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Introduction: (Re)presenting (Im)migration

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Introduction: (Re)presenting (Im)migration

Part of the journal section “Forum: (Re)presenting (Im)migration”



Jennifer Cooley “Introduction: (Re)presenting (Im)migration”

This edition of *UNIVERSITAS* is devoted to the study of Luis Argueta’s trilogy of documentary films about immigration, and, more broadly, the quest to faithfully represent the personal impact of immigration policies in the 21st century. Starting with *abUSED: The Postville Raid* (2010), followed by *ABRAZOS* (2014) and most recently *The U Turn* (2017), Argueta’s films invite us to reflect upon the ongoing injustices faced by Guatemalan migrants living in the Midwest and broader societal issues surrounding immigration as well. They do this by bringing individual stories to the forefront, by giving voice to those who are typically silenced, and thus by humanizing immigration debates that are often so politically charged and toxic that they resist thoughtful and meaningful dialogue.

2. In the opening sequences of the films *abUSED* and *The U Turn* we spot helicopters circling overhead, then assume a bird’s-eye view as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) busses orchestrate the May, 2008 Postville immigration raid, immense in scale with its 900 federal agents compared to the human hands that extend from the darkened bus windows that carry the detainees to the Cattle Congress in Waterloo. We then follow Argueta down the winding roads of NE Iowa as he begins to tell his story and, in turn, the stories of Guatemalan workers, families, and community members of the Midwestern towns where they reside. We sense immediately the many ways their lives are woven together. This narrative technique of superimposing and intersecting stories (both visually

and textually) begins to point to the power of personal testimony, which will ultimately be the axis around which the entire trilogy of documentaries turns.

3. Since human drama is at the core of these films, we might consider them an example of a uniquely American --in the largest, most inclusive sense-- and especially Guatemalan genre, *testimonio*. We recall that the most important text in this genre is arguably Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació conciencia* (1985), in which she recounts her experiences as an indigenous woman growing up in El Quiché, in war-torn Guatemala.^[1] Testimonio, according to literary theorist John Beverley, is always "told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience (for example, the experience of being a prisoner) (71). He goes on to say, "testimonio is a 'narración de urgencia' --a story that needs to be told--involving a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, exploitation, or simply survival that is implicated in the act of narration itself" (73). This quote explicitly notes that a testimonio is shared with some risk involved to those who reveal their plight. It is always, in Beverley's words, "...a... private history... that... confronts the reader with larger issues of social justice" (75). It is also a genre in which the interlocutor, spectator or recipient of the story is called upon to act. Argueta's films exhibit these qualities, as do many of the pieces featured in this forum.

4. Another feature testimonio exhibits is that it always depends on a "collector of stories," an archivist or a documentarian who converts the testimony into a shareable, accessible document (be it in visual, textual, audio or digital form) that allows the story to reach a broader public. The archivist's agency is intertwined with those whose stories he shares, a profound complexity that can raise ethical considerations. In his work Argueta often portrays a shared agency with those whose stories he documents. At the beginning of the film *The U Turn*, for example, seated at the wheel of the car on the road near Postville, he equates his own ongoing journey of discovery with the stories he will document in the film. He also employs inclusive narrational techniques at various other moments in the trilogy, such as in the film *abUSed* (12:30) when Argueta sits down for a haircut in Zaragoza, Guatemala. His own image is reflected in the mirror as he interviews the barber who trims his hair, Rolando Calicio, a migrant who had been arrested at the plant and later deported back to Guatemala. Calicio describes the dehumanizing comments made by ICE agents when he was detained in the raid. The barbershop conversation and intimate contact between the two men (while a woman stands by listening and acknowledging the power of his story, much like the spectators viewing the film) momentarily unite the storyteller and the documentarian, and reclaims the agency of deportee Calicio as he is shown expertly performing his profession -shears in hand- even as the filmmaker performs his.

5. Argueta's presence is also acknowledged as he speaks with Fidel, a Guatemalan farmer whose son has emigrated to Minnesota as recounted in *ABRAZOS* (38:26). As Fidel responds to Argueta's question, he does not address the camera directly but rather appears to focus on something larger and more all-encompassing, much like the global issue of immigration, his face wrought with emotion. The shot frames Fidel in his Guatemalan landscape, (thereby grounding immigration debates in a specific place, with precise familial and personal impacts) as he offers one of the most poignant statements in the trilogy of documentaries regarding the human cost of immigration policies, saying, "*Usted me está preguntando qué solución puede tener. Pues, ¿Solución? ¿Qué solución? Para mi, parece que no hay*

solución.”/You, sir, are asking me what solution [immigration] may have? Huh, solution? What solution? For me, it seems there is no solution [my translation].

6. Argueta also appears in the footage filmed in the Guatemala City airport, La Aurora, for *The U Turn* as he addresses the group of human rights activists and the young migrants who had been employed as minors in the Agriprocessors plant upon their return after offering their testimonies in the Black Hawk County, Iowa courtroom. He notes with irony that cutting edge responses to human rights violations casework is emerging from the experiences young Guatemalans from indigenous villages, and goes on to congratulate them for “experiencing and contributing to justice,” (41:25) then concluding, in a voiceover, that “they have done their civic duty.” His commentary acknowledges the efforts made by these minors (even though the alleged perpetrator of child labor law violations went free) as important contributions to the fight for justice, a fight Argueta, too, advances by collecting these testimonies and fleshing them out in a broader context, thereby granting both storytellers and listeners a point of entry into meaningful, informed dialogue about immigration.

7. These examples of shared agency and many others shown both visually and in the voicing of the films, evidence that Argueta is uniquely positioned to document these stories as a bilingual, bicultural, dual-nationality, award-winning filmmaker who is willing to take the long way around, and, if necessary, to double back, meet again, reconsider, and recollect the thoughts and experiences of those whose stories he shares. In his introductory remarks to *The U Turn* he explains that he initially went to Postville for two days in 2008, instead stayed for two weeks and during the next two years returned 28 times. In the interview included in this forum, Argueta speaks eloquently of how his own awakening to the stories of injustice dovetailed with his growth as a filmmaker.

8. Also in keeping with the typical parameters of testimonio, Argueta’s films document how a series of representatives (politicians, attorneys, judges, advocates, counselors, clergy, teachers and school administrators, professors, students, volunteers, and others) engage migrants’ stories within various social frameworks (i.e., the legal system, the school system, the Church). These advocates (like the director, Argueta himself) enable speakers to embark on the pursuit of justice, many times by educating them about their rights or simply by listening and making connections across the community, and they are often met with the remarkable resilience of the migrants who boldly go forward. This quality is present at various points throughout all the films, such as, for example, in *The U Turn* when Jimmy Gómez reflects upon his initial silence in the face of workplace abuse, “*Yo no les decía nada porque si les contestaba ellos sabían que tenían un rango más grande y ya sabía que, me habían dicho varias veces que si no lo hacía lo que ellos querían, ellos podían llamar a inmigración.*”/I never said anything, because if I talked back they knew they had power over me, and they knew, they had already told me several times that if I didn’t do what they wanted, they would call the immigration police” [my translation] (46:15). Gómez’s revelation is juxtaposed in the film by the intervention of Attorney Sonia Parras, who explains the parameters of the U visa cases she tried, pro bono, for workers like Jimmy that agreed to risk breaking the silence in the pursuit of undoing injustices.

9. The ability to forge paths toward justice is one of the foremost transformational strengths of the genre of testimonio, but often it leaves many questions unanswered and progress toward closure often

seems elusive. Viewers see the complexities of these journeys as the films in the trilogy unfold. The trajectory of stops and starts along a series of personal vignettes has a visual parallel in the films, in which a common motif is a winding road-- sometimes through the hilly country of Northeast Iowa, other times through indigenous villages in the Guatemalan Highlands. Viewers are often dazzled with wide-angle shots of natural beauty that sometimes also include images of people going about their daily tasks, working in the fields, or worshiping. For example, in one segment of the film *ABRAZOS* (32:22) we view the Guatemalan countryside through a series of wide-angle shots as we follow the young visitors from the U.S. as they leave their relatives' homes. These panoramic shots are contrasted by the use of close-ups of faces, eyes, hands and hearts, (one woman places her hand physically on her grandson's heart as a way to comfort him in minute 35:47 of *ABRAZOS*) to signal the profound emotional impact of the children's travels and the Guatemalan grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings they'll leave behind. Another montage in *ABRAZOS* emphasizes deep, sometimes spiritual commonalities linking the people and the land (36:43). This sequence superimposes the sunrise as a backdrop to a Mayan ceremony in Cerro Cotzic en Ixchiguan, San Marcos, Guatemala with participants speaking Spanish and Mam over a morning scene in Minnesota in which students begin their school day, back in the U.S. At several moments throughout the films, we also see a nod to the importance of corn in both Central American and central Midwestern lives, and to varied rural lifestyles that draw from the natural world for human survival. The sky also features prominently in several of the films. We see a space free of borders, across which birds (and planes) can move without restrictions, in contrast to the barriers placed on humans in their land-based existence. In all these ways, the visual representations of the landscapes or spaces where the stories unfold undergird the specificity of the people. Even what we hear in the films, in terms of the languages the people use -- which are often multiple languages that coexist-- and the musical backdrop (indigenous melodies and instruments, such as in segments of *ABRAZOS*, or Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" in the opening sequence of *abUSed*) unlock the complex cultural specificity of migrants' stories. One of the effects of these techniques is to provide breadth and depth to indigenous practices and people in their daily lives. We also note Argueta typically keeps participants' words in their original language and provides subtitles, thereby bridging languages and cultures of protagonists and spectators of many linguistic backgrounds.

10. Testimonio, --like the formal testimonies of victims of alleged crimes that occurred in the workplace, such as those captured on film and featured in *The U Turn*, or like the woman, Laura Castillo, who in *abUSed*, seated on a chair in the rectory of St. Bridget's church in Postville, recounts the verbal abuse and threats of violence she suffered during questioning by ICE agents who detained her at the Agriprocessors plant in 2008 (7:35)-- involves an oath to tell the truth. It always emerges in a framework that is infused with power in which an individual's story is offered as a means to seek justice --but its outcome is uncertain. Testimonio opens a space for reflection and can lay the groundwork for individual agency and empowerment, but ultimately, it also depends upon the recipient of the message to react ethically and responsibly-- in a sense, to be the judge and jury of the information they receive. As a viewer of Argueta's trilogy, you are called to react and engage with the stories to the best of your ability and to carry them with you as you make your own personal and political choices regarding immigration. You can decide how you will double back and revisit these stories as part of your understanding of how migrants and immigration policies shape our times.

11. The contributions to this forum include an interview with Luis Argueta filmed in the studios at the University of Northern Iowa and produced by professor Francesca Soans. The interview was conducted by Juan Zúñiga and a team of digital media and film students, thereby connecting the work of future documentarians with Argueta's legacy. We also include a written interview with Bea Gallardo prepared by professor Stephen Gaies, who turns our focus onto the work of a film producer whose career has helped document the relationship among human rights, migration and social justice. By considering these two interviews in the same forum, we can appreciate the filmmakers' commitment to advance the discussion of immigration issues by offering complex and faithful representations of the real lives of migrants, in long-form interviews situated in the typical spaces where they lead their daily lives (note numerous scenes around a table, in a kitchen, in the interior of homes in the Midwest or in Guatemala, as well as in schools and churches, for example). In this forum we are also attuned to the broader community impact of immigration thanks to also a personal narrative written by professor Cheryl Roberts, who played an active role in community response to the Postville raid in the days immediately following. Additionally, professor Linda Green publishes here a reflection that allows us to consider the Postville raid as part of a larger, *longue durée* socio-cultural, political and economic phenomenon that infuses Guatemalan migrants everyday lives with violence and fear. Finally, union organizer and former Agriprocessors employee Elver Herrera shares an excerpt from his book-length memoir. His dispatch from inside the plant provides readers a firsthand account of somber workplace realities as told from the perspective of an undocumented worker.



[1] Notably, Menchú intervened in Postville in the aftermath of the raid, where Argueta filmed her visit to St. Bridget church which appears in *abUSed*. In her comments she links the situation of Guatemalan migrants in Postville to the larger landscape of injustices committed against indigenous people for which she has become a global spokesperson. In the film *abUSed*, she states, “Este problema de Postville, yo lo veo mucho más profundo porque es como una olla de presión donde estaban ocurriendo muchas injusticias, pero no se sabía de esto. Yo creo que aquí no deben descansar hasta que no logren una justicia plena”/I see the problems in Postville as a much more profound and widespread issue because it's like a pressure cooker in which many injustices were occurring, but nobody knew

about them. I think that here no one should rest until their fight brings full justice” [my translation] (60:26).

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