

Book Review

Review of Schreiber, Rebecca M. 2018. *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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The Undocumented Everyday is a significant scholarly achievement amid growing anti-immigrant practices and populist, xenophobic politics. While straddling Migration Studies, Geography, American Studies, Political Theory, Aesthetic Theory, and Cultural Studies (and arguably more disciplines), Rebecca Schreiber assiduously chronicles the “everyday” politics, artistic production, aesthetic strategies, and struggles for self-representation of undocumented Central American and Mexican migrants in America.

The introduction provides Schreiber’s main intentions: to assess the function of the documentary “as a form of knowledge and a technique of power” while investigating “the possibilities and limitations of the production and circulation of works of self-representation in documentary form in the context of U.S. neo-liberal governance” (4); to examine “how Mexican and Central American migrants use documentary media as part of their ‘counter-representational practices’” and “to generate uncertainty about ‘commonsense understandings of belonging’” (5), particularly “liberal concepts” of belonging via national citizenship and national political incorporation (5-6); to analyze artistic (self-) representation of migrants with attentiveness to “their localities, their modes of address, and their contexts of production” (6); and to consider how “the visual is invested in relations of power,” both through the use of visual surveillance technologies and the production of images (8). These premises are re-visited in the conclusion, and I will return to them later while demonstrating how they are operationalized through the six substantive chapters, which are divided neatly into three parts.

Part 1: Ordinary Identifications and Unseen America consists of two chapters. Chapter 1—“We See What We Know: Migrant Labor and the Place of Pictures”—centers on the organization the *Workplace Project*. Comprised of Central American and Mexican day laborers in Hempstead, Long Island, New York, the project becomes part of *Unseen America*, any initiative to combat activists and local politicians’ anti-immigrant practices by producing photographs of the migrants’ everyday lives. This chapter demonstrates the disjuncture between the day laborers’ attempts to “convey intimacy in a hostile environment” (35) and explicitly challenge *local* racist and xenophobic practices through photographic self-representation and the politics surrounding a national exhibit with the Department of Labor, curated by the organization *Bread and Roses* as part of the latter’s larger campaign to stress equal rights for *all*

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American workers. Schreiber suggests that “personal” images were selected for the latter exhibit for consumption by a national middle class audience, thereby diminishing the significance of the day laborers’ political organizing and obfuscating the local politics toward which their efforts were oriented (73). Here we receive the first treatment of a prevalent theme in Schreiber’s work: acts of photographic (or video graphic) self-presentation are not conveyed through neutral media, and the curatorial, organizational, and political intent behind framing such artistic products leaves an indelible mark.

Chapter 2—“The Border’s Frame: Between Poughkeepsie and La Ciénega”—portrays translocal practices of belonging via photographs produced by Mexican migrants residing in Poughkeepsie, New York but retaining ties to La Ciénega. Here Schreiber accounts for the participation of Mexican migrants in Poughkeepsie and their family members in La Ciénega in the project *Communities without Borders: A Bridge for Health*. Organized by local healthcare provider HRH Care and the Bread and Roses Cultural Project, the project is the culmination of HRH Care’s long-term efforts to improve health care access for Mexican migrants and train migrant *promotores and promotoras de salud* (health activists) amid increasing privatization and restricted access for migrants. Schreiber shows how participants create a “mixed-genre aesthetic” and “translocal aesthetic” of “subjective transnationalism” (the latter derived from Segura and Zavella; 81) through their photographs to demonstrate belonging to multiple locales while engaging in activism against restrictive migration laws in the early 21st century.

Part II—Documentary, Self-Representation, and “Collaborations” in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands is comprised of two chapters. In Chapter 3—“Visible Frictions: The Border Film Project and the ‘Spectacle of Surveillance’”—Schreiber considers how photography can become surveillance in addition to its potential as an emancipatory medium. She details the development of the Border Film Project (BFP), which culminated in a book profiling photos taken by both undocumented border crossers and the Minuteman Project (MMP), a vigilante group patrolling the American-Mexican border. Schreiber historicizes border militarization and increasing practices of “illegalization,” including the emergence of the MMP and its impact on state structures during G.W. Bush’s second term, including the Department of Homeland Security, Congress members, and border patrollers. Largely refraining from including themselves in the photos taken of undocumented migrants, the MMP reproduced a particular hegemonic understanding of the “national gaze” (132).

Schreiber is convincing in demonstrating the structures of representation that obtain in documenting the undocumented. Contrary to initiatives highlighted in previous chapters, migrants participating in the BFP were instructed to photograph not “the everyday” but rather “significant events”; this included the capacity to counter-surveil and represent those performing state or delegated state practices of surveillance and detention. Nonetheless, by seeking to equally represent both sides, project organizers *misrepresented* the phenomenon, creating a “visual equivalence” between migrants and the Minutemen based on the supposed similar class positions and social marginality of both (147), while diminishing the latter’s racism, militia activities, and vigilantism (154). Here photos served to “decontextualize the relationships between migrants and the Minutemen” (151) and obfuscate the social and political relations between the latter and state security and surveillance apparatuses.

In Chapter 4—“Refusing Disposability: Representational Strategies in *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*”—Schreiber contrasts two films about the experiences of female workers in *maquilas* (export-oriented factories), centering on the politics and aesthetic strategies associated with collaborative film projects. These proceed with varying degrees of power sharing with, and autonomy in self-representation by, film subjects in the production process. For Schreiber, Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Tijuana Projection* was compromised by the artist’s preconceptions and intentions to create an “avant garde spectacle” (176), which de-emphasized the women participants’ voices in the process of production, despite the producer’s intention to give “visibility and voice” to women working in Tijuana’s *maquilas* (171). Conversely, the film *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*, directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, was centered on

deep collaboration with *Grupo Factor X*, a group which trained female maquila workers to become *promotoras* [female activists]. Part documentary and part performative reenactment, *Maquilapolis* “privileges the subjectivity of the *promotoras*” and their roles as political organizers (160-161), challenging prevalent conceptions of them as cheap and disposable workers in low-wage production, as well as multinational corporations’ accounts of the benefits of the maquilas. *Promotoras* themselves produced video diaries for the film and narrated the film, thereby taking the film beyond conventional documentary and into the realm of performance (180); in the film, “staged performances denaturalize their classification as manual laborers, accentuating the tension between repetitive mechanized movement and the women as subjects in excess of their capacity to labor” (162).

Part III—Counter-Optics: Disruptions in the Field of the Visible—is comprised of 2 chapters. In Chapter 5—“Disappearance and Counter-Spectacle in *Sanctuary City/Ciudad Santuario, 1989-2009*”—Schreiber deepens her analysis of “counter-surveillance” and “counter-spectacle” practices by the undocumented and their allies. She considers the genealogy of the Sanctuary City/Ciudad Santuario movement in San Francisco, providing concrete expression to Schreiber’s ongoing critique of [liberal] practices of political membership and incorporation articulation of alternative visions of belonging. Schreiber demonstrates the increasing array of powers for detention and deportation accruing to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the increasing criminalization of the undocumented, through programs such as the 2003 National Fugitive Operations Plan (NFOP), campaigns such as Operation Wagon Train, and legislation such as HR 4437, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Control Act. Building upon Nicholas De Genova’s work, Schreiber argues such initiatives increasingly relied on strategies to “make undocumented Latina/o migrants “visible” through strategies of “fugitive apprehension,” highlighting the visibility of their “illegality” while also “rendering them absent within public space” (197). Hence, in the chapter’s titular exhibition, artist Sergio De La Torre and his collaborators, rather than “visually representing undocumented Latina/o migrants.... used aesthetic strategies that made them audible and present, yet also narrated their disappearance through detention and deportation” (198). The artists projected migrant testimonies and politicians’ quotations onto building in the Mission District near where ICE agents conducted raids and where city police engaged in racial profiling, creating a Situationist-inspired “counter-spectacle” while occupying public space in defiance of the profiling, detention, and deportation of undocumented Latina/o migrants (198-199). The exhibit was the culmination of “counter-surveillance” practices of the artists, intending to surveil state surveillance mechanisms and challenge the “policeability” of migrants (216), and hybridized aesthetic strategies: “aesthetics of disappearance” and the “aesthetics of mobility,” both to demonstrate the effects of, and to contest, state practices (220).

In Chapter 6—“Reconfiguring Documentation: Mobility, Counter-Visibility, and (Un)Documented Activism”—Schreiber reveals how activists contest being rendered illegal in the context of Arizona Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070) copycat laws, 287(g) agreements and Secure Communities (S-COMM) programs, all of which conferred greater capabilities on local law enforcement agencies to police and report migrants’ immigration status (23). In organizing the *No Papers, No Fear Ride for Justice*, migrant activists embraced a politics of counter-visibility to shield themselves from state practices of detention and deportation. Migrant activists produce and circulate “counter-documents” through which they, borrowing the words of Peter Nyers, “burrow into the apparatuses and technologies of exclusion to disrupt the administrative routines, the day-to-day perceptions and constructions of normality” (237). Such activism “combines social media counter-documents and place-based political actions across regional networks, in which undocumented youth and migrant activists adopt mobility both as a political strategy and a means of mobilization” (238). Schreiber deems the “decentralized infrastructure” created by youth and migrant activists more attentive to place-based political engagement and therefore more successful than “top-down,” “mainstream” rights organizations (242). The strategy of counter-visibility included the intentional documenting and circulation of videos developed by youth activists in detention, a response to the Obama administration’s strategy of minimizing publicity surrounding the policing of undocumented youth

migrants (257) and a means to challenge the shortcomings of the Obama administration's emphasis on prosecutorial discretion in the detention and deportation of low-priority undocumented migrants (246).

Schreiber is attentive to the structural drivers of mass migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States—American support for the militarization of Central American conflicts in the 1980s, the long term neo-liberal restructuring of the Mexican economy, and the post-9-11 climate in which the criminalization, detention, and deportation of the undocumented was routinized. However, Schreiber refuses to deduce the subjectivity of the undocumented from such “objective” markers alone, instead painstakingly demonstrating how undocumented migrants make subtle and distinct decisions about their own self-representation through activism and artistic forms in diverse temporal, geographical, and political situations. While large historical forces of geopolitics, securitization, empire, national citizenship regimes, and neo-liberal globalization (or continentalization) *produce* the political category of the undocumented, Schreiber directs our attention to the everyday and artistic production to consider the *counter* strategies at the disposal of the undocumented. Schreiber is keen to demonstrate the extent to which participants function as subjects with varying degrees of self-representation in collaborative endeavours. Less scrutinized is the *capacity* of state and capital. As such, we see the promise of the politics of visibility and self-representation more than the asymmetries by which it engages the economics and politics of displacement, migration, and deportation.

Liberal national understandings of citizenship and the “mainstream” politics of migrant advocacy are the counterpoint against which develops her demonstration of “counter-practices,” but in this reviewer's opinion further substantiation as to their content and how the present conjuncture has necessitated a different form of migrant advocacy is warranted. Nonetheless, Schreiber delivers on her other intentions. Keenly aware of the ways in which self-representation is subtly changed according to the geographical scale at which it operates, the political purposes toward which it is directed, and the social structures within which it is manifested, she reminds us that the present climate of surveillance, detainment, and deportation—as well as the various “countering” tactics at the disposal of the undocumented and their allies—are local occurrences, despite their being implicated in national politics and state structures. In ably chronicling multiple artistic and activist endeavours, Schreiber provides the reader with ample material to consider the contingent, localized, and strategic ways in which the undocumented—as well as their allies—use visibility and invisibility in their struggles for self-representation and belonging in a climate of increased criminalization, detainment, and deportation. Arguably, this is the central contribution of this deeply researched and well-executed book.