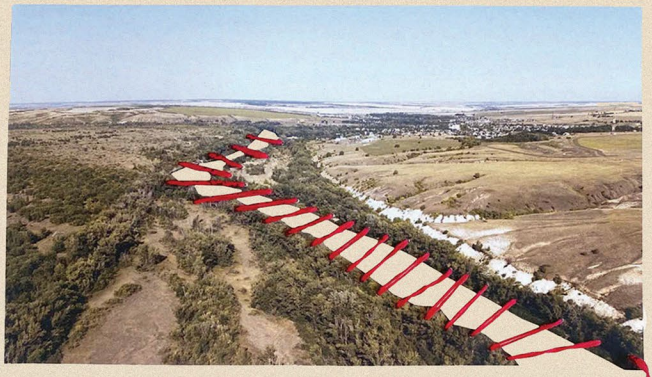
Rivermouth

A Chronicle of Language, Faith, and Migration



Alejandra Oliva

ASTRA HOUSE

READING GROUP GUIDE

Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. In the Preface, Alejandra writes: “This book is unapologetically bilingual. It is written for an audience of largely English speakers because that is where the power and the fault in much of our immigration system lies.” Why does she focus her attention on these readers? What does this focus suggest about the author’s view of power as it relates to the act of translation?

2. Early on in the book, Alejandra discusses her relationship to the U.S.-Mexico border and to translation as practice—as a third generation Mexican-American and as interpreter for migrants seeking asylum. How does Oliva’s background affect her analysis of the conditions at the border?

3. In describing the conditions migrants face entering the U.S. via “legal” means, Oliva writes about “la lista,” a notebook containing the names of every migrant in Tijuana who has declared that they want to cross the border “the right way,” a process that obliges migrants to “cross, get detained for an indefinite period of time, and, during that detention, ask for, demand, insist on a Credible Fear Interview.” How does the anonymous nature of “la lista” affect the options migrants are offered to cross the border? And what is the value of entering “the right way” in a system Oliva describes as “a veritable mountain of xenophobic laws, rules, and regulations”?

4. In Part II, Oliva introduces the term “sobremesa”—the conversations and space held over a dining table, the tending to matters following a meal, idle chat, and chores. How does the idea of “sobremesa” work as a metaphor for the work Oliva does at the border, interpreting the stories of people preparing for a Credible Fear Interview?

5. Alejandra shows how the exploitation of migrant farm workers serves as the basis of U.S. food production. How does American consumption create the reality of the conditions at the border?

6. In revealing the working conditions during the COVID pandemic at Sanderson Farms, the third-largest poultry processor in the U.S., Oliva shares the contents of a memo sent by the president of the company to his employees that read: “If people like you and me stop coming to work every day, people will go hungry. . . . We call upon you to look at this crisis as an opportunity to serve.” What might this company’s expectations about the necessity of the labor of its migrant workers suggest about the relationship between the U.S. and countries south of the border, where much of this labor is extracted more broadly?

7. Throughout the book, Oliva looks at the act of translation through the lens of biblical theory. As she suggests, “even when you’re not necessarily talking about the word of God, the original is held as a bright, inviolable light that the translator must struggle to approach, much less replicate.” How does her understanding of biblical translation theory factor into her position that translation is an act of transferring power, and what impact might Christian theology have on the way immigration policy is determined and enacted in the United States?

8. After 39 people died in a fire in an immigration detention and processing center in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Oliva wrote in an op-ed in April 2023: “These migrants may have died just outside the borders of our country while under the custody of the Mexican government, but their deaths were caused by the policies, practices, and biases of the U.S. government.” In what ways has she proven this argument in *Rivermouth*? What are some potential policy alternatives that might alleviate the conditions described in the book?

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Q&A with Alejandra Oliva

1 **When did you realize that this was the book you needed to write? Was it an idea that grew over time or was there a specific moment when you just knew?**

It was definitely an idea that grew over time. The very first versions of what I thought might be a book were some five or so essays on food, ritual, translation and immigration that I had written for various classes in divinity school. There was an essay on Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*, one on the concept of sobremesa and the eucharist, one on translation, and ritual. I kind of realized that they all fit together alongside my interest in immigration and translation, and from there, the book both concentrated and expanded into what it is now!

2 **You are bilingual and one of the central themes of the book is the power dynamics in language. What was it like for you writing the book primarily in English? How and why did you make the decision to keep parts of the text in Spanish?**

In spite of my parents' best efforts, I'm primarily an English speaker—I speak really good Spanish, I'm comfortable translating and reading and holding a conversation, but I think that if I want to be really artful or deliberate, English is the language I'm going to reach for first. That being said, and as I write in the book, Spanish for me is this language of family and homecoming and safety. I know that there are millions of Spanish speakers around the world, but it still feels like this special family language to me. I wanted to both give Spanish-speaking readers that little spark of recognition and monolingual English speakers a sense of what it might feel like to not have a book or a space cater completely to their linguistic needs.

3 **People often have strong personal views around immigration, migration, and asylum. Sometimes these views are tied to personal experiences, sometimes they are tied to false beliefs about economics and society. What would you say should be the core principles that shape our views on the issue?**

I want to also base this answer on personal experience. My family and I had a very different experience with immigration, one ensconced in privilege and economic plenty, and so for a long time, immigration inequality and asylum were all issues that pertained to other people. What changed that was talking to people who had firsthand experiences within the immigration system. People who had left their homes in search of peace, who had traveled across a landscape that was hostile to their presence, who had encountered the militarized, dangerous U.S. border, who affirmed the justness of their presence in the United States and who spoke clearly and powerfully about the injustices they had encountered along the way. Other issues that are often linked to immigration in public discourse—questions of allocation of resources, jobs, safety, and society—are often either extremely thinly disguised white supremacist rhetoric (looking at you, Great Replacement Theory) or questions of economic injustice in which it's easy to scapegoat immigrants rather than talk about the actual systemic inequalities at the heart of the problem. In short, I think the core principles that should shape our views on the issue of immigration are questions of justice, humanitarianism, and generosity as we strive to build a better country and world for everyone to live in, regardless of their nation of origin.

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4 **You spent time in 2019 translating at the border crossing in San Ysidro—the largest land border crossing in the world—where 90,000 people pass through daily, by foot or by car. This made the border a vivid, real place. For many (most) people, the border is a vague mostly political concept: what do you want people most to understand about the border as a place?**

San Ysidro—and on the other side of the border, Tijuana—is a place where you can see all the contradictions of what the border is. You have all this military surveillance apparatus—the barbed wire, the armed guards, the security cameras, the tall fences—but you also have people moving through it. And they're not just the concept of people but they're real, specific people who, as they're crossing the border, are bringing with them all these hopes and ideals and fears and Minnie Mouse luggage and idiosyncrasies. The people at the border are in this very loaded, very intense place both geographically and often emotionally but they're also just people, trying to get by, trying to make the best choices they can.

5 **Faith is another strong throughline in this book, from your own belief system to religion as it relates to immigration and language/interpretation. Can you explain how these things are related?**

Immigration stories are everywhere in the Bible, the book of the faith tradition I was raised in. From the 40 days and 40 nights wandering the desert, to the flight from Egypt, migration is this extremely old story that has echoes in these stories we tell as central parts of our culture. A lot of my adult journey has been taking this faith I was raised in and often chafed against and both coming to terms with the fact that it did have a profound effect on me as a person, and the values I live by, but also that there are ways to live into those values that aren't necessarily the same kind of conservative, self-isolating and self-centered church I was raised in—and one of the first ways I saw people doing that was in the immigration rights movements. From providing sanctuary in church spaces to immigrants with deportation orders to accompanying people as they encounter the bureaucratic mess of the immigration system to attending to people in immigration detention, religious groups are a huge part of the immigration justice movement, and for many individuals, fighting for justice is a part of their religious practice. When it comes to language and translation—a lot of the oldest translation theory in the West comes from people talking about how or whether to translate the Bible, where the holiness resided in a text written by God and whether it would remain holy if you translated it. Many of the conversations we have today about translation that really venerate the original as this kind of sacred text that we clumsy translators can't help but mutilate as we pass it into another language echo and reflect those early theories. When I was working with asylum seekers' accounts of the violence they had faced, I witnessed how these original "texts" often created through great hardship and effort in remembering and reliving trauma—they were cut and shaped into a very specific narrative and format to fit an immigration form. This process kind of raised my hackles as a translator, and it was through that discomfort that I started thinking about a lot of the questions that led to the more language theory parts of the book—questions about how we value stories, and how we change them through translating or interpreting them.

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6 **The difficulties and dangers of migration are often in the news and the scale can feel overwhelming for the layperson. What process would you recommend for your readers who want to contribute and support their local immigrant communities?**

First of all, the border is everywhere. There's this really pervasive idea that the border is this very specific place where all these issues are isolated, but the truth is that many large U.S. cities have an ICE field office and/or an immigration court where people go to regular check-ins, attend hearings, and the like, and there are immigration detention facilities in just about every state (a few, including my home state of Illinois, have banned immigration detention, but that simply shifts the problem to other states). There are also immigrants in just about every community in the U.S., from the huge cities to tiny farm or factory towns in rural areas. I can also almost guarantee that there's someone already doing the work in your community—providing services, working to ensure that resources are available in the correct languages, delivering on any one of a dozen things that people who are just trying to set up their lives in a new country might need. If you're willing to volunteer, I'd recommend seeking these places out and figuring out how you can help. That sometimes looks like direct services, but can also look like emailing people, translating documents, setting up spreadsheets, soliciting donations. If you're already volunteering or involved in your community in some way, it can also be a good practice to figure out how or whether that organization is engaging with the local immigrant community, and working to make that better. Are you offering services, events, or literature in different languages? Are you making it clear that people from all immigration statuses are welcome or eligible for your services? Finally, there are times when the border comes to us really clearly and directly—there's an ICE raid in our neighborhood or workplace, local officials announce that they're in talks to build an immigration detention facility in your town or county. Being prepared for those moments—finding bystander trainings, getting involved in a local site fight—is critical. So much of the most vibrant and critical activism I've seen is through people looking out for their neighbors in this way.

7 **There are also clearly huge issues at the systemic and policy levels. What are three concrete steps that would lead to a more humane and effective approach to the asylum process?**

I think the three concrete steps we need to take on a systemic, federal level, all center on the idea of making the system less punitive for those who are forced to engage in it. The first and most urgent step is completely ending immigration detention—there's absolutely no reason anyone should be in prison for exerting their human right to migration. The medical neglect in immigration detention is rampant, and has been known to kill and disable people. The second is to demilitarize the border and end the policy of "deterrence," which basically involves making crossing the border dangerous in the hopes that people stop coming. We know that this isn't a policy that works—people are still arriving at the border all the time, and hundreds of people die each year attempting to cross. That leads me to the third step: in not spending the billions of dollars we currently do on both detention and militarization. These funds can be far better used in helping support new arrivals—language classes, helping secure job permits, integration into communities, all kinds of things that have benefit not just for immigrant communities or new arrivals, but all of us.

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8 **What was the big takeaway for you in the experience of writing this book? What do you hope your readers discover in these pages that will stay with them when they finish reading?**

More than in the writing of the book but in researching it, living the events that came to take place in the book, it is the lesson that getting involved in your community is absolutely worth it. It's almost always going to put you into contact with hard things, things you're not able to fix or even get your arms around. It's still worth it to put your shoulder in, to try to change things for the better. I have to believe in a world where collective action can make a difference, where mutual aid matters to the health of individual people and our communities. For me, the road into this kind of understanding of the world was through immigration, but I've seen it over and over again in all kinds of places and situations.

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National Resources

Catholic Charities | catholiccharitiesusa.org
Many branches of Catholic Charities across the country run robust immigration legal services and other programs and services for immigrants.

Freedom for Immigrants | freedomforimmigrants.org
Best known for their detailed map of detention centers across the United States, they also run a legal hotline for detained immigrants, a nationwide immigration bond fund, and more.

Southern Border Communities Coalition | southernborder.org
60+ organizations from San Diego to Brownsville, a good place to get educated and understand more about issues facing border communities.

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Alejandra Oliva is an essayist, translator, immigrant justice advocate, and embroiderer. She is a recipient of a 2022 Whiting Creative Nonfiction Grant. Her writing has been included in *Best American Travel Writing 2020*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and was honored with an Aspen Summer Words Emerging Writer Fellowship. She was a Franke Fellow at the Yale Whitney Humanities Center in 2022. Visit olivalejandra.com.

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