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SPAN 365

*Into the Beautiful North* - Critical Essay

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Before I start the essay, as a disclaimer, I want to be clear that as a member of the queer community, I will be using the term queer as an identifier and not a pejorative. Queer politics are an important part of my life, and I will be using the term freely to speak about our community in a non-derogatory manner. I'm never sure who is and isn't in the loop about the usage of the word queer in modern times, so I just wanted to make sure to cover my bases.

*Into the Beautiful North* features a number of themes, and illustrates them in comprehensive and interesting ways. Some, but not all, of these themes include queerness, prejudice, immigration, and growing up. Many of these issues are overlapping with other books we've read for this course, but I always identify most with the portrayals of prejudice, and especially within this novel. Thus, for this essay, I will focus on prejudice, and particularly prejudice directed at Tacho. I will also focus on growing up, and the sort of generational hope that serves as an underpinning and main theme for the entire novel.

Tacho's character, first off, is somewhat of a queer archetype. He is not only the token gay man, but also a sassy, effeminate, and vain sidekick to our female protagonist. Though probably unintentional, the author paints a picture that, while humanizing, is also effectively a stereotype. The "gay best friend" archetype is further fleshed out with how he interacts with Nayeli -- in a very intimate, yet purely non-sexual manner. This is an important issue in queer communities, because with the propagation of these stereotypes, gay men feel comfortable touching and interacting with women in a way that is not necessarily welcome. So while I appreciate the representation, it has its flaws, and it is important to note how those flaws play into the complex web of prejudice and oppression in our society and others.

Tacho is presented as someone who "lives out loud" in defiance of homophobic social norms. He humorously names his store "The Fallen Hand" with this intention, wears makeup, and does what he pleases. At first, this attitude seems to be the outcome of location. He feels more safe and sheltered within Tres Camarones because it is so small and isolated. He is still an outsider there, however, embraced by the girls and even by others, but continually referred to through a mixture of slurs and put-downs. This is probably why he wishes to escape to the city, whatever city it may be. He wants the freedom a gay community would provide, and he idealizes what life in the city would be like. Though more worldly than Nayeli and the girls, he still has these misconceptions and romantic notions, something that will change by the end of the novel. His arc is less about growing up, and more about loss of innocence.

One of the main aspects of prejudice and its side-effects portrayed in the novel is the way prejudice drives us to create separate communities for ourselves as marginalized groups, and the

drive we feel to escape to those communities in times of need. For example, when Tacho seeks out a gay club for the solace of being around other people like himself, he is reacting to a moment in which he was feeling most alienated. He'd been sexually harassed by men in authority based on his sexuality, beaten and mistreated by border patrol, and called slurs multiple times at this point, so he is clearly seeking somewhere to belong.

The scene is mirrored by the moment when Tacho and Nayeli are traveling to Kankakee and enter a Mexican restaurant in the hopes of interacting with other Mexicans. These scenes illustrate an important point about prejudice and how it affects its victims. We start to band together and hide and separate ourselves from the larger society because we do not feel safe in that larger society. We create microcosms because we can support each other there, we can be ourselves there, we can feel free there, even if it seems to be a self-imposed exile to those who more easily fit the mold. I myself am not open about my bisexuality or my transness distinctly for these reasons. Even on a university campus like ours, where those who are so often shunned or discriminated against are much more freely accepted, cold fear grips my heart when I consider opening up about who I am. I have done so in some environments and been welcomed, but I can't help but feel isolated and scared regardless. This is why the issues of prejudice illustrated in this novel stood out to me so much. Not only for their purposely jarring presentation, but also for how true they rung to someone like me.

Even within these microcosms we create, prejudice remains present. I've experienced erasure in my own community, from people who are supposed to be "my kind," an experience that illustrates yet another important aspect of prejudice presented in the novel. In that restaurant Tacho and Nayeli enter, the Mexican people within reject them based on their status as "illegals." There probably are legal Mexican diaspora in America who feel as the restaurant owner and his wife felt, and this internalized prejudice is a massive problem in marginalized communities. I have friends who use the "f-slur" to refer to each other disparagingly. Friends who call themselves "too effeminate" and feel shame for who they are. They feel, deep down, that they're making it harder for the rest of us. And on that same note, they hate other gay men and women who are too effeminate or too butch because they're "making us look bad." This is a tragic part of the picture that we, as a society, do not often discuss.

Esponsing hatred towards certain sections of our communities so that we may separate ourselves ideologically and become more palatable is not what progress should look like, and yet so often our movements are dyed in these colors. Black trans women led the initial struggle for recognition and rights for the queer community, and yet the new face of our revolution is a perfect Ken doll of a white man. Black women were always part of the fight for women's suffrage yet when it came down to it, they were blocked by the white women they'd formerly worked with because it made it easier for them to secure rights for themselves. This is an ugly truth about many of our supposed advancements, and it is deeply rooted in prejudice. The oppression splinters us off into groups that cannot effectively work towards one goal, and we swallow it and create new forms of oppression, enacting them on certain "less savory" members

of our communities. This is not a concept that is explored deeply in the novel, but the traces of it are all there. Aunt Irma's distaste for "illegals" in Mexico mirrors the distaste white Americans hold for "illegals" in America. Her distaste may not be rooted in racism, but it comes with the same fallacies. "They're stealing our jobs, taking our resources, etc." and it engenders the same hatred towards groups who are "other." This is also reflected in her frequent use of slurs and other negative language when referring to Tacho.

The point is, we do not exist in a vacuum, and what we say and do matters. Even if Aunt Irma personally likes Tacho and doesn't do anything to harm him, she further cements discriminatory attitudes towards him and homosexuals in general through her negative language. Normalizing negativity perpetuates negativity. There are undertones of this idea in the novel, such as the brief discussions about how American media has portrayed illegal immigrants in such a way that they are now more publicly discriminated against. But I digress.

Tacho bolsters his strength through his meeting with Rigoberto, who validates who he is, and shows him that he can continue to live openly in defiance of the homophobia of society. Rigoberto can only do this, however, due to his status and money. This is something Tacho does from the start of the novel anyways (as I mentioned earlier), displaying his queerness in how he acts and dresses (though this is part of the stereotyping that is somewhat problematic in his representation), and taking it even further when the friends' journey begins. Though he fears the outcomes of this, he wants to be able to firmly show the world who he is without shame and without succumbing to oppression. People's reactions to this attitude is something he grows weary of after his encounters with border patrol. When he escapes to the gay club and meets Rigoberto, he begins to rebuild and regains a sense of who he is. He becomes even more thick-skinned through these experiences, and remembers his meeting with Rigoberto as a moment of relief from the harsh realities of the world. It is something he clearly longs for and also portrays as a dream-like encounter that he can't return to. Something outside of the realm of reality for him, because his lack of status and money do not afford him the same freedom Rigoberto has.

Tacho and Nayeli both experience a loss of innocence in a similar manner throughout their journey. Tacho has already experienced a lot of harshness in the world, and has already "grown up," for the most part, but Nayeli's maturation is something more of a slow ascent culminating with finding her father. One of the moments that stands out most is when she fends off the men trying to break into her hotel room in Tijuana. Her somber reaction to the event is a stark contrast to that of Yolo and Vampi. And though she has already been forced to face harsh realities throughout her journey, this is the first moment when it feels as though she's lost her romantic sense of adventure. As the leader and protector, she is forced to grow up a lot faster than her friends, and she starts to feel separated from them in this moment. Before, after failing to contact Chava Chavarin, she at least had the group dynamic to keep her steady. But upon taking on the role of protector and facing the threat on her own, she starts to realize the kind of responsibility she has on her shoulders. She is also forced to confront the way society treats

women, and loses some of the empowerment living in Tres Camarones (somewhat isolated and without fear) has given her.

This feeling abates and resurfaces as the novel goes on, and the highs and lows of the story follow this same pattern. Another distinct moment in which she loses some of her childlike wonder comes with her losing Tacho. She is completely impotent as he is dragged down by border patrol officers and she and the girls are taken away by a bus. This is the lowest moment so far, for her, and for Tacho. She loses faith in her journey and her mission entirely, and succumbs to fatalism. At the same time, when offered the opportunity to go again, she realizes the necessity of going across the border. She is more determined than ever to find her father, though her investment in the main mission has waned. There is a shift that occurs with this, and her goal changes.

Nayeli's divergence from the group and the maturity that increases the rift becomes more cemented with time. After Vampi and Yolo both find romance, Nayeli becomes even more determined to find her father. She has already become more hardened by this point, having experienced such things as fighting skinheads and having taken the mission to the next level on her own. Still, she has some idealized notions of how her meeting with her father will play out, and believes she will succeed in bringing him home. She hasn't lost her spark of hope entirely, and that is something she seems to finally suffer the loss of when she sees what has happened to her father. When she sees his new family, the last bit of naivete in her drains away, by all appearances. Her mien, as described later in the novel, is far more stern and serious. She doesn't really see herself the way she once did, and she doesn't care much about her mission. She was unable to meet her true goal, and she feels she had lost control of the main mission upon Aunt Irma's arrival in San Diego. She is no longer the star of the show, as it were.

Aunt Irma's words to Nayeli when she speaks to her on the phone clearly lay out what I believe to be the main theme. Nayeli, Tacho, Vampi, and Yolo are not powerful or wealthy. They are, in fact, quite the opposite. As three young women and a queer man, they are devalued by society, beset on all sides by threatening individuals and unforgiving conditions. Racism, sexism, and homophobia all play into how their journey unfolds. They are stopped by various things at various points, and come out of it successful only due to resourcefulness, luck, thick skin, and unconventional solutions. This indicates one important point: the next generation must usher in change. This is the gist of Aunt Irma's message, and of the book, I believe. Idealism and naivete were necessary sacrifices for this, which is a somewhat bleak outlook, but with the loss of those things, Nayeli and Tacho in particular gain a new sense of inner strength, self-reliance, and maturity.