



*Mangled Hopes for Bridges, Natalya Critchley, 2020.*

## **Mangled Hopes for Bridges**

**Claudio Mendoza**

*Mangled Hopes for Bridges* is the paintings show by Natalya Critchley, my wife, on the Venezuelan diaspora. This exhibition opens at the Vicksburg Cultural Arts Center in the town of Vicksburg, Michigan, USA, on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, as part of the event “Destination Venezuela: Culture Amidst Crises”. It expresses her pain and solidarity for this tragedy since in many ways we are very much part of it, part of the unstoppable and massive bleeding of the best of our country: its people.

The Simón Bolívar Bridge between the cities of San Antonio del Táchira in Venezuela and Cúcuta in Colombia has become the icon of this migration from savagery to civilization, a complicated toll Venezuelans must pay with the hope of finding subsistence and some prosperity on the other side. I have crossed it several times, by myself and with my physics students on our way to some international conference or school. Not long ago it was more practical and cheaper to fly out from Cúcuta than from the Maiquetía Airport of Caracas. We took the overnight bus of Expresos Occidente to the city of San Cristóbal, and Mr. Clinton, the cab driver who knew all the tricks of the trade, would take us across the bridge. But we soon reached the point of no return. Venezuela was wasted. We could no longer pursue our professional goals at home. The international scientific family to which we belong helped us with projects and doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships difficult to turn down.

Since then every day more and more people arrive, whole families carrying kids and belongings with hardly any cash in hand, who have no alternative but to make the Andean mountains and bridges on foot, each surmounted obstacle with greater illusion and hopes. The writer and academic Tulio Hernández keeps a record of this grueling mountain crossing displaying hair-raising images of Venezuelans in distress. For instance, when they close the Simón Bolívar Bridge to contain the exodus, the walkers cross the Táchira River by setting up rudimentary plank bridges carrying their bags on shoulders and head with the water sometimes up to their waist. As they reach the cities of the different Andean countries – Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia and Chile – our compatriots begin the long and miserable search for a dwelling and a decent job to survive. Natalya’s paintings capture the bridges of this long agony.

To top it all off, the COVID-19 pandemic changed completely this migratory dynamic in the last six months. Most economies deflated reducing drastically the possibilities of the Venezuelan diaspora. It has become a sort of round trip, from bad to worse, of mangled hopes. The returning migrants have not

been particularly well received back at home and are charged for biological terrorism to be detained in concentration camps to quarantine.

However, the pandemic offers Venezuela a unique opportunity to upgrade and replenish the workforce with a new generation of competitive professionals, who have been successful in the international arena but now most have been made redundant. We cannot afford to let it go by. We would only have to offer them good salaries and careers to grow. Otherwise this young talent will find one way or another to settle abroad for good. We are talking of a few months to devise an attractive program of “homeland return” as described in the well-known poem by Pérez Bonalde. The Academy of Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences could certainly take the national leadership. On the other hand, I have discussed this changing of the guard with my colleagues in both Venezuela and abroad, and all take it with deep pessimism and contempt. The Chavista mafias and the Cuban G2 would not allow it. We would have to start by ousting Maduro. What a better moment.