

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

# Centering Latin American Lives Abroad

Ana Hontanilla

University of North Carolina Greensboro, US  
[amhontan@uncg.edu](mailto:amhontan@uncg.edu)

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**Peruvian Lives across Borders: Power, Exclusion, and Home.** By M. Cristina Alcalde. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 230. \$28.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780252083464.

**Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science.** By Carolina Alonso Bejarano, Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 184. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478003953.

**Accountability across Borders: Migrant Rights in North America.** Edited by Xóchitl Bada and Shannon Gleeson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 325. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477318362.

**Emigrants Get Political: Mexican Migrants Engage Their Home Towns.** By Michael S. Danielson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 264. \$74.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190679972.

**Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film.** Edited by Esteban E. Loustaunau and Lauren E. Shaw. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018. Pp. 339. \$89.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781683400233.

**The Immigrant Rights Movement: The Battle over National Citizenship.** By Walter J. Nicholls. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 296. \$25.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781503609327.

**Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration.** By Ana Raquel Minian. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. 328. \$29.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780674737037.

**The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility.** By Rebecca M. Schreiber. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 370. \$30.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781517900236.

---

According to World Bank estimates, some 243 million migrants worldwide live and work outside their country of birth. These migrants send a total of \$582 billion in remittances to their home countries. The eight books under review in this essay argue that because of their economic contribution, migrants' well-being is vital to both sending and receiving countries. Unfortunately, many countries' leaders do not view migrants in this way. Undocumented immigrants are among the most oppressed people in North American societies. The United States, particularly in recent years, is a case in point.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as Ana Raquel Minian explains in *Undocumented Lives*, the question of who was a legitimate bearer of rights was unresolved in the United States. Migrants and their allies concluded that their legal efforts had to carry the label "undocumented" because migrants were denied protections because of their legal status. Framed this way, within the identity-based model, undocumented people must "come out" and declare themselves illegal. Only then would they be able to claim rights. The unintended effect was the reinforcement of the migrants' classification as illegal. During the 1990s and the early twenty-first century,

migrants' pain of separation and their exclusion from the communities in their countries of origin and destination alike exacerbated the difficulties they faced in claiming their rights as workers. This turbulent half century is the one under consideration in these eight books, which are valuable and timely for more than their academic merit. Between the time these authors began to conduct their research and when they published it, many recent events in immigration policy and political rhetoric have further worsened migrants' lives.

The ethnonationalism of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign foreshadowed the spectacular punishments that unauthorized migrants endured during his presidency. Once in office, Trump transformed the deportation machine of the Obama administration—already historically unrivaled—by adding new horrors. Migrant families were jailed by executive order. Thousands of children were separated from their families, with many still detained or lost in the system as of this writing, despite a June 2018 judicial order mandating immediate reunification. The Trump administration also attempted to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). A new Denaturalization Task Force targeted even naturalized citizens for deportation.

Change—and perhaps novel ways to push for it—has never been more urgent. Yet few changes have occurred since I began to write this review in fall 2020. On January 17, 2021, the *New York Times* reported that then president-elect Joe Biden planned to send an immigration bill to Congress that would provide a pathway to citizenship for eleven million undocumented people. Days later, however, in his inaugural address, Mr. Biden did not mention comprehensive migration reform. The lives of unauthorized migrants living in the United States remain painfully fraught and uncertain, their futures in this country still devoid of a clear path forward.

Thus the political debate around migration remains as crucial as ever, and the questions discussed in these books are central to that debate. These questions include the history of unauthorized migration in the United States and the ways unauthorized migrants face displacement, undesirability, disposability, and lack of belonging in North America, including Mexico and Canada. Who is a legitimate bearer of rights is also up for debate.

More importantly, some of the scholarship under review here does more than engage in debate; in an innovative way, it steps out of the academy's gates altogether. These authors ask how scholar-teachers, activists, and artists can elucidate and create the conditions that help migrants become active voices, participants in community organizing, political agents, and legal self-advocates. To avoid reproducing the hierarchies that contribute to political stalemates or destructive policies, they work to right power imbalances between the subject and object of research. They apply new research methodologies and new ways of theorizing and writing, and cultivate alternative relationships among research, activism, and the arts. They differentiate between fruitful and unfruitful collaborations. By accounting for the political and subject positions of undocumented immigrants and centering them in the production of knowledge, these scholars work alongside artists, activists, and immigrants as joint agents of change.

This groundbreaking approach helps us understand how migrants' unresolved struggle for self-representation and advocacy clashes with forces of globalism and nation-states' jealous protection of territorial sovereignty. At a time when the drive toward human and labor rights of migrants has reached an impasse, these scholars show ways to awaken consciousness and promote civil engagement among students and members of migrant communities. This research can be seen as an engine of hope.

*Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration*, by Ana Raquel Minian, traces today's unauthorized migration to the years between 1965 and 1986, when the disruption of Mexican circular migration trapped unauthorized migrants on US soil. The book explores Mexican and US policies as well as media resources and intimate testimonials to show how migrants thought about home and how they were treated, as well as discussing their financial limitations, child-rearing challenges, and relationships with romantic partners and family.

Chapters 1 and 2 elaborate how, starting in the 1970s, cultural attitudes about migrants on both sides of the border created a dispensable population that lived beyond notions of national protection and belonging. In Mexico, influenced by concerns about limited public resources, unemployment and overpopulation, policy makers viewed emigration as a potential solution. Mexican officials publicly encouraged men to leave the country despite knowing that the US would treat unsanctioned border crossers as illegal aliens. At the same time, the United States sought to make it harder for migrants to enter and stay. Congress limited the number of legal immigrants, knowing this would increase undocumented migration. Immigration and Naturalization Services fortified the US-Mexico border and escalated raids. Yet these measures did not reduce migration. Rather, they reinforced the notion that Mexicans were illegal aliens, a population without a country or the benefits of permanent residence, people who could not join the social fabric of either nation.

It wasn't only government officials who prevented migrants from residing permanently in one place. Communities in Mexico with high migrant populations held strong ideas about who had a right to live where. Chapter 3 discusses how families and local communities denied migrants a permanent settlement at home in Mexico. Cultural notions there about gender, sexuality, and division of labor pressured some to cross the border to the United States and engage in circular migration, others to go to Mexico's larger cities, and yet others to remain in their own households. In general, heterosexual men of reproductive age, considered the economic providers for their families, learned at a young age that if they couldn't find a job in Mexico they should migrate to the United States. During the 1970s and 1980s the families and friends of these men, adamant that they engage in circular migration, went so far as to bar them from settling in their own communities. (By contrast, women and gay men, under different cultural pressures, did not migrate.) Once migrants found employment in the United States, the same relatives who had encouraged them to leave Mexico insisted that they return home to spend time with their families—but only temporarily. This contributed to the migrants' sense of not belonging anywhere. In chapter 4, we learn how they countered such exclusion by redefining family, hometown, and community.

Chapter 5 explores how migrants sought pride and belonging through club activism. Taking as a case study the Los Angeles–based Club Social Guadalupe Victoria, Minian demonstrates how by supporting their hometowns from abroad, migrants countered the idea that they were economically superfluous. In the 1970s, members of the *Unión de Mexicanos y Residentes en el Extranjero* stated publicly that the Mexican government was failing working-class communities by leaving men with few options other than emigration. Clubs used their social, economic, and cultural capital to act as extraterritorial welfare states, shouldering what should have been the Mexican government's responsibilities toward its citizens. These welfare communities provided a space where migrants could identify with and belong to local, state, national, and transnational communities simultaneously. Migrant leaders established an organizational framework that politicians in Mexico were forced to recognize for the sake of sustaining the country's economy.

Chapter 7 turns to migrants' struggles in defense of workers' rights within the United States. Before the 1970s, the idea that individuals deserve rights for their humanity or economic contribution was not commonly discussed. Despite migrants' presence on US soil, their lack of documentation meant they could not claim civil rights. However, to do so became imperative amid the consistent denial of workers' rights; growing surveillance; and the use of schools, workplaces and highways as sites to reinforce the boundaries of legality. Undocumented migrants defended themselves with both grassroots movements and legal strategies. The work of the Maricopa County Organizing Project, which sought to unionize undocumented farmworkers in Arizona, exemplifies such grassroots efforts. These organizations helped migrants attain a sense of political power and build an activist community. However, victories were limited to the specific locales where struggles took place. Other migrant activists fought through the courts for those without papers to be able to unionize, go to school, and travel freely. Thanks to pro-immigrant lawyers and advocacy organizations, several key legal cases did reach the US Supreme Court, leading to some protections for undocumented workers.

Despite increasing visibility, activism in favor of undocumented migrants' rights declined in the mid-1980s. Chapter 7 explores how policy makers overlooked migrants' needs and lives and failed to address the true roots of migration. Instead, the Reagan-era 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) made crossing the border more expensive and dangerous, and migrants stopped engaging in circular migration and instead began to settle permanently. By the end of the 1980s, this shift from circular migration to permanent settlement had taken place, as chapter 8 details. In 1986 there were 3.2 million undocumented migrants in the United States; in 1996, 5 million; and in 2006, 11 million. Officials had helped create a permanent underclass of displaced, undesired people.

The migrant disenfranchisement of 1965–1986 only intensified in the 1990s when, under the pressure of globalizing forces, public discourse debated migration under the banners of national security and identity. As national sovereignty diminished, nation-states found meaning in protecting borders and by strengthening and exercising their power against migrants. In response, advocacy groups, including migrant-led organizations, have stepped up to meet the needs of migrant diasporas in employment, health, and education. These groups have demanded accountability on the part of employers and community officials for the well-being of migrant populations. *The Immigrant Rights Movement: The Battle over National Citizenship*, by Walter J. Nicholls, traces the evolution of these groups between the 1990s and the mid-2000s.

Nicholls first focuses on 1990s immigrant rights battles through the lens of day laborers' conflicts. He then discusses the nationalization of the immigrant rights movement in the first years of the twenty-first century. By analyzing an impressive variety of resources, including newspapers, documents associated with national

coalitions, and interviews with leaders, the author shows convincingly how unprecedented social, cultural, financial, and political capital accumulated around the mainstream immigrant rights movement prior to the Obama administration. In 2008, the presidential candidate Barack Obama, then a senator, promised mainstream migrants' rights movement leaders the support of his administration to push for comprehensive immigration reform. Once Obama took office, however, his White House did not prioritize this issue. In 2010, congressional support for comprehensive immigration reform sank, and between 2009 and 2013 the Obama administration removed approximately four hundred thousand unauthorized immigrants each year, more than any other president. In the official view, the deportation of a few million was the price to pay in exchange for the legalization of millions of others. But the promised legalizations never occurred.

Then came the unexpected victory of the distinctly anti-immigration Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, who served as a conduit for the spread of ethnonationalism. These facts lead to Nicholls's central question: Why did a social movement that had gathered such powerful momentum fail to accomplish immigration reform at a time when the political climate would seem to have been friendly? The author argues that this colossal policy failure originated in pressures to legitimize immigrant claims within the frame of liberal national citizenship.

Liberal nationalism is a political philosophy that professes greater inclusion while simultaneously embracing core national norms (border, cultural identity, rights to nationals, and a central state to administer rights) that would resonate with the public. Mainstream immigrant rights advocates embraced national citizenship, placing citizenship, rights, and belonging at the core of legitimate claims. Rather than call for the dismantling of borders (in line with the idea of citizenship as territorial personhood, whereby any person within the US possesses constitutionally protected rights), or for post-national citizenship (stressing that migrants had fundamental human rights protected by state, treaties, and international institutions), the immigrant rights movement buttressed citizenship's nationalistic underpinnings as they sought to make it inclusive of deserving migrants. A movement for the rights of foreigners was transformed into one more political force reproducing the rhetoric of national citizenship. This liberal flavor of nationalism depicted America as welcoming and immigrants as highly deserving subjects: culturally assimilated, well-rooted, respectable contributors to the national community. Liberal nationalism transformed some immigrants into *de facto* members of the nation. Affiliation with US values made them eligible for citizenship, or so the thinking went. This approach failed, Nicholls argued.

Before the 1990s, in fact, questions of citizenship elicited little passion in the United States. Then, growing visibility and settlement of immigrants in towns across the country began to prompt discussions around the framing of citizenship. Policy makers drew legal lines to demarcate who deserved inclusion or exclusion from local communities and therefore access to rights such as work, unfettered public mobility, education, and health care. Suburbs typically embraced the more restrictive end of the nationalism spectrum, defined around ancestry or common cultural traits; they held legal, physical, and symbolic boundaries separating national and foreign to be sacred and immutable. Thus they also saw unauthorized migrants as violating the sanctity of the border. This point of view transformed migrants into an existential threat, a contagion wholly outside the established order and lacking rights. Ethnonationalism gathered steam during 1990s. The notion of citizenship narrowed, centering on common culture, social practices, and belonging.

Day laborers and their allies, however, resisted these discourses and policies that sprang from ethnonationalism, arguing that the denial of basic rights was inconsistent with the ideal of the "land of the free." By the end of the 1990s, support for the rights and dignity of immigrants was bubbling up in small towns around the country. Welfare organizations, unions, religious groups, lawyers, residents, and employers engaged in local campaigns.

At first, their ideological positions were inconsistent and by any definition radical. Amateur advocates and activists argued that migrants, like anyone else, possessed undeniable rights like free speech, assembly, and due process. Some drew from a framing of citizenship as territorial personhood; a few adopted a postnational frame; still others aligned with liberal nationalism. All accepted nationality as the building block of citizenship. Combining several arguments, they defended the idea that undocumented migrants should be integrated into the social order with the right to work, for instance, instead of being banished. Using Los Angeles as a case study, Nicholls elucidates how the National Day Laborer Organizing Network was created in response to the need to coordinate efforts, worker centers, and various advocacy organizations in 2001.

The second part of the book examines how regional battles scaled up and argues that the battle for immigrant rights was now becoming a struggle over the very meaning of national citizenship. The author first explains how, under the Clinton administration, the state accrued repressive power against immigrants with the passing of laws such as Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the

Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. These laws expanded the scope of deportable offenses and federal officials' ability to detect and remove immigrants by restricting judicial review. Second, Nicholls shows how federal officials on both sides of the debate tied discourses about immigration to national citizenship and rights. Both sides agreed that Congress and the White House needed to fix a broken system. Politicians, officials, and advocates spoke of comprehensive immigration reform that would cleanse contaminating elements from national citizenship. Republicans favored restrictive measures, but both they and Democrats maintained that comprehensive immigration reform would grant legal status to deserving immigrants and banish the underserving ones, such as unassimilated recent arrivals, precarious and informal workers, and criminals. In this way, ethno- and liberal nationalism defined the boundaries of acceptable citizenship in the hallways of political power.

The growth of the federal government's legal and symbolic power, instead of discouraging immigrant rights advocates, forced them to find ways to strengthen their position. Several national organizations began to collaborate. Formerly dispersed, the migrants' movement became unified and disciplined. Its growth was aided by several visionary philanthropies whose funding enabled national organizations to undertake costly research and generate ideological frames that would resonate with the US public. Newly flush, the organizations generated activist training materials, ran workshops, and developed relationships with political elites. They developed a sophisticated discursive infrastructure of resonant messages and stories, ensuring unified messaging. Leaders saw to it that individuals merged their personal stories, ideas, and utterances with the movement's central narrative. The idea was to represent undocumented migrants as de facto Americans.

Nicholls argues not only that the frame of national citizenship defined the rules of political engagement, but that the result was unsatisfactory. The more the mainstream movement engaged in resource accumulation and discursive conformity, and the higher it climbed politically, the less able it became to demand change. Ceasing to become a force of transformation, the movement became instead an engine of political reproduction, albeit in a liberal direction. The acquisition of national power required concentration of capital, and as organizations came to depend on elites for key resources, they moved away from the precarious working-class base that had fueled the early movement.

Not all regional organizations cooperated with nationally influential leadership and its unwillingness to criticize the Obama administration for its aggressive enforcement. Many activists were dismayed by the hierarchical nature of the national migrants' movement, its nationalistic mobilizing frames, and the constraints imposed by political and financial benefactors in Washington. Although the mainstream leadership continued to command the general movement, this left flank initiated the most innovative and forceful campaigns of the decade, including the one that resulted in DACA.

Nicholls's book convincingly highlights a key paradox that advocates and activists face when moving into the political field: the same conditions that allowed immigrant rights movements to become a political force wound up binding the movement to the very system it sought to change. It remains to be seen whether the Biden administration's approach to migration reform will support a liberal approach to national citizenship. If it does, Nicholls's readers may wind up being skeptical about the prospect of meaningful reforms.

Complementing the account of the mainstream migrants' rights movement failure, *Accountability across Borders: Migrant Rights in North America* examines factors that have led to relatively successful state-civil society collaborations in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Edited by Xóchitl Bada and Shannon Gleeson, this multidisciplinary essay collection adopts a transnational lens to examine the effects of migrant civil society, migration law, and enforcement agencies on migrants' rights on both sides of the border in areas like employment, health, and education. The essays demonstrate that civic spaces are important not only to advocate for migrant rights in destination countries, but also to hold the governments of origin countries accountable to their nationals living abroad. Contributors to this volume consider the roles of both origin and destination states and how each engages with advocacy and migrant-led organizations. Relying on institutional analyses of North and Central America as well as on case studies, each essay seeks to understand the genesis of bilateral and regional cooperation around migrants' rights, actions taken for the implementations of agreements, and the mechanisms that have produced positive results. With their wide-ranging approach to the study of migrant advocacy, these essays highlight the importance of examining both sides of the border.

The book's most important contribution is its chronicle of migrant efforts to secure resources in host societies, such as working rights in Canada, health services in the United States, and educational access in Toronto and San Francisco. It profiles not only efforts by well-funded transnational coalitions working on global-scale migrant worker rights, but also underfunded, localized battles. The authors argue that

nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations are almost always at the root of formal partnership programs that engage immigrant communities. The importance of such advocacy is evidenced in the case of migrant worker rights in North America, where nongovernmental organizations pushed for accountability under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and to limit immigration enforcement in schools. Sustainable coalitions and alliances are key for policy implementation and social accountability. These policy battles also become a means of building civil society capacity as alliances mature, expand, and gain visibility.

Civil society's capacity to advocate at various scales is constrained, however, by its institutionalization, the structural limitations on policy, and the power asymmetries between origin and destination actors. To overcome such constraints, the book proposes, countries of origin therefore must increase their advocacy for the rights of their nationals living abroad and for returning migrants via bilateral agreements, federal partnerships, and relations with subnational government actors. The authors cite as evidence the repeated successes of robust networks of nonprofit organizations working in collaboration with strong government agencies.

The conditions that favored migrants to become active voices, participants in community organizing, political agents, and advocates who deploy the law to defend their rights are further explored in *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science*. This book discusses how to use anthropological knowledge to advance the causes of undocumented migrants in the United States. Coauthored by four activist-researchers, the book places the tools for research and analysis in the hands of two undocumented immigrants. This research was conducted in a New Jersey town between 2011 and 2015. Daniel Goldstein, professor emeritus of anthropology at Rutgers University, coordinated and managed the project. Carolina Alonso Bejarano, then a graduate student in women's and gender studies at Rutgers, provided the analytical frame, which focused on the relationship between decolonial feminist theory and the production of immigrant illegality in the United States. Researchers Lucía López Juárez and Mirian Mijangos García were undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala, respectively, and lived in the town under examination. Neither had had previous training in anthropology or ethnography. They learned to collect data and in time became educators, communicators, and community leaders.

López Juárez and Mijangos García recorded and recounted stories of often-invisible suffering and struggles of marginalized people. In so doing they became literary writers and storytellers. But their interviews and subject observations were also opportunities for activism and advocacy, allowing them to inform undocumented workers of their rights and how to defend those rights from violation by employers. López Juárez, for instance, transformed her field notes into stories or morality tales for readers outside the research team. Titled "American Dream?," "False Promises," and "A Hard Lesson," her tales served to educate people about their rights and to illustrate the importance of community organizing. Mijangos García, for her part, transformed her field notes into activist songs about immigrant workers' rights, her sense of belonging to the Casa Hometown "family," and the basic humanity of the undocumented. Also the team wrote the play *Sin papeles, sin miedo* with a pedagogical message that emerged from the ethnographic work: under US law every worker has rights regardless of immigration status. Lyrics and drama can be found in chapter 5, offering educators the opportunity to teach these works in interdisciplinary courses that study the social effects of self-representation in writing and literature.

Mexican and Central American migrants' struggles over meaning and self-representation are also explored in *The Undocumented Every Day: Migrants Lives and the Politics of Visibility*, in which Rebecca Schreiber looks at nationwide artistic projects—photography, films, video, and audio recordings—developed amid the post-9/11 War on Terror and through 2012. These projects took place across the United States and in the US-Mexico borderland, and their goal was to change the way "illegality" was racialized and criminalized. The initiatives were based on the premise that visibility would humanize migrants, and that documenting their lives would present them as deserving of citizenship or other forms of migration status. Schreiber argues that, as migrants used the mixed-genre aesthetic, they learned to center their subjectivity, their presence, and their right to mobility in response to state violence and repression. When provided with cameras, paintbrushes, or writing workshops, migrants represented alternative ways of belonging that do not necessarily rely on notions of citizenship. Their artistic creations challenged neoliberal conceptions of representation as a means of inclusion and recognition. They questioned citizenship as a prerequisite to live, work, and participate in the nation-state, and they questioned the role of undocumented people in the US economy. Self-representation became a way to emphasize community organizing and activism, protect migrant communities, and respond to the violence of surveillance, detention, and deportation.

The first of the book's three sections begins by describing two labor union-affiliated documentary projects from 1989 to 2009 featuring migrants' photographs of their everyday lives. Chapter 1 focuses on the Bread

and Roses Cultural Project in the Hempstead, Long Island, area in 2000–2001. Part of the nationwide project Unseen America, Bread and Roses was the first nationwide project to provide photography workshops for groups of workers, including low-wage day laborers, and to exhibit their work to audiences both within and beyond their communities. Chapter 2 focuses on the project Communities without Borders, which in the summer of 2003 provided a photographic bridge between migrants in the Poughkeepsie, New York, area, whose mobility was constrained, and their families in La Ciénaga, Oaxaca, Mexico. A network of community and migrant health centers in the Hudson River Valley created the project to encourage medical self-care.

The second section examines projects that center on US-Mexico border enforcement. Chapter 3 shows how the collaborative 2005 art initiative the Border Film Project focused on both sides of the migration debate and wound up becoming another technology of nationalism. By neither contextualizing the militarization of the border nor addressing the problem of anti-immigrant groups' violence, the project ultimately obscured migrants' perspectives. In contrast, a collaboration between filmmakers and community activists that resulted in the film *Maquilápolis: City of Factories* (2006) prioritized the activists as political subjects and successfully advanced their goal, which was to challenge multinational corporations' positioning of workers as disposable.

The third section analyzes multimedia and social media that show the effects of state practices on undocumented migrants. Chapter 5 examines the art installation *Sanctuary City / Ciudad Santuario, 1989–2009*, which criticized policing and surveillance by exhibiting migrants' oral testimonies and discussing protests that contested criminalization of the undocumented. Chapter 6 focuses on how undocumented youth and activists deployed countersurveillance, performance, and counter-documents to chronicle state agents' processes of arresting and detaining undocumented migrants. The circulation of these projects via social media emphasized mobility and mobilization.

How artists and activists can best work together as agents of change is the focal point of *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film*. This collection of essays edited by Esteban Loustaunau and Lauren Shaw analyzes mostly US documentaries produced between 2008 and 2014, each exploring migrants' experiences as sites of denunciation, resistance, testimonial, and self-representation. Part 1 analyzes documentaries for their political intention, while part 2 studies migration, loss, memory, and identity across time and space. Part 3 includes essays about the latest wave of unaccompanied migrant minors from Mexico and Central America and discussions of recent forms of video production and dissemination and innovative approaches to first-person testimonials. Part 4 comprises the editors' interviews with five of the featured documentarians. The editors' choices centralize filmmakers' contribution to the national debate around migrants' rights and immigration reform during President Obama's first term.

Chapter 1 analyzes the collaboration between historian Juan González and filmmaker Eduardo López. The two filmed a historical perspective of Latin migration to the United States aimed at a wide audience. Lauren Shaw explores connections between González's book *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (2000, 2011) and the eponymous 2012 film by focusing on the film as a counternarrative to that of the mainstream press. She pays attention to the director's skillful use of affect and to his organizing of migrants' narratives around pain and suffering instead of hate. The film was shown on university campuses across the country.

Chapter 2, by Jared List, explores how the films *abUSed: The Postville Raid* (dir. Luis Argueta, 2010) and *Sin país* (dir. Theo Rigby, 2010) advocate for migrants' rights by privileging visibility and remembrance of unjust deportation cases that occurred in 2008 and 2009, respectively. List argues that by presenting migrants outside the law's protections, these filmmakers take a stand on immigration reform: in the name of justice, migrant workers must have basic rights, such as freedom of mobility and from unwarranted searches. Likewise, families have the right to remain united. Chapter 11, featuring Loustaunau's interview with Argueta, complements this essay by discussing his trip to Postville, Iowa, in 2008 to film the aftermath of the infamous raid by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) of Agriprocessors, Inc. These events moved Argueta, a naturalized migrant himself, to film *abUSed*. The film offered a way to reflect on how, for migrant workers, articulating a consciousness of injustice was a slow process, even if at all times they had "an awareness of their dignity."

Chapter 3, by Thomas Piñeros Shields, explores Jenny Alexander's film *The Vigil* (2014), which features two undocumented immigrant women in Phoenix who resisted Arizona Senate Bill 1070 in 2010. This bill empowered local police to stop and search persons suspected of unauthorized presence in the United States. For a few months Gina and Rosa transformed the state capitol lawn into a place for devotion and prayer to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Migrants congregated there to speak, listen to one another, and learn to respond to threats, detention, and deportation. In addition to contextualizing the historical use of devotional figures

as symbols of indigenous resistance against colonial power, Piñeros Shields places this contentious vigil at the epicenter of the immigration enforcement debate in the State of Arizona.

Chapter 12 features Loustaunau's interview with Alexander, a former community organizer. She explains that her films bear witness to the struggles, injustices, and traumas the migrant community endures, but with a dual purpose. The films offer migrants the opportunity to see themselves on camera, to listen to their own voices, and to realize their empowerment. At the same time, filmmaking also enables Alexander to understand how the documentary form can be a tool for activism. Activism through filmmaking can counteract migrants' feelings of shame and guilt for being told they are criminals and end self-abnegating coping mechanisms like silence.

Examining *Los invisibles* (dir. Gael García Bernal and Marc Silver, 2010) and *De nadie* (dir. Tin Dirdamal, 2005), Loustaunau argues in chapter 4 that mothers portrayed in the films transgress traditional expectations in their responses to extraordinary circumstances. Their journeys challenge viewers to identify their own contribution to US cultural contempt for migrants.

Ana Ortúzar-Young opens part 2 with her study of three related films, produced in 1962, 1995, and 2011, respectively, about Operation Pedro Pan. This was the 1960–1962 mass exodus of children aged two to sixteen from Cuba to the United States. Part 3 addresses current patterns of migration as well as new forms of documentary film production. Ramón J. Guerra's chapter explores the role of *testimonio* in the documentary *Which Way Home* (dir. Rebecca Cammisa, 2009), filmed amid the surge of child migrants from Mexico and Central America. By expanding the concept of *testimonio*, the author argues, this first-person documentary with an embedded cameraperson is intended to change representations of the young immigrants. Juan G. Ramos discusses how contemporary forms of video making promote greater participation by encouraging horizontal approaches to self-representation. Migrants introduce the tangle of circumstances that led them to leave their home countries and create new lives elsewhere. These self-representations build on the idea that migrants see themselves as equals to others in host countries. The wealth of visual and textual materials representing and discussing the stories of migrants from Latin America brings migrant experiences closer to students.

Sixteen million Mexican migrants have entered the United States since 1965. But between 2013 and 2018, more Mexican nationals moved back to Mexico from the United States than went the other direction. That trend began earlier. In *Emigrants Get Political: Mexican Migrant Engage Their Home Towns*, Michael S. Danielson explores how the unprecedented return of 1.4 million migrants from the US to Mexico in 2007–2010 has affected the social and political dynamics of migrants' hometowns. Has their political engagement enhanced local democracy in Mexico? One may expect the development of migrant civil society to enhance democracy. Migrant-based organizations may strengthen civil society as well as other components of democracy, such as accountability and competition. In addition, the migration experience opens the door to new political actors, breaking down elite recruitment. The institutionalized dominant party in Mexico is the center-right-wing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which held power uninterruptedly between 1929 and 2000. In theory, migrants who may have developed democratic attitudes in the United States might form a natural constituency for the IPR's political opponents, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) or the conservative National Action Party (PAN). In practice, it was complicated.

It was in 1997 that Mexican migrants emerged as a new social and political constituency in the Mexican polity, when they fought for and won the right to dual nationality and, in 2005, the right to vote in Mexican presidential elections. Many expected that the enfranchisement of the diaspora would shape the direction of national politics. With participation low in both the 2006 and 2012 national elections, this turned out not to be the case. Still, Mexican migrants do engage socially and politically within their communities of origin. Given that one of the enduring features of national and local politics in Mexico is a tendency toward discretionary rule by relatively closed groups of local elites, can the democratizing influence of migrants and returned migrants replace the PRI? The author concludes that there is no simple answer to these questions. Research conducted between 2007 and 2010 in the migrant municipalities of Oaxaca, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato found that while the migration experience shapes individual political identity, such experiences are multiple and diverse. Thus migrants' political involvement and impact is neither monolithic nor necessarily democratizing.

According to Danielson, if one defines democracy and democratization in Mexico as anything that weakens the PRI, then data suggest that the political empowerment of migrants as a new social group does strengthen non-PRI parties. A weakening of presidential power and a reconcentration of power in the hands of the governors have characterized the advent of political competition and increased pluralism in Mexico. In this context, the fact that migrants are organized, engaged, and united in opposition to the PRI means



that they are more likely to find representation and more likely to sympathize with historical opposition parties. This engagement has helped to reinforce democratic institutions and practices such as increased local political competition, strengthened migrant civil society, and the diffusion of more democratic attitudes and behaviors.

Danielson discusses evidence that supports a more pessimistic interpretation, however. By this view, the greater social and political incorporation of migrants in non-PRI states and municipalities is not a sign of democratization. Rather, it suggests that the PAN and to a lesser extent the PRD have succeeded in recruiting the migrant sector into the old corporatist mode that continues to prevail in postrevolutionary Mexico. The author points out that the PRI's technocratic wing under Salinas de Gortari laid the groundwork to institutionalize the relationship between the federal government and the diaspora through the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (PCME) in 1990. Entrepreneurial PRI governors who established tight relationships with organized migrants in the United States pioneered state-level outreach to migrants. These federal and state efforts to institutionalize the relationship with migrants in the United States were arguably motivated by the Salinas administration's need to reestablish popular legitimacy in the wake of the 1988 election, which was widely seen as fraudulent. Protests motivated Salinas to reach out to the migrant community and find ways to represent its interests, or at least to limit the extent to which it strengthened the political opposition. As the party of the federal government at the time of Danielson's research, PAN may have used these connections with organized migrants to benefit its co-partisans.

Research on Latin American migration has tended to focus on the working classes, with only a few exceptions giving sustained attention to emerging middle classes. *Peruvian Lives across Borders: Power, Exclusion, and Home*, by M. Cristina Alcalde, contributes to recent efforts to question social hierarchies defined by intersections of race, class, origin, and sexual orientation. The author explores how members of privileged social groups negotiate, challenge, and reproduce transnational social inequalities. Complexities and conflicts within the country's middle class are vast, structuring Lima's city life against a backdrop of segregation, discrimination, and social inequalities. Alcalde demonstrates how these social hierarchies accompany privileged Peruvians on their transnational journeys. Oppressive practices persist within Peruvian migrant groups in the United States, helping to reinforce exclusionary practices at home. This book demonstrates that attention to migrant middle classes illuminates how everyday practices define power dynamics and structure inequality both within middle classes and between the middle and working classes. Political parties may reproduce inequalities, but common people, too, perpetuate discrimination.

Migration today is a full-blown humanitarian crisis around the world. In their studies of the origins and consequences of mass migrations these books take the bold step of centralizing migrants' stories, dilemmas, and choices, and their authors make conscious efforts to avoid an objectifying approach. They also explore how to provide tools for migrants' self-transformation to gain political consciousness and learn mechanisms for self-advocacy, thus marking their own efforts as activists as well as academics. The centering of migrants' voices in research, teaching, and activist projects reminds us that each story is unique with endings that are impossible to know. Academic and activist projects aim to bridge migrants into a more hopeful future and to give visibility to seemingly dark and hopeless situations. By examining factors that lead to failures and successes of state-civil society collaborations, conditions that promote engagement by returning migrants in politics at home, and projects that enable migrants' voices to be heard, this scholarship contributes to a better understanding of relationships between history, sociology, ethnography, storytelling, the visual arts, politics, and social transformation. If we are to avoid further misery and tragedy, these relationships can and must lead to better lives for the 243 million who have left home.

### Author Information

Ana Hontanilla is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. She graduated with a law degree from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, Spain, and received her PhD in Hispanic Language and Literature from Washington University in Saint Louis (Missouri). Her academic work has appeared in specialized journals such as *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, *Decimonónica*, *Letras Femeninas*, and *Dieciocho*. She has also collaborated in volumes published by Vittorio Klostermann, Honoré Champion Éditeur, Instituto de Estudios Hispánicos and CSIC (Spain), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Gobierno de Tlaxcala, and Universidad de Cádiz. She was awarded fellowships by the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Newberry Library in Chicago. Her short fiction has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *Cuadernos ALDEEU*, *Ámbitos Feministas*, *Chiricú Journal*, *Baquiana: Revista Literaria*, *Switchgrass Review*, *Latin American Literary Review*, and *Seattle Scribe*.

**How to cite this article:** Hontanilla, Ana. 2021. Centering Latin American Lives Abroad. *Latin American Research Review* 56(4), pp. 958–967. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1719>

**Submitted:** 16 February 2021

**Accepted:** 23 July 2021

**Published:** 07 December 2021

**Copyright:** © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**LARR**

*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 