Navigating the Distance Between Natives, Mestizos, and Whites in the Southwest Borderlands

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As a child of perhaps five or six, I had an encounter with a young Indigenous mother selling corn gorditas in the market behind the cathedral in Juarez, my hometown, just south of the Mexico-Texas border. She was one of many Rarámuri (Light on their Feet) people, whose presence in those lands preceded all known organized world religions.

I was very young and hungry; without realizing it, I had been staring at her, enchanted by the smell of her delicious cooking. Two other kids who looked a lot like her and were about my size, one boy and one girl, went to her, dropped spare change from handmade purses hanging from their necks, and she gave them a fresh small box with colorful Chiclets. They put the gum in their purses and then got a gordita each. They spoke to each other in a language I could not understand, but later learned was Taráhumara (a form of Yuto-Nahua).

The kids kept pointing at me talking to the woman, whom I assumed was their mom. When they were done eating, the woman signaled for me to come closer. I did. She offered me a gordita. It looked so good, fresh and hot, filled with lettuce and cheese, its magic smell filled me with joy. I grabbed it fast, then stopped. In a sheepish voice I said, “gracias,” but she replied: “Gracias, no. Vende Chiclets.”

I learned that day that the Rarámuri were fascinating and generous, they worked hard and endured the neglect and abuse inflicted on them, the original landholders, by the rest of us. She was not about asking or giving handouts; she was about fair and true exchanges. We developed a relationship of trust: She made gorditas, I sold Chiclets. The historic distance between us, she as Indigenous, me as mestizo, was cut by her generous spirit and her recognition that hunger and need unite us all, regardless of race or color. She knew better things could emerge if we worked together. She taught me that.

That feeling of being worlds apart from others would come full circle when I found myself on the U.S. side of the border, now a young man, a few miles north of where I was born. I lived in the New Mexico/Texas/Mexico borderlands, which at the time, meant there was no public transportation connecting my small town of Sunland Park, New Mexico, to El Paso, Texas. Instead, private drivers would outfit old cargo vans with welded metal benches, designed to pack in as many people as possible with no regard for comfort or ventilation.

These vans were the welcomed relief for undocumented people who had braved the desert sun to get to the city of El Paso for the next leg of their journey. Never on a given schedule, the drivers waited for "enough" people to come, sometimes for hours, before deciding it was worth their while to drive us to downtown El Paso. Undocumented people hid behind bushes and trash barrels until they saw the van was ready to leave. Then, in a sudden motion, people would come out of hiding and run towards the van, hoping to avoid the immigration officers driving through the area. For those of us waiting inside the metal structure in the desert heat, it meant the van was about to turn into a can of sardines, but with an even worse stench.

Most of the undocumented travelers were younger people making the trek, with a few older folks in tow. The other passengers rarely protested or pressed the driver to ignore these weary travelers, who generally looked like they had been through hell. Often, immigration officers, referred to as La Migra, would stop these vans and demand documents from everyone.

One day, a young Rarámuri family made the run to the van with a small boy of about four or five in tow. This brought back memories of my Chiclet friends. Everyone got in and the driver took off. About a mile into our journey, we got stopped by La Migra. There were two officers, one dark-brown middle-aged Mexican-American man, maybe 5' 10", with thick eyebrows and a mustache, and one younger, maybe in his twenties, a slender red-headed white man about 6 feet tall, who some of us recognized as the a****** who stopped everyone he met and asked for papers, from the same people, daily.

The white officer stepped into the crowded van and started his routine of asking for papers from each passenger. Those unable to show them were sent out of the vehicle, where the Mexican-American officer, who was very polite, got them to form a line. I was seated towards the back of the van on the right side, which meant I had to turn my head around to look outside. It was not long before the line grew long. I saw the young Rarámuri couple in line, but I did not see their kid. I looked intently at them and I felt their stare back. They were looking right at me, as if they were asking where their child was. I panicked and started, as discreetly as I could, to look around for the young boy. He was hiding under the bench opposite me under a group of old ladies. I looked down at the boy, who was clearly scared but silent and alert, as if he had been trained all of his young life for this moment.

I began to open my mouth when I felt someone's elbow on my left side, then a pair of eyes from an old lady across my bench, burning me with their gaze as if they were screaming 'don't you dare.' The passengers on her side of the van had blocked, with their bodies and purses, the lower part of the bench, covering the boy from the eyes of the red-headed officer. I felt a sudden sucker punch in my stomach and, still in shock, looked back at the young Indigenous couple. The man looked at me and slightly shook his head sideways, like saying no. Their eyes and mine were locked for what seemed a long time. The white officer was now in front of me. I was filled with rage. Tears of ancient frustration escaped me. I turned inside the van, and with an accusatory tone, told the white officer who was about to ask me for my papers: "Isn't it funny that you are asking us for papers?"

He was caught off guard by my question. He knew who I was. He would stop me frequently just for the hell of it.

"What did you say?" he asked, getting annoyed.

“I said, how is it that you, the only white person for miles around, is asking us, all brown and Indigenous people, for proof that we belong here? Aren’t you the one away from home? Where are your papers?”

Passengers started shouting in agreement. He got really upset and raised his voice: “You better shut your mouth before you get arrested, young man!” he said while pointing at me, eyebrows raised.

I wanted to respond but it was too late. The other passengers got emboldened and started to curse him, accusing him of harassment and abuse. Voices got louder, and he became really red in the face, nervous and angry. You could smell the fear in him. His Mexican-American partner sensed something was wrong and rushed to the van. As he did, those in line outside made a run for it.

“They are running!” the white officer screamed at his partner. He rushed out of the van and began calling for backup. The Mexican-American officer instructed our driver to get out of there, which he did immediately. As I looked back through the trail of dust, I saw more immigration vehicles arriving, but the parents were gone—and the child was still hidden under the bench.

There was nervous laughter and cheers from some passengers. My eyes were fixed on the young boy, now being helped out from under the bench by the old ladies. They tried to speak to him, but could not, because he did not speak Spanish, only Taráhumara. He held back tears, but did not cry. The driver told us that one of the men working in the parking lot that served as the terminal for his route knew a Rarámuri man who worked nearby. He picked his radio and asked someone to go fetch him. The ladies vowed to stay with the boy until he could be reunited with his family. Bittersweetness filled the air.

We arrived at our destinations and people made their way out of the van. I got off and walked over to an alleyway, where I vomited violently and cried my rage and inadequacy out for a long time. I felt overwhelmed. I felt proud of the young boy, so brave and so helpless. I felt deep respect and admiration for the quick-thinking ladies who'd protected the child and would look after him, but I was also filled with shame and guilt that I did not know how to honor and aid my friends the Rarámuri and their child, remembering how one of their own was able to aid me in my time of need.

Most of all I was livid that some white man, so out of place among us, would have the authority to question the legitimacy of our humanity in the lands where our Indigenous ancestors had lived for millennia. That felt wrong. It still does. That is when I realized I lived in a nation based on lies, a house forcibly built by whites on someone else's land.

Yet there I was, and here I still am. Never able to reconcile the distance between us as races, as people, yet living together, like intimate enemies, in this house of shadows, where its lock still fits my key, as Toni Morrison wrote in her novel "Home":

Whose house is this?… Why does its lock fit my key? Whose house is this? Whose night keeps out the light In here? Say, who owns this house? It's not mine. I dreamed another, sweeter brighter With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats; Of fields wide as arms open for me. This house is strange. Its shadows lie. Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?