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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

NOT A BORDER, BUT A PATH: SWIMMING ACROSS THE RIO GRANDE

By Melinda J. Menzer

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

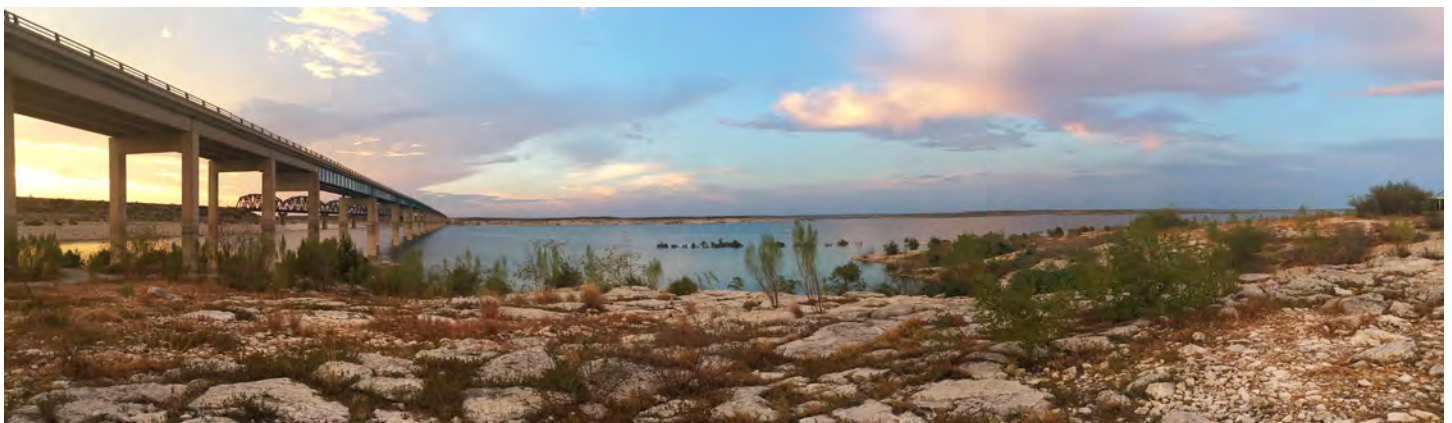
On a cool November day, I floated in the middle of Amistad Reservoir, a lake formed by a dam on the Rio Grande. I was swimming from the United States to Mexico and back, a ten-mile round trip. From the middle, I could see two of the widely spaced buoys that mark the path of the river under the reservoir, one on either side of me; up on the dam, I could see two flags

waving in the wind, one for each country. But in the water itself, there was no way to tell if I was in the United States or Mexico, no line to mark the boundary between the two nations. My body floated in both countries and in neither. There was no border; there were only the water and the sky.

The Plan

I conceived of the plan to swim across the border six months before while reading an article in the *New Yorker* titled, “A Voyage Along Trump’s Wall.” It told the story of a group of people from [American Rivers](#), an organization advocating for this country’s endangered rivers, and juxtaposed their experience paddling the Rio Grande with the political rhetoric about building a wall to keep out immigrants (Paumgarten

2018). I thought about my grandfather’s immigration story, how his survival meant crossing borders and navigating arbitrary restrictions. I thought about the open-water swimmers I knew who swam for various causes. And then I looked at the [photos and video](#) of the American Rivers trip and thought, “If it can be paddled, it can be swum.”



Sunset at Governor’s Landing overlooking Amistad Reservoir. Image by Seth Dodd/NPS.

I have been swimming long-distance open-water swims for almost twenty years now. Growing up, I was a swim-team kid in Dallas, my mother and I spending weekends at various swim meets, often with younger sisters in tow. In the summers, I went to Girl Scout camp on Lake Texoma, also formed by a dam on a river. I was terrible at canoeing and sailing—I have a memory of weeping from frustration and sunburn in a canoe—but I could swim forever. Every year, I would dutifully pack one pair of jeans, one long-sleeved shirt, and an extra pair of sneakers for the safety test. Wearing these clothes, which were otherwise too warm for a Texas summer, each girl would jump in the cold green lake and tread water for 10 minutes. I always passed easily. But as people do, I stopped swimming in adulthood. Many years later, at a difficult time in my life, when my husband said to me, “Melinda, you have to start doing things that make you happy,” I remembered that I loved to swim. I went back to the pool. Then I went back to the lake—this time one of the lakes of South Carolina—and over the next two decades, I became the kind of person who swam marathons and then ultramarathons. I am buoyant, built for distance, not for speed. A ten-mile swim is my sweet spot, long enough to feel like I’ve gone somewhere.

My swim across Amistad Reservoir was designed to raise funds and awareness for [HIAS](#), the Jewish-American refugee relief agency. HIAS is a nonprofit organization with offices in the United States and around the world. Founded in 1881, HIAS originally served Jewish immigrants escaping from Russia (hence the organization’s original name, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society); they estimate that one in three Jewish Americans has at least one ancestor who received help from HIAS. Today HIAS works with people from all over the world and from all religious backgrounds and focuses specifically on refugees and asylum seekers, legal categories of migrants that did not exist back in the nineteenth century when the organization was first formed (HIAS 2023).

But the swim was more than a fundraiser to me. Through the experience, I was also hoping to make visible, to embody, the reality of the border—that it is fluid and permeable, like the river itself. My idol, the person I most wanted to emulate in my swim, was Lynne Cox, an open-water swimmer who specializes in cold water. On August 7, 1987, Cox swam 2.7 miles in the icy water of the Bering Strait, from Little Diomed Island to Big Diomed Island, breaking through the Iron Curtain between the United States and the Soviet Union. Cox made real with her body the fiction of borders. A few months later, when President Gorbachev of the USSR met with President Reagan in the United States to sign a historic nuclear weapons treaty, the two of them toasted the swimmer; Gorbachev said, “She proved by her courage how close to each other our peoples live” (Cox 2004: 305).

Another extraordinary athlete, Yusra Mardini, a member of the Syrian national swim team, swam across a border to save her own life and the lives of others. She and her sister Sarah fled Damascus in August of 2015 after their home was destroyed in the ongoing war. The sisters traveled by land to Lebanon and then Turkey before boarding a boat to Greece. When the motor on the overloaded vessel died, Yusra and Sarah jumped into the water and pushed the boat for three and a half hours across the Aegean Sea, crossing the border to safety. After further travel, the sisters made it to Germany, where Yusra resumed her training, in the end representing the Refugee Olympic Team at the 2016 Rio Olympics (Domonoske 2016). In 2017, she became the youngest ambassador for the [UNHCR](#), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR n.d.); her story is told in her book, *Butterfly* (2018), and in a 2022 Netflix film, *The Swimmers* (El Hosaini 2022).

But as I considered a swim across the United States-Mexico border, I thought most about the people who never make it across. In June 2019, Oscar Martinez and his 23-month-old daughter

Valeria drowned in the Rio Grande trying to reach safety in the United States. They had made it to the border all the way from El Salvador, a 1000-mile journey. As *The Washington Post* explained:

Once in the United States, they planned to ask for asylum, for refuge from the violence that drives many Central American migrants from their home countries every day. But the farthest the family got was an international bridge in Matamoros, Mexico.

On Sunday, they were told the bridge was closed and that they should return Monday. Aid workers told *The Post* the line to get across the bridge was hundreds long.

The young family was desperate. Standing on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, America looked within reach. [Oscar] Martínez and Valeria waded in. But before they all made it to the other side, to Brownsville, Tex., the river waters pulled the 25-year-old and his daughter under and swept them away. (Thebault, Velarde, and Hauslohner 2019)

The news report includes a photo of the bodies of the two of them lying face down on the bank of the river, Valeria tucked into her father's shirt (Thebault, Velarde, and Hauslohner 2019). Sadly, they are just two of many migrants who have died in the Rio Grande. Recently, in September 2022, the bodies of nine people drowned in the river were found near Eagle Pass, Texas, approximately sixty miles south of Amistad. Those nine bodies can be added to the more than 200 found in the U.S. Border Patrol Del Rio Sector between October 2021 and July 2022 ("Officials" 2022).

In planning a border swim, I needed to find a swimmable stretch of the river. As I researched, I found Amistad Reservoir, a 100-square-mile lake northwest of Del Rio, Texas. Amistad Reservoir seemed to come from another world, one in which the border was a place of cooperation

between countries. Created in a partnership between the United States and Mexico to provide flood control and water storage for both nations, the Amistad Dam is under the authority of the International Boundary and Water Commission. When I read on [their website](#) that Amistad Dam was dedicated in 1969 by then presidents Richard Nixon of the United States and Diaz Ordaz of Mexico, it seemed fated that I should swim there: the lake and I are the same age, and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image's [film footage](#) from the early days of the reservoir has the same feel as my family's home movies. The name, "Amistad," is Spanish for "friendship," which seemed to be the opposite of what the border signifies today.

Nonetheless, after I decided Amistad Reservoir was the place, everyone I talked to told me that it was far too dangerous to swim across the border. Friends and acquaintances insisted that every day people were murdered by drug gangs in border lakes. Surely, I would be shot and killed by a stray bullet. In contrast, no one has ever warned me that I might be shot dead in a local lake, and yet in 2022 Lake Keowee, a South Carolina lake I have swum in many times, became internationally known after a man was shot and killed there. BBC News reported, "Lake Keowee is an extremely dangerous man-made reservoir which has seen a number of fatalities over the past 30 years" ("Lake Keowee" 2022). I looked, but I could find no record of anyone being murdered in Amistad Reservoir. In popular imagination, the border is a site of lawlessness and criminality, a perception based on racist preconceptions of the violent Other, but in reality, Amistad Reservoir is a [National Recreation Area](#), administered on the American side by the National Parks Service. It hosts a lot of bass fishing tournaments. It is not a dangerous place; at least, it is not any more dangerous than the lakes near my home.

In preparation for the swim, I scoured fishing websites, looking for information about water temperature in the lake. Fall seemed promising; historically, the conditions in summer were too hot for a long swim. I watched YouTube

videos—primarily videos of people fishing—and zoomed in on Google Maps’ images of the lake, determining where the swim could begin and end. Amistad Reservoir is not that wide; if I could have jumped in anywhere, the swim could have been miles shorter. But I needed safe public access to the water on the American side and a reasonable place to head for on the Mexican side. I found a good starting place, the Diablo East boat ramp, but the area on the other side was undeveloped; I would have to wait till I swam there to determine where exactly I could touch land and turn around. The route I sketched out would be ten miles, my favorite distance.

Once I had a date and a route, I contacted the National Parks Service. They clearly did not know what to do with me, sending me a form designed for other kinds of events, like company picnics and those bass fishing tournaments. I filled it out as best I could and returned it with \$50 for a day permit. The NPS assured me that as long as I wasn’t fishing, I didn’t need to get any permits from the Mexican authorities.

I researched the legality of the swim as well. US Customs and Border Protection told me that, as an American citizen, I was free to swim across to the Mexican side and return. They noted, however, that if I fully exited the water on the Mexican side, the law required that I present myself at the immigration office in Del Rio on my return to re-enter the United States legally. If I remained in the water the whole time, on the other hand, I was not required to go through the re-entry process. This regulation seemed arbitrary. If the border was in the middle of the lake, wasn’t I in Mexican territory as soon as I swam across? And what difference did it make whether I stood in a few inches of water or on dry land? But borders and the laws that enforce them are arbitrary too, and I guess you can’t make every bass fisherman go through immigration. So, I planned to stand at the water’s edge on the Mexican side, my feet in the water, and take a photo before turning around and entering the United States lawfully.

As I considered the options for my border crossing, I thought about my grandfather’s much more difficult journey to the United States almost 100 years ago. For some time, my family and I weren’t sure whether he had entered the country legally or not; when my father began to research our family’s history and found his father’s birth certificate, the birthplace on the certificate didn’t match up with the story he had told his sons about his life. It wouldn’t have been unusual for a Jewish person coming from Eastern Europe in the 1920s to have entered the United States with fake documents. As Libby Garland explains in her book, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921–1965* (2014), the Immigration Act of 1924 (also called the Johnson-Reed Act) established quotas based on national origin, with large quotas permitted from Western European countries and much smaller ones permitted from Eastern European countries. The quotas were based on pseudo-scientific racist beliefs about the inherent superiority of Western Europeans, intertwined with bigotry against the Jews and Roman Catholics who predominated in those supposedly inferior Eastern European populations. The Immigration Act of 1924 followed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration altogether, justified by racist beliefs about the inferiority of people from Asia. These new laws created illegal immigration; people who would have been permitted to come to the U.S. before now turned to smugglers and fake-document sellers in their quest to reach the land of opportunity.

Some of those migrants came to the United States over the Rio Grande. In her second chapter, “American Law, Jewish Solidarity,” Garland recounts the experience of Rabbi Martin Zielonka, rabbi at Temple Mount Sinai in El Paso. In January 1921, four Eastern European immigrants appeared in Rabbi Zielonka’s study, having entered the country illegally. Rabbi Zielonka was torn between his sympathy for these Jews, who came to him for help after escaping violence in

Europe, and his commitment to American law. His correspondence with other rabbis, asking for their advice, forms the basis of Garland's account (Garland 2014: 43, 53–67).

My grandfather did not have to sneak across a border, and it turns out that he did not buy or forge a birth certificate either. His story is more complicated, but it also involves a river. My grandfather was born on the south side of the Neman River in what was then the German

province of East Prussia; it is now known as the Kaliningrad oblast, an exclave of Russia. Shortly after he was born, he and his parents moved across the river to Jurbarkas, a Lithuanian town, where his siblings were born. Despite having grown up in a Jewish Lithuanian (Litvak) family, my grandfather had a birth certificate which identified him as a German because of his place of birth, and when he applied to come to the United States under the quota system of the 1920s, he was able to enter the United States as a German.

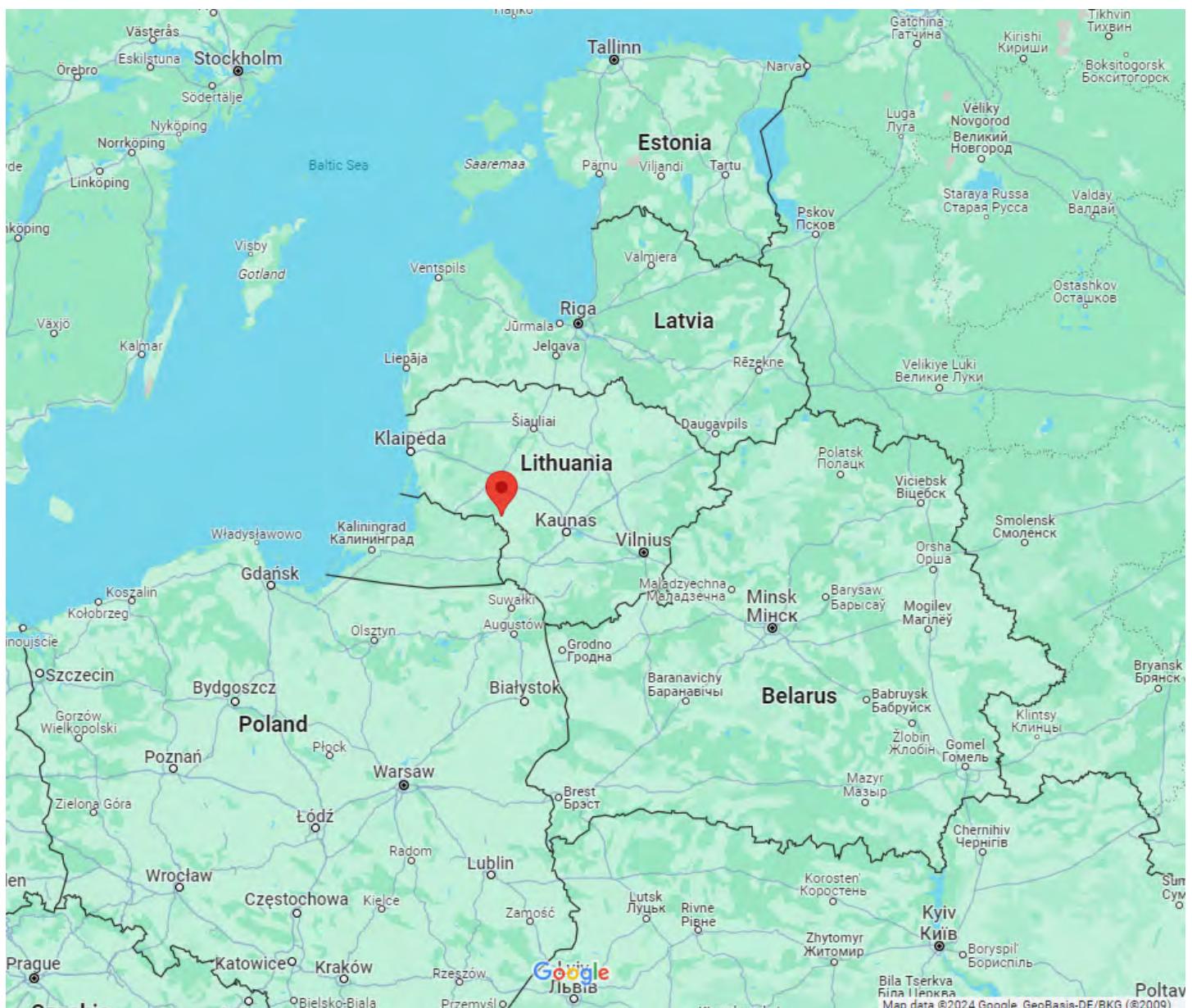


*Lithuania is shown here in red on this map of Europe.
Image via Wikimedia Commons. (CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED)*

At that time, America admitted a large quota of immigrants from Germany, a predominantly Protestant country. My grandfather was not a Protestant, and he grew up in Jurbarkas, Lithuania, but he had the paperwork that said he was German. That saved his life.

In 1939, when my grandfather had been living in the U.S. for over a decade, the Soviets took control of Lithuania. At the same time, the Germans invaded Poland, and Polish refugees, many Jewish, flooded into Lithuania. Although

everyone realized that the Nazis would soon invade Lithuania as well, there were few avenues of escape. While the Soviet authorities would have been happy to let Jews go, no one could leave without a visa to enter another country. And it was next to impossible to get a visa to go anywhere.[1] When the German army invaded in 1941, my grandfather's hometown, so close to the East Prussian border, was among the first locations hit. Between June and the end of September, the members of Einsatzgruppe A, one of the SS paramilitary death squads, and their



The red marker indicates the location of Jurbarkas in Lithuania. Image via Google Maps.

Lithuanian collaborators murdered the 2,000 Jewish residents of Jurbarkas. On October 6, 1941, the mayor of the town, who had collaborated with the invading Germans, wrote the records office in Kaunas, Lithuania, to say that all the Jews of Jurbarkas were dead. My grandfather's mother, his siblings, their children, were tortured and murdered, their bodies left in mass graves. An arbitrary regulation about borders, based on the idea that people born on one side of a river were more likely to become good Americans, saved my grandfather, but left his family in danger.

In comparison to my family's experience, any dangers in my life—or this swim—were miniscule. Still, I needed to plan for a safe swim across the border. For any distance over five miles or so, swimmers require support on the water. At the distances I most commonly swim, a swimmer is accompanied by a kayaker, also called a pilot. Your pilot is a server, a traveling companion, and a bodyguard all in one. Your kayaker feeds you, throwing you a bottle of a fancy sports drink designed to be easy on the stomach every 30 minutes or so. If you like, they can hand you real food too; as Lynne Cox notes in her *Open Water Swimming Manual*, soft oatmeal raisin cookies float, which is helpful if you drop one in a lake (Cox 2013: 71). Kayakers also make you visible to motorboats and jet skis, which are usually operated by people who aren't looking for a swimmer in the water. They are your interface between the world of land and the world of water—maps and GPS in their hands, emergency whistles at the ready, and a sensible perspective when you've lost yours.

Your pilot is key to helping you navigate as well. In open-water swim races, organizers place race buoys to mark a course, but even then, it is hard for a swimmer to see the finish, and kayakers are out in the water herding wayward people in the right direction. In a swim like my Amistad Reservoir swim, we would be making our own course, navigating off landmarks as well as the buoys marking the path of the Rio Grande. I

would depend on my kayakers to help me find my way across the lake and back.

It's not that a swimmer can't see at all while swimming. In fact, one of the great joys of open-water swimming is experiencing a beautiful place from the water. But when you're swimming, you see differently. Much of that difference is due to stroke technique, the position of your head in the water when you are swimming freestyle. Most open-water swimmers swim freestyle—also known as front crawl—because it is the most efficient way of traveling long distances. Historically, freestyle is the stroke of the Americas and of Africa, while breaststroke is the stroke of Europe. In 1844, a group of Ojibwe Indians were brought to the UK to be exhibited to a public eager to see the “noble savages” in person. During their stay in London, the British Swimming Society sponsored a race for the visitors at the High Holborn baths.[2] The *London Times* sports reporter described their stroke technique: “Their style of swimming is totally un-European. They lash the water violently with their arms, like the sails of a windmill, and beat downwards with their feet, blowing with force, and forming grotesque antics” (Sherr 2013: 67).

Similarly, fifteenth-century European travelers in Africa were surprised by the strange-but-efficient front crawl of African swimmers. For example, in 1455 the Venetian traveler Alvise da Cadamosto described the overarm stroke and flutter kick of swimmers on the Atlantic coast by the mouth of the Senegal River. After seeing two swimmers take a letter to a ship three miles offshore and then return with a reply, Alvise wrote, “This to me was a marvelous action, and I concluded that these coast negroes are indeed the finest swimmers in the world.” (quoted in Dawson 2018: 15). It seems sadly ironic that while 500 years ago European travelers were greatly impressed by African swimmers, American segregation of pools and beaches in the twentieth century led to today's widespread racist myth that Black people cannot swim.



As the sun sets, the author is greeted back at Diablo East Boat Ramp by her mother and husband carrying towels, and the rest of her team. Image courtesy of Diego Fernandez.

In spite of being aware of the front crawl, Europeans continued to swim breaststroke as the sport of open-water swimming developed. The first recorded person to swim the English Channel was a man named Captain Matthew Webb; he swam it in 1875 fueled by warm brandy and tea, and he swam it breaststroke. But fifty years later in 1926, Gertrude Ederle, the first woman (the sixth person) to swim the English Channel, swam the distance freestyle, breaking all previous records by crossing from England to France two hours faster than anyone else up to that point (Sherr 2012: 32-33; Bernstein 2003). The “grotesque” front crawl was clearly the best option for distance swims.

The key to successful freestyle, however, is that the swimmer keeps their head down while swimming, turning their face to the side to inhale, returning it to water to exhale. That motion, that negotiation between air and water, keeps the swimmer oxygenated and level at the surface. As result, crawl swimmers aren't looking ahead as they swim: they look down. That's why every competition pool has black or blue lines on the pool floor running the length of each lane; the swimmers are following those lines, and when they get to the end, where there is a cross, they know they are about to reach the wall and can prepare to stop or turn.

When you are swimming in open water, on the other hand, you have no lines to follow. If you're swimming along the shore, you can sight off the land when you turn to the side to breathe, but when you're swimming straight across water, it's easiest to sight off a kayaker who is travelling to the side of you. The saying among open-water swimmers is, “The pilot sets the course; the swimmer sets the pace.” The swimmer is looking down and to the side; the kayaker is looking ahead.

I needed a crew, both kayakers to guide me in the water and helpers to coordinate on land. I put out a call for help. Two friends offered to kayak. My mother offered to drive down from Dallas. My

older child was attending college in San Antonio, and a friend of theirs had a car. These relatives and friends could be my land crew. We had a plan, then; my spouse, younger child, and I would fly to San Antonio, spend the night, and then meet up with the crew and drive out to Del Rio.

On an unusually cold morning, we left San Antonio. The air temperature had dropped below freezing in the night, and I spent the drive worrying about the temperature in the water. Conditions are key in open-water swimming, and I had trained for a water temperature in the low 70s. It seemed unlikely that the water would be over 70 the next morning. As I worried, we drove west on US 90. The biggest town we passed through was named Uvalde; from the road it was mostly dollar stores and fast-food restaurants, though we also got a brief glimpse of a cute old Texas town square. We didn't know that less than three years later the people of Uvalde would gather in that town square to remember their children, murdered in school by a young man from their own community.

In Del Rio, we visited the Val Verde Humanitarian Border Coalition (VVHBC), an NGO which works to help immigrants released from federal detention in Del Rio connect with their families in the United States. One of the meeting rooms in the center was decorated with flags of the many countries these migrants come from, not just from Mexico and Central America, but from South America and Africa. We saw their storerooms of donated clothes, shoes, and diapers and learned about the many ways they help people. Often people are picked up by the border patrol in one place and taken somewhere else for processing; they may have relatives waiting for them in El Paso, for example, while they are being held and then released in Del Rio, hundreds of miles away. Families traveling together are separated at the border, men and women processed separately, so that husbands lose track of wives and mothers lose track of adult or teenage sons. The VVHBC not only provides clothes and food for people who need it, the organization also

helps them find their families and make their way to their final destinations. And the VVHBC helped us too; one volunteer promised to lend us a kayak for the swim, and a writer from the *Del Rio News Herald* met us there, promising to be at the start the next day as well.

After visiting the VVHBC, we made plans for the next day's swim. I went to the Diablo East boat

ramp, a public access point within the National Recreation Area, and made sure that it was a safe place to start. Then I reviewed the weather report for the next day. It was still cold, and the wind was predicted for the morning. I decided to adjust the swim plan: rather than begin in the morning, when the temperature was coldest and the strongest winds were predicted, we would start out around noon.



The author starts her swim from the Diablo East Boat Ramp in Amistad National Recreation Area flanked by her kayakers, November 2, 2019. Image courtesy of Miles Rogers.

The Swim

My whole team, which now included the VVHBC volunteer with the extra kayak and the reporter from the *Del Rio News-Herald*, gathered at Diablo East the next morning. As forecast, the wind was up, but it was supposed to die down as we moved into the afternoon. At noon, my kayakers and I started out, heading directly into the wind. It was not an easy swim. I knew I had a kayaker on either side of me, but I only saw them in quick glimpses between waves. Somewhere in the middle, we looked around us and tried to figure out exactly where the border was. There were widely spaced buoys and a dam to the left of us, but, honestly, I saw only water. I thought of Lynne Cox's triumphant crossing of the international date line, with Claire Richardson, her crew member yelling, "What day is it, Lynne?" and Cox's answer, "It's tomorrow! It's tomorrow!" (Cox 2004: 290). For me, however, there was no such moment of clarity; there was just a lot of water, and I was in the middle of it. We carried on.

See a video in which the author starts her swim from the Diablo East Boat Ramp in Amistad National Recreation Area flanked by her kayakers, November 2, 2019. Video courtesy of Miles Rogers.

Early in my planning for the swim, I was very taken with the idea this border river had two names. North of the river, it is called the Rio Grande; south of the river, it is Rio Bravo—the big river or the fierce river, two Spanish names, depending on which side you are standing on. But now, we were not standing anywhere; we were in the middle of it, and we were heading for an area on the map marked Playa Tlaloc, or Tlaloc Beach. Playa Tlaloc is named for Tlaloc, a Mesoamerican rain deity (Olivier 2001). His companion is Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of

freshwater rivers and lakes and of childbirth (Arnold 2001); if anyone was in charge of this swim, it was her. There are many Mesoamerican names for the river. Speakers of different Pueblo languages call it the big river or the place of great waters—the Keresan *mets'ichi chena*, the Tewa *posoge*, the northern Tiwa *paslápaane*, and the Towa *hañapakwa*. The Navajo name is *tó ba ade*, the female river; as Carroll Riley explains, "In Navajo cosmology, femaleness is identified with the south, and the section of the Rio Grande known best to the Navajos flows almost directly to the south" (Riley 1995: 9–10). The river does not neatly divide the world in two with a name on either side; the name of the river depends on where you are, and there are many places to be.

The first four miles of the swim were choppy and confusing, but as we approached land, the wind died down considerably. It was good timing—we needed to find a reasonable place to stop. We had made a couple banners for a photo opportunity, and I needed to take a photo of my feet. But the land closest to us was undeveloped with no man-made structures; we had started out at a boat ramp, but now we needed to pick a spot and land there. The most dangerous parts of any swim are getting in and out of the water. Even in ideal circumstances, moving from a horizontal position to a vertical position is tricky, and the circumstances are never ideal. The first year I swam Swim the Suck, a ten-mile river swim in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a friend of mine had a perfectly good swim, without injury or incident, until he got out of the water at the end where he broke his toe on the dock. Here in Lake Amistad, there wasn't any dock or ramp or other obvious spot to land.

As we swam closer to the shore, I could see the outlines of tree branches beneath me. With the

water level being controlled by the dam, the shoreline can vary quite a lot, with some areas being submerged some of the time and dry at others. I was looking at land underneath me while my kayakers were looking at land in front of them. That, too, is part of how a swimmer sees differently: a person on a boat or on land looks ahead, but a swimmer looks down, into another dimension. I had learned how different the perspectives of a swimmer and a kayaker can be during a training swim with a friend before I came to the border. We were in Lake Jocassee, a shockingly clear lake. On that particular day, we were heading across a cove in the cold water, and I was looking down, observing the lake bottom as it slowly rose beneath me, watching fish dart among the rocks. When it got shallow enough to stand, I stopped. My friend said with relief, "Oh good! I was worried. I was afraid you were going to run into the rocks." I was surprised. I had not meant to worry him; I had been looking at the rocks, trying to find a place to stand. And it was impossible for me to run into the rocks; they were underneath me. Now, in Amistad Reservoir, again I could see land below me, tree branches rising beneath me, not in front of me.

There's no hard border where the water meets the land and nothing to run into; there are only the shifting proportions of earth and water and sky. As I swam above the trees, the idea that there was an important legal difference between floating in the water and standing on dry land seemed even more absurd.

We found a place to stand, our feet still in the water, and documented our arrival in Mexico.

See video of the author and her one of kayakers, Kevin Hicks, standing in the water on the Mexican side of Amistad Reservoir, holding

two banners, one for HIAS and the other for the North Texas Dream Team. Video courtesy of Susan Schorn.

The swim back was calm, almost another lake. I congratulated myself on making the right choice by starting the swim later in the day. This was an open, beautiful place, with a huge sky above us and a huge expanse of water around us, seemingly endless, seemingly unbroken. When we returned to the line of buoys marking the path of the river, I floated for a moment. To the right of me, I could see the dam, a shed in the middle with two flags, one on either side. They must have been the Mexican and American flags, but from the water I couldn't identify them; they were just fabric in the wind. All around me stretched smooth water.

And yet we were supposed to believe there was a border there, that human beings could draw lines and divide water. When I was a child, I learned about the segregation of pools, but I was an adult before I realized that white Americans had the hubris to segregate natural water too. The Chicago Race Riots of 1919 began because of that segregation; when a black youth swam too close to an imaginary line dividing the black beach from the white beach in Lake Michigan, white people threw stones at him, drowning him. The incident led to seven days of violence, "an orgy of shootings, arsons, and beatings that resulted in the deaths of 15 whites and 23 blacks with an additional 537 injured (342 black, 195 white)" ("Race Riots" 2005).

In the middle of Lake Amistad, the idea that we could divide up the water seemed unreal. The buoys marking the path of the Rio Grande and the flags on the dam were tiny dots compared to the vastness of the water and the sky.



The author and one of her kayakers, Kevin Hicks, standing in the water on the Mexican side of Amistad Reservoir holding two banners, one for HIAS and the other for the North Texas Dream Team. Image courtesy of Susan Schorn.

The Path Home

The way across the river to Mexico was difficult because of the wind. The way back was difficult because I was tired. I was not surprised that I was tired. This is the truth about open-water swimming: you can't swim ten miles without getting tired. And open-water swimming is not like playing football or basketball; you can't send someone else in while you take a breather. Many years ago, I was ten or twelve hours into labor with my first child when I felt I was at the end of my rope, and I said, "I am tired. I don't want to have a baby anymore." But you can't take a

breather when you're having a baby, and in the same way you can't stop swimming in the middle of a river. I think long-distance, open-water swimming is a lot like childbirth, at least in my experiences of them: both are exhausting and painful and at times brutal, but both are also beautiful and meaningful and occasionally transcendent.

I felt no excitement as I crossed the border into Mexico, no sense that I had had crossed into tomorrow. But as I was swimming back across



The author swimming back across the lake with the Governor's Landing Bridge in the distance. Image courtesy of Susan Schorn.

that endless, smooth water, as tired as I was while giving birth, I had one of those moments of transcendence that only come through prolonged labor. Maybe it was a gift from Chalchiuhtlicue. For a moment, I could see myself suspended between water and air, river and sky, a small being in a huge world. And I realized that the only real border is that plane, the water holding me up, the air filling my lungs. All other borders are imaginary. We exist on the plane between water and air, the planet Earth and the space above, and we are very small. I thought of the book *Flatland*, by Edwin Abbott (1884), where a square, who lives in a world of two dimensions, is lifted above his plane of existence into a third dimension by a

sphere and sees his world in a new way, one that he can never explain to the other inhabitants of Flatland. I was the square, and at every breath, I looked up into the sky and then down into the river; those are the dimensions that matter, and the lines we draw on our Earth are not just imaginary, but irrelevant.

The most enduring story of swimming across a body of water in the Western tradition is the myth of Hero and Leander. The two lovers are separated by the Hellespont, today known as the Bosphorus, the body of water that forms the border between Greece and Turkey, Europe and Asia. Hero is locked in a tower in Sestos on



*The author swimming, with her kayaker, Susan Schorn, behind her.
Image courtesy of Kevin Hicks.*

the European side, and Leander, living on the Asian side in Abydos, swims across the water in the dark to be with her. Swimming back in the morning, he then repeats his journey over and over through the summer. But as the weather cools, Leander is not sensible about observing the conditions, and the love affair ends in his death; for navigation, he depends on sighting off a lamp lit by Hero, and the lamp blows out in winter winds. In the same water that Yusra and Sarah Mardini crossed to sanctuary, Leander loses his way and drowns.

On one hand, we can think of the story of Hero and Leander as a story about the dangers of water (or perhaps about the importance of monitoring weather conditions). But at its core, it is a story about crossing borders for love, and the water is not a barrier to their love but the path to their togetherness. When I returned to the Diablo East boat ramp, the people I love were waiting for me. My mother was there, holding a towel for me in a gesture I remembered from so many childhood swim meets. I had swum away, but I had swum back, and we had found each other again.

In July of 1807, about a century before my grandfather's birth, two of the most powerful people

in Europe met near Tilsit on the Neman River. Tilsit is called Sovetsk today, a town on the south side of the Neman in the Kaliningrad oblast, now Russian territory, not all that far from where my grandfather was born. There, Emperor Napoleon I and Czar Alexander I of Russia met, not in the town itself, but on a specially constructed raft floating in the middle of the river. The setting was striking enough that multiple engravings were made of the summit, the two men standing on a raft, embracing, with men in boats from each side moored alongside looking on (Fondation Napoléon 2023a, 2023b).

The raft was temporary and so was the peace treaty they signed. But the idea of the river as a neutral space outside of national constructs endures. My swim across Amistad—Friendship—Reservoir embodies the same idea. When a person stands beside a body of water or looks at it on a map, it appears to form a clear boundary; here the earth itself is making a division between this country and that, these people and those. But when you are in a river, when you are swimming in it, you recognize that a river is not a line that divides but a body that connects. It is the opposite of a border: it is a path across.

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Footnotes

[1] One of the heroes of this period was Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat in Kaunas, Lithuania. In defiance of direct instructions from his government, Sugihara wrote between 2,100 and 3,500 transit visas for Jews trying to escape the country. He was recalled to Japan, and it is said that he was still issuing visas at the train station as he left. Sugihara saved thousands of lives. He has been honored at Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations" ("Chiune Sempo Sugihara" 2003), and his house in Kaunas has been made into a museum.

[2] A [photograph of the Ojibwe swimmers](#) can be found at Brave Brother Native Art Photography's blog. It just so happens that when I'm in London, I swim at the High Holborn baths, now known as the [Oasis Sports Centre](#).

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