

MIGRANT VOICES IN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

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Review of Esteban E. Loustaunau and Lauren E. Shaw, *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018. 317 pps.

Currently, the discussion around migration seems to be more and more divided between two opposite positions: migrants are either victims or responsible for their own harsh circumstances. *Telling Migrant Stories* confronts these dichotomies by examining other perspectives on Latin American migration and diaspora through documentary film. However, as the authors argue in the introduction, this book is not about documentary filmmaking itself, but about sharing the multiple stories about voiceless and invisible migrants critically exposed through alternate methods of documentation. With an English-speaking readership in mind, mainly from the United States, most of the chapters introduce their claims by drawing from the long history of colonization in the region to problematize this limiting binary as well as to extend the debate beyond the Mexico-U.S. border, which has overlooked other transatlantic and regional displacements. In this sense, *Telling Migrant Stories* is a valuable collection of articles that, besides studying the issues from a thoroughly theoretical, sociopolitical, and historical approach, provokes “readers (to) become caught up in the migrants’ struggles, ask questions about the single story, and begin to think about the multiple stories with compassion, solidarity, and a greater understanding” (6).

The book is divided in four sections, the first of which is titled “Enacting Politics of Place in the Diaspora,” and focuses on the experiences of Latinos and undocumented immigrants in the U.S. In the first chapter, Lauren E. Shaw illustrates the hidden side of migration falsified by

mainstream media. Addressing affect theory, Shaw establishes a comparison between the book *Harvest of Empire* (Juan González, 2000) and the homonymous film (Peter Getzel and Eduardo López, 2012), in order to expose some strategies in documentary filmmaking that make evident and subvert the negative narratives constructed around migrants and their affective appeal upon peoples' fears (22). Following the same approach toward exclusionary media practices and the paradoxical relationship between the U.S. economy and immigration policy, Jared List analyzes in chapter 2 Luis Arguetas's documentary *AbUSed: The Postville Raid* (2010) and Theo Rigby's short documentary *Sin País* (2010). List demonstrates how their documentary tactics challenge the dehumanization produced by the *deportability* of life by the U.S. immigration regime.

The two last chapters of the book's first part focus on motherhood and the struggles of undocumented women. In chapter 3, Thomas Piñeros discusses *The Vigil* (Jenny Alexander, 2014). Piñeros claims that the film exposes the resistance of undocumented immigrant mothers performing spiritual devotion as political acts, that is, leading alternative modes of activism emerging from their cultural tradition, religious faith, and experience of motherhood (69-70). As Piñeros points out, the film depicts "the ways that the women tactical repertoires stand in contrast to other, more aggressive, traditionally male forms of resistance to state action" (77). Chapter 4 addresses the harsh journey of Central American women that travel through Mexico to enter the U.S. In this chapter, Esteban E. Loustaunau analyzes *Los Invisibles* (Marc Silver and Gael García Bernal, 2010) and *De Nadie* (Tin Dirdamal, 2005) paying attention to the stylistics of each film and examining them from a decolonial place of enunciation. Defining a critical consciousness of migrant women, Loustaunau argues that both documentaries allow viewers to witness a counter-discourse that disrupts the modern values of motherhood (90-2).

Section 2, "Remembering Past and Present Life," deals with other sides of migration by addressing the feeling of exile and the notions of identity and memory. In chapter 5, Ada Ortúzar-Young discusses the Cuban children's exodus to the U.S. in the early 1960's. The author examines three ideologically and historically dissimilar documentaries about the Pedro Pan operation: *The Lost Apple* (David Susskind, 1962), *Del otro lado del cristal* (Guillermo Centeno, Marina Ochoa, Manuel Pérez, and Mercedes Arce, 1995), and *Operation Peter Pan: Flying back to Cuba* (Estela Bravo, 2011). The juxtaposition of these films shows how multiple perspectives arise inciting

different interpretations. Manuel F. Medina addresses in chapter 6 the documentary *Abuelos* (Carla Valencia Dávila, 2010). Medina analyzes how Valencia Dávila films her own personal experience and confronts her own identity as Ecuadorian, while dealing with the past of her exiled Chilean grandfather, and her present as a child of the diaspora. In chapter 7, Lizardo Herrera discusses the Ecuadorian diaspora in Spain, exploring its strategies of resistance to contemporary postcolonial discrimination through the appropriation of religious symbols. However, he also makes visible its paradoxes, insofar the strategies to resist migrants' invisibility "condenses the contradictions of a project that is compatible with the colonial-national hegemony" (166).

The third section, named "Migrant Identities and Displaced Subjectivities" explores contemporary modes of migration and the use of new aesthetic forms in documentary film. In chapter 8, Ramón J. Guerra analyzes *Which Way Home* (Rebecca Cammisa, 2010). While the film tells the story of Central America children dangerously riding "La Bestia" through Mexico, Guerra observes how Cammisa creates alternative narratives while exploring documentary means. These narratives allow the viewer to visualize the film as a *testimonio*, as *Which Way Homes* disputes discourses about vulnerable children by letting them speak out to the camera. In chapter 9, Zaira Zarza studies the work of three Cuban female filmmakers (Heidi Hassan, Susana Barriga, and Daniellis Hernández) where technical experimentation sheds light upon women's resistance in diaspora. These films question not only the patriarchal predicament of Cuban cinema (195), but also "the macho character of nation-state as institution" (194). Finally, chapter 10 discusses the *Museo de América's: Migrar es Cultura* website. By opening questions about new media from a decolonial aesthetics perspective, Juan G. Ramos studies how internet documentaries disrupt the traditional role of producers, filmmakers, and screening space, since now migrants themselves can tell, record, and upload their own migratory stories.

The last section, titled "Conversations on Documentary Film and Migration," concludes with a set of interviews held with some of the studied filmmakers. Loustaunau interviews Luis Argueta, Jenny Alexander and María Christina Carrillo Espinosa, addressing fundamental topics regarding their most "successful" films in terms of didactic content, that is to say, with regard to the power of documentaries to denounce injustice, document social activism and pose questions

from the filmmakers' individual experience (11-3). Similarly, Shaw interviews Tin Dirdamal and Heidi Hassan, focusing on their lived experiences of migration in order to think beyond the simplistic dichotomy victim/villain (279-80) and the fixed notions of identity and nation (289-90). The interviews offer readers not only a better understanding of the studied documentaries, but also a wider panorama of their strategies for production, distribution and reaching audiences.

Telling Migrant Stories broadens the existing debate on transnational migration by tracing multiple stories and bringing to the table a discussion about the strategies created by supposedly powerless subjects. As the editors state in the introduction: "If the voices of today's migrants and refugees remain politically silent, documentary film in its many modes enables their voices to be heard" (1). Nonetheless, the essays and interviews make clear that the coverage of migrant voices is not a mere gesture of kindness of producers and filmmakers; these migrants' voices result from their own struggles and demands for dignity and visibility.

Although this book claims not to be about documentary filmmaking per se, it deepens the understanding of Latin American migration and diasporas through their representation in alternative documentary filmmaking. The majority of the analyses rely upon the formal tactics of the films; particularly, on the experimental use of inexpensive recording devices (chapter 10), photographic and archival means and strategic cinematographic resources, such as visual and sound innovations, dislocated camera angles, and negotiated dialogues between filmmakers and migrant subjects through "unruly" close-up shots. The various approaches considered by the authors are a reminder of the participatory possibilities opened up by new technologies and media, even under the clout of the hegemonic neoliberal regime.

Telling Migrant Stories is a strong contribution for scholars in Latin American studies, Latina/o Studies, Film and Media Studies, Internet Studies, and Gender Studies. It is a "close up" of the overlooked histories that we should be discussing today and, as such, a recommendable reading to all of those who are concerned with the multiple faces of transnational migration in a global context.