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Border Crossing as a Rite-of-Passage

By Paul Guajardo

The call to adventure ... signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented ... but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight.
—Joseph Campbell

Although we often assume that immigrants come to the United States for better jobs and living conditions, evidence exists that undocumented immigrants cross borders not only for economic reasons, but for more subtle and sometimes equally important purposes; it is possible to view some of these intrepid young men as traditional heroes who unconsciously follow an age-old pattern of separation, initiation, and return. This rite-of-passage serves as an acid-test of masculinity allowing young men to prove their mettle by following traditions established not only by their fathers, brothers, or fellow-townsmen, but by the likes of Oedipus, Ulysses, Perseus, Jason, Moses, Joseph, and King Arthur, among others. Although undocumented Mexican immigrants in general do not slay dragons, descend to the underworld, or marry princesses, many of them do follow the general pattern.

In this rite, thousands of young men cross the border daily (an undertaking fraught with perils on both sides) and attempt to live by their wits while circumventing detection, arrest, and deportation. They usually desire an eventual return to Mexico with dollars, gifts, skills, and with the maturity and self-confidence that allows them to take their place among the men in their communities. The United States has long been a magnet for immigrants from around the world. In general, we have tolerated if not welcomed the world's teeming refuse. They come seeking freedom and economic opportunity. Some come in search of democracy or to escape revolutions, despots, or oppression, whether social, political, cultural, or religious. Others come because they have relatives here and want to be reunited with family. There are as many reasons for coming to this country as there are immigrants.

Mexico also has a history of sending its children north, but many misconceptions remain about them. It must be noted that Mexican nationals, like most immigrants, are patriotic; these modern-day pilgrims do not leave Mexico for lack of love for the mother-land, nor because of excessive love for the United States, but rather because of hardships which take any number of forms.

Lynn Davis estimates that almost 900,000 Mexicans came to this country during the revolution of 1910 (“Mexican Revolution”), and while some of these immigrants later returned to Mexico, obviously some would have stayed and settled here. Then from 1942 to 1964, the U.S. government imported roughly 4,700,000 Mexican nationals for migrant crop work in the Bracero program (“Bracero Program” Wikipedia.org). Having witnessed the higher wages and the opportunities here, some of these temporary immigrant workers later returned on their own, often without documentation.

It is difficult to make a living with Mexican wages. In 2010, for example, Mexico raised the minimum wage to a scant \$4.43 per *day*, if work could be found, but even unskilled workers in the U.S. can earn almost double that in less than an *hour* (Thomas Black). Thus, a minimum wage worker in the United States could make \$58 a day (\$7.25/hour) versus the \$4.43 in Mexico; our wages are 13 times higher. Of course, the living expenses here are often correspondingly high—to the discouragement of these workers.

In *Mexican Voices/American Dreams*, Marilyn Davis chronicles reasons for immigration from the hundreds of interviews she recorded. She gives voice to those who leave because of fights with family members, because of pregnancy, because of legal troubles, debt, and myriad other inducements. Davis comments:

El norte also offers opportunity of another kind—opportunity to cut the apron strings, to break off a relationship, for the dream of romance and adventure, to enhance one’s status, or to save face, to

leave the family or join them, to sow wild oats, and to see the world—not a possibility in the Mexican army. But now there is a new, even more compelling reason, a reason that has grown into a tradition

of deep significance. Suffering the risks, the injustices, and the loneliness of el norte has become the quest, the rite of passage to manhood for young men throughout the villages of Mexico. (38)

Davis’s conclusion resonates in reading Ramon “Tianguis” Perez’s *The Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant* or in Spanish, *Diario de un Mojado* (Diary of a Wetback). In reading the narrative of this Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca, Mexico, a subtext develops that elevates him to the status of a traditional hero undergoing a centuries-old rite of passage—a pattern that includes leaving home, enduring trials, proving himself, and finally returning home as a man and as something of a hero.

Perez ostensibly has come in search of a job; nevertheless his behavior and the experiences he undergoes suggest that there is more to his journey than the desire to earn money. Continually, he exhibits wanderlust and curiosity about his surroundings; he easily becomes bored or impatient with jobs, even relatively good ones; he moves often, travels frequently, seeks amusements, and he spends money unnecessarily, suggesting that economic betterment is not his sole objective. There is, in fact, little evidence of his sending money home, and when ultimately he does return, he brings a few gifts for his family, but after more than two years of work, he brings little money.

Nevertheless, there are other, perhaps subconscious, purposes to Ramon Perez's trip: He wants to prove himself, see something of the world, and return to his village as one who has passed the acid-test of manhood by facing the difficulties of illegal immigration. He desires to return to his village as one who has seen something of the world, as one who has learned about another culture firsthand. Though the average non-Hispanic American may not have much esteem for the so-called wetback, viewed in light of historic patterns, Perez should be elevated to the status of traditional hero.

The rite of passage for Ramon Perez, and for other such immigrants, involves several steps that have been enumerated in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell who discovered similar elements in most of the world's myths—a phenomenon he calls “monomyths.” The basic blueprint is: departure, initiation, return. Although there is variation in each myth, the pattern is as follows—under departure, the steps are: call to adventure, refusal of the call, supernatural aid, crossing the threshold, belly of the whale. Under the category of initiation, the process includes, the road of trials, meeting with the goddess, woman as temptress, atonement with father, apotheosis, the ultimate boon. The final return stage includes, refusal of the return, magic flight, rescue from without, crossing the return threshold, master of two worlds, and freedom to live.

In adapting Campbell's pattern to *Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant*, the steps include: answering the call to go to the United States, gaining the wherewithal to make the trip, following in the footsteps of other men from his village, crossing river/border, living by his wits, obtaining fake ID, finding work, earning and saving money, adapting in the foreign land, learning English, buying a car, seducing an Anglo-American woman, traveling, and finally returning to his village in Mexico with the ultimate boon: tools, money, clothes, and language skills, to be welcomed as one that has been initiated and transformed: to be welcomed as a hero.

It is important to note that Perez is not destitute in his Zapotec village of Macuiltianguis. He tells us that there was no shortage of work in his father's carpentry shop, so though he does go north in search of U.S. dollars, he also goes for the adventure and to prove that he can do it. He tells us that

It didn't take a lot of thinking for me to decide to make this trip. It was a matter of following the tradition of the village. One could even say that we're a village of wetbacks. A lot of people, nearly the

majority, have gone, come back, and returned to the country to the north (12)

The quote suggests that many men from his village have made this journey, and most eventually return; thus, the immigration is not always permanent.

It may come as a surprise to some of us to learn that many Mexican immigrants have no desire to settle here permanently. We might think, narrowly, that everyone would want to live in this country and partake of the wonders we have here: shopping malls, strip centers, pawn shops, fast food, air pollution, congested expressways, large houses that are never paid for, and so forth. In other words, the United States, though full of attractions, is not considered the ideal place to live for all Mexican villagers. Consequently, throughout Perez's narrative, he and his Mexican acquaintances continually criticize U.S. culture, lifestyle, and mores. One Mexican American, for whom Perez works laments the results of U.S. culture on his family. He says: "I have continually repented of having come to the United States...In Mexico...my sons would have become useful young men, not what they are now, men without a profession" (85). Not only are they men without a profession, they are young men without ambition or work ethic. These sons watch TV on the sofa refusing to help the father in his grocery business. They sit passively watching as he unloads boxes and baskets of food. Furthermore, the father came as an illegal and speaks only Spanish while his children speak only English which contributes further to the estrangement between this father and his children.

One of Perez's compatriots confesses that he went to the United States because "he just wanted to see the world before assuming his profession" in Mexico (189). For him, then, the journey becomes something of the grand tour before settling down to the task of earning a living and perhaps rearing a family. Again, there was no thought of staying in the U.S. for anything more than a temporary visit. This desire to see a little of the world is partly the result of routines in Mexican villages. For example, at one point, Perez tells us that he is completely familiar with his mother's daily schedule because it has always been exactly the same (94). In part because of this monotony, he desires to see a bit of the world before settling down.

But these peripatetic young men, the undocumented immigrants, are still much a part of the village: “From the day of their departure, the whole town followed the fate of those adventurers with great interest” (13). And there was always cause for celebration when these pilgrims returned. Perez refers to the homecoming as “a big event.” He also notes that these men returned “home as changed people” (13). Quoting:

The trips erased for a while the lines that the sun, the wind and the dust put in a peasant’s skin. People came home with good haircuts, good clothes, and most of all, they brought dollars in their pockets.

In the *cantinas* they paid for beers without worrying much about the tab. When the alcohol rose to their heads, they’d begin saying words in English. It was natural for me to want to try my luck at

earning dollars (14).

Again, it is important to remember that these adventurers will eventually return to their roots and settle down.

Of course, the journey to manhood is fraught with trials and tribulations to be endured or overcome, and this is why accomplishing the trip proves one’s fortitude. Writing of these hazards in *Across the Wire*, Luis Urrea notes that

... if the coyote does not turn on you suddenly with a gun and take everything from you himself, you might still be attacked by the rateros. If the rateros don’t get you, there are roving zombies that can

smell you from fifty yards downwind ... If the junkies somehow miss you, there are the pandilleros—gang bangers from either side of the border who are looking for some bloody fun ... Now, say you

are lucky enough to evade all these dangers on your journey. Hazards still await you ... You might meet white racists Scorpions, tarantulas, black widows. And, of course [there is] the Border Patrol

(la migra). (16-17)

In addition to these physical dangers, finding work and a cheap place to live can be a demoralizing experience. There is, at every step, the threat of returning home without honor (or not at all) because of the possibility of failure, of being caught, deported, robbed, or killed.

Thus the dream is always easier than the reality. After looking for work, Perez tells us:

Several days have passed without any results. Disillusioned, I see that nothing is as simple as I imagined before coming to the United States. Before leaving home, I thought the trip would be simple. Arrive, go to work, receive dollars immediately, and someday go back like my townsmen, if not driving a luxurious

car, with at least something to show for my efforts. I ask myself if they too, passed through the same difficulties (56)

After a few weeks of unemployment, Perez imagines the worst possible fate; he recounts a dream:

I had arrived at my village in conditions that I dread. I saw myself crossing the main street. I was carrying a bundle of clothes and an atrocious hunger that was devouring my intestines and making noises so loud I was afraid they'd denounce my presence. I was also carrying the bitter knowledge that I'd failed in my adventure to the United States. In my dream I was coming to my parents' house, but I didn't feel any kind of happiness ... because ... I was arriving with nothing. ... I didn't want to arrive ... [but] my Mother...had seen me ... she came out of the kitchen door toward me, repeating my name with happiness painted on her face ... I smiled too, trying not to show my empty hands ... "I couldn't bring you anything, Jefa," I kept trying to explain. "La migra caught me and I couldn't bring anything. I was telling that lie to my Mother when I woke from my sleep ... It was only a dream ... It was time to get out in the street and look for work again. (72)

To return home without gifts, without having succeeded at one's task would be a loss of face. It is almost better not to return than to return with disgrace.

Prior to crossing into the United States, Perez's is robbed of \$550 that he had borrowed to make the trip, money with which he was to pay the Coyote. This is one of the low points for Perez. Then to make matters worse, soon after he crosses the border, while in the trunk of a car on the way to Houston, he and his cohorts are apprehended by the Border Patrol and temporarily imprisoned before being sent back to Mexico. These two low points serve as the symbolic descent to hell—to tie-in with traditional epics. Although Perez contemplates returning home; to do so would be to admit failure, so he perseveres.

Like traditional heroes, Perez and other undocumented immigrants seek supernatural aid. The house in which they take refuge while awaiting passage contains two cardboard boxes stacked atop one another to form a makeshift altar complete with artificial flowers and a half-burned candle, which gives "faint light to two images of the Virgin whose rusty tin frames are nailed to the wall above ... Upon the only plastered wall, a poorly skilled artist has painted the Virgin of Guadalupe in sad and cheap colors" (32). With her blessing, the immigrants feel capable of making the dangerous crossing. A less supernatural aid, but one that is nevertheless just as

necessary, is the address and phone of a friend in the states. This information has been memorized, for writing it down may jeopardize that contact's cover.

After much struggle and hardship in Houston, Perez eventually moves and obtains work in a printing factory in San Antonio. And as soon as he has saved a little money, he decides to buy a car, even though he tells us that he does not need one. He confesses that the city buses never run late and that it has been no trouble to get to work or to the grocery store. He surmises that his feeling of contentment in owning a car comes from wanting to emulate Americans. He adds that he has not met one who does not own a car. For this Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca, Mexico, the car serves as a symbol of his assimilation; he equates the car with success. Not only was he able to buy the car, but he has the nerve to drive it without a license or insurance. Interestingly, and as a fitting contrast, the paragraph after the description of his car states that, in a letter, his parents inform him that one of their cows has given birth (108).

Throughout his stay in the United States, Perez exhibits curiosity about his new surroundings. He tells the reader of driving around in some of the more affluent neighborhoods. He attends a heavy-metal concert. One weekend, he travels to Dallas where he experiences what to him is unusual night-life: a gay bar (by accident, he tells us), topless bars, nightclubs, extravagantly dressed people, drug use, exotic dancers, and people passing out. Perez shares these details:

Some of [the men] can't be distinguished from the women because they, too, wear loud-colored pants and have their hair messed-up in the same way. From a distance, I look at one guy's face, and it

seems to be painted with cosmetics, just like a woman's. (118).

He knows his buddies at home would find all of this hard to believe. Then while making a stop in the men's room, Perez shares this:

While I'm at the urinal, I see ... a woman leaning up against the wall ... On leaving the restroom I ... notice that men are entering at the women's door. My curiosity leads me to push the womens'

door open a crack [and since] nobody says anything ... I go in and behold a half dozen white women ... I expect gestures of surprise to greet my entrance, but ... none of them pays any attention ...

One of the young women raises her dress to adjust her panties, showing her white legs and her rear, which shakes with every twist she gives her undergarments. Then she unbuttons her blouse and before

my eyes I see her ..." (119-20)

Imagine how these descriptions will be greeted by the young men of his Zapotec village in Oaxaca, Mexico. After witnessing these and a number of other unusual sights at this Dallas club that has a \$10 cover charge, he writes: "About two hours after coming into the club, I leave, believing that my ten dollars were well-spent" (121). Again, these experiences form part of his initiation into a new world, and upon returning home, he will be able to entertain others with his adventures.

Of course, it is not all play for Perez. He gets a relatively good job with the printing company, but he eventually leaves it for a job as a carpenter. Shortly thereafter, he decides that he would rather go work in California where, among other things, he enrolls in a conversational English class, for he was much impressed when his fellow villagers returned speaking some English. After working in California for a while, he decides to try his luck harvesting crops in Oregon. While there, Perez and a buddy undergo another rite-of-passage, sex with an Anglo-American woman. They are so proud of this feat that upon returning to camp, they awaken their companions to tell them "We got a hold of some white girls! But what girls they were! You can't imagine it!" (205).

At the end of his narrative, Perez informs us that he has more or less achieved the goals that impelled him to come to the United States, and having accomplished them, decides to return home. Though he came into this country by crossing the Rio Grande on an inner-tube, he majestically returns to Mexico aboard an airplane—the culmination of his experiences. His baggage consists of a couple of big cardboard boxes with electric tools for his father's carpentry shop, American clothes for his brothers, and a manual typewriter for himself.

The diary ends on a disappointing note. Once in Mexico, he is confronted by the federal police who claim he is a smuggler evading import taxes. He is forced to pay a 70,000-peso bribe in order to keep his tools, but he concludes that getting home with his tools is worth more than he had to pay. He has a little money left, and with it, he will no doubt buy drinks for those in the village cantina, where they will be regaled with the story of his adventures and where he will be given the hero's welcome. He returns with experience, knowledge, tools, and clothing. Having ventured abroad, he has returned in the eyes of his fellow villagers as a master of two worlds.

* * * *

In presenting these views, I do not mean to minimize the economic hardships that most immigrants endure both in their native countries and in the United States. Nor do I suggest that they merely come here for a working vacation. Nevertheless, when studied in a larger, centuries-old context, it is possible to view some of these border crossings as more than the search for

work and a paycheck. Often these young men are following the footsteps of their fathers, uncles, or older brothers, and like them, they wish to prove themselves by crossing the river or the barbed wire, finding work, eluding deportation, enduring difficult circumstances, saving money, and finally returning home bearing gifts. Sometimes, they leave as boys; often they return as men, and almost always, they are welcomed back by their families as heroes.

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