

BOOK REVIEW

## The undocumented everyday: Migrant lives and the politics of visibility

**Rebecca M. Schreiber, University of Minnesota Press,  
Minneapolis, 2018, 370 pp., \$30.00, ISBN: 978-517900236  
(paperback)**

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In the late spring of 2018, images of migrant children being separated from their parents went viral. John Moore's photograph, for instance, shows a distraught young child standing barely taller than the tire on the car behind her, crying as she watches her mother being searched by a uniformed Border Patrol agent. Though the child's father later confirmed that she was not taken from her mother, this and similar images appeared over and over again and spurred political challenges to the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" policy.

The image of the Honduran child held such power in US national political discourse in part because, for a US public largely removed from the southern border, it *made visible* a change in immigration policy set by the Trump administration. In other words, this image relied on visibility to "elicit an emotional response from the audience" that would "compel reform" (Schreiber 2018, p. 14). It is this liberal humanist ideal of visibility that Rebecca M. Schreiber complicates and challenges in her book, *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility*.

Schreiber's book looks specifically at how undocumented Central American and Mexican migrants use self-representational modes to counter the usual image of undocumented migrants, a visual archive dominated by traditional documentary aesthetics, in which an outsider records a subject, as in the viral image of the Honduran child. In a political and cultural context in which undocumented migrants are both rendered highly visible by racialized systems of exclusion and, simultaneously, do not have the legal standing to contest these laws and regulations, Schreiber makes an important contribution in arguing that undocumented Central American and Mexican migrants rely on and revise traditional documentary aesthetics of self-representation to establish alternative forms of belonging. Schreiber most clearly illustrates how self-representation is linked to migrants' ability to establish belonging by

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distinguishing between projects that are migrant-led and projects produced by social service organizations and advocacy groups.

Drawing on scholars such as Alicia Schmidt Camacho, Amalia Pallares, Nicholas DeGenova, Diana Taylor, and many others, Schreiber examines a robust archive of documentary photographs, films, social media, audio recordings, and performances by and about undocumented Central American and Mexican migrants. She argues that, rather than being an empathic mode of representation that spurs reform, migrant documentary forms suggest how the politics of visibility operate in multiple ways, sometimes undermining the liberal humanist ideal and other times creating alternatives to it.

One of Schreiber's most valuable contributions is not simply contesting visibility, but showing how representational meaning arises out of the interactions among documentary aesthetics, curation, modes of address, and political context. Although some readers not specializing in documentary aesthetics might find the book's discussion of form to be lengthy, the book as a whole makes a compelling case for the centrality of form to the politics of visibility. For example, Schreiber analyzes an *Unseen America* photography project that affirms migrant belonging by challenging racialized stereotypes through photographs of migrants' everyday lives. But the author also illustrates how the display and curation of the project in the US Department of Labor building participated in a form of "compassionate conservatism" in which empathy, not reform, was the endpoint of visibility.

Schreiber also shows how visibility for undocumented migrants, beyond falling short as a mode of political engagement, can often function as a form of surveillance and a technology of exclusion that operates on racialized, anti-immigrant discourses of criminality. For instance, Schreiber is particularly critical of the Border Film Project, a documentary photography project that represents undocumented immigration from the perspective of migrants as well as the perspective of members of the Minuteman Project. The project places self-photographed images of migrants and Minuteman members next to each other, but does not contextualize the photographs within the power structures that render migrants vulnerable to the violence of vigilante justice. Alternatively, Schreiber also shows how certain forms of visibility, such as documentary films and videos by migrant youth activists, create highly visible counter-documents disseminated through social media to contest representations of migrants as either deserving or undeserving (a discourse that Schreiber argues the DREAMers movement relied on) and the Obama-era "prosecutorial discretion" that operated within this dichotomy.

Schreiber contextualizes her study in a post-9/11 era of intensification of immigration restrictions, deportations, and laws criminalizing undocumented migrants. She draws a deeply researched and rich historical context of neoliberal policies—such as NAFTA (1994) and the Illegal Immigrant Rights and Responsibilities Act (1996)—and nativist, anti-immigrant laws that further criminalized undocumented migrants, such as SB1070 (and copycat laws), S-COMM, REAL ID, the Secure Fence Act (2006), and many others. The context here is much more than background, as Schreiber shows how the documentary projects she studies respond to the situations produced at specific intersections of migration flows, the interactions between national and local immigration laws, and the representational politics surrounding



the interpretation and enforcement of these laws. For instance, Schreiber analyzes a gallery presentation and text installation in San Francisco, which the author reads as a contested site for migrant self-representation. Exhibiting the photographs and text installation in a sanctuary city put the project at odds with ICE's immigration enforcement efforts and made it more risky for migrants to participate in the project, even while it was intended as an opportunity for undocumented migrants to claim public, political space.

It is this kind of dynamic, multidisciplinary analysis that makes Schreiber's text a generative one for Latino/a studies scholars. Scholars and students interested in the politics of representation, undocumented migrants, and the legal and political context that shaped migration status in a post-9/11 era, as well as those interested in the politics of documentary aesthetics, performative representation, and, chiefly, the peculiar dynamic of presence and absence that undocumentedness conjures will find a rich and thorough volume in Schreiber's *The Undocumented Everyday*.

