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Loving Immigrants in America: The Philosophical Power of Stories
by Alexander V. Stehn

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Under Review:

Daniel G. Campos, *Loving Immigrants in America: An Experiential Philosophy of Personal Interaction*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. 284 pp., \$100.00, hardcover. ISBN: 9781498547840.

Through fifteen interrelated essays, Daniel Campos' *Loving Immigrants in America* reflects upon his experiences as a Latin American immigrant to the United States and develops an experiential philosophy of personal interaction. Building upon previous work,¹ Campos' implicit conceptual framework comes from Charles S. Peirce's dual philosophical accounts of the evolution of personality and evolutionary love. But the flesh and blood of the book are Campos' own personal experiences as an immigrant who has labored for more than twenty years to make himself at home in the United States, aka *la Yunai*, by growing to love an impressively broad range of places and people across the country. Campos begins in rural Arkansas (where he arrived as an eighteen-year-old from Costa Rica to study at a small religious liberal arts college), travels extensively across the Deep South (in a series of road trips described in Chapters 3-6), completes an MA in Statistics and later a PhD in Philosophy at Penn State, and eventually settles to teach at Brooklyn College where he is surrounded by immigrants from all over the world. The book's cast of characters and Campos' interactions with them are so extensive as to defy generalization, but careful readers are likely to walk away convinced of Campos' claim that "anyone who is receptive and attentive to the commonality of human experience can empathize with immigrants" (2).

¹ See Daniel G. Campos, "Understanding Immigration as Lived Personal Experience." In *Pragmatism in the Americas*, edited by Gregory Pappas, 245–261. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.

I certainly found myself repeatedly empathizing with Campos and was struck by uncanny connections across our philosophical interests and life experiences (e.g., we were both equally inspired by the movie *Dead Poet's Society*, which in turn led us to fall in love with Thoreau's *Walden*, even though he watched it in a San Jose theater and I in a rural Texas living room). The other people with whom I read and discussed the book—three undergraduate students, three other philosophy faculty, and my mother, who has never taken a philosophy class—also developed a real sense of connection to Campos. (Full disclosure: my wife Mariana and I briefly overlapped with Campos as graduate students at Penn State). My highly favorable impression of the book was thus enhanced by the similar judgements of this mostly asynchronous book group, whose members consisted of immigrants who love or lovers of immigrants or both (Campos' title—*Loving Immigrants*—is pleasantly ambiguous in this same way). Across the board, we seven readers from diverse backgrounds and subject positions enjoyed the book, found it deeply provocative, and talked a lot about the issues raised, which is to say that the book succeeds in its aim “to establish an open and earnest *philosophical* dialogue with critical readers interested in the problem of immigration in the United States today” (1).

A standard review of a typical philosophy book rests upon a summary and evaluation of the book's central argument, but this method is foreclosed when Campos writes: “I do not argue but narrate and reflect...because I cannot argue others into understanding my experience; I can only convey and reflect upon it, so that a critical dialogue can ensue” (3). I cannot summarize Campos' wide-ranging and thoughtfully conveyed experiences (arguments can be summarized; experiences only abbreviated), though I would suggest that the book feels a bit overweight, and would have benefitted from some trimming of narrative fat in order to draw out the philosophical connections that extend across chapters. But perhaps this is a literary quibble. At the deepest

level, the book rests upon a basic, but nevertheless radical premise: Campos cannot argue others into understanding his experiences as an immigrant. And if the problem of immigration in the United States today rests, at least in part, upon a collective failure to understand the experiences of immigrants, then we United Statesians bear a collective responsibility to strive to understand by listening.

Campos writes “as an American philosopher—in the continental sense of North, Central, and South America—whose reflections provide an accessible and provocative angle for the development of insight into the experiences of immigrants in the United States” (1). But he is painfully aware of the fact that it is all too easy for people *not* to truly listen to him. Listening thus serves thematically as a repeating ground bass over which the rest of the book is improvised, beginning with “Chapter 2: An Inclination to Listen,” where Campos introduces Robert Lowell’s poem “No Hearing”:

Belief in God is an inclination to listen,
but as we grow older and our freedom hardens
we hardly even want to hear ourselves... (qtd. on 11, 148, 239)

The fact that Campos quotes the poem three times becomes even more significant when we consider Peirce’s category of thirdness (the level of reflectively emergent *teloi*). Recognizing that listening is difficult, Campos’ evolving struggle is to establish the conditions for listening and dialogue by means of “resistant love.” Campos theorizes *agape* by way of Peirce who explains that it recognizes “germs of loveliness” even in the hateful and “gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely” (5).

This presents a tremendous challenge because the racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States frequently wound Campos, tempting him to “close [himself] off to the

possibilities of relating to some people and places in the United States,” people like *gringos* making fun of him on a soccer field in Central Pennsylvania or *hipsters* gentrifying his neighborhood in Brooklyn. But rather than treat *gringos* or *hipsters* summarily as mere generalizations “ripe for hatred,” Campos attempts “to develop a secular understanding of the role of love and grace in human lives...to live by them—with contradictions and inconsistencies, but earnestly, without hypocrisy” (7). By means of this ethical principle of *agapism*, Campos struggles to understand *gringos* and *hipsters* and even occasionally tries to help them become his fellow Americans—Campos uses the technical term “United Statesian” to refer to nationality and the term “American” as “an honorific term designating those who are open to listening to others and willing to look at each other from either side of the veil anywhere in the Americas” (6).

This listening stands in marked contrast to an opening vignette about being on a subway car surrounded by “Bengali Muslims, Orthodox Jews, Mexicans, Central Americans, and Chinese, as well as Russians, Ukrainians, and white United Statesians.” Campos and his Irish friend Niall listen to a *gringo* twentysomething say: “God, what the fuck is this? Where the hell am I? Isn’t this the United States?” (10). This racist xenophobe represents a sad but routine aspect of life for immigrants in the United States, but, in reflecting upon the experience, Campos is nevertheless troubled by his own temptation not to listen: “And it pained me that I did not want to listen, that I had no inclination to engage, to find a way to make conversation possible” (11). Returning to Lowell’s line—“we hardly even want to hear ourselves”—Campos lingers on its ambiguity and confronts the tragic fact that he himself became less inclined to listen after the post-9/11 United States became more openly racist and xenophobic. Campos reports that when he first arrived in rural Arkansas, “I had a strong inclination to listen to anyone, to observe everything” (12). And in their own way, the people of the United States reciprocated. They were

“not hostile or menacing, just perplexed” to encounter a person from Costa Rica. Across multiple states in the Deep South and the Northeast (another running trope is Campos’s embodiment of Thoreau’s sauntering spirit), “clerks at shops, barbers, bank-tellers, and fellow students would hear our accents and be interested” (16). But over the last twenty years, Campos has witnessed “those possibilities for transaction—for conversation and learning and forging connections across American cultures—slowly closed off or curtailed in significant ways” (17). Campos’ challenge to himself—and to his listeners or readers—is to muster enough love to resist the closing of the heart, mind, and body that has increasingly come to pervade the United States.

Like W.E.B. Du Bois, who developed the epistemic metaphor of the veil, Campos is willing to share his insights with those who are willing to put in the work:

I certainly have not suffered like Du Bois, his black predecessors and contemporaries, or most of my immigrant predecessors or contemporaries. Still I feel that I have not been able to convey to most of my friends, colleagues, or acquaintances this process of immigrating as I have lived, experienced, and witnessed it. I have seen through the Veil into their world, but they have not seen into mine. And I feel that now, more than ever, we are in need of sympathy and mutual understanding (23).

This is the gift Campos offers us as readers, not ethereal theories, but stories, a reflective testimony of his life as an immigrant on the other side of the veil. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson’s heralded “American Scholar,” Campos reflects upon his own experiences in conversation with many US philosophers (e.g., Henry David Thoreau, C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, Virginia Held, John McDermott, Maria Lugones, Douglas Anderson, and Lara Trout) and US writers (e.g., Mark Twain, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Robert Lowell, Jack Kerouac, James Baldwin, Flannery O’Connor, and Tony Morrison). Campos has worked lovingly for years to be able to write in English about his own experiences in dialogue with the works of these great US thinkers, as well as many Latin American writers

and philosophers (e.g., Jose Martí, Carlos Luis Fallas, José Carlos Mariátegui, Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz, and Che Guevara).

Since Campos' basic aim is sympathy and mutual understanding, his basic means is "telling a part of my story, and the related stories of others" (24). His belief in the power and demands of genuine listening and dialogue constitutes his secularized version of religious faith: "I do not merely *think* [that we need to cultivate sympathy and mutual understanding], in the sense in which one may hold an intellectual belief on the basis of observed facts and events. I *feel* it in my flesh and bones, because my emotions, personal relations to people and places, and life-guiding ideals are intricately enmeshed with a people and a country in cultural turmoil over the future place of immigrants" (24). Campos never tries to construct a knock-down philosophical argument concerning immigration or immigrants. His aims, like his hopes, are in a sense more modest but in another sense, bold, even radical: "*Perhaps*, telling a part of my story, and the related stories of others, might help me strike up vital conversations with friends past, present, and future. *Perhaps* through dialogue I can open my heart, smooth its sharp edges, and turn my imagination to possibilities of experience that now seem closed off or lost...And *perhaps* these conversations might help others, in the way that reflection upon simple stories and humble testimonies helps us all be more sympathetic—to 'feel with' one another and expand our grasp on the wide array of human experiences. I *hope* we can be inclined to listen" (24; italics mine).

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps...I hope. *Loving Immigrants in America* presents the possibilities of stories, not the necessary results of argument. This represents a beautiful opening of the discipline of philosophy, returning us to Plato's Socrates, and his much wider faith in *logoi*, which also included narratives, myths, allegories, music, and poetry. Like the American philosophers, literary figures, and musicians that serve as his inspiration, Campos unstiffens our

theories about what constitutes philosophy, reminds us that we can do more than merely engage in internecine arguments, and challenges immigrants and non-immigrants alike to listen.

About the Reviewer

Alexander V. Stehn is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Faculty Affiliate in Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He specializes in U.S.-American and Latin American philosophies with a focus on the intersections between ethics and philosophy of religion, but he is prouder of being an unrepentant generalist and recipient of the University of Texas Regents' Outstanding Teaching Award.