Opinion

News




Migrants from Central America trying to reach the United States react as police approach them near Frontera Hidalgo, Mexico, Jan. 21. (CNS/Reuters/Andres Martinez Casares)



by Carmen Nanko-Fernández

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February 11, 2020

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For the past two weeks, the controversial and overhyped novel *American Dirt* topped The New York Times Best Sellers list, no doubt aided by the Oprah bump. On Jan. 21, Oprah Winfrey tweeted her choice for her book club's March read:

> *From the first sentence, I was IN. … Like so many of us, I've read newspaper articles and watched television news stories and seen movies about the plight of families looking for a better life, but this story changed the way I see what it means to be a migrant in a whole new way.*
>
> *I was opened, I was shook up, it woke me up, and I feel that everybody who reads this book is actually going to be immersed in the experience of what it means to be a migrant on the run for freedom. So I want you to read. Come read with us, and then join the conversation with Jeanine Cummins on Apple TV+ coming this March.*

Within moments, the backlash that had been growing since December 2019, primarily on Latin@ social media and articulated by prominent Latin@ authors, hit the mainstream with justifiable indignation. At the heart of the responses are multi-layered arguments intersecting on questions of representation, especially when those being represented number among those made vulnerable by underrepresentation.

Author Jeanine Cummins intends for her novel to be a means for portraying the humanity of migrants by focusing on a created character in a fictionalized genre. In her author's note at the end of her almost 400-page tome she writes:

> *I hoped to present one of those unique personal stories — a work of fiction — as a way to honor the hundreds of thousands of stories we may never get to hear. And in doing so I hope to create a pause where the reader may begin to individuate.*

Cummins' tale centers on Lydia, a bookstore owner in Acapulco married to a journalist, Sebastián. A woman of moderate means, who is also fluent in English, she flees her home with her young son Luca in the aftermath of the assassination of 16

members of her family at the hands of a drug cartel. Ostensibly, the hit appears related to the publication of her husband's exposé naming the kingpin and crafting a psychological profile that describes Javier Crespo Fuentes as simultaneously not flashy or charismatic, enlightened yet merciless and delusional, "a thug who fancies himself a poet."

The thread that runs throughout the narrative is the non-innocent relationship between Lydia and Javier, a flirtation that matures into friendship and to an intimacy she had "seldom experienced outside of family." Later it is revealed that the suicide of Javier's beloved daughter Marta, who was studying in Barcelona, triggered the retaliation. Sebastián's article found its way into Marta's hands and the truth about her father was more than she could handle. Apparently besides having a wife (*la reina de mi corazón*) and a mistress (*la reina de mis pantalones*), Javier's true loves were his daughter and the bookseller (*la reina de mi alma*) he just met.

From my perspective, *American Dirt* is as much about México and immigration as Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* is about Italian American culture and family. In some ways the plots bear a striking resemblance in that organized crime networks drive the storylines. Both authors attempt to generate sympathy for men who are ruthless yet oddly vulnerable. Both books center on an immigrant to the U.S. and depend on stereotypes. The fact that they share a character named Luca is probably a coincidence. In *The Godfather*, Luca is a brutal enforcer for the don, Vito Corleone.

Cummins seeks to challenge traditional stereotypes of migrants. I guess it could be said that this very atypical migrant accomplishes that goal while feeding into every other cultural and national stereotype available regarding México in particular. Lydia and her story do not represent the complex, multinational, global, socioeconomic mess that is migration in all of its lived realities. Real people are struggling to survive on the threshold and in the shadows of a nation whose current administration lives out xenophobia and exclusion in rhetoric, enforcement, practice and policy. Their faces and stories are not reflected in these fabricated tribulations more suitable for a romance novel trading in what some critics have called trauma porn.



A caravan of migrants from Central America trying to reach the United States crosses a river near Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, Jan. 21. (CNS/Reuters/Andres Martinez Casares)

The violence that drives folks from home disproportionately impacts poor people and is more often than not intricately and historically connected to domestic and foreign policies generated by the U.S. Those fleeing threats of death from cartels are targeted arbitrarily or victimized and not because of casual romantic flirtations. Women running with children rarely have the benefit of available cash and fluent English. The trail of migrants and asylum-seekers travels to and through Latin America from across the globe. Curiously absent from this novel and from many popular portrayals of migrations are the faces and stories of the increasing flow of black migrants from Africa and the Caribbean, as well as the new majority from Central America.

In the summer of 2001, I visited a facility in El Paso, Texas, housing men and women detained for crossing or attempting to cross the border without proper

documentation. These migrants and refugees were set off from the rest of the population, namely those incarcerated for criminal activity, by the color of their prison-issued clothing. Further sequestered in their company was a group of young Asian men, probably minors in their teens. Officials did not know what language they spoke and had no translators who did. They were captured, so the story went, by showing up and handing their coveted identification cards over to border patrol agents, expecting entry to the U.S. The problem was that these alleged official IDs were library cards procured, no doubt at great expense, from their coyotes, who had exploited their linguistic limitations.

My point here is to counter the claim of Cummins, which comes across as both ignorant and arrogant, that she began researching and writing this book four years ago, long before talk of walls and migrant invasions "entered the national zeitgeist." Thanks to cable television, syndicated radio, print publishers and the internet, we have been fed a steady diet of anti-immigrant and anti-Latin@ rants throughout the 21st century by the likes of such media darlings as Lou Dobbs, the newly knighted Rush Limbaugh, academics like Samuel Huntington and politicians like President Donald Trump. The first decade witnessed immigration battlegrounds like Hazelton, Pennsylvania; Farmingville, New York; and Postville, Iowa. Throughout this timeframe (and long before), Latin@ writers have responded: journalists, social scientists, scholars, authors — of fiction, memoirs, plays, music — and yes, even theologians and biblical scholars!

While Cummins acknowledges some of these Latin@ authors, many who themselves are immigrants, she still feels compelled to function as a bridge — between a world she does not come from and "regular people like me." Her misrepresentation of that world cannot be reduced to a matter of skin color, wishing "someone slightly browner" than herself would emerge to fulfill this task. In fact, many across the pigment scale that complicates latinidad have committed their works to that task — she even names some as her sources — but somehow, she really doesn't listen perhaps because "regular people" need something more entertaining to move their hearts.

Oprah's endorsement plays right into this marketing hunch. Why does it take a fictional plight of a fictional atypical migrant set against the backdrop of unresolved sexual tension to shake up "regular people"? Why are the countless stories, faces, tears, separations, detainments, deportations and well over 9,000 actual deaths in the Sonoran Desert since 1994, communicated in real time by contemporary media,

not enough to move "regular people" to feel? If the image of a father face down in a river with his little daughter's arm wrapped about him, or the countless videos of crying children in cages, or the litany of deceased children — Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle (age 10), Jakelin Caal Maquin (age 7), Felipe Gómez Alonzo (age 8), Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez (age 2) Juan de León Gutiérrez (age 16), Carlos Hernandez Vasquez (age 16), Mariee Juárez (age 20 months) — doesn't wake up "regular people," what the hell will? The imaginary life of English-competent Luca?

Or is it that "regular people" need suffering migrants that actually look and sound like them — you know "regular" — English-speaking, lighter skin, educated, preferably heterosexual, middle class or higher, in order to care enough to be opened?

Years ago in my book *Theologizing en Espanglish*, I coined the term ortho-proxy to explain the concept of "right representation." To "stand in" for another requires permission of sorts and an obligation to not confuse solidarity with sanction to usurp another's agency. Ortho-proxy does not assume voicelessness; rather it recognizes and responds to obstacles that might hinder or actively impede someone from speaking out or up. The responsibility to represent takes ethical care to avoid misrepresentation.

Fortunately, Latin@ authors have represented. A prominent pool of 141 writers sent a letter to Oprah requesting that she remove her imprimatur from the book, because "we believe that a novel blundering so badly in its depiction of marginalized, oppressed people should not be lifted up." This was not a call for censorship or silencing; rather it was a challenge to an influential colleague, and through other venues, to publishers and marketers, to place the work in perspective, a perspective that was clearly limited because those being represented were underrepresented in the publishing industry at every level. Ordinary Latin@s have also represented. Across social media platforms, readers posted critiques and recommendations of other books, mostly by authors who are immigrants and/or from underrepresented communities, books that didn't make Oprah's Book Club or The New York Times Best Seller list or the Kindles of "regular people."

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All of these efforts elicited a response from the president and publisher of Flatiron Books, who was "surprised by the anger that has emerged from members of the Latinx and publishing communities." The letter acknowledged insensitivity and overreach on the part of the press in its publicity and promotion events, yet it could not resist framing the legitimate critiques in terms that appease white citizen fragility:

> *We are saddened that a work of fiction that was well-intentioned has led to such vitriolic rancor. While there are valid criticisms around our promotion of this book that is no excuse for the fact that in some cases there have been threats of physical violence.*

For that reason, they canceled the book tour out of a concern for safety, yet they failed to substantiate the existence of any threats. The aggrieved were now misrepresented once again, this time as the potential perpetrators of imaginary violence because they dared to speak out.

Early in *American Dirt* Javier opines, in the context of a conversation about a book club, "sometimes the experience of reading can be corrupted by too many opinions." In light of the subsequent controversy surrounding this book, this somewhat innocuous observation seems to be more of a portent of things to come. Sometimes, however, the experience of writing can be corrupted by "well-intentioned" misrepresentation that results in erasure. From this experience a movement of politico-literary action, leadership and resistance has arisen under the hashtag #DignidadLiteraria, advocating for change in the publishing industry and questioning who gets to "host" the conversation and on what terms.

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