

EP.1

Migrant Diaries. Stories of Life on the Road ***Alba Marina Ospina Dominguez***

Hybrids. These are the authors of the ITHACA-DiMMi diaries, people who have learnt to be reborn in different spaces. People recounting pieces of their lives, sharing experiences, moments of pain, joy, discovery and hardship.

Hybrids. This is how they are referred to by Alba Marina Ospina Dominguez, who is herself the author of a diary shared with the world.

The voices and stories submitted to ITHACA-DiMMi are voices of a future that aims to overturn the idea of a unique identity. The idea that migration stories are ultimately all alike.

So we met some of the diarists.

Some left out of necessity and others to rebel. Some migrated to pursue a dream and others did so out of a sense of responsibility. Some set out to understand the world and others, like Alba Marina Ospina Dominguez, did so to learn about themselves and their past, while building a new future.

We met them together with Carolina Valencia Caicedo, documentary filmmaker and our guide through the mosaic of the lives of ITHACA-DiMMi.

Carolina: I'm in Tolentino, a small Italian town where I've been living for nine years now. But I come from a very different place. I come from Cali, Colombia, a city that is ablaze with festivity, violence and sun.

I remember when I decided to leave my city back in 2014. I was well aware that if I left, I would not return, or rather, if I did return, I would never be the same.

In these nine years, I have never had a chance to reflect on the depth of the verb 'emigrate'. Now I find myself faced with the diaries of people who came to Italy under different circumstances and with different motivations. People who have carved their experiences and memories into these pages. Today, my job is to open these diaries and, together with their authors, immerse myself in these stories out loud.

Alba: I emigrated because I wanted to love. I emigrated because I wanted to study. I emigrated because I was curious to discover the world. I emigrated

because I was a teenager who was fed up with her parents. I changed context to be what I am today.

THEME: Migrant Diaries. Stories of Life on the Road

Carolina: I am opening the diary of Alba Marina Ospina Domínguez. I am very curious to read her story because we have something in common: we are both Colombian, wandering souls who came to Italy.

February 2020. Alba is embarking on a journey in Andalusia. Her only companion is her diary, which she fills with memories and drawings. On this journey, guided by intuition, Alba follows in the footsteps of history and, in particular, of her maternal family.

Alba: Almost led by an invisible thread, I end up opening this extremely important chapter of my mother's family history concerning when my grandfather Manuel was in a concentration camp in Algeciras. That's why I say one of the greatest discoveries in my story and in my family's story was to know, from a historical standpoint, what it was, what was behind this family wound, my grandfather's great sorrow. Because my grandfather suffered from post-traumatic stress his whole life. He is a man who didn't have an easy life.

Carolina: To write her story, Alba wanted to understand the origin of a wound that marked her family. She was guided by the footsteps of the past that trod the bloody path of the Spanish Civil War. This is how she came to Cadiz, in the far south of Spain, and found the 'Casa de la Memoria', a research and study centre for the victims of Francoism.

On this journey, she explored Franco's concentration camps in Gibraltar, where her grandfather was imprisoned between 1940 and 1942.

Two months after the end of the civil war, General Franco ordered the construction of hundreds of kilometres of roads, lanes and bunkers on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar. This work was carried out by 30,000 republican prisoners and deserters. *Manuel Domínguez, Alba's grandfather was one of them.*

There were days when Manuel would wake up to find that some of his companions were no longer beside him; they had been taken away and killed. The anguish of imagining that it might be his turn the following day prompted him to escape from the camp.

Alba: First to Portugal, then to Brazil and later to Colombia because he had absolutely no wish to return to Spain. My grandfather returned to Spain only and

exclusively after Franco's death.

Carolina: Manuel, Alba's grandfather, arrived in Bogotá in the 1950s.

At that time, Colombia's capital was considered 'El Dorado', an ideal place for emigrants from the Spanish Civil War. Colombia was a prosperous country which, unlike faraway Europe, offered opportunities to foreigners who wanted to escape the misery and censorship of the Francoist dictatorship.

Here I meet another character who is central to Alba's story: her grandmother Rogelia.

After Manuel, her husband, settled in Colombia, Rogelia invested all her savings in a trip across the Atlantic to reunite with him.

In this back-and-forth family history, Alba remembers her grandmother Rogelia and writes a poem for her:

Alba: "A land that tells, but no es mia, alli estoy cuando te veo, no..."

I realise that my story is not mine. I acknowledge that in order to talk about me, I have to talk about the women who came before me. I recognise that my voice sings a story whose notes have already been sung in the past. A mute polyphonic choir whose ancient vibrations I can only feel silently passing through me.

Carolina: Her grandfather Manuel's decision to emigrate to Colombia paved the way for a new family history. Alba's mother married a Colombian man, her father.

Up to this point, Alba has traced her family history in her diary, starting from the root of the tree, represented by her grandmother, and passing through the trunk, represented by her mother. Now she is focusing on the fruit: her story.

When she was 18, Alba decided to travel from Colombia to Salamanca to study psychology on a scholarship.

Alba: My grandmother and I emigrated at two different times and in inverse spaces. Although we had radically opposite backgrounds, for both of us migration was synonymous with emancipation: for her it represented liberation from the constraints of an oppressive and domineering family; for me it represented winning my independence.

My grandmother set sail with a 40 kg trunk and a month-and-a-half boat trip across the Atlantic, from Vigo to Barranquilla. I, on the other hand, left with 22 kg of luggage and a 15-hour flight. Both of us set off with a strong hope for the future, perhaps both with a strong fear of the unknown; we were, however, both on the move, in

two different historical periods, in two inverse spaces: from America to Europe; from Europe to America.

As a child, she was fascinated by her grandmother's old trunk. A very large green trunk with rusty old locks. One day, she discovered that it contained balls of wool, in different colours, which her grandmother had brought with her on her transatlantic voyage. However, for Alba, that trunk signified much more.

Alba: As a child, I always thought that my grandmother was there, that her corpse was in there.

Carolina: As she tells me, we start laughing.

Alba: Because I always felt her spirit inside. And for me this trunk was like her grave, you know? Always. Always now that I think about it, but it's true.

Carolina: This first period in Spain opened the doors of Europe to Alba. Thanks to her Galician roots, she obtained a Spanish passport. After spending five years in Salamanca, she decided to complete her studies in France thanks to another scholarship. In 2013, she graduated in psychology and decided to apply for the European Voluntary Service in Italy. In the meantime, she met Mario, a young Sicilian guy. And again, driven by intuition, Alba began to discover a new country, Italy.

Alba: I had an opportunity to find this person with whom I fell in love. I told myself: Where should I do this voluntary service? In Italy, go. So it allowed me to continue the relationship. It also let me have this experience working in an educational centre to continue on my path, which I was still not certain of.

Carolina: Alba moved with Mario to Pavia and began her period of voluntary work in an educational centre. It was a formative experience for her. Working with minors with school and family problems brought her into contact with many migrant children.

In Pavia, Alba immediately immersed herself in the Italian culture, its language, gestures and flavours. Once the volunteering experience was over, she moved to Padua for a Master's Programme in Intercultural Studies. This training enabled her to understand how cultures are hybrid, porous and dynamic.

Alba: After my Master's Programme, with 400 euro in my bank account and no job, I sent my application to do the Italian Civilian Service in the Prefecture of Padua. Here I worked in the Territorial Commission for the assessment of international protection during the migration wave of 2016. The world of asylum seekers opened its doors to me from its starkest side: inside the institution.

This experience posed a sharp contradiction between two crucial values underpinning my work: solidarity and truth. In the institution, my task was to facilitate the uncovering of 'truth' by looking for elements of external credibility in asylum seekers' stories.

Carolina: Coming from a constantly moving family that has spread its branches to the most remote places in the world, Alba is highly critical of a bureaucratic system that suffocates migrants with documents and formalities. Alba calls it "the rose garden".

Alba: This is a metaphor I often use to explain European institutions' ambivalence towards foreigners in Italy. Ambivalence that is evident in the fact that it appears to be one of the countries where the rule of law offers absolute protection to the individual, the person, and in one respect this holds true compared to many other contexts in the world. On the other hand, there seems to be a kind of rite of passage to enter this precious garden full of roses and sweet aromas. When someone tries to enter, they find themselves surrounded by thorns instead. And I even realise that my work is a kind of excrement, in other words, a fetid product of a meaningless bureaucratic and administrative system.

Carolina: For Alba, it was ironic that she, who left Colombia in search of her family's migrant roots, was now part of an institution that had to decide who should and shouldn't be granted asylum. So she looked for another job that was more aligned with her values and found it in Mantua, as a legal worker in a cooperative.

Alba: During my work, I had the opportunity to support 183 people in their legal proceedings: men, women and minors from sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali), the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia) and Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan).

Carolina: She believes that it is wrong to think that only those who migrate after having suffered a great deal can stay in their new country. This forces some migrants to lie or falsify their stories.

Alba: I'm absolutely against this. I emigrated because I wanted to love. I emigrated because I wanted to study. I emigrated because I was curious to discover the world. I emigrated because I was a teenager who was fed up with her parents. I changed context to be what I am today. Not necessarily due to a case of victimhood and not because migration represents this loss or can be justified by this view. This is a misconception that is extremely common both in the newspapers and in hearsay: the distinction between an economic migrant and a genuine refugee migrant.

And what am I? A horny emigrant who emigrated because she fell in love? Sorry but fuck off.

And I'm telling the story of my grandparents, of their migration, not only out of nostalgia and as a family memory, but also to recall the fact that Europeans have always migrated wherever they wanted, however they wanted, even in conditions of misery, and that the rest of the world did not impose the limits on them that they are now imposing on the rest of humanity.

Carolina: Alba has tried to create a safe space in her office, a place for listening where people come to tell their stories, to be recognised, welcomed and understood. She listens to their stories as she would have liked to hear the story of her grandparents, from their own lips.

Alba ends her diary with a thought:

Alba: How porous can maps be? How ephemeral are borders? And above all, who is going to be there to transcend them? Who is going to be there to make them less rigid? Who will be the ones who many years ago helped my grandfather rebuild his life during his exile? Who will help us or our children if the world turns upside down? We are trying to enlighten, with determination and tenacity, many people who are on a perpetual journey to their Ithaca, just as my grandparents did and as I was able to do.

Carolina: When Alba Ospina Domínguez arrived at the "Casa de la Memoria" in Cadiz, archivists informed her of the location of the concentration camp where her grandfather was imprisoned. Alba decided to go there, paying tribute to him through a ritual.

She was accompanied by an indigenous Mayan woman from Guatemala, Maria. With her, she discussed the ritual beliefs of our ancestral, indigenous and African cultures. Together they created a ceremony to pay homage to their ancestors. In that place hidden in the mountains, embraced by the flow of a river, Alba and Maria connected with the 4 cardinal points. They held hands, lit candles and joined in prayer. Alba invoked the women who preceded her. She found the strength to talk to her grandfather, telling him:

"...There is a wound, a strong wound, that originated here, a wound that still cries out in my mother's anguish, in the thoughts that loop in our minds. This is why I came to this place, to find the traces of history, to tell you that from the depths of that wound, life was cemented.

We're well, Grandpa. Your exile wasn't in vain. It gave us wings to travel and opened the door to the world.

We're well, Grandpa. Your pain wasn't in vain. I work to give birth to people like you, to help them be reborn after seeing death.

Thanks, Grandpa, thanks for not giving up. Although your existence was bitter, your granddaughter thanks you from her soul for persevering.

Thank you, Grandma, who I never met, in your light and strength as a woman who supported us".

Alba: At that moment we embraced and the candle light went out. The ritual was over.

Migrant Diaries. Stories of Life on the Road is produced by Radio Papesse with Botafuego Audio.

The voices you have heard are those of Alba Marina Ospina Dominguez and Carolina Valencia Caicedo.

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