

THE VENEZUELAN DIASPORA

A ROUNDTRIP STORY

Mónica, Ilija Ojeda

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THE VENEZUELAN DIASPORA:
A ROUNDTrip STORY

MÓNICA, ILIJA OJEDA

Nacida por razones de logística en la ciudad de Los Teques en Venezuela el 17 de abril de 1978, pero es andina de corazón. Llega a la vida de sus padres de manera perfectamente planificada, quizás de allí le viene esa obsesión por estructurar todo en función de planes, pasos, y actividades y su fanatismo por una hoja Excel para tomar decisiones. La mayor de 4 hermanos, siempre tuvo como tarea ser el mejor ejemplo, de lo cual se cansó un poco tarde. Realmente quería estudiar Biología, pero a los 16 años no tenía la solidez para imponer su opinión y estudia Ingeniería Civil porque le gustaban los legos de pequeña y tenía muchos tíos trabajando en la construcción. Por aplicada más no por genio, obtiene su título a los 23 años en la magna Universidad de los Andes. Buscando acercarse a su verdadera esencia, que era la naturaleza y no el concreto, decide darle la vuelta a su formación y se faja hasta ganar la beca Fullbright-OEA para la Ecología y el Ambiente en el año 2004, con la cual realizó estudios de postgrado en la Universidad Tecnológica de Michigan en Estados Unidos, obteniendo el título de MScience en Ingeniería Ambiental y un Certificado en Sustentabilidad. Vivió dos años en Houghton, donde pasó 16 meses en invierno y un ratito en verano. Regresa a Venezuela y trabaja 3 años en la capital, pero prefiere volver a su monte y sus culebras. Su idealismo y ganas de cambiar el mundo la ha llevado a desarrollar su trayectoria profesional en el área ambiental, desde la docencia, realizando asesorías en tesis de postgrado, y participando en proyectos de investigación y asistencia técnica. Espíritu libre; amante de Mérida, su sierra y su gente; montañista y escaladora; madre de un niño precioso de 8 años que le enseña todos los días la importancia de no perder la inocencia y el asombro ante cada pequeña cosa del mundo; hija de Raiza y Miguel, sus dos grandes ejemplos de integridad, aunque está convencida le complicaron la vida con unos valores que no ayudan a la riqueza económica, pero espera ser retribuida espiritualmente. Los últimos 3 años se dedica a ser parte de la diáspora venezolana en España. Ahora está en Venezuela, confiada en que de alguna manera será parte de la reconstrucción de su país. Intenta de repente ser escritora... todavía no sabe si lo hace bien, pero tiene confianza.

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FOREWARD

Diaspora, conceived as the migration and settlement of people from their homeland to another country, is a phenomenon which Venezuela never truly experienced till it began with furor in 2000 and exacerbated in 2011. Quite the contrary, Venezuela was the home to numerous refugees fleeing persecution from hostile political regimes around the world. With over one million immigrants living in Venezuela by mid-20th Century, Venezuela became the melting pot of Latin America.

Monica Ilija, as the surname demonstrates, is the child of one of those immigrants, one of the almost 20,000 Slovenes who left their homes towards the end WWII, due to political repression and fear of communism. The riveting experience of living the same ordeal as her father is told with emotional detail in this novella, "The Venezuelan Diaspora: A Roundtrip Story." As Monica states the diaspora, "... is a feeling that begins to be generated in the soul and mind... it is a process that does not happen overnight....".

While the causes of the Venezuela diaspora are various, among them systematic violation of human rights, violence, the collapse of public services, the humanitarian crisis, and

the dire economic situation, each emigrant has his or her own reason for leaving home and relocating to call a new place home. Monica tells her story, the plight of an emigrant who voluntarily left Venezuela having lived better days, not of opulence but of comfort, hope, and security, only to be forced to leave because these had been lost. After a litany of reasons depicted in graphic personal detail, she surmises, “you lose your soul little by little” and “you are forced to leave because there is no other way out.” Her story is a duo between a historic recount of events which cause the Venezuelan Diaspora and her personal affliction for leaving.

Though confident in her decision to leave, she relates her coping with a new setting in a foreign country, grateful for having the opportunity to begin again, but shattered by the migrants plight, further compounded by the Covid19 pandemic. Then, after much deliberation and evaluation of the alternatives, Monica returns to her beloved Venezuela during Covid19 lockdown, a Venezuela the same but different. Appropriately, she names her story, “The Venezuelan Diaspora: a Roundtrip Story”.

This is her love song to Merida and a Venezuela she loves but with her eyes wide-open of what it now represents. While her heart is deeply planted in Venezuela, her vision also has an eye to what could be next. She is fully aware of the trials she faces, she marches on living one day at a time, like most Venezuelans do.

MICHELE L. LEE DE LEON
Executive Director, Cevam

A person is seen from the back, wearing a black cap with "SE" on it and a Venezuelan flag draped over their shoulders like a cape. The flag features a yellow top section, a blue middle section with white stars, and a red bottom section. The background is a blurred crowd of people in an indoor setting.

THE VENEZUELAN DIASPORA:
A ROUNDTRIP STORY

The opportunity to write these lines comes to me like those things that life has, that more than coincidences are causalities. Me, having a lump in my throat, knowing that I had to somehow drain so much emotionality experienced during the last years of my life, and suddenly I see on social networks a contest sponsored by my two beloved academic houses of study, both places where I started to knit the dreams and plans of my life ... how not to tear my soul apart in this task that grabs me and shakes me!

Understanding that although the essay as a literary genre is based on the rigor of the veracity of the information, it also allows the author to approach a topic with certain freedoms and subjectivities, or as the Venezuelan poet and essayist Armando Rojas Guardia defines it: “The subjective party of the concept”. In my case, I am not about to discourse about a topic, perhaps I intend to get closer to the concept of the essay that aims to describe points of view about a situation, and thus be able to crumble — and

hopefully, perhaps heal a little — mine ... my situation, my story... that like others, more than 6 million people,¹ already create a collective... the Venezuelan diaspora. And, finally, as my father told me, you are a natural writer, so do it, even if it is only for you.

Going into the topic, perhaps at this point it is convenient to specify what we mean when we speak of a diaspora, what conditions must be met so that a group can be considered as such. According to our obligatory reference, the Royal Spanish Academy, the diaspora refers to the dispersion of human groups that leave their place of origin, a term mostly used to refer to the Jewish exile outside the land of Israel, and its subsequent dispersion throughout the world. Although its meaning has now been expanded to designate all people that are scattered outside their country of origin.

If we delve a little more into the various definitions found in the literature, there are two requirements that seem to be key when it comes to labeling a group as a diaspora: one, *dispersion* throughout the world and two, that this

1 According to the most recent report of the Regional Platform for Interagency Coordination for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela, jointly led by the United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in September 2021, a total of 6,024,351 Venezuelan citizens have settled in more than 33 countries; figure that represents almost 20% of the national population. Additionally, according to estimates from the platform itself, the figures presented may be much higher, because many of the official sources do not take into account Venezuelans without regular immigration status, which makes it the largest migratory crisis in recent Latin American history.

human group has been *forced*, for different reasons, to leave their place of origin.

The diaspora then supposes the idea of dispersion, which means that the human group begins to separate in a large number of countries where they are welcomed.

In the Venezuelan case, on July 16, 2017, a citizen consultation was held to manifest against the official proposal launched by President Nicolás Maduro to implement a National Constituent Assembly. According to journalistic reviews, polling stations were set up in 101 countries where Venezuelans came to express their point of view, mostly against Maduro's proposal. If we compare that number to the 193² countries in the world, and we assume that in some countries polling stations were not installed even if Venezuelans were living there, we are already quite close to saying that we are scattered throughout the world.

Second, a diaspora originates from situations that can be due to religious, ethnic, social, and political conflicts, as well as economic problems; that can lead to a group of people being forced or coerced to leave their place of origin. In this sense, the diaspora implies the massive displacement of people from their place of origin to other destinations

2 The main reference to know the number of countries in the world is the United Nations (UN), which on its official page indicates that it has 193 Member States (to which Vatican City is added, with recognition as an Observer State and Palestine, which is not considered completely independent). The figure increases if you count the delegations that parade in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games: 206 nations that proudly wave the flags of their countries.

that offer them the quality of life conditions that allow them to grow as individuals.

In the Venezuelan case, although mass migration, to the point of becoming prominent news, took place notably as of 2017, the term diaspora has been assigned both in academic and journalistic texts since 2009, the year in which Panama registered a significant arrival of Venezuelans in its capital. There are authors who place the beginning of this migration in 2002, after President Hugo Chávez's decision to expel some 20,000 workers from Petroleum of Venezuela (PDVSA), as a result of the political conflict that ended in the oil strike at the end of the 2002 and early 2003. According to independent estimates, a fifth of these professionals emigrated to the oil industries in various parts of the world. This is why some experts, such as journalist and academic Andrés Cañizales,³ considers this migratory wave, spread over several continents, as the first firm sign that Venezuela was heading towards a migratory diaspora.

With that first wave of professionals leaving the country, also begins the so-called brain drain, a decapitalization of knowledge that will take generations to be reversed. In his book, *The Diaspora of Knowledge: Venezuelan Talent to the World*, Ivan de la Vega⁴ determined that after the arrival

3 Graduate in Social Communication (journalism mention) and Professor-Researcher at the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB). Since 2000 he has been linked to the defense, promotion and study of freedom of expression in Venezuela.

4 Graduate in Sociology from the Central University of Venezuela. With 22 years behind him studying migration flows, he is considered the expert voice of the Venezuelan diaspora. He is one of the researchers who — with statistics from other nations — has

of Chavismo to power in 1998 and until 2010, a diaspora of the most qualified Venezuelan talent, academics with doctorates and specialized training, dispersed throughout 65 countries, a number that continued to grow at a dizzying rate. For 2014, a study entitled *Venezuelan community abroad: a new method of exile* by Thomas Paez, Mercedes Vivas and Juan Rafael Pulido from the Central University of Venezuela, determines that out of the 1.5 million Venezuelans who had left the country after the Bolivarian revolution, more than 90% were college graduates, 40% had master's degrees and 12% had doctorates.

Continuing with the milestones in the Venezuelan diaspora, in 2007 there was what some experts describe as a turning point in relation to the migration issue, preceded by the re-election of Chávez in December 2006, which was followed by an avalanche of official announcements: the persistency in the political persecution and the nationalization of industrial and agricultural companies, declaration of implanting -socialism of the XXI Century as a model of government, the cessation the main television channel RCTV, the petition to reform the constitution to establish indefinite reelection, and the decision to create a single party of the “Bolivarian Revolution”, among others.

These measures are perceived as the consolidation of Chavismo; the regime takes off its mask and rages with all its forces, and as a consequence, there is a change regarding the issue of leaving the country. It is no longer the upper-middle class preoccupied with Chávez's rhetoric

been reporting a silent trend that puts the future of the country in check.

of redistributing wealth to the poor, or the more qualified Venezuelans who decide to leave; now there are middle and lower class Venezuelans, who feel that there is no longer hope. In 2007, according to the Datanalisis pollster, 35% of those surveyed thought that it was best to leave the country.

The exaggerated growth of the external debt without control between the years 2007 and 2012; the expropriation and nationalization of private agro-industrial companies; the application of the currency exchange control system (CADIVI) and price control, in force from 2003 to 2019, which generated a lack of foreign exchange in the economy and the appearance of large groups and companies dedicated to importing goods, taking advantage of the parallel bolivar market value that traded well above the official reference. This brought among other consequences, corruption, the banking financial crises of 2009 and 2016, as well as the shortage of food and medicines, the energy crisis; our almost absolute dependence on oil coupled with geopolitical change and subsequent deterioration of PDVSA. They were all factors that led to the economic crisis and inflation that began to hit the country as of 2013, and that dramatically changed the migratory pattern observed up to that moment.

The migratory wave worsened in 2015, with the closure of the border with Colombia ordered by President Nicolás Maduro on August 19 of that year, who denounced an “ambush” of the Venezuelan military at that time. That year, about 700,000 Venezuelans went abroad, representing 2.3% of the population.⁵ Between the last

5 Reyes, Luzmely (2018). *Venezuela on the Run: Analysis of the*

quarter of 2017 and the first months of 2018, as the country entered hyperinflation, there was an increase to 2.3 million Venezuelans who left the country, representing approximately 7% of the population.⁶ Additionally, the migration crisis became clear with the massive departure of Venezuelans no longer by air —as happened a decade ago—, but by land and traveling thousands of kilometers by bus and even walking, mainly to South America: Colombia, Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Argentina. The latter was influenced by both the economic condition of the migrants (without the possibility of paying airplane tickets in many cases), as well as the crisis experienced by Venezuela's aeronautical sector with an 80% reduction in international flights since 2013. Unfortunately, we began to hear news of tragic Venezuelan makeshift boat accidents heading to Curaçao, Aruba, Trinidad and Tobago,⁷ as well as dramatic videos of Venezuelans crossing the Rio Grande on the Mexican border with the United States.

The pronouncements of various international organizations about the massive exodus of Venezuelans began, as well as the need to give the situation in Venezuela

Migration Crisis. www.eltiempo.com March 07. Accessed November 24, 2021.

- 6 Unstoppable exodus: there are already 2.3 million Venezuelans who fled due to the crisis. www.lanacion.com.ar August 14, 2018. Accessed November 24, 2021.
- 7 In the article *More than 100 Venezuelans flee in rafts from Falcón every week*, published on the First Report portal on June 12, 2019, the deputy to the National Assembly, Luis Stefanelli, reported that although there are no official statistics, it is estimated that between 100 and 120 Venezuelans leave each week from the port of Falcón state, fleeing the crisis in their country to the nearby islands.

the category of humanitarian crisis. By September 2018, Matthew Reynolds, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) representative for the United States and the Caribbean, officially compared the Venezuelan exodus to the scale of the Syrian Civil War migration crisis. The visit of an European Parliament delegation to the border cities of Cúcuta (Colombia) and Boa Vista (Brazil), both with large concentrations of Venezuelan migrants in vulnerable situations, led to the approval of a strong statement about the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela on July 5, 2018, shown in a background of the harsh images and experiences captured by MEPs on the ground.⁸ According to Stephane Dujarric, spokesperson for the United Nations (UN), the organization classifies the Venezuelan migration as the greatest in the history of the Western Hemisphere.

In February 2019, the Nicolás Maduro regime ordered the blockade of the Simon Bolivar international bridge that connects with Colombia, as well as other border crossings with that country, in response to the Venezuelan opposition's attempt to enter humanitarian aid into Venezuela. Although regular traffic had already been restricted since 2015 — only pedestrian passage was allowed— this situation made the crisis of the Venezuelan diaspora even more visible, especially the one experienced on the border.

In March 2020, inflation rebounded again, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall in oil prices. The sending of remittances by Venezuelan migrants to support the economy of their families in Venezuela diminished, due

⁸ www.prodavinci.com July 05, 2018. Accessed November 10, 2021.

to the unemployment caused by the pandemic throughout the world. This situation led to the forced return of some migrants, as a result of the loss of livelihoods, evictions, and increased stigmatization. This was a reality that I experienced firsthand, and as a consequence I made the decision to return to Venezuela, hence the title of this essay.

This is how we arrived at the end of 2021, where the Venezuelan diaspora was already classified as a major issue, with social and economic impact inside and outside Venezuela. The Venezuelan diaspora already has its entry in Wikipedia,⁹ defined as “the migration of Venezuelan citizens who in different ways have emigrated from Venezuela since 2000 and especially since 2011. It is one of the most notorious South American diasporas of the nascent 21st Century”. We already have a position on the list, along with the Jewish, Palestinian, African, Armenian, Spanish, Chinese, Cuban, Greek, Moorish, and Turkish diasporas.

The diaspora is a path that more than six million Venezuelans have been forced to travel today. But what were the reasons that led us to emigrate, to a people that did not have that pattern in their culture?

Before 2015, when the economic crisis had not yet acquired serious dimensions, Venezuelans had left the country mainly for personal safety, the climate of violence and insecurity that prevailed in Venezuela. It was very difficult

9 In his article *Is the mass emigration of Venezuelans a diaspora?*, the journalist and academic Andres Cañizales, mentions that at the time of its publication, in July 2018, Wikipedia did not accept as a definition “Venezuelan diaspora” and recommended searching instead “Venezuelan emigration”.

to find a family in which some of its members had not been the victim of robbery, blackmail, extortion, or kidnapping. Added to the reasons of insecurity and the political tension that preceded it in time, Venezuela is experiencing a true economic debacle that began in 2017, which generates a humanitarian crisis that ends up having an escape valve in the diaspora. In February 2018, according to an opinion study by Datincorp, when respondents in Venezuela were asked the reasons given by their relatives who emigrated, the answers were: economic crisis (45%), lack of hope that there will be a change in the country (25%), and personal insecurity (15%).

Without further ado, and having clarified that I don't intend to do an exhaustive analysis of a reality already treated by so many experts, I would like to begin by stating that talking about the Venezuelan diaspora, at the individual level, is as subjective as talking about love. As a collective phenomenon, it is something that has well-defined causes and effects, as already discussed above, but on an individual level it is a process as personal as falling in love, each one lives it in a different way. The diaspora is not just a social phenomenon, it is a feeling that begins to be generated in the soul and mind of those who plan to leave their land... it is a process that does not happen overnight, or at least not in my case, and that is what I want to talk about in these lines.

When you come from a home where you had an education based on incorruptible values —and more than education, a pair of excellent examples of integrity— it is very difficult to adapt to an environment in which *viveza criolla* (cunning) prevails; you spend your life feeling that

you are sailing against the current, I was a weirdo among the “normality” of this country. I was the “stupid one” that returns the change to the cashier when I was mistakenly given the wrong change in my favor. After all, it would be my fault if later they deducted it from the cashier’s salary. The one who understood from an early age that everything one has in life is earned with work, there is no other way ... and that work must be honest ... because —unlike the classic *El negrito del batey* by Alberto Beltrán—, work wasn’t created by God as punishment, on the contrary, work dignifies! Organizing, planning, and executing the steps to follow to achieve the goals, as an antipode to the vernacular instinct of *como vaya viniendo vamos viendo* (as it comes, we will see) of that famous soap opera character Eudomar Santos... no way! That’s not the way dreams are achieved, you have to draw up a plan and get on the track, because things do not fall from the sky.

So, I could say that the diaspora for me was a process that began when I realized that “I had everything backwards”. Every time I emotionally disconnected from what they call homeland —a word that from so much wear and tear has turned bitter in my conscience— because I felt that I didn’t fit the Venezuelan nature. Because beyond its geography, a country encompasses fellow humans, and I always had my reservations and criticisms about the Venezuelans idiosyncrasy.

Recalling, perhaps my first conscious clash with the Venezuela that I reject, I felt it on February 4, 1992, the day of Hugo Chávez’s coup against then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez. I was studying in my third year of high

school and I was waiting for the bus that would take me to school, when the house phone rang and my neighbor between shouts told me to wake up my parents, to turn on the television that a coup was taking place... A what? Of course, at that moment we did not even imagine what would come so many years later, and I was not in the intellectual capacity to understand the seriousness of the situation, but in my heart, when I turned on the television and saw the image of the characters on television, I just felt fear. I cried without knowing why, I did not know who those men were, but I was terrified to think that one of them would be the new president of my country. Then, the master mind of the coup appears, Hugo Chávez with his famous message: “For now the objectives have not been achieved”, so that we keep in mind that what we experienced was nothing more than a courteous introductory visit. Who would imagine that those hands would later be full of the pain, the blood and the destruction of a country... we did not know it but it already smelled of sulfur.

Venezuelans, like everyone else, seem to have a yin and a yang in their personalities. That character that makes Venezuelans talkative and cheerful is what has allowed us to survive this hecatomb that we have suffered for years. It is like the Venezuelan poet and writer Willy Mckey defines to the Argentine journalist Carolina Amoroso—who lived part of her life in Venezuela—in an interview for her book *You will cry: stories of the Venezuelan exodus*, and that she comments in turn to Cesar Miguel Rondón in an interview in relation to the launch of the aforementioned book: “Venezuela is a grief that dances”; referring to the fact that in the joy of the Venezuelan even in the face of ineffable

pain, there is a certain act of rebellion, as if hope seemed a moral imperative, a form of resistance. But also, the other side of the coin was what led us to this situation. Let us remember that 3,673,685 million Venezuelans (56.20% of the votes) voted for Hugo Chávez in 1998; 3,757,773 million (59.76% of the votes) re-legitimized him in 2000; 7,309,080 million (62.84% of the votes) re-elected him in 2006 and finally, although the result is in doubt, 8,191,132 million (55.07% of the votes) voted for him again in 2012, although we were already suffering what is now well-known.

However, despite the dual feeling towards my homeland and everything that it encompassed, I always knew myself to be part of this land, and I wanted to live here. I never considered living in another place, with its virtues and defects Venezuela—and her people—were my home.

The most beautiful geography that I have known until today, the one that my father, an immigrant more Venezuelan than alpargatas (Venezuelan sandals), introduced to us and taught us to love: from north to south, from Cabo San Román, La Tortuga and the most beautiful beaches that I have known all along our coast, to the Gran Sabana and Santa Elena de Uairén; from east to west, from San Juan de las Galdonas, passing through the plains, and reaching my Mérida and its Sierra Nevada (the one I climbed for the first time when I was just 6 years old, the one that my father fell in love with during his years as a student, in such a way that he decided to put down roots in this city even though our whole family lived in the center of the country). Venezuela is also my experiences, my memories and that human warmth

that can only be felt in this land: my grandmother Lila's arepas, thick but toasted, with butter and hard cheese; the *hallacas* in December, the burning of the *año viejo* with all the neighbors (a man-sized puppet who represents the year that ends every December, -31st), the Contrapunto Quintet, the good parties, the friendships that remain unharmed by the passing of the time ... that Venezuela that embraced my family and so many others.

With that in mind, and trying to put things in context in order to understand my process, I would like to tell my "life plan" in this country and what led me to add two more numbers to the Venezuelan diaspora.

Knowing that I came from a middle-class family, where it was expected that at the age of 25 the birds would fly out of the nest and begin to produce, I graduated as a Civil Engineer at the age of 23 and began to work in a construction company, and in parallel the English Institute practically became my second home. I wished to do a master in Environmental Engineering in the United States, and the only way would be through a scholarship, and for that I had to be proficient in English. So, with that goal in mind, I did all the courses one after one, intensive after intensive, TOEFL, GRE... everything for my scholarship. So, I tried a first time, I was pre-classified but I did not reach the final. It did not matter, it would be next year ... more effort, more perseverance, and that's how it finally arrived. In 2004, I won a Fulbright-OAS scholarship for Ecology and the Environment that allowed me to pursue my Master's degree in Environmental Engineering in the United States ... a little thing! Because yes, under normal

conditions, the one who perseveres, achieves; perseverance bears fruit; and all those maxims that we learn in Aesop's fables and companion genres.

I finished my studies and unlike many, I didn't think about staying in the United States, even though we are already talking about 2006. I had a commitment to Fulbright that gave me the opportunity to study, to return to my country and contribute to its progress with that new knowledge. So, I went back and looked for work in the capital, because as usual, it was the right place to polish those new tools that I had acquired. After some interviews, I started working for a quite renowned Environmental Consulting firm, and in a short time I felt like a fish in water: I combined office work with field work that required mobilizing me throughout the country, marvelous!

But, in the line of the topic that we are addressing, I remember one afternoon in Los Chaguaramos, I was on my lunch break and I went to the ATM. The episode of Chavez when, on a tour of Latin America in March 2007, he cursed George Bush in an anti-imperialist speech in Buenos Aires with the famous *Gringo go home!* was recent. Well, I was just walking when an individual who was walking in front of me yells at me: "Gringa go home!" A trifle that anyone lets go, but for me it was so outrageous, because he reminded me of the hatred they were sowing among us, a people that are mixed race, and thank God it is so! So, in the most vulgar and colloquial way that could come out—and readers excuse me, but it is necessary to repeat it verbatim to be able to make myself understood—I replied: *anda a lavarte ese culo, y no te confundas huevón, que yo soy*

más venezolana que tú!".¹⁰ The poor man was left speechless, because for those who know me, my phenotype did not match such an answer, because yes, indeed I seem foreign, like many children of immigrants who were received by this country. Of course, after I was emboldened, I went away walking quickly, before the impact of the man was taken away and he gave me a few blows. Why that hate? Neither I nor my ancestors are to blame for your situation ... nor is the one who worked hard to buy the car that passes by your side; nor the "Fourth Republic" that gave you the opportunity to study in some of the best public universities in the world if you wanted so; or to work in a country where the unemployment rate was minimal, and others came to make wealth. What opportunities did you not have? What opportunities did they steal from you? Perhaps it would be your way of leading life ... perhaps the real reason for the attack was not the anger they felt towards the foreign enemy, but simply their own misery ... so, if I am completely honest, although the Venezuelan already brought his personal baggage, the revolution and its discourse only exacerbated the most negative of that idiosyncrasy: resentment.

In 2008, a colleague contacted me to offer me a governmental job. Although I was happy in my work, my idealistic spirit —and now I understand that I was excessively naive— thought that perhaps I could generate some kind of change from within, and thus I accepted a top management position at the institute in charge of planning

10 Something as vulgar and colloquial as: go and wash your ass and don't make a mistake asshole, because I am more Venezuelan than you!

and executing rural development in Venezuela, having firmly established in the interview that I was not going to be part of any political activity. Here it is not worth detailing my brief trajectory of 6 months, it is enough to say that having had other values, instead of becoming a stone in the shoe and a problem for my bosses, I would have been able to economically solve my life in a very short time.

With the bitter taste of defeat, not on a personal level, but for having understood that corruption permeated every governmental institution of my country, and it was much more enormous and putrid than I thought, I return to my Merida and as a thing of destiny —again for those causalities of life— a professor position opens after many years in a Center for Environmental Development and Research at my beloved Universidad de Los (ULA). I went through the entire process of credential evaluation, testing, and competition and finally, in February 2009, my college career as a professor began. There I had the opportunity to combine research and academia with participation in projects as an Environmental Consultant ... I had the best of both worlds, I had found my place: I was in the city I loved and with the ideal job, I could have a good and quiet life, like my parents, both college professors; I started to project my little house in Merida's Valley and I even thought that if I had children, I could give them a hands on childhood like the one I had... but the reality of the country hit me hard.

The precariousness and decomposition of salaries in the higher education sector led to the resignation and massive migration of academics: in 2001, a full professor could earn up to \$2,456.12; 20 years later, with the same hierarchy,

the maximum he can aspire to is \$11.14. For an Associate Professor, the situation is much worse: full-time could earn a salary of \$5.65¹¹. In this way, the massive brain drain began and the beginning of the end of the autonomous universities of Venezuela. According to the Professors Association of the Central University of Venezuela, this university lost more than 700 members between 2011 and 2015, out of a total of 4,000; about 240 professors had also dropped out of the Simón Bolívar University before 2014, with 430 additional professors who left between 2015 and 2018.¹² At ULA,¹³ around 99 associate or full professors, with master's and doctorate degrees, had resigned between 2010 and 2016. With a clearly upward trend, for 2017 an increase of 52.5% compared to the previous period was projected—and exceeded—. Added to the number of resignations were unpaid leave of absences—which eventually became resignations—which until 2015 were at least 130, a figure that doubled in 2017.

Then, I did not understand why if I had done things the right way, had made a plan and had worked hard to achieve each one of my goals, I was suddenly in an almost indigent situation, in such a way that at certain point I

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- 11 \$ 11.14 is the highest salary a college professor receives. www.elnacional.com October 21, 2021. Accessed November 24, 2021
 - 12 Small, Andrea. (2014). *Poor conditions blamed for Venezuelan scientist exodus*. www.scidev.net July, 4. Accessed November 25, 2021.
 - Rueda, Julio. (2015). *Professor flee, higher education suffers in Venezuela*. www.apnewsarchive.com July, 11. Accessed November 25, 2021.
 - 13 Secretaría ULA (2016). *Student and teacher dropout at the University of Los Andes*.

could not support myself. There I began to feel that the relationship I had with Venezuela was reaching a toxic level ... Because yes, Venezuela for me ended up becoming that relationship that does not suit you, but you are deeply in love, more or less the same... he is toxic but I want to be with him.

The country's reality was adverse to me, it played against my emotional health, my dreams, my conception of quality of life; but I insisted on continuing, because in addition, I grew up and live in Merida, a city that isn't easy to leave. But the time came when the grounds for divorce were too strong to ignore, and although the most common reasons for the Venezuelan diaspora were mentioned above, as I said, this is a very personal process, and if I would have to list it, my reasons would be the following:

The loss of meritocracy, as a system based on merit, understood as a sum of talent and effort. That is to say, the positions —and with them the respective remuneration and recognition associated with— are conquered by virtue of talent, education, skills and competences. We, human beings, need external confirmation to motivate us to continue, and meritocracy allows us to create a just society, since everything achieved by individuals is due to their merits, and not for other reasons such as their surname, wealth, political affiliation, among others. But it turns out the so called 21st Century Socialism tries to equalize us but by drawing the ground line as low as possible, so that we are all equally miserable. Suddenly, everything changed and we were in the world of no reason, where the more mediocre you are, the better you will be rewarded. Obviously, for

those who have work hard in their education, training and improvement of skills, this modality is unfair and gradually consumes their spirits and the desire to continue striving... at the end for what? The Hungarian writer Sandor Marai describes it perfectly in his book *¡Tierra, tierra!*¹⁴ when he narrates a discussion with a Nazi supporter who tells him: “I am a National Socialist! You are unable to understand it because you have talent. I have no talent, so I need National Socialism”.

Fighting every day against the inertia of getting used to mediocrity, at every stage of our life, as a malevolent adaptation strategy. See how every day, for one reason or another, which at some point we consider quality of life was being dismantled, but we must resign ourselves and be grateful because "there are people who are worse, and at least we are healthy." Little by little we were losing, from the most banal to everything related to the first needs, in a gradual and decreasing way: we can no longer go on vacation to the beach because there is no money to pay for tickets or hotel, then we can't camp to save costs because we could get robbed, then we don't even have enough for the car tires, and finally there is no way to put gasoline along the road; there is no gas, so we have to buy an electric stove (with a high surcharge because here the law of supply—demand became necessity— cannibalism), now we have

14 Book that I highly recommend, which reaches my hands magically a couple of months before starting this writing, because, quoting a phrase that appears in it, *in situations of vital crisis, the invisible hand of destiny provides us with the necessary readings, readings that in some way, although not always direct, give us adequate answers to the problems of the moment.*

to bath using a pot because we have to use water heated in the electric stove, or you have to eat cold food because there is no gas and the power went out, so I can't warm it up... and finally, the most painful—and difficult to explain to the affected—, those related to my son: son, I have to take you out of the school you love and go to a public one because I can't pay it (and we are not talking about Humboldt School or Jefferson School at Caracas); son, play "soft" so you do not damage the shoes; son, I introduce to you the fororo because I cannot buy Nestum.¹⁵

Fighting every day to not end up being grateful that today government shuts the power off only two hours, that thieves robbed me but thank God they didn't kill me, that I got the baby's milk after four hours in a line. It was an exhausting task, because after all, we are animals of habits, and for many people it has been a better strategy to settle and be grateful for what they have and not to suffer too much, than living life with burning guts.

Having lost the ability to project into the future, because it is impossible to plan—or even to dream—in the midst of chaos. In a country where it is difficult to plan what you are going to do next day at work, because if the power goes out for 4 hours, then you have to change your plans; or where you can't foresee how much you need for the month's groceries because prices change daily ... how do you plan your life?

15 Fororo is roasted and ground corn that you mix with water or milk to make gruel. Nestum is similar, but is much more expensive because it is made with various cereals and its taste is much better, reason why kids used to like it more.

Loneliness, because so many friends had already left. There were fewer and fewer of us left, fewer pleasant moments of a good conversation, or venting frustrations. I was left alone, without having anyone to share my joys or my pains.

Finally, all of the above ends in that you lose your soul little by little. And you understand that this is not random, but on the contrary, it comes from a well studied and proven recipe that is precisely intended to annihilate your human condition, your spirit, your character and your individuality.

In this way, the candle that kept my soul burning started to extinguish, until the day arrived, the moment that marked a before and after, the limit line that you do not want to cross. That day for me was the October 7, 2012, elections, or to be more precise, the election results... that was my line. It was one of those moments in which you can glimpse your own destiny, both from what we understood and knew and from what our instincts dictated, especially my father's who just retiring to his room said it all. He knew what that result would mean for our family and for our country, because he had traveled a similar path, when only two years old he had to flee Slovenia with his family, and like many immigrants, were received in Venezuela; perhaps he had safeguarded some reflection of those painful years, a reflection that remained intact until the tragedy presented itself in a different but similar way.

I had lived in a house where communism was mentioned immediately after the seven deadly sins, if not before. So my father's shock was from being convinced of

what was coming and knowing that he was powerless to avoid it. I, for my part, went up to the attic of my room, to that nest so mine ... two days before I had found out that I was pregnant, so hugging the belly that still didn't show, but feeling the human being that it was just beginning to beat, I fell asleep crying remembering that oath that I had thrown into the air some time ago: "If Chavez wins again, I'll grab my bags and go!" ... and now how?

Between that day and the day of my departure, five years passed by... five long years in which I was evaluating options while I waited for my son to grow a little, and maybe waiting in the depths of my being for a miracle to happen. And yet, despite having spent so much time feeling and visualizing my departure from the country, like a dish that has already been eaten and digested, the real moment seemed to arrive unexpectedly.

There was not enough time... we went by land to Cucuta, the Colombian side of the border —as those of us living in Western Venezuela usually do— at 5 in the morning on November 2nd, 2018, but it was 4:30 am and I hadn't finished packing ... I saw my apartment turned upside down, I felt that my life was like that pile of boxes scattered on the floor and I began to cry, and in something that I suppose was a panic attack I said: "I'm not going anywhere, I don't want to go!". My son was sleeping, but his father—who was going to drive us to Cucuta—, woke up and found me sitting on the floor in crisis, absorbed in the fact that I was simply not leaving ... what a hard dawning! The travel to Boca de Grita —the place right beside Cucuta but on the Venezuelan side of the border— was so long. On the

way, the road was closed due to public protests —lack of electricity, water, insecurity, it could have been any of those reasons—. Finally we arrived. Boca de Grita reminded me of García Márquez's Macondo, that place represented in a few square meters, in short, what I was leaving and wasn't going to miss from Venezuela: dirt, nauseating smells, stalking vultures offering various services, heat, the suffocation in the chest because I didn't know if we would be able to cross that day or not, if the migration system would shut down. Feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration. Yes, the diaspora is characterized by the feeling that we are forced to leave because there is no other way out. What a comparison with the feelings of expectation, excitement, and the tranquility of knowing that in two years I would return, that I sheltered when 14 years before I went to study in the United States.

Meanwhile, we waited for my father and brother to arrive, because a whole strategy was required to cross the bridge: they would cross with my life's savings on top, because I have the suitcases and they were going to check me in each of the official and unofficial checkpoints that were posted along it, but the old man —my dad— who only has a small bag to go and buy food on the other side, surely not. Finally, we stamped the passports, we crossed the bridge without major inconvenience, and we reached the other side, to the Colombian immigration office, where we are already beginning to be treated like people. Saying goodbye to my father was devastating, just remembering that moment and trying to describe it collapses me because I relive that pain so deep in my chest. I was the first of the children to leave, also alone with her only grandson, but there he was, stoic as always. While I felt that I would

probably never see him again, after all he was 76 years old, and we had just lost my mother 5 years before —when she was only 60 on her identity card but 40 in spirit— of a disease that I am convinced originated from the titanic effort she made every day in the political struggle against the regime and her devoted dedication to her university, her city, and her country. My brother was there, giving me strength: calm down, see you soon sister! ... He was also making arrangements to leave the country a few months later. That bridge is only a few meters of concrete that separate Venezuela from Colombia, but it is a lifetime that one leaves when crossing it.

What came next is one more migration story, with its various hues and flavors. Three years of experiences and learning. Much growth as a human being when we meet the positive and negative sides of our essence; it's like being one moment with your skin raw —to portray how vulnerable you can be— and the next moment feeling like you are wearing the Superman cape around your neck; humility, a lot of humility, because no one was waiting for me in Spain, and my degrees, my knowledge, my training of so many years had to take a backseat while I figured out another way to pay my rent and food; a lot of reinventing oneself, a word so well-worn but so accurate; my resignation from the university —as I have always shared among my relatives, being a professor at ULA was not just any job for me, it was a vocation that ran in my blood, so accepting the situation and writing the resignation letter was one of the most painful tasks that I have had to do in my life—; feeling my chest swell when confirming that I had made

the right decision, every time that some situation, event,¹⁶ or moment revealed the opportunities and tools for my son; gratitude with every kind and supportive hand that helped us, because suddenly even the smallest gesture that is received translates into one of the stone giants of Easter Island ... as Eduardo Sánchez Rugeles says somewhere in his book *Ljubljana*: “The tragedy —although I would also add the joy— of exile is written by the invisible things, the small details that go unnoticed”.

However, the hardest thing in those years was to decide to return, knowing the reality I was returning to, but three years more deteriorated than the one I left. After three years living in Spain, the arrival of the COVID—19 pandemic, the one that changed the lives of many worldwide, also wreaked havoc on my job stability, which ended up collapsing my strength, already quite weakened. They were a couple of very difficult months, debating between taking the risk and continuing to wait for the situation to improve or to take what little money I had left to return to Venezuela. In fact, the first thing I noticed and was grateful for when I returned, is that I was able to sleep a full night without

16 The first time I had that feeling was the very day we arrived in Spain. We arrived at the end of the afternoon at the house of some friends in Madrid’s suburbs. The respective greeting, the hugs, how was the trip, etc. And suddenly, I see my son, going through the house as if in search of something. After a while he approaches and he says to me with concern: Mommy, there are no candles anywhere, what are we going to do when the power goes out? I could only burst into tears, because it was not fair that my son, a 5-year-old boy, had grown up thinking that that was normal. They were tears of rage, but I also felt a chill on my chest, confirming that I had made the right decision.

waking up with tachycardia ... maybe my body knew I was at home.

So, what about the diaspora that has to return to the origin?

Just entering Venezuela in 2021, was already an odyssey. Crossing the border surreptitiously, like a fugitive. Passing the river that separates Venezuela and Colombia, but now mounted on a *curiara*,¹⁷ seeing from below the same bridge that we crossed more than three years ago. Then, to be intercepted—yes, intercepted, there is no other word—in each one of the thirty control points that cover the short journey from Boca de Grita—the town that in my memory concentrated the worst of this country—to Merida. Arriving in a dark Merida, without a single pole lit from Las González, was like literally entering a wolf's mouth. It only comforted me to imagine my father's hug, and yet I had to wait fifteen days to give it to him—and above all to receive it—because I couldn't take the risk of infecting him with the COVID we could have acquired on our journey.

At first, I felt like I was in a Dali painting, full of surrealism. A full week passed before I looked at my beloved Sierra Nevada, it was like if I didn't, it meant I wasn't here. See my city in tones of sepia; dirty, harassed, forgotten, deteriorated... like our dreams. Seeing my people with their faces haggard by need, with their worn clothes and gnawed shoes... like their hopes. But it has been seven months since we returned, seven months in which the strategy has been

17 An indigenous boat.

to minimize the considerable bad and maximize the little good, as the only way to cope with this "new" reality.


Meanwhile, there are no signs that the economic crisis will be contained in the near future, so the effect that this kind of vortex —that wraps and destroys everything— has on Venezuelans, allows us to predict that the diaspora will continue with all certainty. But for the moment we are still here. Who knows, maybe later I will travel to Rugeles's Ljubljana, to that land that also belongs to me and I carry in my blood; perhaps with my father, who will return to the land that he also had to abandon so young, a closing and an opening of interconnected cycles. But until that day arrives, we live one day at a time, now applying the saying, *como vaya viniendo vamos viendo...* the only way you can live in this Venezuela so painfully mine ... but yes, mine!

LA MAGA

Though confident in her decision to leave, she relates her coping with a new setting in a foreign country, grateful for having the opportunity to begin again, but shattered by the migrants plight, further compounded by the Covid19 pandemic. Then, after much deliberation and evaluation of the alternatives, Monica returns to her beloved Venezuela during Covid19 lockdown, a Venezuela the same but different. Appropriately, she names her story, “The Venezuelan Diaspora: a Roundtrip Story”.

Michele L. Lee de Leon

IS ILLEGAL



THE
VENEZUELAN
DIASPORA
A ROUNDRIP STORY

PREMIO de ENSAYO 2022
DIGECEX-CEVAM

Mónica, Ilija Ojeda. Los Teques en Venezuela, 1978. Ingeniera Civil por la Universidad de los Andes.. En 2004 gana la beca Fulbright-OEA para la Ecología y el Ambiente en el año 2004, con la cual realizó estudios de postgrado en la Universidad Tecnológica de Michigan en Estados Unidos, obteniendo el título de MScience en Ingeniería Ambiental y un Certificado en Sustentabilidad. Trabaja como docente en el área ambiental, realizando asesorías en tesis de postgrado, y participando en proyectos de investigación y asistencia técnica. Los últimos 3 años se dedica a ser parte de la diáspora venezolana en España. Actualmente reside en Venezuela.de la prestigiosa revista *Literature and Arts of the Americas*.



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