

FREE TRADE REFUGEES:
FROM CHIAPAS TO THE PRAIRIE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, comprising an experimental hybrid of a video documentary and this accompanying text, explores the central phenomenon of the experience of immigrant Mexicans to the Midwest and aims to inspire action rather than only to prompt reflection. Situated as part of the broader historical trends of Mexican immigrant migration to the United States in the post-NAFTA era, the video documentary in particular aims—in a way that text documentation cannot—to show the “autobiographical face” of Mexican immigration in this recent era; an autobiographical face that stands not as a “truth” that refutes prevailing untruths or stereotypes about Mexican immigrants but that stands, rather, in contrast to the “truth of the period.”

Leps (1992), building on the work of Foucault, asserts that *the truth of a period* “corresponds not to the closest perception of a primary reality, but rather to the sets of information which, having been legitimized by institutions, organize the mode of being, the social arrangement, [and] the historic reality of people and product” (3). The truth of a period, then, exists not simply in terms of the prevailing framework(s) constructing what is taken for the truth during any given period, but also in the forces that manage, surveil, police, contend, and defend it. As such, the truth of a period constitutes a discourse, but one that is never simply neutrally or equally accessed and debated by all, but one rather that has markers of control and delimitation that determine not only *what* is accessed and discussed about a topic—what is permitted, what is not permitted, and what remains under contestation as permissible or not—but also *how* these topics are and may not be discussed, subject also to various contestations.

For Mexican immigration in the post-NAFTA era, the truth of the period manifests in what and how the figure of the Mexican immigrant is and is not represented and discussed, along with sites of relative contestation around the propriety, veracity, accuracy, decency, utility, or

desirability of framing those discussions and absences in different ways. At its simplest, or most widespread, this involves stereotypes of the figure of the Mexican immigrant (both positive and negative), variously deployed for different political, humanitarian, bigoted, or sympathetic ends; here, one must say the *figure* of the Mexican immigrant, since very often an actual Mexican immigrant is missing or not visualized in these representations: whether as the job-stealing parasite singlehandedly destroying the United States or as the hardworking immigrant who simply wants to make a life in a new home.

A key trait of stereotypes is their selectivity, which narrowly emphasizes some negative or positive trait in order to make an argument—to assert, either in support of or against the prevailing truth of the period, some political or humanitarian project, framed in terms of what the period warrants as valid argumentation. As such, a hardworking immigrant who wants to support his family in his new home and resorts temporarily to selling drugs to meet that goal gets transformed into a caricatured figure of contestation and mis-emphasis: either his industriousness and family orientation is ignored in order to highlight a wicked criminality as a negative stereotype, or his criminality is downplayed (or framed in terms of an unfortunate necessity) in order to make his fundamental motivation toward his family into a positive stereotype.

Already one may say that his “autobiographical face” has been masked to suit different political or humanitarian aims, but we must still not imagine that this autobiographical face refutes or offers a “truth” in contrast to these (stereotypical) “lies” or misrepresentations. It will already be obvious how the demonization and negative stereotypes of the Mexican immigrant are a truth of the current period; earlier eras reflecting more dire labor needs in the United States enthusiastically solicited foreign immigration, e.g., the Chinese during the railroad building era, only later to demonize those invitees via the *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882* and other legislation.

But the hardworking family man also reflects its truth of the period; at a time when we see the radical decimation of Labor in general, the image of the *individual* struggling to make a life for himself and his family wholly obliterates both the collective or community aspect of human life generally along with the embedment of the “self” within a milieu determined by “others”.

While stereotypes are generally marked by this selectivity, a difference may be seen between negative and positive ones. Succinctly, negative selectivity tends to oversimplify, while positive selectivity tends to overcomplicate. Hence, negative stereotypes select a single trait, a single behavior, or often just a single individual to metonymically stand in for the whole person or a whole class of people. In this sense, the image of the Mexican immigrant as *only* a hardworking family man comprises a sort of negative stereotype as well, a dangerous or disingenuous *idealization* that may be just as compelling *emotionally* for a viewer as the *demonized* negative stereotypes about Mexican immigrants, but also equally monocular in its framing. Much work in feminism makes absolutely clear how negative *and* positive stereotypes intertwine problematically; the binary stereotypes of woman as an angel or a whore not only woefully miss in accuracy but also problematize and impact the actual lived lives of women. In the same way, these metonymic stereotypes of Mexican immigrants, whether demonizing or idealizing, similarly affect their lives and distort our understanding of them.

Instead, the contrast offered by positive stereotypes is in their overcomplication, most of all in the ways that they try to frame or bracket out or excuse the kind of traits, behaviors, or individuals that negative stereotypes emphasize. A positive stereotype will attempt to argue, “Yes, he sold drugs, but ...” or “Yes, that happened, but you have to understand ...” Under the truth of our current period, this approach suffers because it accepts the framing of those traits, behaviors, or individuals as negative, albeit misunderstood. Most of all, it accepts a framework

of analysis that looks at *individual* (not collective) traits, behaviors, or people. As such, it generally fails to overcome what Paley (2015) summarizes from moral attribution theory:

moral attribution studies indicates that people ‘generally infer an immoral disposition from immoral behaviour regardless of the presence or absence of situational factors’ (Gawronski, 2004, p. 201). They make ‘dispositional inferences from situationally induced immoral behaviour, even when they agree that situational factors actually promote this kind of behaviour’ (p. 201). It is as if they say: ‘It doesn't matter if anyone does it under situational constraints; it is nevertheless immoral’ (p. 201).

In view of this rhetorical failure by positive stereotypes—this attempt to acknowledge some trait, behavior, or individual that negative stereotypes strategically align with negative values under the current truth of the period—one could easily say it might have been better never to have raised the issue at all. And yet, this kind of “complexity” insists on its necessity in the name of an abstract “truth,” that one simply must acknowledge the “facts.” And yet, no amount of imagery, no amount of verbiage, will ever capture some *whole* truth, some complete veracity, the absolute factualness of anything. Every truth, as the Jains have insisted for centuries, is at most and necessarily always partial. As such, this will-to-complexity in the name of truth is not only every bit as selective as negative stereotyping, albeit it in a more multivariate way, but also remains wholly delimited and framed by the warrants of the truth of the period.

The “autobiographical face” then stand in contrast to these stereotypical truths of the period, whether demonized, idealized, or complicated. While obviously also framed and selectively determined both literally (as video documentation and editing require) and figuratively (in terms of the themes, content, and analysis), this project as a pursuit of the autobiographical face nonetheless invites an awareness not only of the constructedness of a periodic truth but also of who generates and how such constructedness comes about, as well as maintained, and enforced.

At the most basic level, the video documentary part of this study attempts to resist the mechanisms of the truth of the period, even as this is formally impossible; having determined and policed what shall constitute truth at all, to offer anything outside of that will seem either false or remain incomprehensible. Nonetheless, the video documentary aims to avoid both idealizing or demonizing stereotypes, while not falling prey to the conceit of more complicated stereotypes as “true”.

Of course, the video documentary’s participants and the documentary producer alike are embedded within these period truths of demonizing, idealizing, and complicating stereotypes. In the lives of the participants, this manifests in a tension between the official (public) stories they wish to construct about their lives and the unofficial (not-yet-disclosed) details of those lives that challenge, qualify, or color the official story. If, in the public world of discourse, the ideality of negative or positive stereotypes collides with the actuality of humanly lived lives, then in the less widely public world of community, this collision can occur at the intersection of official and unofficial stories.

It is expressly at this moment of collision—both in the public world of discourse and in the less widely public world of community—that the autobiographical face can, or begins to, emerge. For the documentarian, this manifests at times when both stories—the official and unofficial—are known, as at a moment when a participant’s statement, “I was working really hard to make ends meet” is informed by the knowledge that the “work” in this case is dealing drugs. In that collision of an official story—that emphasizes both the desire and the actuality of hard work (even dealing drugs) in order to make ends meet—with an unofficial and unacknowledged qualification on that story, the irreconcilability of those two stories seems to

momentarily suspend them, from behind which the autobiographical face can emerge, as distinct from either of those stories.

This same mechanism can play out in the public world of discourse for viewers, when experiencing the ideality of a positive, negative, or complicated stereotype about Mexican immigrants in representations or discussions in light of other knowledge (equally framed, equally selected) concerning the actually lived lives of Mexican immigrants in the post-NAFTA world. In that moment, where both the stereotype and one's own knowledge become suspended, then the autobiographical face in the public world can emerge.

Showing *Free Trade Refugees: from Chiapas to the Prairie* affords this experience and is an underlying aspiration of this study: to provide that experience. If positive, negative, and complicated stereotypes, framed as they are by the truths of the period, also come with an equally delimited, policed, and enforced set of reactions or possible actions in light of those representations of Mexican immigrants in a post-NAFTA world, then to experience the autobiographical face offers at least the potential of an alternative to those already established actions, reactions, and sentiments.

This, at least, is the experiment this dissertation aims to deploy and accomplish. It aims to replicate my own movement from sympathetic observation to activist intervention. It hopes to inspire people to ask, "So what can *I* do now?"

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PRELUDE

As a communications scholar and activist, my intention is to practice both. Consequently, I used ethnography to conduct research over the span of five years among a Mexican undocumented community living in a small town in the Midwest and in Chiapas Mexico, to create an approach that simultaneously presents the research while also proposing a critical and interdisciplinary examination of representations of culture in relation both to undocumented migrant trafficking and the structural power relations involved in that.

This research-documentary then not only problematizes the representation(s) of migrants both via ethnographic methods and discussions about visibility but also proposes complementarily alternative forms of representation in the form of a documentary that intends to challenge conventional or dominantly gendered and racialized representations.

Contemporary documentaries can be artworks and ethnographies about the social life of images—a visual dialogue between anthropology, ethnography, and contemporary art. In terms of the politics of visibility, the documentary genre provides an excellent medium for recording and archiving events and daily life but more importantly for experimenting and presenting other modes of representation and hence other modes of reception.

INTRODUCTION

The Project & the People

The purpose of the film documentary is to explore issues within undocumented migration, transnationalism, and community building—more generally, to document in the migrants' own voices the stories that those issues generate. Because of class and economic conditions, these migrants are doubly or even triply silenced—by their undocumented status, by their social class, and by their limited English ability.

Specifically, the documentary tells the stories of four families, all from the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas who were pushed out of their home village by the latest pressures of globalization starting in the late 1990s. Shot over five years, the film invites the viewer to share the lives of the families as they make places for themselves between permanent homes in Mexico and temporary homes in Champaign County, Illinois.

As a longitudinal view, the documentary provides us (and them) an inspirational insight into this group of new US Americans. It asks and explores questions for the purpose of understanding and presenting a human and dignified face of Mexican migrants, beyond the statistics and stereotypes.

As a recorded, oral history project, the documentary promotes a meeting of different voices around the current social and cultural reality for Mexican migrants and makes possible an exchange of knowledge and experience that takes into account both social/scientific disciplines as well as media (communications specialists) and institutions that contribute to public policies. The documentary repositions the various actors involved, deriving their respective epistemologies and ontologies of knowledge production from the current social context while

making the playing field more level. It tells an old story of immigration, but also a new one that most have never heard, because the prevailing, dominant discourse makes us deaf to it.

The documentary also attempts a hybridity of form. That is, where traditional oral history research does not have to deal with the visual part of video documentation, video documentary projects usually does not deal with orality or narrative; that is, content to insist that a picture says a thousand words, those words are rarely framed fully in their status as narrative. To be sure, individuals filmed are imagined as spokespeople, as speaking from specific frameworks and (subjective) points of view. But how those points-of-view, which are anything but subjective in the final analysis (Bakhtin, 1981), came to be constructed are not. Documentaries purport to tell that *telling* tells the truth, without always delving as deeply or self-reflectively as they might into what truth is in the first place, or who gets to tell it (Chapman, 2009). For the documentarian who incorporates video elements, this more often means for the sake of the content spoken and not the identity of the one speaking irrespective of content. I incorporate both of these elements—oral history and video documentation—in order to complicate the narrative and better capture the presence and performance of identity.

As a selective representation of these migrant families' stories, this positions me, as the interviewer and documentarian, as a part of the migrants' history/story. This is always the case, whether acknowledged or not, or whisked off-stage by an objectivist misdirection and sleight-of-hand. But also this is no mere substitution of the auteur's point of view for the truth. This is not my story, or their story, but quite authentically our story.

As such, the major intervention I am staging proposes an experimental combination of oral history, documentary video, and academic research toward producing a new type of non-traditional academic thesis, meant to perturb the text-based norm of academic theses and itself

challenging received truths about technology, the repository/archive, and availability. If read simply at the level of “representation” and “fact,” the documentary behaves like a traditionally qualitative exploration of the central phenomenon of international Mexican migration to the Midwest, seen through the lens of its representations. If read more reflexively, however, it invites a constant questioning of seeing and who is permitted presence to read, who represents and who is permitted to represent, and what constructions and framing of narratives are established as valid, the truth of the period (Leps, 1992) and who is permitted those.

The documentary, then, explores the lives, experiences, and implications of these latest migrant communities from Mexico. My project, combining film documentary with theoretical and critical commentary and analysis, addresses a number of challenging questions: can critical race theory help to interpret the experience and social position of undocumented Mexican migrants within the U.S. social system? Can a researcher speak both for and in solidarity with them? Can a researcher provide a safe space for them to talk, to share their stories? Can relationships between “researcher” and researched” be created? Can research relationships be forged in which social class, privilege and power relations are not an issue? Can a researcher with such goals realistically obtain the necessary permits for oral and video documentation and successfully co-exist with activists, who also claim right to represent and often (over) protect the undocumented workers?

These questions, challenging already in themselves, in the filming and production of the documentary become as out-in-the-open but invisible as Mexican migrants themselves within their larger environment. Like the people of the documentary, whose identity is not only so concretely present on the screen that the fluidity of it at times seems to vanish completely but also so ubiquitously present that it directs and shapes every frame of the video, so also these

questions too, first and foremost as concerns in the decision-making of the documentarian, sometimes fleeting, always present but invisible in the ways that they shape and direct filmic choices in interviews.

The Documentarian & Mexican Immigration in a Midwest Rural Town

Illinois as a rich agricultural area—specifically around Hoopeston, Paxton, Rantoul, Onarga, and Urbana-Champaign—is accustomed to receiving seasonal migrant workers who arrive in the Spring and leave in the Fall after the planting and harvesting of crops. Traditionally, those workers would leave Texas—or towns near the Texas/Mexico Border—and move toward both toward the east coast from Florida to New York (the Eastern Stream), and the west coast from California up to the Canadian border (the Western Stream). But now they move also toward Iowa, Indiana, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan and across to Colorado and Idaho (the Middle stream).

Workers usually arrive in the Champaign-Urbana area the first days of July, work on de-tasseling of seed-corn for and packing agricultural products in canning factories for about a month. Then they move north to Michigan to harvest tomatoes, later to Idaho to harvest potatoes and, early in the fall, harvesting pumpkins in Illinois before returning to their home in Texas as late as November. They are seasonal migrant farm workers; the majority of them are documented.

In the summer of 2000, while working on a short educational project with migrant workers in the Hoopeston area, I found that many new arrivals were not originally farm workers. They were different from the group that had for many years migrated from Texas every summer to Hoopeston and been educated through migrant education programs during their sojourns north. This new group did not speak any English; I suspected they were undocumented.

While this was the first time I took note of this group, the roots of the present project on Mexican workers in the Champaign county area run even further back. One day while eating at a Chinese restaurant, I noticed that every time the door opened with the trays of food, a blast of *ranchera* music would come out along with the Chinese dishes. That experience began little by little to become the norm around town. In many other specialized Japanese, Italian, and American restaurants I saw that the cooks, the dishwashers, and bussers were Mexican workers. Gradually, Mexican workers were in all types of restaurants as kitchen help, even in the chain restaurants around the town's shopping malls, as well as working in nurseries, in recycling businesses, and at factories in Champaign county.¹ This suggested that the labor streams were now fanning out across bottom paying jobs beyond agriculture.

My first contact with the group from Chiapas who comprise the focus of this documentary/oral history project occurred while I was volunteering to translate for Spanish-speaking people in legal trouble for minor traffic violations and family disputes. The Traffic Court at that time did not have English/Spanish translators, so I was called upon often. I would give out my phone number, and gradually, I met many of the Chiapas group that way, whether asking me to make a doctor's appointments, to translate at their court appearances, to help buy car insurance or enroll their children in school. I noticed that these Mexicans were predominantly industrial workers and that—interestingly in our initial contact period—they all knew each other and that, indeed, many of them were relatives.

By the summer of 2001, I was accepting invitations to birthday parties, baby showers, and cookouts. On these occasions, interesting conversations ensued. For instance, talking one day about the possibility of installing Latino cable through local cable companies, I asked:

¹ The town of Onarga now has approximately a 65 percent Latino population. Workers at Arcola's broom factory are all Mexican and come from the same town in Mexico where they know how to make brooms.

“What do you think about the Mexicans on TV? Are you like them?” The answer was a laugh and a big “*no!*” I then proposed, “What do you think about making a documentary? One that would record your lives from your point of view, would record your experiences in the United States?” Their “yes” was not immediately so forthright or certain as that “no!” but gradually it came.

To accomplish such a project, however, I wanted to follow the criteria of a participant-collaborative relationship, wherein personal narratives are privileged and integrated into a collective memory of the community (Denzin, 2003). By the Fall of 2001, I began conducting video interviews around memories and stories of their village in Mexico, of the maquiladoras in Tijuana, of crossing to the United States, and around work and how they reconstructed their lives and community in Champaign-Urbana.

The research is based on validated qualitative practices that respect both first-person narrative and well-founded ethical and ethnological concerns around representation and voice (Errante, 2000). Oral history is based on memory rather than text. The culture of the families I interviewed is a culture of storytelling, not a culture of writing. It is not only much easier for them to express themselves in a non-structured informal conversation, but they are great storytellers as well and are proud of that. The process of video interviewing thus usually flew rather smoothly, and the videos recorded conversations and stories that people were eager to tell.

Nonetheless, all narratives, whether oral or written, personal or collective, official or subaltern, are “narratives of identity” (Anderson, 1991). Moreover, the project in this case was to elicit cooperation around responding through individual narratives to the popular (stereotypical) perceptions from mass media about undocumented Mexicans. Their stories were also meant, then, to serve as “representations of reality in which narrators also communicate how they see

themselves and wish others to see them” (Errante, 2000, p. 16).

Through these oral histories, identity and identities were revealed and practiced (Friedman, 1992). Their memories—acting as filters for their biographies—emphasized the values they held more dear, like being Mexican, *Chapaneco* (from Chiapas), *muy macho*, or great workers. They themselves made distinctions between peasants, as good workers, compared to other groups, i.e., Whites and, to a lesser extent, Blacks; groups for which they externalized disfavor as poor workers: “they don’t work hard as we Mexicans”.

How they articulate their social position in a small Midwest town is a major part of this project. In their stories, they attempted to articulate not only their identity and the location of their pride in their families here in the United States and back in Mexico, but also their solidarity with other members of the community and those outside it. They evinced a strong desire to identify and claim a ground as persons with a history and story to tell. In a word, they sought to make *sense* of their experiences of migration, hardships, and joys in the host nation. Since to validate a person’s narrative is to give that person her or his human dignity (Said, 1995), their articulation then also an argument for recognizing their basic, human being.

Representations of Mexican Border-Crossing

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best — they’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. —Donald Trump announcing his candidacy: New York Times: 16 Jun 2015

Many people cross the US border with and without documentation, and their experiences are shaped by their histories, places of origin, personal biographies, and how they arrive (Miraftab, 2016). While this documentary/oral history project necessarily includes the

influences, factors, and decisions that impel people from Mexico to cross the US border without documentation, it is even more about how we construct narratives about that. More precisely, it is about the tension between highly audible dominant or stereotypical or widespread narratives formed out of and by the prevailing status quo, like Trump's declaration above, and those less audible, non-dominant narratives formed out of and by the experiences of those stereotyped.²

Mexican migration and the border have been themes in the cinematography of Mexico and the United States for decades. "In Mexico alone, close to one hundred full-length 'immigration movies' have been produced and distributed in the Americas" (Maciel & Garcia-Acevedo, 1998, p. 151). On this side of the border in the Hollywood-style and Chicano cinema, we find other constructions and perspectives in film about the immigration issue. With only a few exceptions, Hollywood cinema dealing with immigration has not portrayed immigrants in their whole human dimension (Fojas, 2008). While research continues to be done on the stories of working-class migrants into the US (Hirsch & Philbin, 2016; Sertzen & Torres, 2016), working-class immigrants from Mexico in the wider, popular imagination are not yet so well-conceived of in mainstream U.S. cinema as contributors to the economy and the ever-changing culture of the nation; for example, while a search for the phrase "Mexican migrant success stories" in the literature yields no hits, from Google we can read:

In the last fifty years the Hispanic population in the US has grown from 3 million to 53 million. Despite the large numbers of undocumented migrants, included in these figures, many argue that Hispanic migration to the US has been a success. Simon Rosenberg, president of the pro-immigration group NDN/New Policy Institute, argues that we may now see a 'tipping point' where Hispanics are now able to gain socioeconomic status and acceptance by the general population. He raised a number of important points about Hispanic migration to the US:

² We might remember, in this regard, that such less audible narratives might be equally widely known, if not by the mainstream status quo, then by those who live the experiences.

- In 2014 the unemployment rate for Hispanic migrants in the US dropped from 8.4% to 6.5%. This is a reduction of 25% in only a single year.
- There has been a huge reduction in school drop-out rates for Hispanics; 13% last year, compared to around 35% in the mid-1990s.
- One third of all Hispanics with no health insurance were able to find insurance under Obama's healthcare reforms (Obamacare). The rate of Hispanics without insurance has fallen from 36% to 23%
- Millions of undocumented migrants will see economic gains following Obama's immigration reforms. Data from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, although still in its early days, suggests that those who have benefited from this program have seen significant increases in their income.
- Trade between the US and Mexico is now booming, with Mexico now the third largest trading partner with the US, and second largest export market. The improvement in the Mexican economy has resulted in a large reduction in the number of Mexicans entering the US illegally. There is less of an incentive to emigrate as Mexicans can more easily find employment in Mexico.
- A recent CBS News poll shows that 69% of the US population want the 11 million undocumented migrants to remain in the country (n.a., 2015, 2 February)

This is one kind of narrative of Mexican migrant success that counters Feagin's (2001) observation, "The role of middle- and upper middle-class whites in circulating negative images of Mexican immigrants, other Mexican Americans, and other Latinos can be seen in the commonplace mocking of Spanish and Latino cultures" (p. 980). But both of these kinds of images, negative or more economically positive, can still conflict often strongly and damagingly with the sense of Mexican migrant experiences of success (Sertzen & Torres, 2016; Tangalakis & Peña). Seen either negatively as a social problem or positively as the next person melted down in the US melting pot, Mexican migrant stories can challenge and reject as false the binary of "illegal" or "not illegal" (Seif, Ullman, & Núñez-Mchiri, 2014), reframing the premises of

deservingness (Huber, 2016) and even providing grounds for an inter-national civil disobedience of border-crossing (Negrón-Gonzales, 2016).

Along with any consideration of art and artistic vision by directors, actors, and producers, for many years now Mexican cinema, as a subset of Latino/a cinema in general, has worked also potentially to enlighten the public's perception of people who come here from south of the border (Brégent-Heald, 2015). But gains seem to come with reversals, as the Trump candidacy suggests, such that the wider part of the US population seems still yet to grasp that the ideological constructs of "migrant" or "illegal alien" when applied to certain persons crossing the Mexican border *already include* a set of dangerous and demeaning experiences faced by many of those Mexican immigrants. These constructs implicitly include factors like increased militarization of the border (Durand, Massey, & Pren, 2016), while excluding the cross-border connections (other than remittances) most Mexican migrants maintain to some extent with Mexico (Orcés, 2016). As stereotypical discourses, these ideological specifically *mis-represent* Mexican migrants.

These constructs also exclude the experiences around who they were when they decided to come to the United States and how changes in Mexico by U.S. policies, economic treaties, neoliberalism, and the present state of employment played a role (Miraftab, 2016). The "othering" of Mexicans—in marked contrast, for example, to the embracing of the Canadian—is an economic weapon. Rendering a group as "other" is a vital link in a chain of ideological control (Said, 1995). Those who wish to dominate and exploit are careful to reinforce this image-making constantly throughout the culture as a matter of control (Foucault, 1977). Consequently, one of the most direct, filmic, and compelling ways to undermine this logic and break its chain is to put an individual face where only a stereotype has been present.

Such an assignment, however, can meet with many pitfalls. Always at the plot level and the character level, another stereotype or ideal is waiting to replace the older one; the concrete representation of an “other” in film risks simply substituting this new (positive or at least different) stereotype in place of the older (negative or at least assumed) one, whether this change, for example, makes the subject desirable by meeting middle-class expectations or makes them pitiful and noble and have them sacrifice themselves in the end for someone else.

By contrast, what is not stereotypically desirable about an individual face is that it less well affords storytelling needs. In place of neat and tidy short stories with no loose ends, we find autobiographical chaos. In place of clear moral outcomes, we find pathos half finalized. It accomplishes a heroic deed by snail mail; the subject stops and has children; worst of all, perhaps, nothing happens at all.

What is desirable in this filmic move of putting put an individual face where only a stereotype has been present before is that it demands the viewer pay closer attention (whether they take up the that demand or not). By not meeting (stereotypical) predictions, by showing a person not doing the expected, this can invite speculation, “What was that person thinking?” The experience invites reconsideration; it serves as a refreshment, as an opportunity to make an attentive, unhabituated response.

In studies of the eighteenth-century English novel we can find that integral tension between, on the one hand, a desire to tell a morally appropriate and instructive tale, while at the same time avoiding the imputation of being a deception, a lie, a fiction (Eagleton, 1984). On the one hand, this has obliged authors to record whatever it is that winds up in the frame of their gaze (no matter how it might unsettle them to do so) while simultaneously trying to bend those

unsettling elements in morally instructive ways.³ This struck later writers, or the public, as disingenuous—especially those members of the public who had previously been represented in novels—the desire to correct the moralizing defects of one’s forebears can at times lead to an equally selective frame, that just as surely leaves out elements of the truth of a situation. If the previous novels erred on the side of negative stereotypes, the latter can err on the side of positive stereotypes.

The need for these positive stereotypes is clear enough—to offset the *stigmatization* of social discourse, especially about marginalized people (Goffman, 1963). The necessity and rationale of this project notwithstanding, this tends to make many documentaries dedicated to portraying the basic dignity of down-trodden people in terms of heightened pathos.

Consequently, while the history of Latino/a cinema in the United States seems to swing between these two stereotypical poles (Fojas, 2008), to attempt to show the “autobiographical” human face, albeit still through the mediated lens of selection and judgment, represents a potentially new form of representation.

This project, as an act of ethnographic documentation, represents such an effort. The scholarly apparatus of this documentary /oral history not only aims to get at and out the story but also to intervene into the discursively available stereotypes. As a media scholar and activist, I mean for this juxtaposition to interrogate and rethink through Latino/Mexican representation via an *in situ* realization of people who are migrants.

³ Alternatively, they can decline to put certain problems into the frame at all, quite selectively.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

Ethnographic documentaries aspire to change not only how identities are perceived but also the cultural and social realities that inform them (Barbash & Taylor, 1997). They afford ways of creating new strategies of expression and communication in all areas of social, public and private, artistic, academic, and scientific life (Page, 2016). Ethnographic documentaries can vary significantly and contribute to revealing and refining knowledge around identity, culture, and society, while enriching social science and building new or alternative ways of perceiving, researching, representing, and communicating what we call our social reality (Hassard, 2009). They allow us to present a new communication alternative that reveals and refines knowledge around who and what we are as cultures, as identities, as individuals and as a collective (Henley, 2007).

From the postulates of research-action-participation, ethnographic documentaries are a valid and relevant model epistemologically, theoretically, and methodologically for capturing the social and cultural dimensions of individual and collective identity (Hassard, 2009; Henley, 2007). They offer a coherent and effective way to produce scientific knowledge while at the same time generating socially relevant and valid strategies for the promotion of social change and democratization of media. This includes, in the present case, the problem of the representation of immigrants and its offer of soliciting from amongst those represented their critical responses to the visualizations and speeches generated in conventional media.

Oral History Narratives/Filming

While the use of first person narratives in research that emerged in the 1990s “seems to stem from our ethical and epistemological concerns regarding representation and voice” (Errante, 2000, p. 16), we should remember also that the self and voice are not always monolithic. Times

and moods, attitudes and understandings, can change over time. Oral history that records a single time or instance risks reification. And, in fact, in some of the multiple interviews with a single subject, different personas could appear. While one may easily distinguish “official” narratives of self-representation (i.e., public ones, generally offered first) from “unofficial” narratives of self-representation (i.e., those that generally appeared after a greater establishment of trust, and that often added contradictions or nuance to the official self-representations), narratives that shift persona over time do not always clearly fall into these two categories of self-representation. These nuanced, compromised, contradicting, or simply different narratives of mood, or attitude, I call “blended” narratives.

For example, I constructed the narratives of Cuco, a twenty-three year old, then unmarried male, in two stories: (1) the official ‘public’ story of a young Mexican male in the United States who wished to construct himself as part of the collective of Mexican migrants, and (2) the unofficial ‘private’ story that he shared as a friend, consultant, and confidante that sometimes contradicted his official story. As two similar but different self-representations to me, the documentarian, the composite of these sometimes incommensurable, but autobiographically “true” elements, yields a blended narrative, simultaneously true and untrue, simultaneously clarifying and confounding. And it is precisely this blended, autobiographical hybrid of the human face that seems to perpetually resist stereotyping, whether for a positive or a negative purposes.

The ethical issue also comes into the scene: is it betraying him to tell the unofficial story—the one that he did not want to be part of the official person he created and presented for the video but nonetheless disclosed to me, sometimes on camera, sometimes not? Moreover, what role do I as interviewer play in this unfolding? And what does it mean to collect and

analyze personal narratives when things were revealed in an informal (or unrecorded) context? How would I conduct an “official” further interview as one entrusted with this “unofficial” knowledge? Am I being asked, being used, to misrepresent Cuco to the world and to his community? Involved as I am in the interviewees’ lives in so many ways, where does the boundary between the research and the shared life of the researcher and the researched remain, if at all, or if it ever did?

In the most obvious cases, one can simply ask permission to do so. But this involves considerable risk. Insofar as some degree of trust informs the very willingness of a person to sit down and record one’s official story, then the further trust involved in granting unofficial access to the unofficial story can become threatened if that trust seems violated. Having been entrusted, to some extent, with the unofficial story, even to suggest making that public, and thereby official, can already seem a violation of trust.

Moreover, unofficial disclosures themselves may often go beyond the simply personal. For example, a part of Cuco’s story that concerned custody of his son hinged crucially on a previously undisclosed legal trouble that his older brother Leonel had had in Chicago. That is, Cuco originally told me that his older brother had outright “refused” to take his son, but later disclosed that Leonel declined to do so, after expressing a desire that he would, because the process of adoption would have involved exposure before the courts.

All of this now being safely water under the bridge, at the time to have made this unofficial detail public and there official might well have affected Leonel and his immediate family. At the time it seemed, perhaps out of a sense of feeling that he had nothing more to lose, Cuco moved much of the content of his unofficial story into the official domain. Given that he was severing his ties with the United States (declaring resolutely, “I am never coming back”),

perhaps it became imaginable for him then also to let all of the truths of his unofficial story out.

Whatever he imagined our future status would be—as researcher and researched, and as friends—at this point, his future context would only be Mexico; there'd no longer be any need for circumspection or to feel whatever external forces at work in the United States were any longer putting pressure on the official/unofficial distinction Cuco had had to create and maintain.

And then, still again, given the historical pattern of temporary migration to the United States and back again, one can never be fully certain that Cuco will in fact never return.

On Interpersonal Bridges: The True Blended Narratives

As a memory /history project wherein all of the participants were and are in the process of constructing memories and identities out of an interaction with current issues affecting the landscape of Mexican-American relationships, globalization, and migration, as a researcher, I am also trying to find out first-hand from the field the information and lived experience of people who were subjected to policy changes like IRCA in 1986, NAFTA in 1994, the events of September 11, 2001, and the most recent US guest-worker proposals from 2002-2005. Through the interviews, we learn about and interpret these crucial issues together, for they are anything but clear. Migrants get their information from many sources, including rumors and the Spanish language cable television channels, while I get my information from academic sources and English-language cable television channels. Neither of us seem privileged or necessarily well-enough informed.

Many of the weekly visits were spent not only learning opinions about these issues, but also researching and discussing the findings with them to *establish* our responses and opinions. The interpersonal bridge between the researcher and the researched in this context became more than interesting.

Addressing this kind of interpersonal bridge, Kaufman and other oral historians are very cautious about the impact of power imbalances between the researchers and the researched (Kaufman, 1974). He describes an “interpersonal bridge” as the “emotional bond that ties people together... Such a bridge involved trust and makes possible experiences of vulnerability and openness. The bridge becomes a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth and change” (Kaufman, 1974, p. 570). While the power relationship between the researcher and the researched can become quite a challenge for constructing an interpersonal bridge, in the present case, this was not a significant issue. Partly this was due to my already long-standing visibility to people in the community, but also I had offered my assistance, or been called upon to provide it, precisely in situations of vulnerability and emotional distress. In part by accident, in part simply as a matter of course, the interpersonal bridge was built in advance of beginning the project in earnest.

Nonetheless, an “oral history project must foster this sense of trust, respect, and validation as the remembering and telling and listening and probing unfold” (Errante, 2000, p. 16). She continues, “with every intimate, personally important memory which narrators offered, they revealed their humanity. This drew out our own humanity” (ibid). The issue is that in this case the researcher is also part of the memory because I participated in making “my ” history by way of my rather intensive involvement in their lives. Rather than the classical anthropological situation, where an outsider seeks out the confidence of an insider willing to explicate and disclose the culture, here I served as an outsider who could mediate to the confusing, sometimes hostile, culture around them.

I found myself able to be helpful and useful to them. Not only could I decipher and negotiate bureaucratic complexities, I could also travel with relative ease between their home

village and Rantoul. I could carry images, still and moving, across the border. I was their open secret. But as their bridge to the immediate world around them in Rantoul and Illinois as well, it was in their best interests that I best understood them. The better I could more faithfully present them to the world, not only the better their lives might be—less affected by negative stereotypes or bureaucratic hassles—but also the more those truths about which they were most proud—as Mexican, *Chapaneco* (from Chiapas), *muy macho*, great workers, as peasants—would be known and recognized by the world. Certainly, one of the most poignant, recurrent confusions on their part was not understanding how anyone could look down upon them so harshly.

But their self-interest was informed as well that they were helping me. I had had them interview me as well, as much to familiarize them with the process I was asking them to participate in as to allow them to get to know me as well. I modeled vulnerability and emotional connection by being open to their questions. But they understood as well, within the context of the whole life of the project, that their participation meant something personally to me as well.

A bridge, after all, is always two-ways.

On the Intersection of Biography And History

Addressing the issue of the researcher vis-à-vis fieldwork, Errante describes recording and probing into the memories of interviewees and their stories as “remembering vicariously”. Teski and Climo (1995) note further not only how the interpersonal bridge develops, that “their memories had vicariously become my own” but also that “vicarious memory...happens when the memories of others become a part of reality for those who hear the memories but have not experienced the event to which the memories refer” (p. 9).

In a general sense, vicariously sharing in memories can become part of any group’s solidarity work by imparting a sense of community. Long-term participant observation and

fieldwork can make researchers vulnerable to vicarious memory. Are we fated to become vulnerable observers (Errante, 2000)? How much is our point of view shaped by our own perception, and how much do we researchers project of our own sense of self in interpreting their story?

As a specific illustration of this, explored at length in the film, when I first met Cuco, he was twenty-three years old and had lived in the Midwest for about three and a half years. By then, he'd involved with an older white woman, living together, but things didn't work out. Nevertheless, she had had Cuco's child, a son, but she wound up in the sights of the Illinois Department of Child & Family Services (DCFS), the state-equivalent of Child Protective Services. Cuco sought to maintain custody, I attended at the child visits and watched him taking parenting classes and going to doctor appointments for his son.

This created an especially close and familiar relationship for me with Cuco, the circumstance that led to him sharing not necessarily comfortable personal information later; things that were not verbalized while telling his 'official' story, the one that he wanted to remember and be remembered for. Fentress and Wickham (1992) especially emphasize these kinds of remembrances mediated by context as one of the many different ways of remember. These point to the complex intersection of personal history and biography, i.e., the desired 'official' story, as a kind of history, in tension with the less desirable 'unofficial' story of biography, as actual events.

For me, privy to both versions, the official and unofficial uneasily combine, as noted above, in a blended narrative. But at the social level, at the level of the community, this happens as well for others who similarly are in the know: between the public history known about Cuco, as his official story, this is in tension with his biography, as an official story, known only to a

few. And just as the literally storied difficulty of witnessing a “blended narrative” creates challenges personally and “professionally” as a documentarian, similarly people in the public world also had to negotiate Cuco’s blended narrative, when or if they were aware of it.

There is a kind of social double consciousness in this (Du Bois, 1903), but one which connects intimately with the discourse and representation of Mexican migration (its history) in tension with the actual lived lives of Mexican migrants (their biographies). If, under normal conditions, one is always to some extent under the a kind of watchful eye of the community, as place where your name and reputation have social capital and cache, for marginalized or stigmatized people, this gaze doubles, in places allowing certain forms of self-expression and in others inhibiting it, in a complex and often uncomfortable, cramping situation.

For instance, whatever the generally complex motivates had had for wanting to keep custody of his son, one of these was certainly the desire not only to be a father to his son, but to openly and proudly be a father as he had seen and learned from his culture. But his social situation played an inhibiting role on the extent that he could do that. But it not only mediated to what extent he could be public as a father, the situation also demanded other markers of fatherhood, i.e., parenting classes, and judgments by DCFS about his son’s welfare, and the like. As such, in seeking out the pathway to being able to express his social identity as the father he wanted to be, this required a managing of both his official and unofficial histories (in the plural): not only his status within the Mexican community but also the official judgment of DCFS on his character; not only a sufficient disclosure of his unofficial history, both for the sake of the truth and his own sense of integrity but also as a protective mechanism so that others, knowing his circumstance, could help him to keep any problematic marks of that from coming under the gaze of DCFS.

In Friedrich Schiller's (1794) wonderful essay "On the Sublime" from the turn of the nineteenth century, he specifically locates the aesthetic sense of the sublime (as opposed to the beautiful) in an experience of double-mindedness. On the one hand, the aesthetic object evoking a sense of the sublime is simultaneously awe-inspiring, even frightening or overwhelming, while nonetheless evoking a sense of pleasure. It has a contradictory quality, similar to those quotidian moments of everyday life that seem suddenly imbued with an utter enormity.

Not only does this sort of aesthetic double-mindedness seem connected to an experience of double-consciousness, it connects also to the ways that even the most ordinary of everyday events in the lives of migrants can at times take on an overwhelming enormity, a vertiginous sense of the sublime. Simply to be stopped while driving for a broken tail-light can become a situation of potentially world-changing significance. Similarly, the utterly prosaic and commonplace appearance of Cuco at parenting classes or sitting in a doctor's waiting room can have such a sense of stakes that at times it becomes difficult to continue. Or one does so almost impersonal, as if traveling alongside oneself.

This intense parallelism of official and unofficial story, blended in the consciousness of the one trying to maintain it, visible in the other of the documentarian or community member who knows both stories, grounds and explains this aesthetic experience of the sublime, as overwhelming and awe-inspiring at the same moment. It is at the heart of this film, even at its most seemingly prosaic or banal—in fact, some of the most celebrated moments for those filmed are the ones where this double-mindedness, double-consciousness, and double-gaze of intra- and extra-community gazes are temporarily forgotten or suspended.

The lens, with its relentlessly monoptic and literal view, is singularly ill-suited for capturing the duality. Thus the greater imperative to do an ethnographic documentary that

attempts to fuse oral and visual history, to fuse the person but also the modulating voice that, in its description of events, bears witness to the inner world and stakes at play.

CENTRAL PHENOMENON: MEXICAN MIGRATION

Today, a migrant trafficking problem results not only from economic policies but also as a consequence of war, invasions, displacements, and genocides both literal and figurative. This problem has become one of the most mediatized and politicized social processes within contemporary migration dynamics. The situations of violence being experienced by migrants have been matched with an increasing deployment of technological, military, social media, surveillance, and other resources to combat migrant smuggling. Nonetheless, these State-sponsored securitizations of migration (Haas, Natter, & Vezzoli, 2016; Treviño-Rangel, 2016), framed very noticeably in internationalist and globalized frameworks rather than local or domestic terms, have not prevented the proliferation of irregular migration routes and consequently undocumented migration. Migration has always, perhaps never more than today,⁴ been linked to problematic narratives of race, class, gender, and representation. And whatever determinations we find at work at the national or international levels of policy, at the domestic or popular level, media narratives both respond to and represent the attitudes that inform such policies, often in more anxious or demagogic form.

Central to these policies and representations, despite any generalized talk about migration, is the migrant, but especially the Mexican immigrant, who serves as the ambassador to the concept in popular and state imagination alike, just as drag queens once served as the ambassador-image for the gay community. This ambassadorship is, of course, a pedestal and a

⁴ At the international policy level, Haas et al. (2016) insist that the “essence of modern migration policies is thus not their growing restriction, but their focus on migrant selection” (p. 1). Notwithstanding the authors’ interpretation of this “essence,” by design or consequentially, a policy that does not expressly name restricted classes of immigrants in advance, as previous racist immigration policies did, but presumes to function meritocratically, judging individuals on a case by case basis, is not inconsistent with the sorts of structural racisms that similarly use determinations of merit in school systems to deny scholarship or even opportunities for accessing higher education to people of color. As such, even if migration policy is less restrictive on its face than in the past, this does not automatically mean it is not more restrictive in who it selects.

punishment, a reifying and condemning visibility—false, or at least insufficiently broad enough to carry an adequate picture of the phenomenon in general, but so strongly deployed and enforced that even those incorrectly labelled by it feel obliged to take it as a starting point for their identity and resist. As such, the literal person of the migrant, especially the Mexican migrant, is all but shouldered out of the picture, obliterated by Trump-like rhetoric about rapists and murderers or lost in statistical abstractions by the State Department. As such, in a sort of reverse of Arendt’s (1963) banality of evil, which could not reconcile the enormity of crimes by Nazi Germany with the quotidian humanness of Eichmann sitting in the accused’s box, so a banality of goodness in the actual person of an immigrant seems so dissociated from the migrant as world-destroyer that the actual person becomes virtually unthinkable, unseeable. Put generally, the tendency is to substitute a static image for individuals.

This project, using an interpretivist social science approach that gives voice and dynamics and motion to otherwise marginalized discourses and groups (Edkins, 2013, p. 34; Selbin, 2010, p. 67; Stern, 2005, p. 166), reverses that trend.

Background

Labor trends of the past few decades have been characterized by massive shifts in world labor patterns. From the 1960s until the early 1980s, these patterns were dominated by a combination of pull and push factors that increased international labor migration from the “underdeveloped” periphery to the developed core (Salt, 1989, 1992). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the GATT-induced reduction of trade barriers brought increasing core-country investment in the periphery (Richards, 1992; Sherman, 1992). By locating their industries abroad, core countries gained access to cheap labor without having to pay the social cost of an immigrant labor force in addition to negotiating favorable taxing and infrastructural deals with

other countries. Since the mid-1980s, high-technology and flexible production processes have contributed to the stiffening of immigration policies (Freeman, 1992). This transition first took place between northern Europe and its periphery, and subsequently between the United States (Callovi, 1992; Hammar, 1989; Oberhauser, 1991; Weintraub, 1992).

In 1985, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) granted amnesty to 600,000 undocumented immigrants, many of them Mexican. In 2001, President Bush proposed to give amnesty to another 3 million Mexican nationals. The impact and anxiety created by Mexican immigration was represented by the historian Samuel P. Huntington: “Mexican immigration is a unique, disturbing, and looming challenge to our cultural integrity, our national identity, and potentially to our future as a country” (Huntington, 2000).

Migration from the 1990s was encouraged by the prosperity of the Clinton era. Factory jobs became available for many who had managed to obtain legal status through IRCA. In addition to the farm work that had long been migrant’s major source of labor, Mexican workers came into the United States to work in the rapidly growing service sector.

As of October 1992, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) statistics of undocumented immigrants from Mexico estimated that there were 3,379,000 undocumented persons in the United States (INS, 1997). California had about 1,441,000 or 43 percent of the total; 786,000 of these undocumented persons were Mexican, 205,000 were El Salvadorian, 88,000 were Guatemalan, and 60,000 were from the Philippines. By 2002, soon after 9/11, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) estimated there were 8 million undocumented immigrants, of whom approximately 5 million were Mexicans (INS, 2003).

None of these statistics come with pictures.⁵

⁵ Cárdenas (2010), by contrast, explores at length visual depictions of Mexican migration for more than a century from approximately 1848 onward, focusing primarily on work by Mexican and Chicano artists.

The US economic prosperity of the 1990's, and in particular economic displacement in Mexico due NAFTA, drove millions from their traditional livelihoods to maquiladoras along the Mexico/US border (Miraftab, 2016), but limited economic possibilities there prompted increased border crossing, documented and otherwise, nearly tripling the number of migrants to the United States from 4,298,000 in 1990 to 11,541,400 by 2006 (Zong & Batalova, 2016).⁶ While significant numbers of this huge influx reached the Midwest, especially around Chicago,⁷ the predominance of public discourse and research on this phenomenon, particularly a series of statistical studies by the Center for Immigration Studies and the Pew Latino Center, focused more on the California and Texas as the epicenters of the phenomenon (Center for Immigration Studies, 2001, 2002, Pew Latino Center, National Latino Survey 2002).

In 2014, President Obama's executive action on immigration, announced 20 November, intended, among other things to expand deportation relief to almost half of the unauthorized immigrant population, though this part of the program is presently on hold. This action is the most significant since 1986, when Congress passed a law to give resident status to 27,000 undocumented immigrants. As of 19 November 2015, the "number of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. has stabilized in recent years after decades of rapid growth. But there have been shifts in the states where unauthorized immigrants live and the countries where they were born" (Krogstad & Passel, 2015, 19 November). Illinois, due largely to Chicago as a major hub of migration, leads the Midwest as having the most significant number of migrants.

But none of these facts come with stories.

⁶ While still accounting for the largest percentage of immigrants in the United States, Mexicans have been passed by people from India and China as the largest annual groups arriving; in addition, Mexicans are repatriating to Mexico in large numbers (Zong & Batalova, 2016).

⁷ For details, see the Migration Policy Institute's interactive map of metropolitan centers of immigration at : <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-metropolitan-area?width=1000&height=850&iframe=true>

Transnationalism

Rouse's (1992) theory of migration begins to put a human face on these statistics and facts. It challenges the traditional nation-state/border-crossing type of model as no longer relevant for interpreting the phenomena of migration in light of the world labor changes. He proposed to view of migration through a transnational lens, "to treat the texts (or narratives) of [migration] less as symptoms of contemporary conditions than as crucial vehicles through which individual and collective actors pursue specific strategies and projects" (Rouse, 1992, p. 359).⁸.

As such, while individuals may continue to portray themselves as pushed out by NAFTA and the WTO, they are, in fact, forging strategies, personally and collectively, in anticipation of and response to transnational social changes. In this way, they build economic solidarity among the expatriate villagers and among communities here in the United States by sharing information and economic resources with each other for survival. Their collectivity, self-organization, and interdependency have changed both the face of the village and the Mexican national boundary so much that in July 2005, Mexican President Vicente Fox granted voting rights to Mexicans residing in the United States.

Migration Patterns of the Chiapas Group: People on the Move

Under the framework of NAFTA, which produced in Mexico the displacement of 1.5 million peasants, many people moved to work at the corridor of the maquiladoras in border towns like Tijuana. Mexican President Salinas de Gortari made public policy even harsher and displacement more likely, dismantling the communal land reforms of many rural villages.

⁸ The unofficial estimate of the US Census Bureau reports that by April 1993, the total undocumented immigrant population was 2.083 million in California. But the INS had a much smaller estimate, only about 1.441 million for Oct. 1992. Using the higher estimates by the US Census Bureau, Governor Pete Wilson estimated that it would cost 1.7 billion tax dollars to educate the undocumented children in California. If the INS figures were used, the number and cost would decrease almost to one third of Wilson's estimates. (Alarcon, Rafael, 1994).

Disenfranchised farmers found that they did not have the cash required to buy their share of the communal land or the land that other villagers were ready to sell. The move to global cash crops also added to the displacement. Due to the ruin of agriculture that resulted, many Mexican farm workers and rural residents were compelled to leave their home villages and towns and move to border towns to work (Jesus, Rosendo, Lupe, & Carmen, 2003; Nelly, 2002) After experiencing the meager salaries at the border towns (Jacinto & Patti, 2001, 2002, 2003; Mario, 2002; Nelly, 2001) and suffering to live through the misery of these towns (Jacinto & Rosendo, 2002), many decided to go to *el Norte* and paid a *coyote* to help them cross to the US. This migration was fueled by disappearing access to jobs and the means of production, which often meant starvation at the location of former residence.

From those I interviewed, they tell how of the generation now between the ages of forty to forty-five came into the United States via the pattern of working in the border towns for a while and then crossing the border (Jacinto & Patti, 2002). During the 1990s, when Mexican migrants crossed the border into California, they faced the anti-immigration and racist environment of the state, particularly in two pieces of legislation: first, the Immigration Act of 1990, which was intended to erode the more open immigration legislation of 1965 while imposing “limited access to those thought to be undesirable future citizens”(Ono & Sloop, 2002, p. 45); and second, Proposition 187 (1994), which denied social benefits to undocumented workers. At the time, the Midwest, especially around the Chicago area, was more friendly to Mexicans (Nelly, 2001), and it began to become a destination during the late 1990s. Some of those aged between twenty-five to thirty-five ventured first to Florida and some went directly north to the Chicago area (Jesus et al., 2003). After a group was established in the Midwest around 1998, a younger group aged fourteen to twenty came directly from their village to small

Midwestern towns (Jacinto & Rosendo, 2002).

What Does It Mean To Be A Mexican Migrant Worker In A Small Town In The Midwest?

Migrant Defined

What, first, or who, is a migrant?

According to the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of The Families*, a migrant worker is one “who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national” (UN, 1990); it describes a state of existence whereby people (must) move internationally in order to find work. However, this definition is problematic. From a later declaration, the term migrant “should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without intervention of an external compelling factor” (Commission on Human Rights, 1998).

The aim here is to distinguish migrants from displaced people and refugees:

This definition indicates that **migrant** does not refer to refugees, displaced or others forced or compelled to leave their homes. Migrants are people who make choices about when to leave and where to go, even though these choices are sometimes extremely constrained. Indeed, some scholars make a distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration (UNESCO, 2016; bold emphasis in original).

A point of tension exists here, then, since the difference between “people who make choices about when to leave and where to go, even though these choices are sometimes extremely constrained” and people who are refugees or simply displaced will be difficult to determine. It seems a matter of scale or sheer numbers and timing; when whole populations are forced to leave all at once, these are displaced or refugees; when it’s only a few at a time, or even a steady stream but distributed over months, even years, then they’re migrants. What then, as in the present case, when it is entire generations of a village over a number of generations? It seems

that while military adventurism that mass-displaces thousands of Syrians as refugees prompts a humanitarian call for action, but economic adventurism less drastically and immediately ruinous to a region declares leaving a matter of choice, however extremely constrained, rather than a humanitarian crisis.

The UN definition of a migrant worker above also implies a border crossing, but does not yet acknowledge or distinguish qualitative differences in those crossings, whether through customs in international airports or at the US/Mexico border. Even documented Mexican migrant workers into the United States specifically add a traumatic element to their migratory experience, if only to anticipate their reception at the border. Due to the stigmatizing US discourse about migrants, meaning particularly Mexican migrants, for anyone who appears to fit that profile, border-crossing even through its most legal channels risks a sense of being unwelcome and uprooted; it can generate lack of security and sense of hopelessness about one's control within the environment. For undocumented migrants, these threats are not just multiplied but typically become utterly real (Jacinto & Patti, 2003; Nelly, 2002). The community-building process in the United States serves (or at least hopes) to counter the psychological, social and economic insecurity induced by constant border crossings. These community-building strategies are related to the sense of a lack of control in the host nation; community-building helps to create stable environments for current and newly arriving migrant workers.

While the definition above seems to disregard *economic* refugees as displaced people, and does not distinguish qualitative differences in border crossings, even for documented workers, the definition's insistence on engaging "in a remunerated activity" also misses a key part of the Mexican migrant experience. That is, in making an adjective of "migrant" vis-à-vis "migrant worker," this elides the very phenomenon (the migrant) it seeks to define.

Sometimes whole families (as small as husband and wives) will make the crossing. And if someone, usually women, takes care of what Miraftab (2016) has called “social housekeeping,” i.e., the building and maintenance of the social structures within communities (first and foremost around child-care but also out into the larger community as well), then if the people are not “remunerated” are they not migrants? Similarly, children and college students are not generally remunerated in the formal sense the definition seems to imply (Seif et al., 2014; Sertzen & Torres, 2016), and even “classical” undocumented migrants like Cuco can move from the status of worker—apparently the preferred categorization for migrant—to student at a local community college or public health. Even in the labor emphasis of the main phrase, which covers all of the bases that a migrant is one “who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged” in remunerated work suggests that one who never actually works was ever really a migrant.

Imagined Communities

To the definition above one could add, at least in spirit, how when one migrates, one brings some belongings, both material and immaterial. All along the route of migration, one creates a trail of records and memories later shareable with others or that can serve as touchstones of similarity (especially around border-crossing experiences). In this way, community building represents a fluid and changing state that Benedict Anderson calls “constructed” and “imagined” (Anderson 1991).

The participants in this project devoted significant time and energy to maintaining their community and communities, constantly locating and relocating themselves in relation to the ever-changing world around them and experiencing and working against an ambient lack of control over external forces around them. They worked constantly on the struggle to make sense

of their surroundings and to take control of their present and future.

During the interviews or in first encounters with new participants, family members are introduced to me through photographs sent to them during the course of their stay in the United States. For instance, I would be shown pictures that include grandparents, parents, and small children left behind, or pictures of goods purchased with the money they sent home: houses, trucks, stereos, cattle, horses, and land; and of memories of important events, like children's baptisms and birthdays, the celebration of an end of a school year. There were many pictures of the children or a child sitting alone on a hammock looking into the camera waiting for a parent or relative to return

These photographs served as a visual record of what was left behind. Other photographs, taken in the United States and intended to be sent to Mexico, serve as records of their lives here and objects of hope for people back home. They depict the excitement of arrival, reunion with family members who sponsored them, the first snow, the first house they lived in, or simply posing in front of someone's fancy car. They show a first job or standing in front of a huge house while working as gardener, or the park where they went on a picnic, driving their first car, their soccer team and first Christmas in the United States. The memories of the past persist, grow, and change with time, just as the local photos hold out a promise a future, whether reunion or the next generation's crossing. The imagined community is in a constant state of reconfiguration, a continuous bulwark and negotiation to maintain a stability while living so uncertainly.

If all communities are constructed and imagined as Anderson indicates, then the community of this project's participants also includes an interesting variable. Economic solidarity can provide a strong basis for constructing a community (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). For Mexican migrants, beginning with finding sponsorship for crossing and sharing information

about a reliable *coyote*, the provision of places to stay upon arrival and assistance with job hunting, especially navigating the system to find “good papers” for work, and above all providing safe havens in time of unemployment, all of these factor into the imagining of the community. A recognition and ethos of mutual responsibility is implicit in this; as Walter Benjamin said: “With imagination comes responsibility.”

Daily Life in Rantoul

By 2002, I had noticed a gradually developing, five-adult economic unit that served to cope with and mitigate economic hardships and undocumented status.

This kind of unit worked as a safety net for the unpredictable job market. Members were typically connected by family relations and *compadrazgo* (religious responsibility that comes with being a godfather, godmother, or through close ties from coming from the same hometown). This type of community formation is not different from other Mexican communities in the United States, but I observed a recurring pattern of five adults as a sustainable economic unit among the group. The pattern was first set to cope with the landlord’s regulation of no more than five adults living in a two-bedroom apartment. Most of the time, two couples would occupy the two bedrooms and a younger relative would sleep in the living room. The formation of this unit provided a good safety net against unemployment, since the unit of five would allow at most two out of the five to be without a job for as long as six months, or to have only part-time employment when full-time jobs were not available. It also allowed shared childcare and cooking in a more manageable way than a nuclear family model would permit.

This unit of five addressed the comparably high rent charged by the white/American-Chinese landlords. Upon first arriving, workers are very visible and do not have credit. No

typical company or landlord will rent them housing. Only a circumstance like the out-of-town, poorly managed locale owned by the white/American-Chinese landlords afforded them an opportunity for housing. Gradually, more Mexicans arrived, and the established track record as tenants improved their general reputation, and so more places opened up to them.

After a variety of experiences, the community found that the best way to manage the monthly cost of rent was to buy a trailer in a trailer park. Ownership is not only a step up on the social ladder but also better affords control of one's living conditions. No longer under the jurisdiction of a landlord who would constantly count how many people were living in the apartment—and who was also very poor in maintaining the standard of the housing—moving to the trailer park also meant that they would not have (white) neighbors who would call police for a Christmas party or a *piñata*. The trailer park also offered affordable housing and a way for the people coming from the same village to create their accustomed patterns of living together in family houses. It was a way to further practices that they used to do in the village—constantly paying one another other visits, playing games, chatting, and cooking together. In the course of one year, every family I knew moved to the trailer park. Pride of ownership also made them very keen to participate in park resident meetings. Typically, they paid \$1,500 to \$5,000 for a home with a monthly charge for land rental of approximately \$150.

Many of their children are born in the United States. As one grandmother both proudly and nostalgically recounted during my 2003 visit, “I have five grandchildren born in the North.” In 2005, there were seven US-born in the families with two returned to Mexico.

While President Vicente Fox was visiting the United States just few days before 9/11, everyone returning to Mexico had gotten their papers together in readiness should amnesty be granted. With 9/11, however, everyone knew that amnesty would not happen and that hard times

were ahead. The community underwent a major reconstruction and reconfiguration at a fast and steady pace. Some who were not able to keep up with even more hardships and changes moved away from the town or back to Mexico. As Cuco said before he left for Mexico, “We work to eat. If we do not work, we do not eat.” He said this bitterly in English.

As a human face, Mexican migrants resist stereotypes; they slip by, or through, even the official definition of migrant. And in the same way that they maintain official and unofficial narratives of self-representation, with the vertiginous, contradictory, sometimes blended narrative as perhaps the closest approximations of their truths, this holds for the term “migrant” as well, as a kind of self-representation of discourse. As such, an official, tidy narrative of representation—one that further breaks down the migrant worker into the subcategories of itinerant, seafaring, frontier, seasonal, project-tied, specified-employment worker and worker on an offshore installation (UN, 1990)—breaks down at the point of contact with its subject, and only tacitly, half-alludes to the economically displaced, or migrants who don’t work, don’t do work that is formally remunerated, or (most of all) are undocumented. And, here again, in the sublime moment of doubled-conscious, with two “truths” before us, the blended narrative of this official and unofficial self-representation of the discourse of the “migrant” in the United States, in all of its contradictions and stammering, seems ultimately a better approximation of the truth than either self-representation on its own.

FILMING THEIR STORIES: THE PROCESS

Overview

In the process of making this documentary, several themes emerged, particularly the differences between official and unofficial narratives migrants constructed about living in the United States. These narratives, official or not, could be nuanced by time (the time of arrival in Chicago, or Rantoul), sometimes integrating these late arrivals into the existing social structures, other times leaving them stranded around the perimeter.

To explain the choices made in the processes of making the documentary would address questions like: what understanding of the stereotyping of Latinos in films and documentaries impacts my choices in filming and editing of the film? How will understanding of oral history research methods impact my work in examining my relation with them? How does biography becomes history? How do these academic understandings problematize and enrich the making of the documentary and the selections at the editing?

As the Latino population in the United States constructs its identity—viewing itself as an ethnic group with long history of being in what is today part of the United States, with recurring migration, forced repatriations, and multiple legal statuses in the community—a uniqueness of this project's group is that all of the adults in the community are undocumented. Currently, there is only one mixed (cross-national) marriage that could lead to the husband obtaining legal papers in the future if the couple can save enough from their meager income to hire a lawyer.

In Chiapas, the whole village has about one tenth of its population in the United States, waiting for some way out of the undocumented predicament. With growing numbers of US-born children, the community has started to plant even deeper roots in the United States. But since these US-born children are still very young—the oldest one in the United States at the time of the

editing and writing was only four years old—they still have a long way to go for their children to help them out with their legal status.

When a collective identity of Latino is constructed around citizen rights, and when the political potential of Latino people is predicated upon the power to vote, then latecomers to the Midwest are situated in a very peripheral position even among the imagined Mexican-American communities.

The group participants for this oral/video documentary project come from the innermost lands of Mexico. When they were in Chiapas, for instance, they traded more often with Guatemalans than with Mexicans. In their hometown, people from all over South America passed through en route to the United States. In the Chiapas village, they were small landowners; they were sisters, brothers, fathers, daughters, and sons who learned about their social role when they crossed to the United States. Here they realized they were viewed as sexual predators, noisy drunks, wife beaters, troublemaking Mexicans, and illegal aliens taking the jobs of (white) “Americans”. Not only do they not see themselves that way, but the sorts of values (or lack of them) necessary to be such people is not consistent with the values they hold for themselves. This misrepresentation (of migrant Mexican workers) creates a need amongst them to create, tell, and present their own biographical stories. Over the process of making this oral and film documentary project, I kept in mind what Minh-Ha (1997) emphasizes, that to “raise the question of identity is to reopen again the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations” (p. 415).

The Raw Footage

Over the past five years, I recorded nearly 80 hours of footage. By agreeing to have their lives video recorded, the migrants entered into a new moment of communication. Previously,

they had only used photographs as a means for recording their experience. With the project underway, they began planning their collective community events with the video camera, and the documentarian holding it, in mind; in turn, I asked for interviews. By one year into the project, I had filmed all kinds of occasions and, in response to their requests, had also provided copies of the tapes for them to relatives in Mexico. These events included formal and informal gatherings and interviews alike.⁹ Later, I visited Chiapas itself and took videos of their newly bought houses to show their communities and relatives in the United States. I filmed messages that wives wanted to send to their husbands and from parents who had not seen their children in the United States for many years. While there, people I did not know would show up at night and ask to be filmed. I brought this footage back from Chiapas to relatives in the state, becoming a thread in a transnational fabric of communication.

While in the United States, I made weekly visits to homes in Rantoul, usually on Saturdays and Sunday or on alternative days off as my schedule of work permitted. In a context of daily phone calls to deal with appointments, legal bail-outs, or simply domestic questions, I helped to mediate—especially to translate—and to try to explain the many issues that arose from trying to interface with the culture around them. In this way, I got a very good sense of their daily life, of the difficulties they faced, and the changes happening in their community and around them.

In time, I formally interviewed fourteen major community members, usually numerous times. I also conducted informal interviews with at least another sixteen persons from the village

⁹ Formal gatherings included birthdays, baby showers, quinceañeras, celebration of family reunions, Christmas parties; less formal ones included the birth of children or weekly cook-outs, fishing trips to Clinton Lake, slaughtering a cow, shopping trips to Chicago's Mexican Shopping Malls. Some were domestic (family gatherings in Chicago, parties) others related to work (in the fields, factories, pig farms, while detasseling or pumpkin harvesting). It included the prosaic (routine fixing of cars at home) and the dramatic (confrontations with landlords, police officers, doctors and nurses). It includes games (soccer) and home-making (tamale-making).

in Mexico. The project took me also to Chicago many times to interview people who left Rantoul to reside on the city's South Side. All formal interviews were videotaped and transcribed.

In July, 2003, over seven days I conducted interviews in their village in Chiapas that included both villagers and some of the migrants to the United States who had since returned to Mexico.¹⁰ In Champaign County, I had been asked to record messages of family members to be shown in Chiapas, returning the favor of earlier. And also, as during my time in the States, over the course of that week in Chiapas, I filmed their daily lives, attending a village women's meeting, a kindergarten graduation, to two cook-out picnics at the river near the village, and a party for which a cow had been killed as a gesture of hospitality.

In all, the thirty or so people who have been interviewed for this documentary originate in the same rural small village in the southern part of the state of Chiapas, "one horse hour" away, as they put it, from the Mexico-Guatemala border.¹¹

When I started the project, all of the seven or eight families (each with at least four to five adults) were living in the United States in the same housing compound. The compound was owned by a white person with a Chinese-American wife who claimed to be very sympathetic to Mexicans who wanted to find housing in the area. Since the compound was on the outskirts of a town that was still feeling the effects of its military base closing, it could often be very difficult for landlords to find tenants. Mexicans who had recently moved into the area provided a good client base for the landlord. There were very few apartments in the compound with working class whites living in them.

¹⁰ Between December of 2002 and April of 2003

¹¹ Itself a dangerous and dreadful crossing point for the undocumented South Americans immigrants on their way to the United States.

A part of this process also involved gaining the trust of those I desired to represent; more particularly, that I (as the re-presenter) and they (as the represented) came to see the mutual benefit of that representation. For me, this involved making a documentary and processes of self-understanding; for them, it was as much about seeing themselves represented as being able to communicate cross-nationally with their own voice and image with people in the United States and in Las Norias. Part of eliciting this trust involved being seen as an advocate or ally who would faithfully represent them in the way that they understood themselves, but also that I proposed they video interview and represent me as well. They were not just the object filmed but became subjects who filmed. My intention was to make the process of interviewing as transparent as possible, to make the interviewing process more familiar and comfortable.

Beginning with the migrant families living in Chiapas, the documentary establishes for the unfamiliar viewer not only the cultural environment of rural Mexico but also the community bonds that the migrant worker leaves behind. Later, while capturing their radically different living situation in the Midwest, we see the families struggling to change their lives in defiance of cultural, political, and legal stereotypes and obstacles. In this world, children are born. Joys and celebrations occurs. More families come from Mexico, while others return. This viewed reality contrasts with the stereotypical popular and corporate media reports that present these families and people as statistics or as a menace to order and security in the United States.

The ultimate purpose of the documentary is, ideally, that after showings of it, the viewer should understand how migrant workers are integral to the local U.S. economies, paying taxes, buying and spending money, yet remaining socially and legally ostracized due to their inability to obtain the formal documents needed to drive and legally work. The documentary is intended not only to elicit a sympathetic understanding of migrant workers in the Midwest but also to

show the contributions that this new group of immigrants have made to local communities in the constant construction of the United States as a nation.

Editing & the Construction of Lives

As what Chavez (2001) describes as an interactive documentary and research project, the documentarian edits the raw footage from shared day-to-day activities, personal stories about their lives in Mexico and the United States, border-crossing experiences, as well as struggles and joys in rebuilding their community in the United States into a single, constructed object. Over the period of gathering this footage, I solicited feedback from those filmed, which both influenced the editing process, particularly the selection of footage, as well as sometimes prompting further follow-up interviews with key community persons.

In June of 2001, before the documentary was in its now final form, I travelled to Mexico with a migrant woman who was returning to be with her daughters after two years of working and living with her husband here in the United States. Filming this trip, I created twenty minutes of an initial segment focusing on women and migration called "Transnational Motherhood." This selected portion of the story received has been publicly presented at times,¹² but it points clearly at questions of when, or if, a project can be completed, when a construction has a sufficient totality or completeness to be construed as a story.

On 28 December 2002, a group of eleven people, including eight adults and three US-born children, returned to Chiapas. Most of the adults in this group had lived in the United States for approximately ten years. It was in July, 2003, then, that I travelled to Mexico with the

¹² I have been invited to present this twice on the UIUC campus. Once, in the 2002, at the annual symposium of the Office of Women and Gender in Global Perspectives (Oct. 18) and once at the Third International Conference on Woman and Globalization: "Documenting Family Life, an International Documentary Film Series" (UIUC) on 20 November 2002. After these local presentations, I had requests for the video from university libraries as far away as Washington State.

purpose of further understanding their socioeconomic process of migration within a broader context of international and global migration. Here again, I gathered and documented three key images into select themes: (1) the reintegration of the returnees lives back into the community, (2) the new implications of NAFTA following the border-crossing of US agricultural goods into the Mexican market, (3) and the differences in their daily lives, work, family, and community-building in Mexico compared to in the United States. While this trip was crucial for presenting a clear and more whole image of this migration and these migrant workers, placed into a context of the political and economic forces generating these phenomena, each “theme” itself represented only a part, a component towards trying to build a total figure.

In one respect, the “completeness” of a story is determined by its creator, who selects the boundaries of it, where it starts, where it stops. One place where this boundary seems almost immutable is the boundary of the self—as if “I” end at the boundary of my skin. But lives do not end at that border. Bodies might, but not people, not characters. Nonetheless, “characters” as people, as “the migrant,” are utterly central to this the larger, constructed picture.

So we start there.

Their Arrivals, Their Stories

Representing a story, thus, is never strictly straightforward. “Narrators not only ultimately choose what they wish to remember and tell you; they also participate in negotiating the context of remembering” (Errante, 2000, p. 19).

I was told that Nelly arrived in Chicago in 1992. Her husband, Marcos, had come earlier in 1990 and gradually found his way to Chicago and got a job. Two years later, he went home both to visit his parents and to bring Nelly. They crossed the border through Nogales in Arizona. Later, another family—consisting Lupe, her brothers Angel and Lauro, her sister-in-law Alina

(married to Lauro) and her brother-in-law Jesus, married to Lupe's sister who remained in Mexico—came to join them in Chicago. They stayed in Chicago with Nelly and Marcos for some months. One day, Jesus found a flier in the supermarket that looked like a recruiting flier for work downstate. Even though none of them read English, they managed to find the location of the factory in the announcement and later found their way down to the small town. On a cold winter day, then, they arrived by bus from Chicago at the factory that would hire them. They rented apartments in Central Illinois, and others followed, some from Chicago, some directly from Mexico.

For Jacinto, who left Las Norias in Chiapas, Mexico and moved to Champaign County, Illinois in 1999, this especially meant loneliness, isolation, a lack of freedom, and a shocking shift in cultures. Living in this small town surrounded by cornfields in central Illinois, he often felt invisible and unsafe unless he was around other migrants. It took Jacinto three years to save enough money so that his wife Patricia could join him in Illinois. Both were working in factories with purchased identification cards. Their combined income allowed them to send \$500 a month home to help the family in Las Norias and to save to build their own home for the time of their return. As a result, they barely eked in their temporary new land, so that over the last few years, their life in the Midwest is a contrast to news footage of migrants either trapped in a cargo trucks, shot by vigilantes, or rounded up by Immigration Border Patrol in the southern edges of the United States. Although crossing the border is a difficult story for them to tell.

There are many people in the documentary, but for the purpose of this paper, Cuco stands out especially as illustrative of the many themes that emerge from this project. Cuco had been one of the first in his village to leave for Tijuana when he was fifteen years old. He crossed the border when he was sixteen and worked in Texas. He has since crossed the border many times

and stayed extensively in the United States for about a decade, with two previous returns to Mexico. When he decided to return to Mexico once and for all in 2003, he had been in the United States continuously for approximately five years. During time in the US, he had been able to find constant work through temporary agencies. For about two years, he'd worked night shifts; he was used to the work and got to like it because it offered more security than the daytime jobs preferred by most workers. In his last interview, the day before he left in April of 2003, he talked about his son in front of the camera for the first time. He showed me white spots all over his back and arms, signs of a medical condition because of his work at night. He had been to Chicago to see a Mexican doctor but nothing had worked. I jokingly told him that it was because he drank too much, that they were white beer spots.

But Cuco was not in his usual humorous mood. He wanted to draw a conclusion to his tenure in the United States. What had triggered the return to Mexico was not just the present illness but mainly the psychological exhaustion caused by his dealing with things in the United States. He was simply just tired of everything. Through the course of a long visit and interview, I learned that he had been fired the previous week. There was a new job opening in the factory that he'd been placed at for about a year, and he anticipated that since he worked hard and that the employer liked him, they would give him the job if he applied. So he filled out an application form directly, without notifying the temporary agency who had placed him. Consequently, the agency dropped him from their service, and the factory would not give him the job he applied for.¹³ He found himself suddenly not only jobless but unemployable, since the agency then

¹³ The business model for employment agencies involves taking up to one dollar an hour of its employee's wages while, at the same time, serving as a security blanket and buffer for factories regarding employment legalities, health care (if offered), and other benefits. Employment agencies often receive a commission when a temporary worker gets hired-on permanently. By filing out an application, Cuco was seen as trying to manipulate the hiring situation—a manipulation that factory HR personnel are willing to use as well when they have already decided in advance that they specifically want to hire someone. By following neither the official protocol—seeking a

refused to place him anywhere.

During that interview, he went on record to address his lifestyle here. He was the only person among his brothers who did not save enough money to buy his own land and stores in Las Norias. He regretted that he spent money on cars, white women, and his love for fancy clothing and jewelry. When I caught up with him again August 2003 in his village, he showed me his healthy skin, explaining that it was from “the beautiful Mexican sun”. And while cooking at the riverbank, he addressed a message to his friends and family back in Rantoul via video, inviting them to return to taste the natural and fresh food in Mexico.

The Official Story: The Public Self In Construction

How many stories are there? And how do we manage what they say?

Cuco agreed and gave full support to recording his story in the United States. When he was formally interviewed, he initially addressed only official type of themes: abusive work environments, problems with driving, difficulties in obtaining a driver’s license, issues with police, immigration papers, and loss of jobs because he could not produce a matching social security card. In addition to this, he would emphasize his love for his family, for Mexico, and his social background, repeatedly declaring “I am a peasant” with pride. He was also proud of how much money he sent home to help his parents and to support his sister to go to school.

The documentary and oral history project developed his awareness of a public persona. He could see himself on-screen, and there were no doubt conversations going on within the community about the project that I was not always privy to. Given an opportunity to describe what he felt proud of, what he esteemed in himself and his community, externalized that sense of self as a persona. He used the occasions of interviews to build and develop his official story.

different job placement through the agency—nor the unofficial protocol—indicating his interest in the job to the factory in case its HR was willing to evade paying a commission—he was abandoned by both.

The Unofficial Stories: The Private Self

But again, as Errante (2000) insists, “Narrators not only ultimately choose what they wish to remember and tell you; they also participate in negotiating the context of remembering” (p. 19).

Cuco didn’t always tell me everything. Sometimes I knew facts that he’d yet to disclose (or never did); others I only discovered from him that could recontextualize whole narratives: as when his brother, Leonel, simply, seemingly selfishly, “refused” to take his son, but later why that occurred was made clear.

One especially painful subject was his son. During the period of four years filming and interviewing in the United States, Cuco would not talk about his son in front of the camera. He would not talk on camera about his history in Tijuana, where he had engaged in some petty drug selling until a day when, as he said, “I was in a corner, a car passed by and three meters from me, a guy was shot dead.” He did not want to talk on camera about his crossings either. He did not talk about the young wife he left in Mexico, or the fact that after six months, she left him, leaving his parents’ home to go back to her parents’ house.

He spoke to me of these things off-camera only after I had spent hours with him during visitations with his son, creating a closer relationship. Had I not engaged in such long-term, confidential relation with him, I would never have heard the other side of his stories. These unofficial stories in many ways clash with his official story: the stand-up husband, a good family man, a provider. His sense of dignity as someone who did honest work conflicted with his temporary role as a drug-dealer. These dissonances themselves for him clashed in his own mind, and he’d sooner not have the world looking at him through that lens. At least not at first; not before a witness, like myself, already understood the basis in fact that he *was* a good father

(attending parenting classes, doing what he had to bureaucratically in the United States to see to the well-being of his son).

Blended Narratives

For Jones (2004), the notion of blended narratives refers to storytelling where “joint construction is a relationship between narrator, and writer influenced by the power relationship inherent in oral history and governed by ethnical responsibilities” (p. 23). From the material in this paper, blended narratives operate not only at the point of construction between a narrator and the narrated, but also through the narratives each use for that construction. It becomes the point where autobiography resists stereotype, especially where the official and unofficial become sublimely irreconcilable.

Even though the priority of Cuco’s life from 2001 to the fall of 2002 was the fight to gain custody of his son, he dealt with it in a private way. He was clear about it from the very beginning. He developed a strategy of talking in a very cunning matter. He would start to joke around and laughed when the topic of his son came up. He immediately switched to talk about “white women’s ways,” remarking how “they go out without asking permission.” “Who knows what they are doing?” he would say, as if to provoke me, a female researcher who similarly wanted to be involved in his life as a witness to it, but without any permission from a husband or boyfriend (given that I am unmarried); a moment that shows the complex knot of interviewer and interviewee who interact over a long period of time. Qualities of the interviewer become inputs to the context of the interview.¹⁴

While involved in the process of struggling for his right as a father to win custody of his

¹⁴ In one respect, he believed in traditional roles for women, but he also knew that when it came to issues around dealing with women, I would engage in response. In part, some of these sensitivities were introduced to him through parenting classes and his encounters with social workers while dealing with getting custody of his son. He learned all of the tricks to manage the situation. And he used them quite well.

son, he was living at the house of his brother Leonel, his sister-in-law Patti, and his niece Jackie, who had recently moved into town from Chicago. Cuco shared the bed in the living room with his younger brother Quincho, since Cuco worked night shift and his brother Quincho worked day shift. He was near to the point of having full custody of his son, and there were constant family talks about adopting the child. He was very content at the time. Having moved out after many years living in a single-men's setting with his uncle Rosendo, with other older friends, and his brother Quincho, to now find himself living in a household with Leonel and two capable Mexican women was not only a good and comfortable arrangement for him but also for everybody in the household as well. By that time, his son had been in foster care for some time, placed there due to the mother's irresponsibility, and Cuco was following the steps laid out by the State to obtain custody, including his parenting classes, and having a stable living arrangement, which his brother Leonel's household provided.

But one day, without much explanation, he decided to move out to live with his latest girlfriend, a very young white woman living with her mother and with three children fathered by a different Mexican man. After he moved out, I arranged for the State-mandated DCFS visits to occur there, but the place was not a good one, and the process of getting custody of the child ground to a halt until, finally, the child, much wanted by Cuco, was adopted by a white family who had been fostering him and really loved the child. Cuco's family back in Mexico, and especially his brothers here, were not happy that he'd chosen to live with the new white girlfriend, her children, and her mother in government-subsidized housing. After soon "recovering his senses," he returned to live again at the house with his elder brother, Leonel, his sister-in-law, and younger brother Quincho, who had since moved in.

But the story—as any story of migration and community building—is more complicated.

Still, I was surprised that last day before Cuco departed for good to Mexico that he chose to state on camera all of the many, previously undisclosed details of the situation.

Cuco explained he had moved out to live with his new girlfriend after his brother Leonel and his wife Patti declined to adopt his child, understanding that without a woman in the household to help him raise the child, he would not be granted full custody. Cuco had first criticized his brother for not supporting the process of getting custody of the child because of their reluctance to adopt and used it as a reason to move in with the new girlfriend—an example of an “official” story to cover his brother’s reluctance to get involved in the courts due to his own legal problems. Nonetheless, the move proved fatal for the custody process, since the new girlfriend’s household was not only notorious with DCFS for drug use and selling, but also for the history of the girlfriend’s mother, and the complications of long-term unemployment for his girlfriend as a stay-at-home single mother with three young children. The young woman, in fact, was already under heavy surveillance by a governmental social service agency for Welfare Reform.

It was understandable that Cuco, who had complied with requirements to submit to various kinds of parental training, monitoring, and English language learning for almost one year in order to gain custody, became frustrated, hurt, and confused when his son was ultimately given to the white foster parents instead of him, even though he liked the people. He had imagined, perhaps even fantasized, that the new girlfriend’s white privilege, and having a family of his own, would help him gain custody when he moved in with her; that these would give him the validated credentials demanded and expected by the State to grant custody. After all of his training and counseling at parenting classes to be recognized as a loving and caring parent, to become more sensitive to a woman’s needs, to realize his own capacity to be a good step-father

to his girlfriend's children and to provide them with his income in order to live as one happy family, he fell short. Having turned over nearly all of his salary to his newly adopted family, his new girlfriend's household was too chaotic. Strangers, especially other men, circulated through the world of the mother/daughter team. It became a huge awakening for him to learn so starkly that white skin did not automatically confer every white privilege, particularly where social class and gender were involved. Both women, the mother and daughter alike, used their comparative racial privilege to persuade Cuco that, if he acted as their provider, then he would get custody of his son. He came to believe whole-heartedly that that would work.¹⁵

Later, when he would speak off-camera about his loss, I tried to explain to him why this particular family was ill-suited for winning any preference from the State for awarding him custody, but incident overall made Cuco realize that there are sometimes insurmountable differences among whites and social class issues that he had not realized could create barriers for his case.

On the other hand, when speaking off-camera about this experience, he began to see that he had asked an impossible favor from his brother and sister-in-law. Both had been unable to secure consistent jobs; the situation on its face precluded adoption. It was only later, in 2005, that I learned of Leonel's minor traffic violation in Chicago area that had resulted in a chain of violations for failing to appear in court that led him to decide to skip town to Rantoul to avoid any legal entanglements or the scrutiny of mainstream social agencies. Here, then, was the unofficial fact coming out through the official story of not being able to find secure, consistent jobs. But even this fact, during Cuco's final interview, did not come out; for the interview itself,

¹⁵ He could not have seen that simply his own non-white status in the context of his relationship with his girlfriend, even under ideal circumstances, might have militated against him receiving custody.

it remained unofficial, not a part even of the full disclosure at the end.¹⁶

When does a story stop? When is it complete? Always subject to later articulations or iterations, during that last interview I had the blended narrative experience of the unofficial emerging in light of the official. Yet even then, in the light of full disclosure, in the fullness of trust at that moment, there still remained part of the story out of sight—an only partial collision of the double-narrative at the heart of life, but especially the lives of Mexican migrants.

In a sense, one could say that in his last interview, Cuco provided a new official story that incorporated facts about his son, well known to everyone who knew him, but not a part of the record. He told about how he saw his son with his foster parents in the mall; his son recognized him and said him, “Zapatos, zapatos,” showing off his new shoes. Cuco was very happy that he was recognized by the child and that his son remembered Spanish, especially that his son made a connection with him in his native language, so dear to him. Moreover, he pointed out that he had maintained good relations with his son’s new parents and that they were very friendly with him as well. The family were farmers, like him, hard-working and honest; this made him feel better about them having his son. They promised to send pictures. Before the finalization of the adoption, Cuco actually went to the family’s house to see his child’s future home, and he was very satisfied because he knew that the child was loved and would live in a good environment. He told the family that he was about to leave for Mexico never to come back again, but that he knew his son was in good hands.

¹⁶ In fact, even at the first time when Cuco asked Leonel and his wife to adopt his son, they gladly agreed to raise the child as their own and share him with Cuco as they would in Mexico. The concept of extended family and family members help out in raising the children is still the norm. Cuco was happy and full of hope to participate in whatever would be needed for him to do gain the custody. Once the legal process began, however, it was more complicated than any of them could have ever imagined. Once supplied with the papers for adoption, Leonel and Pati began to have more than second thoughts. They were scared. They said repeatedly: “It is not like in Mexico. You give a child and that will be it. No complication, No problems. The child is your child, but here you have to sign papers, you have to go to court.” They are afraid of government agencies in Mexico; the thought of dealing

The story was told as a testament to a process that had reached closure for him, as part of a new official narrative, a now-official narrative as a good father, as a responsible man. After that, he could move on.

The story has never been mentioned again by any of the family members.

with United States social agencies was overwhelming to them.

CONCLUSION: What Happens To The Mexican Migrant In The Midwest?

This documentary can offer no resolutions to the conflicts and contradictions it identifies; blended narratives, like real human faces, defy stereotyping, even as stories seem to complete themselves and present themselves as done, complete, virtually new stereotypes themselves. While first tracing the gradual evolution of migrant families who aspired to recreate their Mexican community in the Midwest while learning English and becoming more oriented to US lifestyles, it ends, for now, at the point of both established migrants helping newcomers in the United States and others who have returned to Mexico.

While the documentary invites us to continue to meditate upon questions like: who is the Mexican immigrant, and why is she or he willing to sacrifice family bonds, cultural familiarity, and pride for danger, abuse, and indifference in another country? How does that setting seem to promise supply of enough money that hopes for future generations and those left behind can be met that way? What is the meaning of the "globalization" and "economic dislocation" that pushed this group of small farmers out of Chiapas? Why did the migration path take them first to the *maquiladoras* of Tijuana, on the US-Mexico border, just South of San Diego, California, and only later into the US and on to the Midwest, to ask questions remains the only constant throughout. Such questions, on the one hand, help to disclose historical forces at work in the production of immigration (through US policies, NAFTA, repeal of the Mexican land reforms), but they also prove merely "local" versions of those questions, and forever promise to open up on still newer, still "nower" versions as the official histories of situations disclose unofficial (auto)biographies.

For migrants, many stay for decades. A few manage to make a trip back home. Most say that they miss nothing about the US or that if they had the resources to survive they would stay

in Mexico. Their own precarious legal status in the United States, as well as new cultural barriers between themselves and their families and friends in Mexico, can lead to depression.

Nonetheless, at the same time, we see the immigrant families increasingly striving to adopt US mores and material goods and to identify with US culture.

For the documentarian, I began this project in an almost idle remark about whether a TV show about migrants could tell the truth of their experiences. But why did their “no” impel me to create this documentary. I had for a while been an activist for the migrant community locally. I saw the unjustness, but also the gratuitousness, of much of the trouble they encountered trying to make a life for themselves locally: not only the racism and inequalities affecting their life chances, but also the unnecessary difficulty of no services in Spanish, no local newspaper in Spanish.¹⁷

For me, I saw them as people, not the caricatures often presented in media representations. I had experienced many of the varieties of racism that they had, that I witnessed them experiencing as they went about making lives for themselves and their families. I could feel painfully aware of the disparity between the official representations of Mexican migrants and the unofficial self-representations they lived biographically.

I might have gone on in that way indefinitely as an activist, but at some point I had a realization, a break-through. The real difference between myself and the people I helped, who came to me asking for help, didn’t involve a failure to see them in stereotypical terms—in this case, not the negative stereotype of the wicked migrant, but also not the “positive” stereotype of the human being struggling for dignity, recognition, and simply an even chance at life. The gulf that separated us was that they experienced misfortunate, while I was fortunate.

¹⁷ I eventually founded *El Informador* to meet this community need, serving as its chief editor from 2007-8. It ran locally as an adjunct to Champaign County’s *News-Gazette*.

In a word, most of all, my privilege of citizenship allowed me to be treated different, even as a person of color. I could speak English, with an accent but I could negotiate bureaucracies, in part because I had the privilege of citizenship. With was upon this realization, and the sense of responsibility that came along with it, simply because I had the privilege to do so, that particularly drove me to undertake the work needed to create this documentary.

I see that change of mind—less, the absolutely basic demand of the real human face to be taken seriously, not dismissed—as the spark driving this work, the hope that the documentary embodies towards changing people’s minds as a project. So often it seems we are inundated by images of human suffering—lately refugees from Syria—but somehow these only frequently spur people to action beyond a sympathetic acknowledgement, “Their situation is terrible.” This feeling of generous pity for others in dire situations seems to mask a realization: I could do something. What that something is remains as yet undetermined, unasked because fellow-feeling for the suffering of another has somehow made itself seem sufficient. Underneath this may, indeed, be a feeling, “I can do nothing.” But however one responds to a real human face, to recognize one’s good fortune compared to lesser good fortune of another can serve as a call to action, as the project of this documentary did for me.

My hope is that the documentary embodies that realization and serves as an inspiration for others also to ask themselves, “So, what then can I do.”

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