

# River of Angels



ALEJANDRO  
MORALES

# **River of Angels**

**Alejandro Morales**



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*Dedicated to my granddaughters*  
*Isabela Inger Morales Gunz and Iliana Gill Morales*

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To the future readers of this work: If you read this book like a work of history, you are reading fiction; if you read this book like a work of fiction, you are reading history.

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## Prologue

**B**astard Out of Carolina!” Mark yells again in my car stuck on the 5 freeway, at five on a hot Friday afternoon, heading north toward Los Angeles. Freeway? I laugh as I look over to the huge white new Volvo Luxury Liner tractor and then to the left at the Honda Element driven by a bi-speckled mother juggling a cell phone and reaching back to comfort her child as we both come together to a sharp stop. All this happens in seconds while listening to Mark rambling on about a book. The freeway had not come to a complete stop until almost the East Los Angeles area. Usually it crunches down to a crawl, then stops at the Valley View exit in Buena Park. Ahead, millions of unending red lights stream northward, and millions of white lights rush slowing south. The weather has been strange all week long. A kind of June gloom, but with high temperatures and humidity, fills the spaces throughout Southern California. No matter what time you travel, the freeways are congested. There is never a pause, a completely free space, a feeling of being alone on the road. Those uncrowded times are long gone. They cannot widen or stack the freeways fast enough—from San Diego to Alaska; Tijuana, Mexico to Vancouver, Canada; Sacramento, California to Mexico City to Central America—to take over Canada and Mexico and make it one big country. After all, we are the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, SPPNA. We could include South America all the way to Tierra del Fuego.

“Bastard Out of Carolina!” When he’s excited, Mark always raises his voice to yell. No matter if he is in a car or in a restaurant, he never realizes how loudly he’s speaking to one person, even if that person is sitting across the table from him. He sits up straight in his chair, crosses his arms and talks as if everyone in the restaurant wants to hear about his day, or listen to his complaint, or any part of his life story. He adjusts

his seat belt and, finally, we begin to move north for a few seconds to stop again.

“Seven, we’ll never make it to the library by seven!” Mark turns, rolls the window down, pushes, and leans half his body out the window and starts to wave at the cars.

“Get off at the next exit! I know short cuts on the surface streets!” He shakes his unruly, bushy white hair; his round, recovering-drug-alcoholic red puffy face smiles as he waves at cars to slow down to a stop, allowing us to make our way to the far-right lane and exit on the off ramp to Garfield Avenue into my territory: Montebello, Simons, East Los Angeles.

“I know my way ’round here. I went to USC! Lived in LA for years. Follow Telegraph along the freeway. We’ll get there before seven! Don’t worry!” he assures me while practically screaming in a panic.

“Calm down, Mark. You don’t have to yell. I’m right here next to you.”

A few days ago Mark invites me to the Mark Taper Auditorium at the Los Angeles Central Library to listen to Dorothy Allison, the author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The flaming liberal-probably-Democrat writer is going to read and discuss her new book and other writings.

“I have to go hear this writer. She is great! She is a powerful word-smith.”

I accept with a little twinge of dread and a great sense of adventure because, knowing Mark now for at least ten years, I know that he possesses a tremendous knowledge and love for literature, and that going out with him I can expect anything and everything to happen.

“Just keep going on Telegraph and then get back on the freeway and exit on Fourth. I know the maze. Let me read you my latest poem. It’s short!” He opens his journal. Mark has thousands of journals filled with his writings I’m not exaggerating.

As he reads, we drive through the Chicano capital of the world, the heart of Aztlán, the country of East Los Angeles, where Latinos, mostly Mexicans, have taken over their undeclared city. A Chicano/Mexican barrio has been shaped for about one hundred years by white flight. Like Los Angeles, Montebello and other surrounding cities were abandoned long ago by Anglo residents who ran away, who did not stay to protect their turf, who feared the many brown, yellow, black faces walking around in their once pure-white neighborhoods.

Statistics are overused repetitions of numbers that have no meaning for the present or the future. The numbers have stabilized. Borders are no longer a concern. Everybody knows what is on the other side of the fence, and it is not greener pastures. People are staying put, not moving. What concerns them is the standard of living, a greater life expectancy, assurance of a long life span. From the time the SPPNA was signed, all the regions focused on improving living conditions, and crossing borders does not make any difference when you can travel at great speeds from your comfortable home in Los Angeles to a comfortable home in Baja California.

At this moment Mark and I are struggling with congestion on an outdated freeway and old Los Angeles streets, trying to get to the Los Angeles Central Library.

Los Angeles, once sold by Anglo California boosters to white Protestant investors at the beginning of the twentieth century, again had become a Mexican city. California, according to the demographers, will soon have a Latino majority population. Millions of Latinos live in the southwestern United States. Today, Latinos reside in great numbers in every state of the Union. The United States will have, by the year 2050, nearly 130,000,000 Latinos enjoying life in each and every state. In Mexico there are already a significant number of Anglo Americans living well in the northern Mexican states. These populations are constantly crossing the border, going back and forth to their homes both in Mexico and the United States. For most people today, home is in two cities. Everything has changed: most importantly, attitudes toward life and the environment; and the desire to share the wealth, to make life better not only for oneself but also for one's neighbors. Nonetheless, there are dangers lurking in these futuristic times.

Neo-nativists are terrified by this vision. Their dread encourages them to call for a closed border, one language and a stable culture: all impossible demands to achieve, impossible because they are unnatural and counter to human development and progress. Borders cannot be controlled—shut down by the military or by a great wall or technological devices—simply because inherent human migration cannot be stopped, detained, held back by artificial means. Attempts to control borders, to stop the movement of people, have and will cost lives and billions of dollars. Human migration is a natural phenomenon, as natural as the mass migration of birds, fish and butterflies. It will cease when there is no need to move. Language is a living dynamic system whose

process must be learned, supported, and whose existence must be encouraged. For the United States, one language is no longer feasible, productive or wise. Multilingualism is the answer for the times to come. A stable culture is an anachronistic idea, a silly demand that advances nativism, racism and discrimination. The United States is a vigorous, energizing, pluralistic cultural force. Cultures here constantly impact, change and support each other. Continuous cultural negotiation is the future. Mark reads on:

The waves of the sea  
The sands of the shore  
Never the same inscribe  
My ever-changing love

For a moment our voices fall silent, and only the motors—of the SUV, and trucks and cars circulating on the surface streets east of Los Angeles—fill our vehicle. This part of East Los Angeles, along the freeway, has small muffler, transmission, mechanic, welding, upholstery, machine shops, light industry long present on the scene—since the twenties, thirties or before. Anglos still own many of the shops, along with the Mexican mechanics, machinists, welders who purchased these rundown buildings. The Anglo owners do not live in the barrios—the Mexican owners do. Some larger buildings and warehouses are owned by Jewish businessmen who have done business in the Belvedere, East Los Angeles communities for decades. Generations of Jewish families have witnessed the Mexican community grow to the majority. Asians who bought out family-owned liquor and grocery stores have joined in developing and selling to the Latino commercial base. On the freeway, lingering voices from all times and spaces pursue me, forcing me to listen as they invade and mingle in my mind and burrow up from my memory.

Mark points ahead, above a recycled-tire garage, to a billboard displaying a woman in a yellow bikini. She smiles, inviting us to a Gentlemen's Club a little further north, not too far; always nearby are warm, shapely, easy bodies of young women.

"I don't think you'll dare to go," I challenge.

"Sure I'll go! Maybe on the way back."

We are on the freeway again, traveling north toward "the 101" or better known as "the Hollywood Freeway." I'm looking for Fourth Street, Boyle Heights, La Plaza de los Mariachis, near La Serenata de

Garibaldi. For a while my SUV cruises next to the Los Angeles River. Across the river Los Angeles proper shows off its skyline and several bridges that lead to downtown. Downtown, under the city, Los Angeles is a city with history buried underneath its present face. It is a palimpsest with archives layered one on top of the other by human beings crossing into this vortex since the ancient people settled here near the river. I am only an extension. In me there are several hidden currents of blood running through my veins, like the water running underneath the cement shell that the Anglos used—to bury, disfigure, control the Los Angeles River—in order to smother, oppress the natural waterways of the river. Someday the river will rise and break through, crush and wash to the sea the tons of cement that for years have forced it down.

“They’re beautiful,” Mark mumbles.

“What’s beautiful?”

“The bridges. Magnificent architecture.”

We exit on Fourth Street and I circle the Mariachi Plaza, where individuals and groups of men dressed in *mariachi* suits carry guitars and strum a tune hoping to get a gig at a birthday party, a wedding, a *quinceañera*, a baptism or a *serenata* for a loved one. I turn right on the Fourth Street bridge that crosses the Los Angeles River and places us on the other side near Olvera Street, the Old Plaza, the founding site of Los Angeles. From the Mexican Eastside, we cross into Los Angeles’ many downtown options: Skid Row, Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market, Staples Center, Latino Broadway, MacArthur Park, the Central-American zone, Angels Flight, MOCA, Disney Hall, the Los Angeles Cathedral, the Water Grill, the Lost Histories Museum, the Los Angeles Central Library and its Mark Taper Auditorium. Once on this side we can easily work our way to the library.

“Nobody knows anything about these magnificent bridges, especially the ones that cross into downtown LA. Who built them? They’re the most ignored beautiful architectural structures in Los Angeles.” Mark rubs his stomach.

“The bridges? They were built in the twenties and thirties. The *gringo* city fathers built the bridges so that the Mexican laborers who worked in the city on the Westside could leave. Mexicans worked during the day—starting early in morning—in factories and sweatshops, cleaning rich Anglo homes, taking care of their kids. At the end of the day, back they went, over the bridges to the Eastside. The rich didn’t

want Mexicans living with them or anywhere near them, so the Eastside, known as “East LA,” was developed for Mexican workers to inhabit. I think it was a guy named Downey who bought land on the Eastside and subdivided lots to sell to Mexicans. He gave Mexicans a home to go to after work, a home on the east side of the Los Angeles River. That’s what happened. That’s what the Anglos wanted, and that’s what they got. East LA was designated for Mexicans and industry. They did not want Mexicans living in Hancock Park, West Los Angeles, Hollywood, Brentwood, Beverly Hills. They built the bridges to get those Mexicans, that labor force, back over to the other side. They didn’t care how they got there: by bus, trolley, car, horse, burro, walking, running. They just wanted them on the other side, out of sight. That’s why the bridges were built.”

“What about Calvary?” Mark checks his watch.

“Calvary? Where they crucified Christ?”

“No, Calvary Cemetery on the Eastside?”

“Because it’s Catholic and Mexicans are Catholic. The Anglo political machine did not want Catholics or Mexicans buried in Los Angeles, in the affluent sections of LA. Work for us here, but live, die and be buried over there on the Eastside. It’s history, Mark, fact, unknown, never written.”

“Fifteen minutes to get there.” Mark stares at his watch or skin cancer spots he’s been fighting for years.

“We’re almost there. I’ll turn on Spring and head down to the library.”

I catch the lights. I pull out a ticket from the kiosk and drive to the fourth level of the underground parking behind the library. Mark can’t sit still. His hands grip the door handle, and as soon as I park the truck he jumps out and starts running up the ramp. At a fast walking pace I follow his long white hair fluttering behind him, his shirttail hanging out from under a stained beige blazer.

“Mark, slow down! They always start late.”

Mark pauses before the garden steps leading up to the main entrance to the library. A homeless man in bad shape staggers to one of the benches. Beads of sweat run down Mark’s forehead. His red face glistens with perspiration. His damp shirt collar moves up and down along with his loud heavy breathing. He catches his breath and we walk up together. A group of talking and laughing people gather at the library entrance. They wear dark clothes, predominantly black with a little

white collar. The men look like priests. The women who wear a white hat or a black veil can be mistaken for nuns. Mark and I keep walking to the auditorium and allow ourselves to be swallowed by sharp glamorous LA, Hollywood, Beverly Hills movie-industry and literary types. Mark waves to several fellow PEN members who had encouraged him to come to the event. All their correspondence occurred through the Internet. Mark has a high-powered BillionCom, aka BillCom, a computer that has multitudes of communications applications. It is the devil housed in a light palm-held slim metal container that eliminates talking. The joy of conversation slowly disappears from the human habits of the First World. I am sure we walk with poets, journalists, screenwriters, novelists, playwrights, freelance writers, members of PEN—a liberal international organization that has concerns about writers imprisoned for their writing. They walk into the library confident and arrogant, staring at Mark as if he is a misfit, as if he doesn't belong near them. Mark stumbles on to the literary show. The deranged stoned homeless guy on the bench outside would have gotten a better reception. But Mark wants to listen with them. So do I, so we stand fast and alone, surrounded by beautiful runny-nosed young Hollywood classics.

We push and shove a little to get through the reception area where Dorothy Allison smiles behind a counter, signing books and casually expressing her appreciation to her readers, admirers, supporters of her personal and literary achievements.

"I gotta get up there and buy her books!" Mark's face drips with sweat. He wipes his brow and dries his hand on his sport coat.

The heat is unbearable inside the foyer where people crush together, smile, sip white wine and try to chat quietly. It seems that everybody knows each other. They all are so cool, while I, like Mark, am wiping the perspiration from my face. I pray that beads of sweat will not bubble up from the top of my bald head. If I start to water up there, I'll be drenched; in a few minutes my shirt will dampen like a paper towel. I have nothing on my head to hide the sweat: no hat, only a few hairs to block the rolling drops of salty body fluid. Mark tries to get closer to Dorothy Allison, but is blocked by a tight-fitting human wall before him. He is only four standing bodies from the table, but they appear like hundreds of stacked well-wishers—like asparagus shoots. I shrug my shoulders. I'm unable to help him.

A hairless man approaches me directly; for an instant he stops in front of me. He holds a glass of wine. His head and face are dry, not a

speck of body fluid sheds from that bald pate. For an instant we gaze into each other's eyes, smile and move away. I find nobody, but him . . . the embrace of an elegant woman. He is dressed in a black suit, black shirt and tie. How does he do it? Stay so cool, calm and engaging in the middle of this crush of hot excited bodies. It's probably over one hundred degrees in here. The air conditioning must not be on. The tall glass doors to an outside patio are closed. Not a breeze, a sliver of wind, of moving air circulates in this confined space, only voices that grow louder as more people push in to join us. Everyone else but Mark and me seems cool, comfortable and happy to be here. I notice several wet trickles of perspiration running down the back of Mark's neck. Mark has gotten a little closer to Dorothy, who is just about to set out on her magic transformation road.

Beyond where Mark stands there is an open hallway, but not one person ventures there, not one person stands and waits there. The hallway invites, offers separation and sanctuary for the hot human mass, but strangely it remains empty like an off-limits place. I wave to Mark. He sees the open space but is trapped, frozen in a sea of concerned, compassionate Hollywood sophisticates. Hollywood, like the political system, naturally corrupts, and anybody involved in it must negotiate a path. In reaching the deal, they always are bought, broken, made a little less than what they were. In politics everybody has their price; in Hollywood everybody has their movie. Elected and appointed politicians throughout all levels of government become corrupted and continue on that path faithfully. Ditto the Hollywood profiles. Mark is caught floating, perspiring and breathing awfully hard in the frozen Tinsel Town stream. I point to the open space of the empty hallway. The churning current of beautiful stars—they are all stars in their own minds—pulls my friend away. Helpless, sweaty Mark seems to be sinking. He raises his arms, swings them over his white hair, desperately fighting the riptide.

I work my way toward the empty space of the hallway, and suddenly I am pushed into a woman. I grab her arms and prevent her from falling backwards off her high heels. The woman pushes off immediately and from a distance offers up a disgusted stare, a *mueca* of nausea. I think: Hey, I just saved you from being trampled by your own kind! I watch her latch onto the arm of a movie star. I got the *you make me sick* look. I consider my shirt, pants and shoes. To her maybe I am just another homeless guy who wandered into the library. Her gaze is enough to remind me of who I am in her eyes. Still not free from the crush, I turn

in a circle and notice no other brown faces. At least from what I can determine, there are no other brown faces attending the reading. There are millions outside but only one in here. Two black faces and one Asian staff member are present, but no other people of color attend this literary de facto segregation event.

I break away from the crowd and stumble into the hallway, find freedom and space in which to move. Five, six steps, I see MEN. I cup my hands and splash cold water on my head and face. I sense a pleasant coolness. I push my head closer to the faucet and splash water on my neck. Head down in the washbasin, I sense a guy watching me. He is as cool as an iced dill pickle. Dressed in black, he adjusts his tie and walks out as if the bathroom is empty, as if I am not present, as if I do not exist. I am familiar with being seen but not seen. I follow the man and watch him return to the crush. I walk in the opposite direction, hoping to find a cool spot in this house of books. Maybe I can discover an outside patio where I can feel a breeze. I find myself walking toward another hall that offers another directional choice. Photographs, rows of photographs run the entire length of the walls. To my left, to my right, and before me the photographs multiply and draw me to them. Historical photographs of Los Angeles taken according to the dates circa 1931. I scan four and, to my surprise, their world and time peers back. They are photographs of the downtown Los Angeles River bridges at different stages of construction. I stand at a crossroad of time gazing at men and machines and their creations, and I know they are staring at me, calling me to recognize them, as if my glance into their space would make them live again and again.

In one photo, fifteen men, workers—with sleeves rolled up, suspenders, wearing what appear to be heavy high rubber boots—smile at me. Their posture, smiles reveal them as warm, tough guys whom I would have liked to have met, in order to talk to them about their work, their families, their dreams, to embrace them as brothers, as important workers. They gather around a cement mixer and pose for the camera. One sits on top of the cement mixer, several stand leaning on shovels, and the rest of the crew intertwine their arms on each other's shoulders. They smile against the background of the massive footings of the Seventh Street bridge. I look away from the photo and see the hallway walls covered with photographs chronicling the building of the bridges over the Los Angeles River. I advance, stop and peer into the framed time and life captured in another photo of twenty-five workers. I touch every

one. I pray. I ask for their help. I whisper to the twenty-five men sitting high on top of a massive concrete pillar. Beyond them rises the City of Los Angeles. I study their faces. They, too, smile. I quickly move to other photographs of different bridges, crews and times. Naturally, I start looking for Mexicans. The men appear the same. I cannot distinguish between a Mexican and an Anglo. I find one Asian, but then he could be Mexican. I see two black men, but they also could be Mexican. I slowly move down to a photograph where I find a crew with Mexicans. There had to be Mexicans working on these crews, Mexicans building the bridges of Los Angeles. In this photograph the twenty-five men stand by the door of a truck that reads "Sun Construction Company." I fall into their eyes and sense my grandfather, my father, his face under that hat behind the Zapata mustache. This crew has Mexican workers. Again I stare into their eyes in hopes of hearing a sound, a word, a phrase. They have to tell me something, communicate a feeling, a memory to me now here in this place. I possess a gift, *un don, de oír y sentir los sentimientos de los que caminaron sobre estas tierras antes de mí. Todos son mis hermanos, mis hermanas y yo, como ellos, quiero existir ayer, hoy y mañana.* Their energy is present—I sense it even among these people at the library who do not feel the place where they live. I keep looking into the not-so-distant eyes of those Mexican men working on the Los Angeles bridges. I see a black box on a tripod, a photographer with a lamp in his hands.

The noise in the lobby fades into the running water of the Los Angeles River, ignored by most, hated by many, profoundly loved by a few. A loud pop, a flash of light in the late afternoon make us all laugh.