

Stones, bones, and tar: the legacy of migrant workers



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The images of stones, bones, and tar form a motif in Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*. From Alejo's sickness to the encounter with the nurse, these images are continually linked to each other to depict a wide range of the experiences, dreams, and sufferings of migrant workers. Stones, symbolic of the migrant workers' history and tie to the earth, are ancient like the bones that ache, provide the labor, and eventually become the tar oil that supplies fuel and energy for America. This relationship between stones, bones, and tar is similar to the community of the migrant workers: all the members are connected and provide for one another. Through their prevalence in the novel, these images leave a trail the way migrant workers leave behind a trail of their lives as they move from place to place; the reoccurring images represent the continual sacrifices of migrant workers and portray their hope to leave a legacy that will remain long on this earth like the stones, bones, and tar. Alejo's interest in stones exemplifies the desire of the migrant worker to earn a name for himself in the land where he must struggle to survive. His interest, evident in his plan to major in geology, is equated with his goal to obtain an education. His plans also include "buy[ing] a canvas backpack to carry his books, a pencil sharpener, and Bobcat bookcovers" as well as graduating high school (52). Although his plans are simple, they exhibit ambition and reveal his dream to progress in life. Plus, stones symbolize permanence and durability, traits that Alejo hopes to attain. "He loved stones and the history of stones because he believed himself to be a solid mass of boulder thrust out of the earth and not some particle lost in infinite space" (52). The contrast between the presence of a boulder "thrust out of the earth" and an essentially invisible particle is applied to Alejo's wish to become a bold, noticeable and distinct being on the

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earth. He does not want to end up like a lost particle, something lacking direction and purpose. In addition, he wishes to become “ a part of the earth’s history” and “ exist as the boulders did, for eternity” (52). He hopes that his memory and his life struggles will not just die out and be forgotten; instead, he longs to be remembered and to leave part of himself on earth that will remind the world of his existence and his accomplishments.

Complete erasure of one’s existence is a fear of the migrant worker in the novel. The scene in which Alejo falls from the tree as he desperately tries to escape the shower of pesticide depicts this fear. Images of bones and tar prevail in this scene and foreshadow death, a force that causes one to vanish from the face of this earth. Sepulchral images, such as the “ thousands of bones, the bleached white marrow of bones” and the “ splintered bone pierced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone” describe a setting appropriate for a burial site or a death camp (78). Although they symbolize death, the bones also represent the memory of a person, for they are his remains and are typically the only things that his body leaves behind. Yet, if these cannot even be preserved, then it seems as if truly nothing is left to remind others of that person, as if he never lived; this is what Alejo fears. As the biplane spraying the pesticide approaches, Alejo imagines “ sinking into the tar pits” (78). This is where he sees his bones vanishing, leaving behind “ no fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone” (78). Death is so inevitable that even lava stone, a formation that has been on this earth for millions of years, cannot withstand disappearance. Language used to depict this scene is repetitive and employs many commas to make the pace slow. This makes Alejo more helpless and powerless to save himself, regardless of his determination to fight the oncoming force. “ He thought

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first of his feet sinking, sinking to his knee joints, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs" (78). Like a slow, painful death, Alejo envisions himself gradually sinking into darkness and blankness forever. This feared entrapment extends to preventing migrant workers from progressing; in addition to not being able to escape the approach of death and disappearance, migrant workers must face another struggle if they become "stuck". Since they rely on migrating from place to place to earn their living, getting stuck, particularly being stranded in one place, poses a threat to their livelihood. Images of people getting stuck in tar pits, such as Alejo's vision of sinking into tar, relate to this dilemma. The horror of this type of incidence is also portrayed in the conversation between Alejo and Estrella while they are lying under the truck. Here, Alejo introduces the topic of tar oil: Once, when I picked peaches, I heard screams. It reminded me of the animals stuck in the tar pits. Did people? Did people ever get stuck? Only one, Alejo replied, in the La Brea tar pits, they found some human bones. A young girl. (88) This brings back the chilling images of bones and tar that death accompanies. Evidently, the girl stuck in the tar pits became erased for a period of time until her bones were discovered. Another instance of getting stuck occurs in the following excerpt from the conversation between Alejo and Estrella regarding oil: You know where that oil comes from?. . . Why you asking me? If we don't have oil, we don't have gasoline. Good. We'd stay put then. Stuck, more like it. Stuck. (86) At first, the possibility of staying in one place is appealing, especially to Estrella who perceives it as having to stay put. After years of constant packing up and moving, sometimes having no destination, remaining stationary seems like a pleasant idea. However, Alejo's response differs in <https://assignbuster.com/stones-bones-and-tar-the-legacy-of-migrant-workers/>

diction from Estrella's, implying a negative side to this immobility, for he calls it being "stuck." The word implies a sense of being trapped and unable to get out of a place or situation, as if one is imprisoned for a long time. It also connotes helplessness for it makes one think of the possibility of being abandoned and forgotten. Through its language and imagery, the conversation between Alejo and Estrella demonstrates how the inability to move forward can make one disappear without a legacy. Ironically, the bones of the migrant workers provide the fuel and energy that allow the rest of the people to progress while they are prevented from doing so. After Perfecto pays the nurse the family's last nine dollars, Estrella becomes enraged because she feels that they have paid much more than they deserved to pay. They have lost more than money, for they have paid with their lives, with their sweat, and with their bones. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones.

(148) This metaphor describes the bones of the migrant workers as if they were fossil fuels, thus giving their bones ancient attributes. It symbolizes not only the consumption of human lives, but also the exploitation of these bones that make up a part of the earth's history and natural resources, all for the sake of progress. Eventually, all these lives and resources will be used up, leaving no more for future generations. Because this is part of the legacy that the migrant workers leave behind, the loss of these bones, figuratively speaking, is analogous to erasing the remnants of the migrant workers from the face of the earth. Despite their numerous sacrifices for America, the <https://assignbuster.com/stones-bones-and-tar-the-legacy-of-migrant-workers/>

migrant workers receive nothing in compensation and are essentially forgotten by those who benefit from their sufferings. One example is the ignorance of the nurse when she does not realize that nine dollars is still extremely valuable to Estrella and her family. Even though she lets them pay nine dollars instead of fifteen for the visit, she still lacks compassion for the family's situation. The nurse exhibits this as she takes the money with indifference from Estrella's hands and drops it into the metal box. Also, after Estrella pleads with the nurse to let her baby-sit and to let Perfecto fix something in the office instead of paying the last of their money, the nurse does not feel the least bit of pity; all she can worry about is picking up her kids in Daisyfield by six. Lastly, the nurse's ignorance is manifested when Estrella thinks, " The nurse owed them as much as they owed her" (148). Estrella's comment refers to the metaphor relating their bones to the fossil fuels that make the nurse's car run so she can pick up her kids. Considering this, their payment is in fact an unfair trade-off. Unfortunately, the encounter with the nurse is only one of many cases that refuse the migrant workers what is rightfully theirs; even gratitude is denied them. A significant moment in the novel occurs when Estrella gives Perfecto his first " Thank you" in America. He had given this country his all, and in this land that used his bones for kindling, in this land that never once in the thirty years he lived and worked, never once said thank you, this young woman . . . had said the words with such honest gratitude, he was struck by how deeply these words touched him. (155) Again, the image of the migrant worker's bones providing the country with energy is associated with exploitation. Despite all his offerings and sacrifices for America, Perfecto, like other migrant workers, has never received anything beneficial in return, has never encountered a

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thankful expression, until Estrella said “ Thank you.” By not receiving the thanks that they deserve, the migrant workers’ efforts and struggles are left unnoticed, unacknowledged, and forgotten. The images of stones, bones, and tar emphasize the great extent to which the migrant workers sacrifice not just to survive, but to have something on this earth that they can leave behind to remind others of their experiences, their contributions, and their existence. Although the rest of the world passes them by, the stories and determined spirits of the migrant workers will not die out. Through their sufferings, the migrant workers are all connected collectively and share this legacy.