot sacrifice our safety to the murderous greed of drug cartels. We cannot stand idly by as drop-houses, kidnappings and violence compromise our quality of life’. At a later point, Brewer made clear how huge she believes the drug threat is; she said, ‘we all know that the majority of the people that are coming to Arizona and trespassing are now become drug mules’. Although it is impossible to know the exact numbers, the governor grossly exaggerated this accusation. Brandon Judd, the president of the Border Patrol Union for the Tucson Sector, refuted her assertion simply: ‘the vast majority of those who we arrest are not smuggling drugs’ (quoted in a *Star* article from 2010). Brewer, it seems, imagines one of the most nightmarish manifestations of the drug threat: an army of evil traffickers marching across the Arizona border to permeate society, addict innocent Americans to life-threatening drugs, and undermine American families and communities.

Although this emplotment may be a little extreme, it is the dominant story told – even by the *New York Times*. In the May 31st 2009 article ‘In heartland death, traces of heroin’s spread’, Randal C. Archibold tells how two illegal immigrants were prosecuted for manslaughter in the death of Arthur Eisel, who died of a heroin overdose. Throughout the article, Archibold casts Mr. Eisel as an innocent victim – not, as one might expect, of the vicious drug, but of the ruthless and undocumented dealers. Archibold channels the strong emotional response readers have to Mr. Eisel’s death by opening the article with an image of Mr. Eisel’s mother ‘huddled stunned and bewildered’ struggling to cope with her son’s death. The article uses this example to illustrate how Mexican drug cartels are similarly infiltrating America’s ‘heartland’. Although Mr. Parra and Mr. Contreras – the dealers in question – merely sold Mr. Eisel heroin, prosecutors found them culpable for his death. Archibold suggests that the federal government sees this case as ‘a stark illustration of how Mexican drug cartels have pushed heroin sales beyond major cities into America’s suburban and rural byways, some of which had seen little heroin before’; he continues: ‘federal officials now consider the cartels the greatest organized crime threat to the United States’. Using drugs and related violence as a tool for invasion does seem a pretty scary threat.

Because people have been trained to think in terms of the invasion prototype and have emplotted the two previous threats into that structure, they similarly see increased militarization as the appropriate solution for the drug threat. As in the previous two cases, however, militarization is an illogical response. Many scholars have pointed out that increasing security has probably *contributed* to the rapid organization and sophistication of the drug cartels. In *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide*, Peter Andreas suggests: ‘even while failing to control illegal border crossings, law enforcement has shaped their location, routes, methods, and organization’ (2000: 8). Making it more challenging to traffic drugs has encouraged smaller cartels to combine into larger and more violent organizations; which, in turn, causes the increase of drugs Archibold refers to in his article. Focusing enforcement on north-going traffic also perpetuates the problem; Brandy McCombs reported in the *Arizona Daily Star* in 2009 that

‘firearms traffickers find it relatively easy to come to the U.S. and buy the high-powered weapons that fuel the billion-dollar drug-smuggling trade’. In an Associated Press article that appeared in the *Star* seven months later, Jacques Billeaud reported that ‘Mexican and U.S. officials estimate the cartels get 95 percent of their guns from the United States’. Andreas argues that the United State’s strategy focuses too heavily on the supply in terms of both people and drugs, rather than demand. He writes:

In both cases the primary target is the supply (illegal drugs, migrants, and those who smuggle them) and only secondarily the demand (consumers of drugs, employers of migrant labor); the foreign supply is defined as the main source of the problem; and deterring the supply through enhanced policing is promoted as the favored solution (2000: 6).

Focusing on the supply, he argues, is politically easier because it is less controversial; but it is not very effective. He continues, ‘the overwhelming political focus on curbing the influx of drugs and immigrants has drawn attention away from the more complex and politically divisive challenge of dealing with the enormous domestic demand for both psychoactive drugs and cheap migrant labor’ (Andreas 2000: 8). So while the threat of illicit substances is more tangible than that of terrorism (at least on the southern border), the proposed solution is just as much a fantasy. America needs to focus on its own addiction problems just as much as it needs to question these drugs’ method of entry.

2. ‘REALLY THEY ARE JUST PEOPLE’ — THE HUMANITARIAN PROTOTYPE

While the three threads of the invasion story seem to be unconscious manifestations of a common prototype, the humanitarian story has been consciously constructed. Humanitarian storytellers from aid organizations like No More Deaths, the Samaritans (Arizona), and Border Angels (California) resist the traditional liberal-conservative divide. While both liberal and conservative politicians work towards a ‘more secure border’, volunteers from such diverse backgrounds as faith communities and anarchist collectives come together to expose the hypocrisy of policies that use death as a political tool. Because it is a response to the fear stories, the humanitarian story is almost precisely the inverse of the invasion/heroic prototype. Rather than stressing the influx of a foreign element into society, the humanitarian stories focus on the historic integration and interdependence between the groups and the common humanity Americans share with migrants. Although these stories are intentionally opposed to the invasion stories – which one assumes to be a liberal gesture – they are couched in conservative rhetoric; and, as I will show, all the national stories make similar assumptions.

The first phase of the humanitarian story stresses the economic integration between Latin America and the United States. Humanitarian storytellers such as No More Death volunteers, Samaritans trainers, and Border Angels speakers place this response story in the context of the imperialist history of the U.S. in Latin America and explain how the U.S. government created the current situation. They not only argue that the U.S. economy is based on migrant labor, but that the U.S. is at least partially responsible for the

inability for some Latin American governments to ensure jobs for their people, thus forcing them to emigrate. Isabel Garcia, the Pima County public defender and long time Derechos Humanos activist, said, 'I think it's really vital that people realize in this country that we have had a hand in exactly what's occurring. Until the American public realizes that our own economic policies definitely have a hand in what is going on at our borders we will not have any true solution'.

The 2004 film *A Day Without a Mexican* cleverly and comically lays out the argument in the exact inverse form of the economic security story, although it is a little more nuanced and oriented towards Latinos already living in the U.S. than most humanitarian stories. In the film, a border of impenetrable fog develops around California as the entire Latino population – a third of the state's population – disappears; the film shifts back and forth in mockumentary style following various people as they react. The collective response is almost as traumatic as in some invasion films. A black produce market develops as people fight for the few remaining fruits and vegetables; schools struggle to stay open; Border Patrol agents, already missing many of their ranks, page through the classifieds; sports fans riot when the L.A. Dodgers cancel their game; and a state senator steps up as governor *pro tem*, because the governor is in Washington and the second in command disappears. One scientist draws the connection with the alien invasion prototype explicitly. He says, as he points to the similar shape of a sombrero and a flying saucer:

I think the government was in on this, to a certain extent. Otherwise why else would they call them aliens? Illegal aliens? I mean they are Latinos, Hispanics, Mexicans. But really they are just people. So why is the government calling them aliens if they did not think they were from somewhere else?

The point of the film is clear: California cannot survive this loss. *A Day Without A Mexican* is a good example because of the way it reflects, and mocks, the invasion prototype; but it is, as said, slightly different from most humanitarian stories, which focus more on migration than on Latinos already in the United States. Most humanitarian stories tend to be highly academic: re-framing history to understand how the U.S. is responsible for the situation; and intensely emotional: trying to inspire sympathy for actual migrants.

The next phase of the story argues that, in the context of the clear integration of and dependency on Latino people within U.S. borders and with Latin America across them, the increased militarization of the border is cruelly and intentionally violent. The immediate alternative story¹ begins before September 11th – in the early 1990s, with the simultaneous passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) and the establishment of the Border Patrol's operations *Hold The Line* (1993) and *Gatekeeper* (1994). As

¹ A longer alternative story that is told by Chicano and Border Justice activists alike begins with Native American populations and various Anglo invasions, from Spain and England initially and the United States afterward. Many historians, such as David G. Gutiérrez and Vicki L. Ruiz, have worked towards this more accurate academic re-framing of history.

the name implies, NAFTA made possible the free trade of capital, goods, ideas, and technology – but not of people. Because the United States has a much larger infrastructure for the production of these goods than, in particular, southern Mexico, the agreement created a large demand for labour in the United States and a large supply of labour in Mexico. At the same time, the two border patrol operations successfully sealed off urban areas from illegal migration. This funneled potential border crossers into more desolate and isolated places. According to INS Commissioner Doris Meissner, the thought at the time was to use the harsh landscape as a deterrent for crossing; she said, ‘we did believe that geography would be an ally for us. It was our sense that the number of people crossing through the Arizona desert would go down to a trickle once people realized what [it’s] like’ (quoted in Borden 2000) (Cornelius 2001: 675). The strategy, in other words, was to use the deaths of the first few hundred to dissuade the rest.

The strategy failed. The Mexican consulates filed 1,700 death reports between 1994 and 2001. The Border Patrol did not start counting until 1998. Since then, the number has only increased. *Coalicion de Derechos Humanos* estimates conservatively that 5,000 people have died since 1994. Although the U.S. government realized the failure, they only continued the error – increasing the militarization and making the journey more deadly and more treacherous.

In the context of this fairly academic argument, humanitarians build strong sympathy cases for migrants who become ‘innocent victims’ of U.S. economic policy and border strategy. In addition to explaining in those terms, some humanitarians use rhetorical questions or statements: ‘how far would you walk to feed your family?’ or ‘drug runners have mothers too’. The 2007 film *La Misma Luna* dramatizes the argument poignantly and sentimentally. When his grandmother dies just days after his ninth birthday, Carlitos decides to cross to the U.S., where his mother, Rosario, has lived for the past four years, sending money home. As mother and son go through their days miles apart – waking at the same time; making the same breakfast; and, of course, looking at the same moon – one sees the daily challenges Rosario faces as she tries to live and work without papers and witnesses Carlitos’ struggles in crossing the border. Although the film is contrived – Carlitos, almost at the point of giving up, sits down after running from the police only to find himself on the street corner where his mother is – it voices the sentiment behind the emotional emplotments of humanitarian stories. Migrants are not some alien threat but people, just like us, who love their families and work towards their dreams.

The issue at stake in both the security and humanitarian stories is the militarization of the border. Invasion plots require it as the solution to three different fears and humanitarians argue that it forces innocent people to die. Despite the clear opposition between these two perspectives, both stories share some central assumptions – most of which Enrique’s story resists (although *A Day Without A Mexican* highlights the assumptions with humor instead of playing into them). First, all the stories discussed above assume migrants are leaving, not returning home as Enrique was doing. Second, both the economic security story and the humanitarian story assume that migrants come looking for low skill work, not

already, as Enrique was, in the position of owner of a company. Third, the characters in the three security stories: terrorist, worker, and drug runner; and the humanitarian story: worker or young father, invoke the image of a young, able-bodied brown man. *A Day Without A Mexican* illustrates the assumption via a ‘Missing Jose’ poster that looks like it used a ‘WANTED’ template. The sixty-one-year-old Enrique assured us that his body had no business walking through the desert. We ran into him about fourteen miles from the border; he had forty or so left to walk. Finally, all these stories are generic and disconnected from the actual experience of crossing the desert.

3 “¿TIENE PAPEL?”— FROM NATIONAL PROTOTYPES TO PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

As the preceding discussion suggests, standard ways of emplotting immigration are inadequate at best and often profoundly harmful, even murderous. From working with No More Deaths and listening to the personal stories and experiences of actual migrants, I find that three points stand out as particularly important. The first is that the most important stakeholders in the current, controversial immigration debate are largely excluded from it. People with little knowledge about the actual experience of immigration create their own versions of the story, as Brewer does with the drug threat. Those of us who feel empowered and obligated to speak on behalf of undocumented people have a tendency to co-opt migrants’ stories for our own rhetorical purposes. We have to constantly remind ourselves not to tell their stories for them. For instance, I was on patrol with a retired pastor when we ran into two men who asked us what may be the most common question migrants ask: ‘why are you here?’ Drawing from the human rights and moral imperative discourse of our organization, the pastor answered, ‘because we have to be’. The migrant shook his head politely. ‘No. You don’t have to be here. We do’. While it would be easy for me to use these words as evidence for the economic-victim story, I’m not convinced this particular man was making that claim. It is possible he was simply noting that we could be on the road openly while they had to stay hidden. I’m not arguing that his story cannot prove the economic claim, only that it did not in and of itself. This is an interpretive step that we, the audience of the story, impose; in so doing, we too often lose the stories of individual migrants.

Second, the national stories can act as a form of border patrol themselves by excluding entire storylines – like Enrique’s – that do not fit the prototypes. Almost half the people we encountered this year have stories structurally similar to his: they have lived in the U.S. for years and years, had their papers checked, found themselves in an unknown place, and are now crossing to return home. Because of the increased deportations under both Bush and Obama, more and more Americans – people with jobs, families, and homes in the U.S. – find themselves in a foreign country with few options. Many choose to put their money on a desolate trail through a harsh desert.

It is important to stress that the problem of co-opting other people's stories does not mean one should not share the stories one hears. Indeed, retelling is crucial. Before continuing north, one man from the Bay Area asked an unusual question. '¿Tiene papel? Quiero escribir un testimonio': he wanted to write his story so we could share it. Whenever stories such as these are routinely silenced and excluded, those of us who hear them have a responsibility to share them. Hearing these experiences that so clearly resist common assumptions may help in making better policy decisions. In these instances, we, the re-tellers, have a strong obligation to the author to understand and share her content and intent rather than manipulating the story to fit our political ends. We should retell their stories in an effort to change the conditions that silenced them in the first place. Three Samaritan volunteers – Kathryn Ferguson, Norma A. Price, and Ted Parks – have eloquently worked to fulfill this obligation in their recent book *Crossing With the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail*. By focusing on *their* experience in individual encounters, the authors avoid co-opting the stories of the migrants they met. Instead, in the academic and passionate voice that characterizes the humanitarian stories, these volunteers offer windows into the experiences of the people they encounter.

Finally, the national stories themselves – especially the security stories – can determine migrants' stories for them. By pushing people further and further into the desert wilderness, the Border Patrol's fear tactics prevent people from seeking help. One eighteen year-old named Jose wandered into camp after his group was separated by a Border Patrol buzzing: a technique where a helicopter flies as close as possible to a group, in order to separate them. Jose was unable to find his group again. He said that, if we could take him to a specific hill, he would be sure to find them. We walked to hill after hill; they all looked the same. The events of Jose's story were determined by the whim of a Border Patrol helicopter pilot. I have met people who have hidden for days under the same mesquite tree on the same trail because they have lost their group and are too afraid of going to jail or facing what the Border Patrol officers will do to them if they seek help. Both the premise (they are crossing the most desolate part of the desert) and outcomes (they might make it, get caught, lose their way, or die in the desert) of these migrants' stories are determined by the militarization of the border.

More terrible than the testimonies one hears are the ones one does not. In addition to the stories one does not hear about people living and working in the U.S., one does not hear about the many women and children who cross, almost invisibly, though the U.S. deserts. It is eerie to walk down a seemingly solitary canyon and then up an isolated ridge to find a mesquite tree with lingerie hanging in it, swaying in the breeze. These are called rape trees, because after a coyote or a man rapes a woman, he hangs her bra and underwear in the tree to mark the site. There are many in the desert.² Less commonly, I have

² In 'Rape as a weapon of war: Advancing human rights for women at the U.S.-Mexico border', Sylvanna Falcón documents how sexual abuse of migrant women does not stop at the edges of the desert but often occurs at the hands of border enforcement agents as well.

friends who have found piles of rocks marked by stick crosses and bones, sometimes with flesh underneath, marking stories we cannot know. I have a friend who found the body of a fourteen year-old girl whose story we *do* know because her younger brother made it to Tucson and asked us to look for her. Josseline Hernandez Quintero was walking from El Salvador to be with her mother in California. She either froze to death or died of dehydration. These deaths and rapes are the effects of the stories we tell on a national level about migrants we do not know and cannot hear.

This is not an argument over stories only – over which is truer, or more logical, or more valid – but over lives and ethics. When one reads fiction, one expects authors to manipulate the plot to move the reader in certain directions. One does not expect the same thing from one's government – or national media. As people who know that narrative has the power to move readers certain directions, we must be aware and wary of the ways in which these national stories move the public to feel certain things and then act – e.g., vote – in certain ways. One cannot have real democracy when such important decisions depend on illogical, but rhetorically persuasive, tales. Nor can one have ethical democracy when the voices of twelve million people living within U.S. borders are silenced by the very stories told about them. By sharing the stories I have heard, I hope to work towards a place when those who have experienced them can choose to tell them for themselves.

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