
Book Review: Camille Slack

*The Far Away Brothers* follows the journey of Ernesto and Raúl Flores, twin brothers born and raised in rural La Colonia, El Salvador, as they travel to the United States. In 2013, with the country amid the lasting waves of brutal civil war, the twin’s family struggles to stay afloat with the financial burden of rising debt and the increasing threat of gang violence in their small town. After, Ernesto is accused of disrespecting their uncle Agustín, a powerful man with strong gang affiliations, the twins have no choice but to leave, for their own safety and that of their family. This book investigates major themes including: citizenship, the construction of migrant ‘illegality’ and the impact of migrant remittances, as they intersect with racism, class prejudice, and masculinity. It offers a gritty and humbling testament to the migrant experience and the impact of harsh U.S. immigration policies on unaccompanied minors.

To escape the inevitable violence, or possibly worse, recruitment by local gangs the twins run. They flee *Al Norte* with the help of a Mexican *coyota*, through El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, before embarking on the final leg of their journey across the Rio Grande into Texas solo. Their journey is no easy feat and when at last they arrive in the United States, they are faced with unimaginable obstacles, including being taken into custody by U.S. Immigration Authorities. The second eldest Flores, Wilber Jr., had become a *hermano lejano* - a faraway brother - years beforehand and the twins are eventually released into the hands of their estranged older brother in Oakland, California. Suddenly they find themselves grappling with the responsibilities of independence - they must find jobs to help pay off their collective $14,000 debt while also attending school, completing legal paperwork for their appearance in immigration court, attempting to integrate into an unfamiliar culture and navigating the pitfalls of adolescents.

Throughout the novel, there remains a narrative of the Flores family back in El Salvador which offers a glimpse of a nation overwhelmed by conflict. The family struggles as the twins fail to pay off their debt and the maintenance of the family farm falls upon the shoulders of the aging Flores parents and their remaining children. Throughout the novel, readers are also witness to the struggles of the twins’ sister Maricela, who must navigate the highly restrictive, and at times dangerous, life of a young woman and young mother in *La Colonia*. *The Far Away Brothers* situates the Flores twins and their family within the Latin American migrant exodus that characterizes modern South/North migration patterns and the residual effects for migrant families.

Lauren Markham, the book’s author and real-life ally of the twins, emphasizes the deep fractures between U.S. immigration policies and rising conflicts throughout Central America. She utilizes the metaphor of a hemorrhaging patient to underline the flaws of the current migration system, stating that “when a patient is hemorrhaging, the surgeon doesn’t just sew up the body to stop the bleeding; they look for…the root of the problem.” (268) When we analyze mass migration out of Central American nations, we should be asking “[w]hy is Central America hemorrhaging people? And what can be done to stop it at the source?” (268) Markham’s main argument stresses that physical walls and exclusive immigration policies do not stop migration. These barriers do not secure borders, but rather act as a tool to further complicate crossings for those escaping conflict or persecution in their own nations.
Ernesto and Raúl grapple with notions of masculinity as their coming-of-age intertwines with the immense financial responsibility of repaying their ever-growing coyote debt. The twins struggle to mature from boys to men as their perceptions of masculinity and self-worth are interlaced with their ability to send money home, while also avoiding the material temptations of the U.S. The young twins understand making money as a symbol of “moving forward” however, the “disconnect between the life they’re building and their family’s dire [financial] situation overwhelms them” causing them to limit contact with their family when their remittances are low or non-existent due to shame. (161)

Markham highlights the complex ideologies surrounding citizenship and U.S. immigration policy through an analysis of the twin’s migration experience. Ernesto and Raúl are fortunate to find themselves relocated to Oakland, a “sanctuary city” or region which offers safe haven to refugees from war-torn Latin American nations limiting discrimination on the basis of immigration status. While the twins struggle to become proficient enough in English and U.S. immigration laws to defend themselves in court, Oakland offers an environment where their “illegality” feels muted compared to their visible “otherness” in Texas.

Though the twins experienced class prejudice in La Colonia, racial discrimination is a new element of xenophobia they encounter upon arriving to the U.S. Much like the correlation between the twins’ sense of masculinity and their ability to repay their debts, the numerous forms of discrimination they encounter also take a toll on their sense of manhood. Having “Latino” spat at them while waiting tables and enduring an onslaught of other micro-aggressions, forces the twins to feel like they might never truly belong in the U.S.

Markham’s retelling of the Flores twins’ harrowing journey towards citizenship offers a humanized perspective on the inequities and challenges of the migrant experience. She captures the weight of U.S. immigration policies on unaccompanied minors and does so in a manner that exposes the underbelly of discrimination and greed that distinguishes the business of U.S. immigration. To immigrants, the U.S. can be a land of mixed promise, flowing honey and curdled milk.¹ The Far Away Brothers offers a singular testament to the experience of thousands; a narrative of high risk and uncertain rewards, extreme sacrifice and hope for a brighter future.

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