2019 INTERN PROGRAM WEEK1

My first day along the border began with a walk through Nogales, Arizona, population 20,000. From our cozy ranch in view of “the wall” (which I learned is actually a large metal fence), some of us interns made our way downtown to the small collection of stores. It was already late on a hot Sunday afternoon, but we ended up in a tiny *nevería*. And although the older shopkeeper could tell we were out-of-towners, she greeted us in Spanish. As I have now learned, eight-five percent of Santa Cruz County is Hispanic, and most residents don’t wear shorts or sandals, nor do they wonder absently into quiet ice cream shops. But back then, surprised to hear *Hola* instead of *Hello*, I switched into rusty Spanish and ordered a *paleta* or popsicle *de guanabana*. *¿Qué están haciendo en mi pueblo feito?*, she asked us. *Estamos aquí porque hay paletas deliciosas*, I answered. *Gracias*.

Before visiting the border, I had assumed that whatever absolute security apparatus the government had built, it was working successfully to divide families, divide communities, and divide nations. Yet within hours of landing in Arizona, that imagined “wall” had vanished in the hot desert sun. Nogales, Arizona is Nogales, Sonora. There is an immense, complex, invasive, and terrifying security apparatus between the two cities, but there is also a shared geography, a shared culture, and a shared language. Whatever war the U.S. is waging with its 20-foot fence and concertina wire has already been lost. Here, the borderlands truly are *ambos*.

After that first evening in town, we started the following day with a BCA tour of Nogales with Jerry, Alex, and Alma. I felt anxious to cross for the first time, but the walk through the metal gates was relatively painless. (It wasn’t until later I realized that leaving is always easier than entering.) Once in Mexico, the Nogales I knew from yesterday had changed. While the Arizona side felt languished by the wall and its limitations (on movement, on trade, on families), the Sonora side was vibrant and alive. The wall felt more like a boon than a tragedy. Nogales, Arizona was surviving despite the border; Nogales, Sonora, was thriving because of it.

Throughout our first day in the city, we stopped at ATIC and ARSOBO, two incredible non-profits helping people with disabilities. We then stopped for lunch with some local entrepreneurs from the Sonora side and exchanged laughs over *carne asada*. We went to a migrant shelter where bodies took up every inch of floor space, but when we visited during the day, the place was empty and spotless. Afterwards, we met a member of the U.S. consulate over *flan y café* at the beautiful *La Roca*. We then crossed Morley Gate, and I made nice with two CBP officers as they dissected my movements and asked me where I was from/where I was going. But before I could make any sense of their questions, I was already “home,” through the gates and feeling a little more uneasy than before.

On day two, we met Jaime Chamberlain, a prominent local figure in the produce distribution business. Jaime was charismatic, engaging, passionate, and smart; our two-hour chat flew by, and it was clear he cares deeply about his work. As a political thinker, I rarely get the chance to learn about the economic aspects of an issue, but when it comes to the border, Jaime showed us that understanding trade is essential. Soon after, we crossed and taxied to the U.S. Consulate and met Virginia Staab, the top U.S. diplomat in northern Sonora. As a member of the State Department, she must serve Trump, but within this assignment she does have the agency to invest and support where she sees value. And it does seem clear that the consulate has done much good in the community, particularly with ARSOBO. Meeting Virginia, who speaks fluent Spanish, who was aware of U.S. horrors in Latin America, who understood the struggles of migrants, was encouraging.

After an off day spent driving around Tucson (and up Mt. Lemmon!), we began our Thursday with the Mexican consulate in Nogales, Arizona. While the U.S. Consulate had been fortified with high walls and tight security, its Mexican counterpart was an office in a roadside complex. An official unlocked the front door and we were inside, having a much more personal conversation than the other day. Gone were the discussions of security, safety, and foreign policy; instead, we talked about migrants and Mexico—past and present. Afterwards, we drove up to Tucson for a meeting with the Sierra Club and a discussion of “the wall” from an entirely different perspective, that of animals, water, and native peoples. I had never heard of the Real ID Act before, but apparently it allows DHS to waive dozens of federal laws for the sake of national security, including the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, etc. And so the tragedy of the border grows.

Finally, on Friday morning, we met with Border Patrol. As you can imagine, it was quite a shock to enter the epicenter of Nogales border enforcement. After only a few days in town, we had already seen Border Patrol everywhere—at checkpoints, on bikes, in restaurants, and even in front of our house. As much as residents may try otherwise, the Border Patrol is an unavoidable aspect of life, yet here we were, willfully entering the belly of the beast.

The agents we met at Nogales station were friendly and responsive. They led us around the facility like college tour guides, dropping facts and pointing out small details and familiar faces. It was a P.R. face of normalcy atop a system that we already knew to be wildly dysfunctional and horrific. We asked agents a few questions to that effect, like, for example: “When is deadly force appropriate?” “What do you look for at a checkpoint?” They answered each question diplomatically, never quite getting at the deeper issues at play but still making the effort to help us understand. Still, the fact that we had such access to their facility was an incredible and painful privilege. We were not allowed to see more than the lobby of their detention center, but we know human beings were held there as we passed. It was a strange feeling to be there, wooed by agents and encouraged to “spread the word.” As we left the grounds, we passed rows of Border Patrol trucks, ready to catch the next group of migrants and to stop our car the next time we drove north on Highway 19. It was a strange feeling indeed.

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