

Review of Schreiber, Rebecca M. 2018. *The undocumented everyday: migrant lives and the politics of visibility*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 370 pages. \$30.00 paper ISBN 978-1-5179-0023-6

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Undocumented residents in the United States and elsewhere are the object of concurrent and complementary politics of visibilization and invisibilization. Indeed, state actors deploy technologies of visibility that have been central to nation-building and colonialism to surveil, count, and expose undocumented immigrants, while at the same time rendering invisible the complexities of their lives and their status as political subjects. Undocumented residents are also active subjects in their own diverse counter-strategies of visibility. It is these strategies—and the role that documentary aesthetic practices play in them—that Rebecca M. Schreiber analyzes in *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility*.

The author looks at aesthetic projects developed by Mexican and Central American migrants in the United States between 2000 and 2012. Specifically, Schreiber studies projects mobilizing a “documentary realist form” (p. 4) such as documentary photography, video, and film, and centering the personal lives of migrants and their families. Schreiber argues that while some of these practices reproduce the liberal ideal of “giving a voice” to marginalized people, or mobilize techniques of self-representation that play into a politics of humanization and incorporation, many of the projects challenge these narratives. In doing so, they make their aesthetic practices a central dimension of their political interventions, but also of their political organizing.

The Undocumented Everyday shows how this trend increased when the 2010 version of the DREAM Act—a bill that could have provided conditional residency status to over a million young people who were less than 16 years old when they entered the US—was blocked in the Senate. Schreiber discusses the work of undocumented activists who were distancing themselves from the politics of respectability

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put forth by some of the DREAMers at the time. They abandoned the promotion of exceptional solutions aimed only at young people presented as the “victims” of their parents’ decisions and excluding those framed as “undeserving” irregular border crossers, and instead engaged in broader anti-deportation work and more radical forms of organizing.

The most interesting and politically exciting examples of these types of practices are presented in Chapter 6, titled “Reconfiguring Documentation: Mobility, Counter-Visibility, and (Un)Documented Activism.” Schreiber describes, for instance, how young undocumented members of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA)—self-described as “an undocumented youth-led network of grassroots organizations, campus-based student groups and individuals” (p. 341, n8)—produced “counter-documents” in the form of videos to document their civil disobedience actions aimed at challenging federal and state policies. Undocumented youth would film and broadcast their actions, and at times their arrest, as forms of performance and political intervention, but also as a means to garner public support and build public pressure for their release. These counter-documents thus act as a way to increase the impact of their action, as a form of political action in themselves, as a means of self-protection, and as a networking tool and a way to mobilize other people. As this example and the book make clear, these political and aesthetic practices of documentary self-representation serve a very different purpose than the work aimed at convincing a broad public of one’s worth, or trying to teach a mainstream audience about one’s reality. Here, the target audience is primarily other undocumented young activists and their allies.

One of the weaknesses of *The Undocumented Everyday* lies in the difficulty of analyzing visual practices—many of them in the form of videos or films—in a book format. Despite the inclusion of 27 photographs and stills, the description of so many different cases of documentary self-representation without access to the material makes the reading tedious at times. To be fair, there is no easy solution to this problem stemming from the limit of rendering visual arts into a written form. Through these descriptions, the book provides rich empirical data, and insightful analysis, but I found myself wanting for more engagement with the broader conceptual implications of some of the findings.

Some parts are fascinating, however, and *The Undocumented Everyday* will be of interest to a number of different readerships. Among them, scholars who work on the limits of the visual politics of recognition will find in this book not so much a comparative analysis of recognition-oriented versus politically disruptive visual strategies, but certainly the material for contrasting the two approaches. While not being dismissive of the first option, the author clearly sides with the second one. Schreiber provides interesting accounts of what she describes—with Pallares (2014)—as “impossible activism,” that is, the intervention in the public sphere of those not generally recognized as political subjects, a notion that echoes the Arendtian idea of fighting for the right to have rights, the Rancièrian idea of a politics of the not-counted that disrupts order, or what Butler and Spivak (2007, pp. 68–69) describe when they claim in relation to undocumented activism that “to make the demand on freedom is already to begin its exercise, and then to ask for its legitimation is to also announce the gap between its exercise and its realization, and to



put both into public discourse in a way so that that gap is seen, so that that gap can mobilize” is a key challenge to liberal politics.

The Undocumented Everyday will also speak to surveillance, criminology, and security scholars studying counter-surveillance and the visualization of justice, to visual anthropologists and other researchers interested in visual methodologies in the social sciences, and to those working on the role of visual technologies in activism and social movements more broadly. In fact, migrant justice organizers—from the US and beyond—will find that this book documents practices, and point to strategies that they may want to learn from. Since many of the politico-aesthetic practices analyzed were indeed conceived as tools to network and inspire other organizers, if *The Undocumented Everyday* can amplify and relay their arguments, make readers excited about these strategies, and encourage them to experiment with them elsewhere, it will have succeeded where it matters the most and contributed to this movement for change.

References

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