

## Midpoint Musings

How do you define the migrant experience? How do you comprehend the journey? And whose job is it to put it into words? These past few weeks we have been exposed to many different forms of comprehending the migrant journey. Some chose to understand the migrant journey by becoming a stop. Migrant shelters, like Casa de la Misericordia and C.A.M.E., become temporary homes, and resource centers, like Casa Alitas and Centro de Recursos, become a pit stop to recharge before another leg of travel. Some chose to understand the migrant journey by making the land survivable. The Samaritans and Humane Borders regularly put water jugs and water tanks in the most remote parts of the desert in the hope that someone in need comes across them. Some try to provide legal assistance or financial opportunity to migrants once they have arrived at the final destination of their journey, as Keep Tucson Together and Rancho Feliz do. And, some try to replicate the migrant experience, by going on long hikes and simulating detainment, or by creating “migrant museums” that memorialize the deep traumas suffered by people migrating across the border.

But, migrant is not a noun. It is an adjective. It encapsulated just one phase of the complex lives of people who enter the United States. People who migrate are not defined by their journey. Their most traumatic personal histories is not who they *are*. For this reason, it is impossible to try to replicate the experience. The experience does not start on the long trek through the Sonoran desert. The journey does not start at the wall or in ICE detention centers. They do not become a migrant when they enter the United States. The migrant journey begins in home countries, the ones that they had to flee to survive. Their stories begin by understanding the opportunities being sought in the United States that they were not provided at home. The migrant journey begins by understanding the financial suffering, the social oppression, and the violent circumstances of their native countries. For this reason, a black-tape water gallon, barbed wire, or camouflage clothing do not represent the migrant experience. A “migrant museum” cannot accurately depict the traumatic and haunting tales of migrating people, often riddled with loneliness, heartbreak, grief, and mourning.

How could you succinctly define this experience? The migrant experience is not analogous. The people who migrate are not homogenous. To try to encapsulate the experiences of migrating people cannot be summed up in one story, one anecdotal tale about a diverse population on a harrowing journey. People migrate from different regions, of different tongues, and with different experiences. Salvadorians Dora Rodriguez and Javier Zamora’s tales of survival are not comparable to one another, crossing twenty years apart from one another and being impacted by very different policies despite crossing through the same terrain. Their stories are not identical. Their stories are not the same as the Haitian or Mauritanian peoples who stop at Casa Alitas daily. While we have largely met people who have crossed through the

Sonoran desert, we know that this experience does not apply to the hundreds of thousands of people who migrate through the borderlands annually. The experiences of people who migrate are constantly changing, becoming more harrowing and life-threatening by the day. In the most desolate of places, the United States has worked tirelessly to make the border a deadly place with bigger walls, floating walls, nets, barbed wire, and militia. The migrant journey can most aptly be described as a constant struggle to choose life over death.

And whose job is it to tell the stories of people who undertake this journey? Is it theirs to tell themselves? Is it the job of migrating peoples to fight for their rights? To educate others? To relive their traumas in the hopes that policymakers care? After talking to Dora and Javier, it is clear that healing is not quick and not linear. Retelling migration experiences to others is understandably difficult for survivors. Reliving the dangers of the desert, the lost lives of loved ones and companions, and often, being detained for days on end are individually heavy. Together, the weight can be unbearable. But if it is not the people who migrate who tell their stories, who does? Is it the job of those who listen? Those who are entrusted with one person's tale to create actionable change in their communities of privilege? Because the people who support non-profit organizations for migrants often are coming from a place of privilege. *I am coming from a place of privilege. I will never be a person migrating to the United States. The last person to migrate to this country from my family was three generations ago. As a privileged person, what is my place in all of this?*

I don't have a clear answer. It is clear to me that migrating peoples deserve to have their voices heard, and even further, amplified. It is clear that there is work to be done in border policy that makes it both possible and safe for people to migrate to this country. It is clear that there are forms of comprehending the migrant experience that are unhelpful, if not traumatizing, to all parties involved. It is clear that people of privilege should and can follow the direction of people who migrate on matters of migration and how to share their stories. It is clear that the migration experience is not able to be comprehended in a matter of words or place. And, lastly, it is clear that a migration experience is not what defines a person who migrates. That is only part of their story.

