

Óscar Osorio, *Allende el mar*

Bogotá: Tusquets Editores, 2023. 203 pp.
ISBN 9786287567603

Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky / Oakland University

Migration occupies a central role in global debates, as people cross oceans and continents en masse, risking their lives for a better future. Oscar Osorio's *Allende el mar* is thus a particularly timely contribution to contemporary dialogues on human movements, wars, national borders, otherness, social inequalities, the heterogeneity of human experience and its actual oneness despite divisive politics on race and nationalism.

Allende el mar presents a Bakhtinian polyphony of voices, giving stage to ten Colombians whose life circumstances drove them to migrate to the US. These first-person accounts conserve the interviewees' voices, shedding light on individual struggles and desires presented in the form of a literary chronicle. The author remains invisible, yet it is evident that he gained the trust of his subjects and paid attention to the pivotal moments in their lives, as each story stems from the circumstances that determined their future. This focus, as well as the depth of each narrative, make *Allende el mar* a singularly intimate insight into the Colombian diaspora.

Osorio's account starts with a captivating anecdote unique to Colombian reality and yet universally common in that, oftentimes, fierce political opponents cross paths under the most mundane circumstances. The first narrator's father, a member of the renowned Bloque de Búsqueda that led to the capture of Pablo Escobar, used to run into Escobar's hitman in his own house because one of the infamous Prisco brothers was courting his father's aunt. Exasperated over what she considered a pure nuisance, the grandmother—their family matriarch—would order the warring men to take their conflict outside and stay away from her freshly cleaned floors.

Yet readers would be mistaken if they assumed that the escalation of this conflict was what led to the tragedy detailed in the story. In an ironic twist of fate, following the death of Escobar, the father died in the ensuing wave of violence, but it was his superiors who secretly murdered him. In fact, the narrator who conducted his own investigation—as the law appeared unfazed and ineffective—discovered that the killer was the man lauded for decades as a national hero. As the crime went unpunished, the young narrator and his family suffered acute poverty, societal indifference, and lifelong trauma. Seeking justice for his father's murder became the

narrator's mission and it took him all the way to the American courts.

The effects of the sixty-years armed conflict in Colombia mark the lives of many interviewees. A social worker dedicated to helping underprivileged housewives from the shantytowns was threatened by paramilitaries to stay away from her project and the neighborhood. When her coworker from the Bienestar Familiar disregarded a similar warning and was found dead, and when someone tipped the narrator off about three assassins waiting for her nearby, she promptly left Colombia, leaving the life she really enjoyed behind. Similarly, another male subject barely escaped with his life dodging various murder attempts by the police for standing up to his superiors against corruption in the Secretaría de Tránsito.

Nonetheless, political violence is not the only motivator of Colombia's diaspora in Osorio's book. It is more a lack of opportunities and familial neglect. Generations of wife beaters and proverbial Latin lovers attest to the continuous hold that sexism maintains over Colombian society. Some of the fathers have multiple women with whom they form (legal or not) families they do not bother to support. Other husbands openly take much younger lovers who then taunt their legitimate partners, calling them old and neglected. In some cases where the wives prove to be better earners, husbands insist they stay home in poverty, so that the men preserve their symbolic hegemony while their children suffer hunger and intimidation. Life stories emerging from Osorio's accounts reveal entire generations of victims of domestic violence, with women and adult children scarred for life from the inescapable male aggression. Their painful realities attest to society's tacit acceptance of gendered cycles of abuse, with other women (read: mothers-in-law) reinforcing their sons' belligerent ways, blaming the victims for the perpetrators' aggression.

Predictably, migration complicates familial bonds, fragmenting the social fabric and leading to isolation, both physical and emotional. Generations of children grow up without parents, who work tirelessly during their first years in the US in order to adjust to their new circumstances. Yet leaving home and starting anew also proves beneficial, as Osorio's subjects can start to heal their traumas, away from the place of wound. Thus, migration offers them another opportunity

at life, at love and at simple pleasures. While hoping to one day return to retire in the place they call home, his subjects triumph over hardship, finding solace in newly found independence and financial security that allows them to save for a dream house in Colombia and a peaceful retirement. They recover from troubled relationships, find new loves, freedom to express their sexuality, and dedicate themselves to passions that bring them true satisfaction, such as writing and literature.

Osorio's collection of stories unmasks a panorama of social history that prompted many Colombians to establish themselves in the US. It explores painful circumstances at home, and individual challenges of uprooting and making a fresh start in a new setting. Its elegant and concise narration engages with stories that reveal unique circumstances and diverse characters. Every life story is unique, but at the same time, they share similar fears, regrets, and desire for happiness, thereby demonstrating a deep humanity that knows no boundaries or borders.