

***Loving Immigrants in America: An Experiential Philosophy of Personal Interaction*
by Daniel Campos, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017. P. 282, paperback
\$39.99. ISBN 978-1498547840**

Can Love Work? A Review of Daniel Campos' Loving Immigrants in America

by Mariana Alessandri

Author Daniel Campos admits that he comes from modest privilege, falls on the light shade of the color spectrum, learned English quickly, speaks eloquently, presents as clean-cut, professional, heterosexual, etc. Thus, it is unsurprising that his literary persona in *Loving Immigrants in America* has not faced violence against his body in the way that other immigrants have. Campos comes to his philosophical memoir from the point of view of an immigrant learning to love and gain the love of nonimmigrants in America. Campos, far from his native Costa Rica, writes about how he responds to the different places he lives and visits, including Arkansas, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania. Like Gloria Anzaldúa before him, Campos perpetually carried “home” on his back like a turtle.[1] His shell is made of literature and music, and his book manages to avoid the trappings of philosophy while remaining an academic volume. *Loving Immigrants in America* is a true crossover book: it is first and foremost a presentation of Campos’ experiences as a Costa Rican living in the U.S., so readers who have no philosophical background can glean insights from his interactions with hostile and loving United-Statesians, and they can draw their own conclusions about how best to love immigrants in America. But unlike a typical memoir, *Loving Immigrants in America* is grounded in philosophy, specifically in American pragmatism. Campos’ framework is subtle but will be familiar to those who have read Charles S. Peirce. Some readers may be left wanting to be told what to conclude from his stories, but having been raised on novels that do no such thing, Campos refuses to tell us what to believe.

Loving Immigrants in America presents no philosophical argument. As such, this review could take three forms: 1) Turn Campos’ book into an argument and respond to it like professional philosophers have been trained to do. But this would do violence to the spirit of the book; 2) Join Campos in his shell and respond with literature and music, ideas, connections, similarities, challenges. This would be less of a review and more of a response or a written dialogue; 3) Read the book as a how-to manual for loving immigrants. This would put *Loving Immigrants in America* closer to the self-help section of the bookstore, and it could be renamed: *Six Steps to Loving Immigrants in America*. This format has practical application for the reader while reviewing the book. Campos’ six steps would be fairly simple:

Step 1: *Don’t turn away from an immigrant, no matter how much you want to. Get yourself an Anderson who knows this immigrant and can attest to their humanity.* From

the time he arrives as a college freshman in Arkansas until he is a professor at Brooklyn College, Campos' hostility toward United-Statesians increases (as does his love, dialectically). We see a first hint of anger when he reads Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Campos admits to becoming frustrated with the Anglo protagonist, Sal, for sowing his wild oats and carelessly hurting people. Campos' disgust is justified: Sal treats brown bodies as dispensable. But it bothered him to be so bothered by a book that so many Americans loved. Campos writes about how his teacher and mentor Doug Anderson became a mediator between reader and protagonist, able to show Campos the fragile and sympathetic side of Sal. Because of Anderson, Campos was able to soften toward Sal to a degree he could not have achieved on his own. We could all use an Anderson to humanize our imagined enemies.

Step 2: Sidle up. This is technically Kwame Anthony Appiah's advice, but Campos' body articulates a remarkably similar belief about humankind.[2] When you disagree with someone on politics, Appiah recommends not talking about politics. Talk about cooking instead, or, better yet, cook together. Campos instinctually sidles. He does not talk directly to hostile people about issues they feel strongly about, like immigration. In so doing, he finds a path to their heart and those of their family members. This will work for anyone aspiring to be more loving, immigrant or nonimmigrant. For Campos as protagonist, sidling meant traveling with them, visiting them in their homeland, playing with them, dancing with them, and living with them. A major part of Campos' sidling takes place inside of books and music. In *la Yunai*, (which is how Campos calls the United States) Campos reads local literature and listens to local music to help him understand the place he inhabits and the people he meets. In New Orleans, Campos listened to jazz and ate po boys; in the South he read Faulkner and Morrison.

Sidling is a painfully slow process, but it humanizes the other in a drastic way. Caution: this only works if the other allows you to sidle up to them. Some would rather harm you than let you sidle. But it would be a mistake to invalidate the project on the grounds that it might fail. It must be the case that, for Campos and Appiah, those with no sidling power are relieved from an ethical obligation to sidle. But there are many of us, including Campos, whose bodies are not in physical danger, and who could make tremendous progress in loving others if we could get to sidling. The following three steps are other examples of sidling:

Step 3: Play football with them. Campos writes (perhaps in too much detail for *nonfútbolistas*) about the art of making connections through this sport.

Step 4: Dance with them. Campos artfully describes how dance has the power to connect people regardless of their politics, and even their religion.

Step 5: Go on road trips with them. Campos frequently travels with companions from all over the map, and doing so teaches him to value difference.

Step 6: Realize that the formula for loving an immigrant in America turns out to be the same one you can use as an immigrant loving nonimmigrants in America. The question that Campos is subtly and indirectly asking and answering in *Loving Immigrants in America* is: can love work?

If you had asked José Carlos Mariátegui in 1925: *Can love work to change the latifundista economy of Peru?*, he would have said no. If you had asked Søren Kierkegaard if love could work in Denmark in 1846, he would say that if it didn't work, then it wasn't love. Martin Luther King, Jr. published a collection of essays in 1963 called *Strength to Love*. W.E.B. Du Bois added his answer: "I do not pretend to 'love' white people."^[3] The list goes on, the debate continues, divided between people who think love can thread human beings together and those who don't. Campos's experience tells him that yes, love can dismantle the wall between immigrant and nonimmigrant.

Campos' book is brave: he is justified in hinting, suggesting, whispering to us about works of love. It's a tricky business to tell people to love people who do not love them back. In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson writes, "mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven't earned it, who haven't even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion."^[4] It's unpopular and sometimes dangerous to propose that we extend mercy to the other, since the hating other might be volatile. We might be tempted to restrict mercy to those who deserve it. But this is where it gets difficult: Stevenson is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, which has been fighting institutionalized racism—specifically the death penalty and life-in-prison sentences for juveniles—since 1989. Stevenson defends kids who have sometimes killed people, kids who the justice system wants to erase, kids that Dr. Tommy Curry writes about. When he talks about mercy, Stevenson is precisely not suggesting that we extend it to the deserving ones. It is the undeserving that need our mercy: kids who others believe have forfeited their right to live. But he's not only talking about extending mercy to kids who kill; he is also talking about extending mercy to those who want to kill them.

Campos is aware of the danger of suggesting that love can work, and he points us to Maria Lugones who states that "traveling" to oppressive worlds is dangerous and suggests that it need not be done.^[5] But, for those of us who have few, if any, scars from racist violence, love is, at least, a possibility. Campos calls it grace, based in part on his reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. He slowly and beautifully recounts Baby Suggs' pro-grace sermon, a sermon she retracted when she found out that Sethe had killed her child. Baby Suggs could no longer preach the possibility of "saving grace in the flesh," and instead took to her bed.^[6] Although he is not naïve as he was when he got to la Yunai, Campos still opts for gritty grace instead of the metal pylons that become border walls. He refuses to take to bed. He wants to remain "alive and awake" like the Americans that his mentor Doug Anderson writes about. Campos shows us what can happen when grace is extended by immigrants, who have every reason to

withhold it, to the undeserving. Love is a Christian message even if those who practice it are not Christians and even if professed Christians refuse to practice it. Throughout the book, Campos returns to the line from “No Hearing” by Robert Lowell that “belief in God is an inclination to listen.”[7] The secular translation of “God” that he seeks throughout the book might just be “love,” cliché and all, as love is an inclination to listen.

Notes

[1] Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 43.

[2] Tippet, Krista. “Sidling Up to Difference: Social Change and Moral Revolutions.” Audio blog post. On Being. On Being Project, August 15, 2013.

[3] W. E. B. Du Bois, “Whites in Africa After Negro Autonomy” in David Levering Lewis ed. *W.E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, (New York: Henry Holt & Company), 686-687. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Whites in Africa after Negro autonomy 1962” (W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries).

[4] Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2016), 314.

[5] Campos, Daniel. *Loving Immigrants in America: An Experiential Philosophy of Personal Interaction* (Kentucky: Lexington Books, 2017), 256.

[6] *Ibid.*, 146-150.

[7] *Ibid.*, 71

[8] *Ibid.*, 11, 148, 239.