

BOOK REVIEW

Leaving Home to (Re)member

Erika Abad

Don't Come Back. By Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas.
Columbus: Mad River Books, 2017. Pp 277. \$22.95 (paper).

In her collection of essays, *Don't Come Back*, Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas walks us through the Colombia that gives her reasons not to return: poverty, limited professional opportunities, political unrest, and relatively better opportunities in the United States. She writes about her time in the United States, introducing the reader to the legal policies that reveal why she, as a young student without a job, inevitably does return to Colombia. Through the collection, Cabeza-Vanegas walks us through various forms of policing that shape her relationship with her hometown and her home country. Importantly, she familiarizes the reader with the political institutions in the United States and Colombia that shape the extent to which she can stay in either the United States or in Colombia. Her critical contribution to writing from diaspora and exile lies in her honest and complex attention to her childhood of white privilege and her critical acknowledgement of her privileged education. At a time when Afro-Latinx writers are calling for critical attention to the privileging of whiteness, Cabeza-Vanegas explores it through her creative nonfiction work.

Cabeza-Vanegas' essays do not rely on academic or political discourse to critique regional, national, or international human relations; she relies on animals. Whether as metaphor or parallelism, the normalized cruelty between humans and animals and within human interactions across age, class, and

gender functions as social commentary. Cabeza-Vanegas is exposed to violence at a young age, as she relates in the essay, “A Dry Tree.” She tells the story of the impoverished, indigenous boy Knute Cachan’s interactions with an “angry goat,” named Diego. Knute Cachan loses his testicles as a result of improperly wrestling with the goat. As much as this is a story of a boy who doesn’t follow unspoken rules, it is also a story of discrimination as well as social ostracization. Knute Cachan is, as Cabeza-Vanegas writes, “last for everything”—last to understand the social norms other children followed, from how to wrestle a goat to how to respond to peers’ bickering. As last to everything, Cachan also represents how the indigenous are the last to adapt to external intervention. Cabeza-Vanegas contrasts peers bullying Knute Cachan at school and his interaction with the both with the racial caste system outlined in her childhood history book. The “dry tree” in the title is the end of a line, as well as the end of Cachan and, more broadly, the indigenous communities’ inability to reproduce their authority within their native land.

Cabeza-Vanegas’ stories within stories piece together episodes of hope, fear, and indifference that shape her reluctance to follow her mother’s advice to not return to Colombia. “Tinfoil Astronaut” links Cabeza-Vanegas’s unwillingness to study math to become an astronaut to her learning of her mother’s reluctance to commit to the leftist organizing she had done before getting married and becoming a mother. Cabeza-Vanegas’s discovery of her mother’s former communist patch leads to a discussion of the risk and sacrifice involved in the space race. The story of the first dog to orbit the planet on a Russian space shuttle becomes the tool by which her mother warns her of who or what is sacrificed to achieve such a perceived noble goal. Cabeza-Vanegas also learns that her mother’s near brush with death due to her affiliation with a resistance movement shapes her altered path to focus attention on her family. Through this story, Cabeza-Vanegas exposes the

high cost of beliefs, as the most defenseless are the ones who pay: Russia's first orbit around earth, her mother explains, cost a stray dog his life, as the dog died seven hours after the launch. As much as the narrator starts off as a child wanting to defy limitations and expectations, Cabeza-Vanegas shows us a flawed narrator whose investment in growth and opportunity is consistently informed by the minimization of risk.

Socially and politically aware, Cabeza-Vanegas produces an honest collection of essays in which she reflects on her own childhood complicity in social rejection of the undesirables as well as the indifference to the rising criminalization of the poor. The opportunity of education that distances her from the criminalization of the poor sparks critical introspection. Honestly speaking to her cultural complicity with the caste system, Cabeza-Vanegas' collection models the ways in which a Latina author can act as a conduit for readers to explore the complexity of light-skinned privilege. Adult introspection fosters her awareness of the layered social interactions that formed her coming of age as does her time away from Colombia. The essays contribute to the cultural production of light-skinned Latin American immigrants who reflect on race and class from afar to paint a more nuanced picture of a homeland toward which they remain ambivalent. Further, she extends the Latina feminist tradition of the anthology *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*—not only that she may live, but that those erased from history can find other forms of life.

