

El Norte: A Contemporary Portrait of the American Dream

A land of dreams and opportunity, founded over three centuries ago to protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, America is the land of modern day fairy tales. Yet, the sad truth remains: despite the many opportunities available, it is still a Herculean challenge to escape poverty. This is the reality shown and developed in Gregory Nava's 1983 independent film *El Norte*, where two indigenous Guatemalans flee the violence of their country in order to go to America, or the north. They arrive in Los Angeles, but through their immigrant experience, they discover the truth – that the American dream is only that – a dream. Through narrative structure, recurring thematic elements, and character conversations, *El Norte* tells a Los Angeles immigrant story – one which depicts the futile pursuit of the American Dream.

The story of *El Norte* is told in three parts; Part 1, which is titled after a worker named Arturo Xuncax, focuses on the harsh lives of indigenous Guatemalans. The way which *El Norte* portrays the lives of the Guatemalans later contrasts and reflects the way life is shown in Los Angeles. The opening of the film shows many workers picking coffee beans. A significant shot zooms in showing only the workers' hands and arms. While they work, exploited by their government, the Guatemalans whisper secret plans to one another to meet that night at the old church. The strength of the government's influence is highlighted when an official calls out a lone worker and bribes him to disclose the location of the meeting. The worker betrays the other men both for the money, and so that his family might remain safe. This is the first event in which an individual advances in the world by looking out for only himself. However, it will not be the last time.

After a hard day's work, Arturo Xuncax goes home to his family. That night at dinner, Enrique and Rosa's godmother Josefita tells an elaborate story about life in the north, where people have toilets that flush, electric lights, and "even the poor have cars." Josefita only knows

about America from a friend, and from reading issues of *Good Housekeeping*, but she strongly believes in the Dream and passes it on to her godchildren. But while Josefita is telling this tall tale, there are constant cuts to shots of government soldiers arriving on the edge of town. This intercutting, as well as the stark contrast between the soldiers' footsteps and the native music playing during dinner, creates tension when Arturo leaves that night. Enrique, very concerned, follows his father, and asks why he must fight. Arturo responds with his own tale about the north, telling that he has worked in Mexico and the USA, but no matter where he works, "to the Rich, the peasant is just a pair of arms." Arturo tells Enrique, "I fight to show that I am a man with a heart and soul." He then tells his son to go home, and that his time to fight will come, foreshadowing the difficulties that lie ahead for Enrique. That night, the workers are all slain by the onslaught of soldiers. Enrique, hearing the gunshots, investigates, and is shocked at the sight of his father's decapitated head hanging from a tree. He hides in the mountains, and the next day, Lupe, his mother, is captured; Rosa hides away with Josefita. In Guatemala, they have no guarantee of life, and no chance to pursue happiness, so Rosa and Enrique to flee to the north, concluding Part 1.

In Part 2 of the film, titled "El Coyote", Rosa and Enrique make it to America, but not without difficulty. As they hitchhike to Tijuana, a city on the US-Mexico border, Rosa and Enrique encounter racism from many Mexicans who consider themselves better than Indians. When they finally reach Tijuana, they are unable to find that their coyote, and have no one to help them cross the US-Mexico border. Because they are indigenismos, ignorant about Tijuana, they are tricked by a fake coyote who nearly robs them. The siblings escape robbery, only to be captured by border guard who heard the struggle. He blocks them from entering America, and pursuing the dream.

After being sent back to Tijuana, the siblings survive by stealing food until they finally

locate Raimundo, the coyote they were searching for. Loyal to his old friend from the village, Raimundo gladly agrees to help. It is because of close village ties that Enrique and Rosa are able to make it this far. They were able to reach Tijuana using money from Josefita, and by selling their mother's necklace, they fund their border crossing. After overcoming these logistical setbacks, Rosa and Enrique are brought to a rat-infested sewer tunnel, the safest crossing. The cinematography greatly conveys the sheer terror that Rosa and Enrique feel in the tunnel, with close zoomed in shots and shaky camera work, making the tunnel very claustrophobic and visceral. *El Norte* clearly depicts their midnight passage as a journey through Hell, and on the other side, San Diego's nightline seems very much like heaven. Upon exiting, they are greeted by Raimundo, who promises they will be in Los Angeles the next day. Surely here, they can achieve the American dream.

Part 3, "El Norte," opens with Raimundo speaking in English to Monte, their new landlord. Monte sarcastically comments that, "Without the cheap labor we bring in, this economy would be finished." Despite this sarcasm, he is fairly accurate. According to Abel Valenzuela's article "Immigrant Day Laborers: Myths and Realities," the American day labor phenomenon has been going on since at least 1780, and currently, there are an estimated 120,000 American day laborers (Valenzuela 1). Furthermore, the demand for day laborers has grown in recent decades (Valenzuela 3). Though *El Norte* was filmed in the 1980's it still rings true, showing that the landscape of Los Angeles' workers has changed little in the past 30 years.

After Raimundo settles the terms of their lodging, the siblings are shown their room, and immediately it is clear that reality does not match up with the imaginings of *Good Housekeeping*; their home is very old, dirty, and cramped. Ironically, they do have a single electric light, a stove, and a toilet, just like in the magazine. Josefita's concept of the dream is incomplete, but it is here. The next day, Rosa is taken with other women to work at a garment factory, where she learns

how to iron from an experienced woman named Nacha. And the work is not only easy, but the pay great too! A whole 30 American cents per job! While a common myth is that day labor is safe work which pays well, this is not the case, neither in *El Norte* nor in real life (Valenzuela 2).

That same morning, Enrique is the last man to be picked up after waiting with other men at a work corner. Unlike Rosa, no one has given him any assistance. Nik Theodore's article on labor tells that since the year 2000, labor centers have been established as an alternative to parking lot and street corner hiring. (Theodore 4). These centers help make arrangements between employers and workers, can help improve worker's skills and knowledge, and reduce employer abuse (Theodore 4-5). Not so fortunate as the workers of today, Enrique nonetheless gets lucky, securing a permanent job at a French restaurant. He no longer needs to seek out new work every day, like many other contemporary Los Angeles day laborers. In fact, it is not long before Rosa's job is taken away from her. Several scenes later, immigration services raid Rosa and Nacha's factory. Because she has grown close with Nacha, Rosa is able to escape.

After escaping, the women have lunch at a Mexican restaurant downtown. Still new to the city of the angels, Rosa asks Nacha where all of the white people are. This is another example of an LA reality, the phenomenon of white flight. To whites in Los Angeles, illegal indigenes and illegal Mexicans are no different. Both groups are equally rejected. Nacha explains as much to Rosa, and suggests they stick together. The film then cuts to Enrique's story; the two stories are told side by side but we do not see the siblings together as much as in Parts 1 and 2. This creates a filmic distance between the two characters that serves to critique America's splitting of families. We see that while at work, Enrique has also made a friend, George, who is also illegal. While on lunch break, George comments that Carlos, an American born Latino worker, must do the same dirty work as they do. That is, Carlos is a legal American, but the white ruling majority deems him the same as illegal immigrants.

Soon, Rosa and Nacha are hired as housemaids for a rich American woman. Because of their limited English, neither Rosa nor Nacha understand how to use the machines around the house, such as the washing machine. Later, when Rosa tries to use the machine, she is unable to and so she resorts to cleaning the clothes by hand, as she did in Part 1 of the film. During this scene, indigenous music plays in the background which has not been played since Part 1. This harkening back of the old ways is very out of place in modern day Los Angeles. After Rosa is scolded by their boss, Nacha explains, "In the north, this is just how it is done. You always use machines." This is an example of forced Americanization, where the culture of immigrants is rejected and useless in America.

Thanks to his improved English, Enrique is able to interact more with customers at his work, and gets a promotion to assistant waiter. As he tells Rosa that evening, their success "seems like a dream come true." He gestures around their home, which has gone from being filthy and run down, to looking more and more like the picture presented by *Good Housekeeping* at the beginning of the film. Blinds were added in one scene, and then furniture in another, and even a pet bird. It is no accident that Enrique and Rosa have been able to succeed. It is thanks to support from Nacha and George, who are representative of the Latino community in Los Angeles. As discussed in Professor Upton's lecture entitled "Ethnic Enclaves and Ancestral Homelands," a characteristic feature of Los Angeles immigration was that oftentimes, ethnic associations of established immigrants would provide support for newer immigrants who were just arriving in the city (Upton 11). And in real life, as in *El Norte*, these associations allowed minority groups to rise in society. It is because of this success that Enrique disagrees with his father's perceptions of labor, coming to the conclusion that "a worker can get somewhere in the north."

Had *El Norte* ended with the good news of Enrique's promotion and Rosa's safe cleaning

job, it could have had a happy Hollywood ending. But real life Los Angeles, while the home of Hollywood, does not play out like a blockbuster. Independently produced with funding from PBS, *El Norte* is meant to reflect reality more than fiction. Because it was made independently, *El Norte* did not have to worry about turning in a massive profit, and could instead be a work of art which highlights and criticizes modern realities. In this reality, Rosa becomes more and more ill, unbeknownst to Enrique, as they have grown apart due to work. The next day, Monte introduces Enrique to a woman named Alice Harper, who offers him a job as a foreman in Chicago, where he might even get a Green Card and become legal. But this offer is only for Enrique. Because he does not wish to leave Rosa behind, he says no. Monte thinks Enrique is "too smart, too self-assured," but he assures Alice that, "[LA's] got millions of [these immigrants]." This attitude toward Los Angeles' workers solidifies the earlier notion that the rich only view workers as tools, tools which are easily interchangeable.

It is in this final segment of the film that Los Angeles clearly connects back to Guatemala. Angered by Enrique's promotion, Carlos calls immigration services to take away George and Enrique. Like his father before him, Enrique's life was ruined because of the selfish actions of a fellow worker. Once they escape, Enrique discusses the prospects of getting another job with George, but there are "so many people here now, and not as much work as their used to be." This is true today even more than in 1983 when *El Norte* was filmed. California has one-quarter of the nation's illegal immigrant population according to a recent Times article. In fact, until the recent 2008 recession, which caused unemployment for legal and illegal residents alike, "the illegal population has continually grown" (Watanabe). Because of this, George tells Enrique that "You have to look out for yourself [in the north] or you're fucked." This is enough to convince Enrique to go to Chicago. He makes the arrangements with Alice and plans to leave.

However, Rosa fainted while on the job, and has been taken to the hospital, where she is

diagnosed with typhus. He goes to visit Rosa, who dies that night. The supposedly safe trip through the sewers led to Rosa's death, again reflecting how difficult life is for immigrants to succeed in America. Now stuck in Los Angeles with no job and no family, there is nothing left but for Enrique to go searching for work again. He picks up his father's hat, signifying that he has accepted that he is only a laborer, and not a "man with a heart and soul," and he goes back to the corner to compete with the other men for work. A truck comes by, and the man asks for men with "strong arms" to do manual labor. Enrique unflinchingly calls out to say that he has strong arms, and by doing so, he gets picked to work.

El Norte, while a film about the journey of two indigenous Guatemalans, tells a story that is distinctly that of Los Angeles. In the 2000 Census, of the 9,519,338 people counted living in Los Angeles County, 3,449,444 were foreign born (Census). Today, even more than when it was founded, even more than when the whites came to conquer the plazas, Los Angeles is a city of immigrants. And because it is a city of immigrants, legal or illegal, it is a place where individuals have opportunities they may never have had in their home countries, and therefore, chances to succeed. While the glory of the American dream, a car in every garage, is not achieved by every immigrant here, there still remain possibilities, possibilities which are uniquely American.

Works Cited

Insdorf, Annette. "'EL NORTE': ON SCREEN AND IN REALITY, A STORY OF STRUGGLE." *New York Times* 8 Jan. 1984.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C02EEDF1338F93BA35752C0A962948260>

Theodore, Nik. Valenzuela, Abel. Melendez, Edwin. "Worker centers: defending labor standards for migrant workers in the informal economy." *International Journal of Manpower*. 30.5 (2009): 422-436. Web.

https://classes.sscnet.ucla.edu/file.php/5687/course_materials/AVWorkerCnts.pdf

Upton, Dell. "Ethnic Enclaves and Ancestral Homelands." General Education Cluster 66A. De Neve Auditorium, UCLA, Los Angeles. 22 Nov. 2010.

Valenzuela, Abel. "Immigrant Day Laborers: Myths and Realities" *NACLA Report on the Americas* 40.3 (2007): 1-7. Web.

https://classes.sscnet.ucla.edu/file.php/5687/course_materials/Valenzuela-NACLA.pdf

Watanabe, Teresa. "Illegal immigrant numbers plunge." *Los Angeles Times* 11 Feb. 2010.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/feb/11/local/la-me-immig11-2010feb11>

"Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000/" US Census Bureau. Web. 10 May 2011.

<http://censtats.census.gov/data/CA/05006037.pdf>