

# Migrants at the Center: Expulsion Regimes, Self-Representation, and Translocal Lives

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An expanded regime of expulsion haunts the globe. Refugees from long-past or current wars, legal residents with “irregular” backgrounds, “enemy” or undesirable minorities and “aliens,” as well as the undocumented live under the sign of expulsion on all continents. In the US, this regime is tied to the growing demonization of migration and policies and practices of the past decade, whose scale and impact have been massive. Despite official rhetoric about the legitimacy of legal immigration, it is clear that the notion of the US as “a nation of immigrants” has been in the process of dismantlement. Popularized by John F. Kennedy in the 1960s, this phrase, and its ideology, which occludes conquest, slavery, and expulsion, had served as a core of official national identity until fairly recently. The post-2001 border and immigration restrictions and targeting of the undocumented have been amplified more recently with selective limitations of legal migration through bans of particular nationals, proposals to eliminate “chain migration” and birthright citizenship, the telling removal of the phrase itself in 2018 from the federal immigration agency’s mission statement, and much more. While the immigrant no longer stands for the nation, the undocumented or “illegal” migrant has risen to the position of an essential other to sovereignty itself and is the key figure mobilizing the new securitization, the bedrock of “homeland” identity in the new millennium. As scholars like Mae Ngai have shown, the shifts regarding unauthorized status and criminality predate 2001, setting the stage for the current moment. In two new books, Ana Raquel Minian’s

*Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration*, Ana Raquel Minian. Harvard University Press, 2018.

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

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*Undocumented Lives* (2018) and Rebecca Schreiber's *The Undocumented Everyday* (2018), the "migrant" rather than the "immigrant," and the "undocumented," rather than the potential "new American," occupy the center of the analysis of national identity and belonging. These indispensable studies enable us to deepen our understanding of the sources and consequences of this new regime, showing up the willed blind spots of Kennedy's notion and exposing the historical and current policies that have shaped, and, often, diminished or devastated the lives of migrants' and those of their families across borders. Significantly, the authors do dual work in highlighting migrants' own feelings, ideas, aesthetics, and actions regarding their condition as well as rigorously exploring practices and policies at federal and local levels and their transnational impact. In doing so, these scholars also debunk certain myths about migrants' silence and hiding as a permanent and universal position and the politics of recognition and visibility as a route to a more just world.

In the US, potential deportees—so far mainly the undocumented—are permanently "in the shadows" as goes the common metaphor, and live and work "under" everything: "under cover," "under the radar," "under the table." The nondeportable might be in contact with the deportable every day and not even register it. *Lurking*, *hiding*, and *slipping by* are the main action verbs with which the expellable have been associated, when they are not maligned as criminals. Yet migrant activism and self-representation through media and other narratives have changed the perception that migrants are invisible, abject victims of empire and nationalism despite their condition of being "impossible" and "deportable" subjects (see De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality'"; Ngai). The 2006 mass mobilization emblemized by the description "A day without an Immigrant" as well as the interventions of the DREAMers, despite the subsequent repressions and reprisals, made evident the plight but also the presence of the undocumented (see Chavez 171–72, 185–86). Most remain "in the shadows," but more undocumented people take risks to assert themselves, their communities, their stories, and their demands publicly.

While disobedience and "autonomy" are embedded in border crossing itself, as Nicholas De Genova has argued ("Incorrigible Subject"), scholars have also positioned migrant activism as the performance of transgressive "acts of citizenship" (Isin and Nielsen), especially in urban spaces (Sassen). Boldly, the undocumented have engaged in storytelling, art, and media work in order to document their lives and make demands. They have "come out" even under media scrutiny and despite the ongoing "border spectacle" meant to instill fear in large swaths of the population, with or without papers

(De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’” 436). In the politics of refusal that emerged, DREAMer activists, for example, who focused at first on destigmatization of the undocumented have more recently widely rejected the differentiation between deserving and undeserving immigrants. “Undocumented and unafraid” and “unapologetic and unafraid” have been slogans for a defiant stance “disrupting the dream” and ideas about citizenship (Carrasco and Seif). Those calling themselves “undocuqueers,” some of whom have created art and media projects (for example, Julio Salgado), have cemented citizenship status as a key category of social analysis that intersects with gender and sexuality, not least in discourses of “coming out,” ending the silence about both sexuality and documentation. In addition to countering conservative and nativist discourses and policies, many of these self-representations also raise different issues and questions than those that circulate in the liberal public sphere regarding the functions of visibility and recognition, such as reformism and tolerance.

Since the nineteenth century, the documentation of marginalized groups, whether in nineteenth-century photography by the likes of Jacob Riis, or in oral history, which arose as an academic field in the mid-twentieth century but was deployed earlier, has been mobilized in the US to increase their visibility (see Kerr). Although today’s scale and availability of images and stories of undocumented and racialized people might be unprecedented, the assumptions and impetus of some of these efforts have been longstanding. Chief among these is the presumed perlocutionary function of visual and narrative presence: the ability of stories and images of usually unseen and unheard “others” to arouse the awareness and compassion of the more fortunate and thus initiate reformist action toward integration and tolerance. The structural inequalities are left intact, and a lucky few are absorbed in part thanks to visibility politics. Schreiber pays special attention to the logics behind such efforts, often guided by institutions rather than the subjects themselves, and contrasts them to the more “disruptive” work by migrants that eschews or subverts ideas about visibility and the “truth” about undocumented lives.

The “truth” value of documentation and visibility is related to the assumed persuasive power of representation. Empathy can be mobilized because the words and images are real. But of course, the truth of self-representation has long been contested. In oral history, for example, in which Minian engages in addition to archival and other studies, the veracity of testimony has been challenged from its beginnings. It has been characterized as a fount of unfiltered reminiscence, hence (potentially dubious) memory rather than (verified) history (Grele). Minian, who touches on this issue, explains that

despite what is viewed as the shortcomings of oral history, such as the mediated nature of remembering and “the fact that community members often reproduce each other’s scripts,” it is a key way of understanding “the social history of a group that purposefully hid and left little documentation behind” (241–43). Given that the undocumented can often safeguard and transmit few material traces regarding their experiences in hiding, self-narration and self-representation are indispensable to the work of scholars. While contestations over truth, visibility, representativeness, and reception are common to the self-representation of all unprivileged groups, these issues are particularly charged in the context of images and stories of undocumented individuals and groups, few of them self-produced and in the public sphere. As Schreiber shows regarding media, artistic, and other public acts, self-representation does not necessarily present truth through visibility but can tactically subvert both.

Bringing the top-down and the grassroots together is particularly important in the study of unauthorized migration, given the dearth of recorded evidence, documents, and artifacts. It is also important to register the structural conditions and particular large-scale or chronic events, from federal policy changes to quotidian surveillance, within and against which migrants represent themselves. This is a challenging task that Minian takes on admirably by relying both on traditional archives as well as oral history to underscore the particular ways in which laws and policies impact but also shape and mobilize individuals and communities. A significant portion of *Undocumented Lives* is devoted to the analysis of policy and laws that shaped undocumented Mexican migration in the period between two crucial pieces of legislation, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), when undocumented immigration rose by 3,000%. Ironically, the 1965 “re-opening” of immigration to most countries led the same year to the deportation of many Mexicans, who, without the Bracero Program (terminated in 1964), became “illegal.” The migrations as well as detentions and deportations only increased in those years of Minian’s focus to reach millions with the passing of the IRCA.

The changing approaches of both Mexico and the US to migration, in which the well-being and personhood of migrants are discounted in the interest of the political and economic goals of each state, are registered variously in testimonies. Some of the variances depend on gender and sexuality, key categories to Minian’s analysis. It is precisely through interviews in both Mexico and the US that Minian uncovers some of the reasons for the heterosexual male nature of the migrating populations in the years between 1965 and 1986. She presents a comprehensive picture of the social context in

Mexico, where straight men were pressured, often, as they told her, against their own will, to become unauthorized migrants in the US in order to provide a better life for their families back home. Feeling obligated to leave, they pursued lives “under cover” on the other side, while women who stayed behind, now under greater surveillance and suspicion, experienced different social pressures toward more intense conformity to sexual morality, including in public space. These findings, made possible through oral history, do not necessarily lead to particular ideas about migrants or propel empathy, but they do reveal a social, economic, and cultural web that operates within the legal and political systems in both countries.

Minian details what she calls “cartographies of belonging” uncovered through 257 interviews, in which the sense of space both contracted and expanded for migrants and their families on both sides of the border. Women had to avoid socializing in their town squares in Mexico lest their fidelity be questioned, for example, while men in the US had to avoid public space to escape detection. At the same time, everyone’s sense of space expanded through the experience of new places or the consciousness of the family as a translocal unit (110). And, significantly, “While heterosexual men felt pushed out of their hometowns because of economic need and their identities as providers, queer men saw their own towns as spaces where they could reside permanently” and work at feminized professions unattractive to the straight men who left Mexico at much higher rather rates (92). These narratives by gay men and straight men and women revealed the strongly gendered basis to and the consequences of undocumented migration through the 1980s. Oral testimonies do not simply individuate the migrants, often perceived and represented as a mass, and highlight their subjectivity; they also reveal reasons not found by examining official archives for migrating and not migrating. Indeed, one of the obvious challenges of studying the undocumented is the lack of documentation about daily lives discreetly or secretly carried out. But *nonmigration* and the experiences of those community and family members whose lives are affected by collective migrations also lack documentation, and personal narratives are one important lens onto those with potential to migrate but who do not. One of Minian’s many contributions is in this examination of *both* Mexico and the US policies *and* undocumented workers’ transnational and translocal lives.

Minian is especially revealing on the collusion between Mexico’s and the US’ practices in creating the situation and Mexico’s facilitating of the emigrations to control its “surplus population,” perpetuating the undocumented migrant condition. Despite being “pushed out” under social and economic pressure however, Mexican men, she determines from her interviews, have valued their

citizenship status in Mexico and the absence of “deportability” there, an interesting sentiment given their de facto exclusion (albeit not an expulsion) from their country of birth and subjection to lives of non-belonging in the US, lives nevertheless essential to those left behind.

Oral history reveals how the migrants register the implications and practices of states, with observations about inclusion and exclusion on both sides of the border that are central to the study. That Minian’s focus is on belonging is not surprising, given how the narrators describe their situation as being “ni de aquí, ni de allá,” not belonging to either country (3). For belonging is the central axis of *Undocumented Lives*, whose dual emphasis on both here and there presents a full view of migrants’ translocal condition, subject as it is to legal, economic, and social pressures from not one but two sides, whatever their condition of mobility or stuckness. Minian accomplishes this through the study of state-produced belonging and migrants’ own sense of being “from neither here nor there,” though she also documents their organizing and group activism and mutual support networks. The hundreds of interviews Minian undertook offer knowledge about migrants’ ideas and emotions about their own experiences not found elsewhere, alerting us to the ways in which oral history thus always creates, interprets, and contextualizes a new archive, consisting of the interviews and their analyses, which can also be of value to future research, and, perhaps, to the migrants and their descendants and communities.

Like Minian, Schreiber treats migrants’ expression of their lives, their “undocumented everyday” according to their own terms, specifically in the use of media to contest their situation and make demands. Schreiber judiciously combines extensive political contextualization of the documentary project that is the subject of each chapter with the analysis of the politics of representation, highlighting the visibility of the projects as well as their individual or institutional creators and supporters. For example, her chapter on the 2009 exhibit in San Francisco of *Sanctuary City/Ciudad Santuario, 1989–2009* (which was a part of the 2012 No Papers, No Fear tour) concerns the period following the mass immigrant mobilization in 2006. Here, Schreiber focuses on the contrast between local and federal policies regarding sanctuary and legality and the way the exhibit intervenes through a particular aesthetic and politics of invisibility. San Francisco’s sanctuary ordinance, federal immigration raids, and immigration hearings are not explained as a mere background but are treated as integral to the content, execution, and form of Sergio De La Torre’s art project. The choice of audio-only testimonies of migrants heard in the Mission gallery, Schreiber argues, “accentuated the absence of their physical bodies” and evoked the invisibilization and disappearance of the undocumented, thereby

making disappearance felt and known (215). While the migrants were made present through voice rather than image, the video component of the exhibit displayed the migrants' own visual documentation of "watching" the policing of their own neighborhoods, which Schreiber suggests is a form of countersurveillance.

The politics of visibility in such works is more about turning visibility on its head and making surveillance itself visible than about simply increasing awareness. This strategy is reminiscent also of essential recent work that transforms surveillance studies, especially Simone Browne's work on "dark sousveillance," or black people "watching the watchers" through activism and, art, along with purposeful resistance to visibility (including in the context of slavery). The emphasis on sousveillance or countersurveillance in such studies that place race and migration at the center corrects the claims to the universal application of surveillance. Even as it does so, this corrective emphasis also opens up a larger, racially nuanced space for art as a critique of new technologies of control, which makes demands and asserts subjectivities while subverting conventional notions of visibility. Schreiber's success leads to the conjecture that more oral histories illuminating various aspects of hiding and sousveillance practices would also be welcome in both surveillance and race as well as migration studies.

The *Undocumented Everyday* is devoted to investigating these and many other ways in which artists and migrants negotiate visibility, sometimes critiquing by withholding images and registering absence and at others by deploying media (for example, *Google Maps*) or the built environment against their customary uses for either detection of policing or concealment. "Counter-" is the prefix that Schreiber uses to describe much of the art and documentation in part 2 of the book, including as "counter-spectacle," "counter-conducts," "counter-surveillance" or "counter-visibility," and "counter-documents." But there is no perfect term for Schreiber's astute, multidimensional analyses of how each work's para-/visual politics counters, overturns, infiltrates in managing to "capture its referent but [also] *show* this failing" in the definition of the "critical image" by Judith Butler that Schreiber cites (197). The last chapters of the book detail the "counter-documents" created by young undocumented activists, work carried out at great personal risk in North Carolina and Alabama that included infiltration of and video recording at detention centers. In contrast to documentary work undertaken with a more conventional impetus regarding visibility and integration, Schreiber argues, a mixed genre and translocal aesthetic (for example, with an address to the family "on the other side") characterize the critical documentary interventions. In all their variety, Schreiber emphasizes the media productions investigated in *The*

*Undocumented Everyday* negotiate the terms of visibility in ways that go beyond recognition and integration. The demand for justice is more fully realized through making visible the actions of federal immigration agencies and their impact on communities, rather than through self-presentation as worthy subjects needing visibility and recognition. Far from being simply a means of self-expression or visibility, media are also used strategically, including, for example, in the circulation of videos in targeted communities to help with mobilization.

Current work like Minian's and Schreiber's testify to the ways in which "unauthorized" lives in hiding are still lives in which survival, resistance, and creativity occur under extremely difficult conditions. It is easy to reduce migrants to "threats" or silent victims (Chavez). Because of the necessary attention we must pay to migration necropolitics (see Márquez), which results in deaths and harm on a daily basis, it is also possible to overlook the complexity of "lives," a word that appears in the title of both books. Understanding the eruption of undocumented people's political agency through daring acts of presence and countersurveillance, as well as the ordinary "everyday" precarity, mobility, and stuckness, needs to take place, at least in significant part, through local, translocal, cultural, social, and economic analyses of self-representation in narrative and image. The scholarly vagaries of presenting self-representation in nonmigrant publishing and readership contexts are not resolved but worth thinking through, as are the meeting points of literary expression by undocumented people with media productions and oral narrative. What is certain is that representation by migrants themselves and new work on migration that shift our focus from immigration and integration to migration and expulsion, and from the historical record to life stories, media ephemera, art installations, and much more, are necessary to apprehend the evolving definitions of national and translocal belonging that enable or destroy lives.

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