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Review of *Into The Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea

by Marianne Rogoff

There are still many places in the world where electricity is a luxury and *bandidos* regularly assert power over powerless villages, where a plate of beans has to suffice as daily bread, and the lure of Hollywood cowboys and television heroes encourages the imagination to believe in fantasies. Escapism is a form of hope.

The men of Tres Camarones, the dusty *pueblito* in Sinaloa, Mexico, at the center of Luis Alberto Urrea's new novel, *Into the Beautiful North*, have escaped to the U.S. The fantasy was, the men cross the border, acquire riches, and return to the land of lagoons and mangrove swamps to spread the wealth. But after braving the dangerous, illegal crossing and vanishing into the empty expanses and hyped-up culture of "Los Yuinaites," it is the rare man who comes back home.

"The modern era had somehow passed Tres Camarones by, but this new storm had found a way to siphon its men away, out of their beds and into the next century, into a land far away." The men are gone. The women, teenagers, dogs, and children are on their own against thieves, darkness, and loneliness. Luckily, with the help of Diós and Tía Irma, who is running for mayor, these plucky characters continue to dream.

Romantic and bored, inspired by the local Cine Pedro Infante showing of *The Magnificent Seven*, in which a group of brave peasants is sent north to the U.S. to bring seven men back, the women of Tres Camarones start to envision a future with their men once again among them: "Dances. Boyfriends. Husbands. Babies. Police – law and order. No *bandidos*." With the blessing of Tía Irma, a foursome of local teens decides to go

searching for the town's men—La Vampi, the one goth in Tres Camarones; Tacho, a pretty gay boy with blond gel-spiked hair; Yolo, short for Yoloxochitl, a Nahuatl name given by her father who “had made it through one year of university and was thus well connected to his Toltec past;” and Nayeli, who secretly aspires to find her long-lost father. Since he left for the beautiful north, Nayeli's father has sent her one taunting postcard, from Kankakee, Illinois, a scrap of cardstock now creased with longing.

The four leave the familiar comforts of their little hometown on a bus to Tijuana, where they find a world shockingly different from their fantasies. “The USA didn't look as nice over there as it did on television.” From there, they forge bravely into the heart of the U.S., from Colonia Libertad, “the notorious launching pad for a million border-crossings” to Las Vegas (“CELINE DION!”), and onward to Kankakee.

In Urrea's telling, it is the United States that seems like a foreign land: “As soon as you escaped the island of neon and cement, the whole world was charred ruins, hoodoos and spires, dust devils and drooping power lines. Shreds of truck tires like fat black lizards. Smears of fur and brown blood upon the blacktop.”

In his introduction to *Light from a Nearby Window*, a 1993 collection of Mexican poetry, Juvenal Acosta describes how contemporary Latino literature departs from the magic realism of previous generations of authors: “Earlier Mexican writers have felt it their task to interpret the enigma of *mexicanidad*. If defining Mexican literature was a challenge for Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz, the poets of our time, beneficiaries of those efforts, situate themselves more naturally in the world they have inherited. Without this problem of identity, they have been able to set about their work in a more relaxed way.”

Urrea, born in Tijuana to a Mexican father and American mother, embodies this more relaxed aesthetic, bringing comic attitudes and fantastic intentions to his eleven books, and juxtaposing the stereotypes of old Mexico against a new millennium of Google, vampires, Johnny Depp, and YouTube. *Into the Beautiful North* examines the way new generations of Mexicans are pre-Americanized, though their images of El Norte can't prepare them for the crazy—and dangerous—encounters they'll find in the real America. Liberally dosed with references to Diddy and Kanye West, nostalgia for Yul Brynner and “Estip McQueen,” this is a novel about our continent and our times, about the coexistence of old and new cultures, of north and south, and how they intermingle, fight, come of age, and ultimately change each other.

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