

To Arrive is to Begin: Benjamin Sáenz's *Carry Me Like Water* and the Pilgrimage of Origin in the Borderlands*

Alberto López Pulido
Arizona State University West

Todos vuelven a la tierra en que nacieron;
al embrujo incomparable de su sol.
Todos vuelven al rincón de donde
salieron: donde acaso floreció más de un
amor.

Everyone returns to the land where they
were born; to the incomparable bewitch-
ing attraction of its sun.

Everybody returns to the place from
where they came, where perhaps more
than one love blossomed.

—Rubén Blades y Seis del Solar

Pilgrimages of faith and identity have been woven deeply into the history of the borderlands. From Huitzilopochtli who led the Mexica out of Aztlán in search of Tenochtitlán to Juan Soldado who protects the undocumented in transit from Mexico to the United States, borderlands people continue to move and traverse borders led by the promise of self-fulfillment and wholeness. Yet in the contemporary period of South to North crossings, this pilgrimage of prosperity comes with the rejection of our personal and collective past. This style of pilgrimage is characterized by movement beyond the personal and familiar into the liminal world in search of the multifaceted shrine of affluence and well being. It is a flawed assumption because it requires the fragmentation of Chicanas/os past in order to be whole and complete in the present. It represents the painful negation of Mexican history “that hurts in a way that you don’t even realize hurts” (Mura

19). One is forced to choose between one's past and present worlds.

In contrast with this linear view of movement and pilgrimage, this essay examines Benjamin Alire Sáenz's novel *Carry Me Like Water* and introduces a unique and different perspective for understanding culture and identity in the borderlands. The view of movement described in this essay is as a pilgrimage of origin where movement is understood as returning to the past, obligating participants to return to their sacred sources of origin in order to fully understand themselves. In this cyclical perspective of movement, all return to the place from which they came, to that source of origins where personal identities are first discovered and established (see Blades). Like other ethnic literature, such as *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), *Memories of the Alhambra* (1977), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *Praisesong to the Widow* (1983), *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1992), *Fatheralong* (1994), and *Ceremony* (1977), *Carry Me Like Water* teaches us that we must first go back in order to identify and proclaim our sense of place and belonging before we can move forward (see Villegas).

In this essay, *Carry Me Like Water* represents a sacred source of cultural and spiritual creativity identified as a "lyric" of movement that guides and teaches about the pilgrimage of origin (Carrasco, "Perspectiva" 207-08). It offers an important lesson for understanding and interpreting Chicana/o culture in the borderlands. We specifically explore the relationship between Maria Elena, who at the beginning of the novel is Helen La Greca from Palo Alto, California, and her brother Diego from El Paso, Texas. We analyze how through Maria Elena, Sáenz takes the reader on a journey of rejection and abandonment of her brother and ethnic culture, and then back to a pilgrimage of acceptance and resolution of her past sacred origins.

Carry Me Like Water is a passionate exploration of relationships between families, lovers, and friends. Sáenz skillfully weaves a story of multiple worlds comprised of people striving to reconnect deep human relationships. In addition to Maria Elena's and Diego's relationship, we uncover emotional and complex relationships between Maria Elena and her husband Eddie and

close friend Lizzie; Eddie's relationship to his brother Jake, and Jake's relationship to Joaquin. We also discover the world of Diego and his human connection to both Luz and Mando. Through the use of literary devices such as conversation, diary, internal monologue, and the omniscient storyteller, *Carry Me Like Water* underscores the need for lasting interpersonal ties and community for Chicanas/os.

Maria Elena is a middle-class woman who has chosen to run away from her memories of growing up in El Paso. She has abandoned her brother Diego, a poor laborer, barely surviving on the U.S.-Mexico border, unable to hear or speak, and who spends his time rewriting a suicide note. Maria Elena's exile is driven by her desire to shed her Chicana identity by renaming herself Helen and becoming Italian. She did not want to be poor and Mexican growing up in El Paso (132). She is married to Eddie Marsh, the reluctant heir to a multimillion-dollar family fortune who seeks to reconnect with his brother Jacob. However, as revealed at the outset of the novel, Maria Elena and Eddie share unspoken pasts and have made a pact never to reveal anything about their childhood backgrounds. This shared unspoken past allows them to live in a perceived perfect world of wholeness and self-fulfillment.

We are introduced to Maria Elena as a pregnant woman who excitedly anticipates the birth of her first child. Eddie and Maria Elena live a worry-free life in suburbia where everything is described as rare and miraculous (7). From their intimate moments to the meals she prepares for her husband, life is "perfect" (8). For Maria Elena, such a perfect world can produce nothing less than a perfect baby (16).

As the child's birth draws closer we discover changes in the lives of Maria Elena and Eddie. For Eddie, the agreed upon pact of silence must cease because in his mind it was nothing more than a game devised during their courtship. With the imminent birth of their son, the time has come to know and reveal everything (88). Maria Elena is in complete disagreement with this idea and resists. Yet, with the birth of Jacob Diego she is forced to look back and listen to and feel the Old World of the silent.

In a pivotal scene midway through the book, the stark contrast between a blaring smoke alarm in a smoke-filled kitchen

and a still and quiet infant awakens Maria Elena to the reality that something is seriously wrong:

She looked at her son still lying peacefully in her arms. She had noticed it, too, though she'd said nothing. She was working hard at ignoring the fact that he didn't respond to noises. She didn't want to know. (258)

Like her brother Diego, whom she had abandoned in El Paso, Jacob Diego's world is also shrouded in silence. Maria Elena's world is no longer faultless. She does not possess the perfect baby in a perfect world. In a subtle, yet powerful way, Maria Elena discovers new forms of meaning and order in her life as she begins to slowly embrace and accept her silent child.

She is taken back to the memories of her mother who would sing to Diego. Maria Elena's brother Diego could not hear her, but he definitely could feel her: "'He can feel it,' she said, 'he can feel my voice running through his body. It's different than hearing, maybe better' " (271).

Soon after the discovery of Jacob Diego's silence, Maria Elena prepares the bland and sterile family meal of the past in a new and totally different way. In the presence of her baby:

She chopped the carrots and onions as if they had somehow offended her. . . . The stew was done by seven—she'd never made it before—it was a stew her mother had made. She wondered why she'd made it. This was peasant food—more potatoes than meat—a bad cut besides. She wasn't poor any longer, no longer just the daughter of a wetback. Look at this kitchen, she thought, it's mine. But as she tasted the stew, she smiled. It was good. She could almost smell her mother and the small apartment they had lived in on Ochoa Street after they'd left her father. (271)

Maria Elena realizes and accepts that perfection is no longer meaningful or valid in her world. The visual and audible memory of her deceased mother returns to Maria Elena as she remembers her mother sharing with her that "Only the dead were perfect—because they were dead" (272-73). With the birth of her son, Maria Elena finds herself talking to her mother more and more and eventually "comes to know everything her mother had known" (273).

We also discover a renewed love between Maria Elena and Eddie despite their emotional and physical imperfections. During a moment of intimacy with her husband, Maria Elena acknowledges the imperfections of her body in conjunction with their renewed love for each other. Sáenz describes it as feeling poor again, without possessions or the need for them and the need to return to her source of wholeness. "She was compelled to stop running away from the people and the desert that had formed her and given her an identity" (278-79). As the result of a powerful dream that places her in the center of the sacred desert landscape, Maria Elena is convinced that she must return to El Paso and find her brother Diego.

The final chapter of the second section of the novel describes Maria Elena, Eddie, Jacob Diego, Lizzie, and Lizzie's mother Rosa traversing the New Mexican desert as they personally and collectively struggle with their decision to uproot their lives in California in order to transform their lives:

They are traveling away from the westering sun as if they are being beckoned by something they cannot resist. The gravity pulls them and they are tired of fighting. They drive free into that something they've never known. That unknown something does not frighten them. (368)

The final section of the book is too short to fully capture all of the adjustments and reunions of this California clan in their move from Palo Alto to El Paso. The third and final section could actually have served as the foundation for a sequel. However, with regards to Maria Elena's story, the act of reuniting with her brother represents an important lyric for understanding the pilgrimage of origin. Chapter 10 is the most powerful in telling the story of Maria Elena.

This chapter opens with Maria Elena and company engaged in the act of pilgrimage on Cristo Rey Mountain in El Paso. Cristo Rey is truly part of the social and religious history of twentieth-century El Paso. As symbolic acts of faith, thousands of "peregrinos" 'pilgrims,' Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os, ascend yearly to the top of Cristo Rey (see Ortiz). It represents that sacred source for Maria Elena in the company of Lizzie as she

trudges up the mountain engrossed in girlhood memories despite one hundred-degree weather. Here she feels at peace in speaking openly and directly about her brother Diego:

She talked a lot about Diego. She said she'd hated him because he was so helpless until she realized that she only thought he was helpless because he was deaf. But she only came to that conclusion sometime after she'd abandoned him. "After my mother's funeral, I just walked out" she said. (447)

Lizzie continues to describe Maria Elena's actions within this space that even allows Lizzie to experience a sacred moment:

When we grew quiet, she prayed a rosary in my ear. I listened to her whispered prayer as we climbed higher and higher. Despite all the rows of cardboard houses, the homes with bootlegged electricity that often destroyed entire neighborhoods in the night in flames, despite the pollution, despite the tamed and beaten river, the desert I was staring at was as sacred a thing as I had ever seen. (447-48)

Cristo Rey represents a sacred site of reunions. Not only is Maria Elena drawn closer to Lizzie, Eddie is drawn closer to his brother Jake, and Lizzie is drawn closer to her mother. More importantly, Lizzie recognizes Maria Elena's brother Diego, who is also on the pilgrimage trek with his good friend Luz.

Like flowing rivers of waters, Cristo Rey represents the sacred source of origin, "a place of miracles," where families and friends come together and create community (496). Yet we are also reminded of the fact that rivers also flow apart because the "world conspires to keep us all separate from each other." As Lizzie so poignantly reminds us, "we have to fight to belong to those we love—maybe that's all we can hope for" (449).

Through the silence of the written word in the form of a newspaper ad, Maria Elena eventually reunites with Diego. The reunion of siblings is expressed through the nonverbal language of tears and forgiveness. Together they create a new language without "respect for borders" (497).

Analysis and Discussion

Carry Me Like Water guides us back to the sacred sources of our origins. As with Miguel Méndez's Chicano classic, *Peregrinos*

de Aztlán, we discover cyclical movements that do not fit into the traditional linear paradigm of pilgrimage where self-fulfillment and wholeness are discovered in a new and different place. Instead, the movement is expressed by pilgrims who leave an old and familiar place and journey back to this old place only to understand it in profoundly new and different ways (López Pulido 80). In *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, pilgrims move northward from contemporary Mexico and back to Aztlán by crossing into the desert of the contemporary southwestern United States. Similarly, Maria Elena returns to her source of origin in El Paso to reclaim her familial relationship with her brother and to find her Chicana-self in the borderlands. This pilgrimage of origins represents the movement of culture and identity that has been ignored or gone unresolved by borderland scholars.¹

One could argue that this journey back is nothing more than a feeble attempt to mourn the past. It represents an elegiac culture where this act of pilgrimage is a "consolation for the survivors of a culture in order to go on living in spite of the loss of something" (Novoa 7). However, as with the traditional pilgrimage paradigm, I take issue with this perspective because it understands movement from a linear framework. It frames the pilgrimage of origin as regressive and assumes that all understand and are consciously in touch with their past. More importantly, it does not account for the social and political forces of cultural assimilation from the dominant culture that demands the rejection of the Chicanas/os' personal and collective past.

Carry Me Like Water is a lyric that guides and teaches us to challenge and transgress personal and political borders in order to uncover and create deep human relationships rooted in compassion and justice (see Abalos). It is a story about transgressing the borders in our lives that separate us. As illustrated through the characters in the novel discussed in this essay, Diego transgresses the silent world and learns how to belong in a speaking world. Maria Elena comes to accept and transform her imperfect past and along with everyone else, chooses to search and discover her true identity (Villegas).

One of the main points to be taken from this essay is that borderlands people create and transform culture and identities as they continually and communally cross and transgress borders. They represent cultural strategies of resistance, empowerment, and transformation described by one scholar as “religious poetics” (León 6). Movements from this perspective are cyclical and reciprocal between old and new worlds. It is a “meronymic” (13) movement where all the scenes and expressions comprise a composite or cumulative image of borderland culture and identity that are acknowledged and affirmed (see Shinn).

Scholars of Chicana/o literature identify these spaces and expressions as dualistic, continually transforming, and in a constant state of flux. However, in *Carry Me Like Water*, Sáenz provides something very different in his assessment of Chicana/o culture and identity in the borderlands. He offers a temporary resolution to the Chicana/o experience for purposes of underscoring individual and communal transformation towards wholeness and self-fulfillment. Through the telling of his story, Sáenz has powerfully woven together the multiple worlds of Chicanas/os and successfully created a new or “third” space beyond borders, a new space where the people of the borderlands discover and express friendship, kindness, and redemption (see Cantú).

*I wish to thank my colleagues Alma Rosa Álvarez, Manuel Avalos, Gloria Cuadraz, Shari Collins Chobanian, Alejandra Elenes, Mario García, and Ellen McCracken for their insights in the preparation of this essay.

Note

1. Two notable exceptions are León, who has defined these expressions as “rituals of eternal returns,” and Carrasco’s “Jaguar Christians” (78) in which they are identified as “hidden, secret, local, difficult to get at places.”

Works Cited

- Abalos, David. *La Comunidad Latina in the United States: Personal and Political Strategies for Transforming Culture*. Westport: Praeger, 1998.
- Anaya, Rudolfo. *Heart of Aztlán*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico Press, 1976.
- Blades, Rubén y Seis del Solar. "Todos Vuelven." *Buscando América*, Elektra/Asylum Records, 1984.
- Candelaria, Nash. *Memories of the Alhambra*. Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1977.
- Cantú, Norma. "Border Crossings." *Publishers Weekly*, 23 January 1995: 43.
- Carrasco, David. "Jaguar Christians in the Contact Zone." *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples' Religions Among Latinos*. Ed. Anthony M. Stevens Arroyo and Andres I. Pérez y Mena. New York: Bildner Center, 1995. 69-79.
- . "A Perspective for a Study of Religious Dimensions in Chicano Experience: *Bless Me, Ultima* as a Religious Text." *Aztlán* 13 (1982): 195-222.
- Gaines, Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. New York: Dial Press, 1971.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- León, Luis Daniel. "Religious Movement in the United States-Mexico Borderlands: Toward a Theory of Chicana/o Religious Poetics." Diss. University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997.
- López Pulido, Alberto. "En Peregrinación: *Peregrinos de Aztlán* as History and Liberation." *Miguel Méndez in Aztlán: Two Decades of Literary Production*. Ed. Gary D. Keller. Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1995. 78-82.
- Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Putnam, 1983.
- Méndez, Miguel. *Peregrinos de Aztlán*. Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1992.
- Mura, David. *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity*. New York: Anchor Press, 1996.

Novoa, Bruce Juan. *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1982.

Ortiz, Fred. *Mt. Cristo Rey*. El Paso: Guynes Printing, 1989.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Carry Me Like Water*. New York: Hyperion, 1995.

Shinn, Thelma. "A Pattern of Possibility: Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior." *Exploration in Ethnic Studies* 17 (1994): 11-19.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: New American Library, 1977.

Villegas, Rubén Sosa. "Author Benjamin Sáenz on crossing all borders." *Rocky Mountain News* 24 July 1995: D4.

Wideman, John Edgar. *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Father and Sons, Race and Society*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.