

10/20/2023: Must a Migrant Be Grateful?

In Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" is the memorable definition: "Home is the place that, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." His interlocutor adjusts: "I should have called it/ Something you somehow haven't to deserve." Who has the right to cross a border, who has the obligation to open the door, must the one crossing the threshold take off their shoes and bare their head, must she or he "deserve" ...? And how to think about this dialectic of yearning and rights, of mercy and obligation, when a fault line much less tangible than a national border hovers above us all, namely the latitude at which heat and drought make living conditions impossible? What will become of the expectation that someone someplace "has to take you in" and that this is something one needn't "deserve" when political lines drawn around "land" become meaningless?

Brenda Navarro (Spain), Guru Ladakhi (India), Artur Domostawski (Poland)

1. BRENDA NAVARRO (Spain)

Everything is a narrative. Humanity exists as it is now because we began to invent stories of who we could be and decided to give testimony to it. I like literature because in the broad and philosophical sense of time, it knows no borders, so its diverse expressions are infinite. There is no impossible path for language: language is the path itself and it ramifies everywhere. Ergo, literature does not migrate; it is part of the concept we have built of humanity. Borders begin when we do not have the words to narrate a problem, or when we forbid words from being used to find answers.

Everything is narrative and in the present time we have been led to believe that there are not enough words to narrate our situation and formulate questions. It's a lie. For example, in Mexico in 1994, the Zapatista movement showed us how many contradictions the country was hiding as it tried to give an economically strong international image because the government wanted to join the Free Trade Organization with the United States and Canada. Unfortunately, as we would see over the years, commercial doors would be opened, while at the same time the border conflicts we are living today took deeper root. This example is a contradictory metaphor of the current 21st century: People cannot move freely around the world, despite the existence of international conventions and protocols that protect the free flow of merchandise, and meanwhile weapons manage to cross all borders with a frightening ease.

According to reports from international organizations this year, the countries with the largest arms and defense budgets will be: the United States, which is also home to the five largest arms manufacturers in the world, followed by other imperial powers such as China, Russia, and India. And the leading countries in arms exports are the United States, Russia, France, China, and Germany. These countries provide the weapons and our societies provide the dead.

The narrative is that many of these highly militarized countries also have a big problem with migration. However, reality tells us that in Europe, people not authorized to cross borders (including asylum seekers pending the resolution of their cases) represent just one percent of the total population of the European continent, while according to Pew Research statistics in 2019 in the U.S., so-called "unauthorized" immigrants were only 3% of the total population. What are the interests behind investing so much in armed conflicts and in migratory control as border armor? Maybe it sends two clear messages: one, that societies have to bet on national security (us) and that the pornography of misery that they provoke in people who leave their countries (them) is the punishment for not obeying the mandate that one should not migrate

when one is poor or when one's life is in danger. People are dehumanized when they are called migrants with a derogatory connotation of the other. And for every message and use of language that supports borders there is a business of corporate lobbies that receive public money from most governments. The concept of migrants is a business.

But let's go back to literature, In 2017, the Iranian writer Dina Nayeri wrote in *The Guardian* about her experience as a refugee girl, the bullying she endured for being Iranian, and the violence she was subjected to by her classmates at school, to the point that her injuries required hospitalization. In Spain, between 2022 and 2023, a 9-year-old Colombian girl, two girls of Russian origin, and two other Argentinean girls, threw themselves from the balconies of their apartments because they suffered xenophobic bullying at school. Dina Nayeri explains that when she arrived in America and tried to explain to her teacher that only a few months before she had lived with refugees outside Rome, and that most of the social studies work baffled her, the teacher looked at her sleepily and said: "Awww, sweetie, you must be so grateful to be here."

"Grateful. There was that word." Nayeri continues: "But what America did," she said, "was a basic human obligation. It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks. It is your duty to answer us, even if we don't give you sugary success stories. Even if we remain a bunch of ordinary Iranians, sometimes bitter or confused." I close the quote.

If migrants have the obligation to feel grateful for offering the best of ourselves, for creating networks and knowledge, for paying our taxes, for making cultural and social life, for enriching the place where we arrive, what kind of narrative of humanity are we allowing?

In 1994, the Mexican indigenous communities, always considered foreigners, launched a question that I take up again in the heat of this table: if we are not grateful migrants, is it that we have to ask forgiveness for not being grateful? "Who has to ask forgiveness and who can grant it? Those who, for years and years sat at a full table and were satiated? Or we who sat with death, a figure so quotidian, so much our own, that in the end we ceased to be afraid of it?"

Everything is narrative and everything can continue to be given new life and meaning through literature. Perhaps it is time to question the lies that have been passed off as reality. It is not the borders that kill, but the people who allow the free circulation of weapons. Language is powerful, very powerful and we must be critical when using it to ask questions. Almost all of us have questions. It is time to dare to demand answers.