

Empathetic and Affective Circuits in Marcela Zamora Chamorro's *María en tierra de nadie* and Tin Dirdamal's *De nadie*

Jared List
Doane University
jared.list@doane.edu

Using Roger Rouse's (2002) theoretical conceptualization of migration as circuits and border, this essay analyzes two documentary Central American-Mexican films on migration, Tin Dirdamal's *De nadie* (2005) and Marcela Zamora Chamorro's *María en tierra de nadie* (2011). The films represent and engender circuits rooted in basic humanity and seek to recuperate a humanitarian model that establishes an ethics of relationality grounded in human rights as opposed to a necropolitical one derived from violence and consumption. Both documentaries become a form of resistance against a necropolitical system that consumes and destroys human life, through their ability to prompt viewers to recognize and apprehend the migrants' situations. By employing testimonial and affective strategies, the films attempt emotional identification and affective transmission between the viewer and the films' subjects, at the risk of replicating the very notion they are fighting. The films challenge viewers to comprehend the humanity shared by self and Other. Such a demand threatens the gore capitalist model of power that enables the violence, precarity, and vulnerability that migrants face during their journey.

Keywords: migration, Central America, Mexico, documentary film, affect, circuits

Utilizando la conceptualización teórica de Roger Rouse (2002) de la migración como circuitos y frontera, este ensayo analiza dos documentales centroamericano-mexicanos sobre la migración, *De nadie* (2005) de Tin Dirdamal y *María en tierra de nadie* (2011) de Marcela Zamora Chamorro. Las películas representan y engendran circuitos arraigados en la humanidad básica y buscan recuperar un modelo humanitario que establezca una ética de relacionalidad basada en los derechos humanos, frente a una necropolítica derivada de la violencia y el consumo. Ambos documentales se convierten en una forma de resistencia contra un sistema necropolítico que consume y destruye la vida humana, a través de su capacidad para mover a los espectadores a reconocer y aprehender las situaciones de los migrantes. Mediante el empleo de estrategias testimoniales y afectivas, las películas intentan la identificación emocional y la transmisión afectiva entre el espectador y los sujetos de las películas, a riesgo de replicar la noción misma que están atacando. Las películas retan a los espectadores a comprender la humanidad compartida por uno mismo y el Otro. Tal demanda amenaza el modelo capitalista

gore de poder que permite la violencia, la precariedad y la vulnerabilidad que enfrentan los migrantes durante su viaje.

Palabras clave: migración, Centroamérica, México, cine documental, afecto, circuitos

Introduction

In his essay “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” Roger Rouse (2002) challenges the relevance of two modern discourses that have informed the fields of social sciences: the center-periphery narrative and the one on bordered communities. Drawing upon Fredric Jameson’s notion of postmodern hyperspace, Rouse argues that in a world where transnationalism engenders social, cultural, and economic relations, sociospatial images of the circuit and border zone better describe current social, transnational realities. Nearly twenty years later, Rouse’s argument remains relevant, perhaps even more so. Rather than the image of the territory-bounded community delineated by borders, for Rouse the community has transformed into “a *site* in which transnationally organized circuits of capital, labor, and communications intersect with one another and with local ways of life” (165). Within the context of the United States and Mexico—the sites Rouse had in mind as he wrote his analysis—the circuit aptly describes many cities across the North American continent.

In this essay, I will use the image of the circuit to explore the representational and affective potential between the viewer and two documentary films on Central American migration through Mexico: Tin Dirdamal’s *De nadie* (2005) and Marcela Zamora Chamorro’s *María en tierra de nadie* (2011). This analysis expands upon Rouse’s understanding of community as a site of transnational circuits, taking into account the dislocated affective and relational circuits that open space to virtual, transnational sites of community rooted in empathy, moving past the traditional understandings of the self and the Other that the concept of the nation-state engenders. The essay also draws upon the theoretical contributions of Affect Studies, *testimonio*, and Subaltern Studies. We argue that both documentary films recuperate a humanitarian model that establishes an ethics of relationality constituted in human rights and foster emotional identification and affective transmission between the viewer and the films’ subjects through a politics of representation and affect. Ultimately, the films’ transformative power exists in their ethical demand to attend to the Other, even at the risk of replicating the same necropolitical dehumanization that the films are challenging.

Multiple Views of Central American Migrants in Films of Migration

It is important to examine the ways in which films on migration are received, perceived, and codified within prevailing discourses. In my essay on Luis Argueta’s *abUSed* (2010) and Theo Rigby’s *Sin país* (2010), I demonstrate that, particularly in the case of these two documentaries, the genre becomes a rhetorical and a representational strategy that makes the political argument for inclusion and humanization (List 2018a, 40–41). This tactic is employed through representational and affective

forms and content that call attention to the injustices and precarity of immigrants living in the United States. Both films highlight configurations of life deemed dispensable, bare, and/or deportable; yet, I show that the subaltern approach in both films, that is, giving voice to the voiceless, is what establishes and advocates for a politics of inclusion and humanization. As director Luis Argueta states in an interview in the book where my essay appears, *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film*: “For people who do not know immigrants, I think it is very important to show that immigrants are not that different from them, from us and our ancestors, and our own families. I think documentaries can educate and transform people” (qtd. in Loustaunau 2018a, 259).

In “The Unending Journey of the Migrant Mother in *Los invisibles* and *De nadie*,” Esteban Loustaunau (2018b) elaborates an interpretation similar to this essay’s argument regarding films of migration, particularly in his analysis of the role and figure of the migrant mother in relation to the filmmaker and the viewer, through the examples of Gael García Bernal’s and Marc Silver’s *Los invisibles* (2010) and Dirdamal’s *De nadie* (2005). Loustaunau claims that the “filmmakers and women subjects in these documentaries come together to reveal what I call ‘otras formas de mi(g)rar,’ the fusion of other ways of viewing (*mirar*) the migrant and of experiencing migration (*migrar*) within the purview of what Mignolo describes as ‘geography and biography’ (‘I Am’ 168–169)” (Loustaunau 2018b, 92). The filmmakers provide space for migrant mothers to share their acts of resistance against injustices and violence, while at the same, they afford proximity to the migrant women vis-à-vis the filmmaker (102). Ultimately, what Loustaunau argues is that both films “register the unspoken voices of the invisible and in the process, introduce alternative forms of knowledge that challenge the goring acts of extreme violence and impunity along the migrant trail” (2018b, 108).

We must also be simultaneously cognizant, however, of what Adrián Pérez-Melgosa (2016) argues in his essay “Low-Intensity Necropolitics: Slow Violence and Migrant Bodies in Latin American Films.”¹ Likening the migrant film genre to slave narratives, Pérez-Melgosa argues that a slow or low-intensity form of necropolitics is enacted and inscribed on the migrants’ bodies through their filmic representations. Despite the fact that in many cases the films aim to humanize the victims—what the author calls humanitarian films—, they actually enact violence upon migrants through a singularized necropolitical representation, ultimately replicating the very form of power that they are attempting to denounce. This double bind, as Pérez-Melgosa notes, is an aporia of documentary film on migration, or really, any film that uses suffering as a means to provoke change (2016, 231).² The films represent the migrants as “abused and dead bodies” which, rather than humanize them, reproduce a necropolitical logic within a system that the film attempts to reject (231).

¹ Citing Achille Mbembe’s definition of necropolitics, Pérez-Melgosa (2016) summarizes the definition of necropolitics: “the symbolic use of a constant threat of death to wield power over the living” (226).

² Pérez-Melgosa writes: “The most widely held consensus among critics and directors is that migration films, because they engage directly with the representation of difference, dramatically emphasize the representations of migrant suffering to articulate anti-hegemonic views” (2016, 221–222). For him, the migrant’s body is the site and receptacle of “recurrent affective negativity” (218).

Furthermore, consider what Loustaunau (2018b) and Pérez-Melgosa (2016) say about *De nadie*. Each offers an interpretation of the film that aligns with his overall arguments. On one hand, Loustaunau's analysis is framed within cinema's transformative potential in representation, visibility, and agency. Through the interaction between social actors and filmmaker, Dirdamal's documentary makes "visible the dreams and the struggles of undocumented migrants" (Loustaunau 2018b, 92), and Loustaunau concludes that the filmmaker holds a level of respect that "is part of a collective effort to restore hope in a migrant mother's endless journey of love and despair" (2018b, 108). On the other hand, Pérez-Melgosa argues that *De nadie* is a "particularly poignant example" of a documentary film that contributes to a necropolitical rhetoric (2016, 229). Pérez-Melgosa claims that the film, rather than showing dead bodies throughout, allows the subjects' testimonies to provide the necropolitical rhetoric in the absence of bodies (229). If Loustaunau (2018b) sees individual migrant testimonies as acts of resistance against the injustices and suffering within the documentary film, Pérez-Melgosa sees their stories prominently narrativized in *De nadie* as a problematic strategy that uses necropolitical rhetoric in an attempt to undo the necropolitics that govern social and national relations.

In "Migrant Identities in Film: Migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States," Deborah Shaw (2012) examines the subgenre of migration films. She references *De nadie* as a film that pertains to the subgenre and shares the characteristics that she identifies among the films analyzed in her work. They: (1) give space to migrants' voices to highlight injustices and further the cause of human rights; (2) avoid addressing the role of the state and nation in the migrant's plight; (3) place blame on individuals and organized crime for their precarious conditions; (4) present the social actors through a framework of tragedy and trauma; and (5) seek emotional identification between the spectators and the films' subjects as a means of resistance against antiimmigrant sentiment and discourse (Shaw 2012, 233, 238). All these characteristics resonate with *De nadie*, and her further analysis captures both Loustaunau's and Pérez-Melgosa's positions in relation to *De nadie*. Shaw writes: "The directors, thus, avoid making their films overtly political and prefer to concentrate on immoral individuals and the emotional weight of their subjects, rather than considering the effect of national and transnational policies on migrants. Nevertheless, the films do put the spotlight on the migrants who become agents of their own stories, and become more than simply statistics, while escaping the stereotypical roles so often assigned to Latino and Latin American characters in US films (Ramírez Berg 1990)" (Shaw 2012, 233).

While *De nadie* avoids an explicit condemnation of the state or an acknowledgement of Mexico's failure to protect migrants, the film does respond to what Sayak Valencia (2010) terms "gore capitalism" in the migrants' stories as an ethical call to action. By "gore capitalism" Valencia refers to the systemic use of violence (what she called "gore practices") as a means of accumulating capital (51). Although Valencia does not specifically cite violence against Central American migrants in Mexico in her argument, mentioning their experiences in Mexico here: (1) shows they are absorbed into a gore capitalist model; (2) historically and socially contextualizes *De nadie* and *María en tierra de nadie*; and (3) helps elucidate the films' objectives in furthering a human rights agenda through the ethical call to action via the migrants' stories. Her main argument is that we have arrived at a stage in capitalism that

is based on extreme violence, necropolitics, and hyperconsumerism. This iteration of capitalism manifests itself globally (and largely in border zones) and uses extreme violence as a means of producing and accumulating capital.³

Valencia explains that the current reality in which we live is determined by hyperconsumption which engendered subjectivities whose actions are marked by the incessant call to consume (2010, 82). Within gore capitalism, trying to satiate the desire to consume and the resulting pleasure has become fundamental, and, in order to satisfy this desire-pleasure, seeking new modes of capital accumulation is necessary (63). Here is where violence becomes the instrument to accumulate more capital: “Desplazando el centro epistemológico moderno del humanismo al hedonismo consumista que oculta, dentro de su devenir en mercancía capaz de satisfacer el hedonismo, un proceso de violencia, sangre y muerte” (64). The figure of drug trafficker best represents gore capitalism, given that drug cartels employ violence not only as a means of accumulating capital, but also of producing it. In other words, violence not only results from the competition between cartels for control of the market and maintaining impunity within a failed state, but it also becomes a means of transmitting messages and asserting dominance, creating an environment of fear (45–48). Valencia calls this use of violence as a means to power “necroempoderamiento”—necroempowerment (15).

Within the gore capitalist framework, ethics and limits no longer matter; there is no longer consensus or a social contract restricting behavior or actions. Everything is fair game. Decisions or actions no longer are framed as moral questions of good/evil, but rather as economic issues (Valencia 2010, 106). In other words, the ethical is now “una ética generada por el mercado” (Valencia 2016, 80). However, to mention only drug cartels as an example does not capture gore capitalism’s reach, since other utilizers are pharmaceutical companies, the media, videogames, movies, and television programs, as Valencia explains (69). All these entities employ violence as a means of producing and accumulating capital.⁴

³ For Valencia, gore capitalism is found primarily in the “Third World” zones of the world. Nevertheless, she points out that some aspects of gore capitalism exist in the “First World” (Valencia 2010, 15). In her analysis, she recognizes that this relationship between violence and capitalism is not new; this configuration has existed for centuries, as evidenced in colonialism and coloniality (124–125).

⁴ I appreciate the suggestion by a *MARLAS* peer reviewer that I highlight the circuits of violence that migrants face in their home countries in Central America, during their journey through Central America, Mexico, and the United States, and in their (un)intended final destination. The notion of affective circuits of support counter the circuits of violence that adversely affect migrants. Gore capitalism is an example of this circuit. While this essay focuses on the circuits of support engendered through the documentaries, it is important to point out that the films’ production result from circuits of violence manifested in various forms. For example, as Lara Riediger-Röhm notes in her essay “¿México: ruta de la muerte o camino hacia una vida mejor?” (2013): “Toda la travesía por México puede convertirse en un infierno tanto físico como psicológico para los migrantes indocumentados” (168). For example, between 2007 and 2009, gang and cartel violence resulted in the deaths of more than 15,000 people (Amnistía Internacional 2010, 8). Additionally, torture, kidnappings, and sexual violence is a large threat for those who are in Mexico, particularly for migrants. Between September 2008 and February 2009, it was estimated that 9,758 migrants were kidnapped (Amnistía Internacional 2010, 12–13). Various Mexican states—Chiapas, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Tabasco and Tamulipas, states that form part of the “Ruta del migrante,” are particularly dangerous for migrants (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2015, 84). Mauricio Espinoza (2016) uses the terms “círculos viciosos” and “violencia circular desterritorializada” in his analysis of migration and violence in trans-Central American narratives, such as Héctor Tobar’s *El soldado tatuado* (1998), and film, Ishar Yasin’s *El camino* (2007).

Discursive Representation: *Testimonio* and Subalternity in *De nadie*

De nadie, directed by Tin Dirdamal, debuted in 2005. This independent documentary film covers the journeys of various Central American migrants through Mexico, beginning at the southern border and moving toward the country's northern border. Since the 1990s, as a result of the exacerbating socioeconomic inequality due to neoliberal policies in the region and the enduring hardships resulting from civil wars in several of the countries, Mexico has experienced an increase in the number of migrants who enter the country in the south and often see the United States as the final destination (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2015, 85). In a 2010 report based on data from the National Institute of Migration's Center for Migration Studies, the Mexican federal government estimated that each year 1,700,000 individuals crossed its southern border, this including visitors, local workers, and migrants (Gobierno Federal 2010, 11). According to a 2010 Amnesty International report, ninety percent of Central American migrants entering Mexico did not have legal documentation and had planned to continue to the United States (5).

The idea to produce *De nadie* emerged from the director's experience meeting an immigrant from Honduras in his hometown of Monterrey. At the time the director, Tin Dirdamal, was studying engineering at a university in Monterrey and along with scriptwriters Iliana Martínez and Lizzette Argüello decided to produce a documentary on migrants' lives Mexico (Montero 2006, par. 1). The film begins in Orizaba, Veracruz, in an immigrant shelter with Dirdamal asking a woman about her movement through Mexico. The film follows this similar structure throughout, where viewers hear the stories of migrants crossing Mexico. Viewers come to see that many of them are trapped in a sort of purgatory, or for some, hell. For the sake of brevity, I offer two stories from the film, those of María de Jesús Flores and Adolfo.

María's story is one of the most developed and prominent in the film. She left behind her four children and sick husband in Honduras. When viewers are first introduced to her on screen, she is in a migrant shelter in Orizaba, Veracruz, and explains that she left her country twelve days earlier. For various reasons, her family found itself in an economically precarious condition due to the devastation from hurricane Mitch in 1998, her husband's illness, and the inability to make ends meet with the corn mill she operated. With few options, she decides to attempt the journey to the United States in order to work and support her husband and children, but first she must pass through Mexico. Once past the border, while she and other migrants are moving across the country, a group of twelve men rob them all and rape her in Rizos de Oro. Without money and now with that traumatic experience in the middle of the journey, María finds herself in even more vulnerable.⁵

⁵ Loustaunau (2018b) reviews María's experience as well in his essay. Sharing on camera with Dirdamal that she had been raped, María instructs the filmmaker not to mention what had happened to her when she meets up with her family. Loustaunau maintains that the close relationship engenders an interpersonal dynamic in which "María becomes Dirdamal's

Adolfo's story begins *in medias res*, as viewers quickly learn of the trauma he has suffered. Two kilometers outside the city of Tierra Blanca, a group assaults Adolfo's father and mother. It begins as a robbery, when they demand that his father hand over his money, which he resists and is killed. They rape Adolfo's mother and kill her. During the attack, Adolfo was able to hide and save himself. Nevertheless, he had to observe his parents' brutal murders. Covering their bodies with dirt and branches, he did the only thing he thought he could—continue walking. When the filmmaker interviews him, Adolfo shares his story and explains that they were en route to the United States. Besides now being an orphan, he does not have the contact information his father carried for relatives in the US.

What these two stories share with us is the precarity and vulnerability of living in a violent, necropolitical, gore capitalist environment that rejects life. In both cases, migrants suffer traumatic experiences that make them feel more alone and isolated. Adolfo tells the filmmaker: “Los dejé [a los padres muertos]. Seguí caminando, solo, llorando... No pude hacer nada. No pude hacer nada” (Dirdamal 2005). The power of scene not only results from the horrific details but also the testimony's source—a child who witnesses his parents' torture and death. Any innocence Adolfo had before has been stolen from him.

Pérez-Melgosa cites this scene in his analysis and argues that Adolfo seems to be speaking directly to the audience, “implicitly asking for empathy first and, as the narrative progresses, for outrage” (2016, 230). Yet, in Pérez-Melgosa's reading of the scene, the film directs that outrage away from the nation-state and toward organized crime. He claims that the film redirects the spectator from laying any blame on the state for its complicity or lack of action against the violence (230). Ultimately, Pérez-Melgosa posits that “this rhetorical gesture of the film, symbolically exonerating the nation from the deaths of subjects that have positioned themselves outside the protection of their birth communities, re-states through the documentary's rhetoric of truth . . . : those who position themselves outside the protection of their nations should expect to pay a high price for their transgression” (230).

Both stories describe and come to represent the situations of thousands of Central American migrants who journey through Mexico to the North. While recognizing Pérez-Melgosa's argument on the double bind (i.e., reiterating the same dehumanizing practices that the film is attempting to reject), I affirm that the documentary films' affective and testimonial potential affirms life through cinematographic production that paradoxically uses a necropolitical discourse that saturates current mediatic realities with violence and death. In light of the state's failure to protect migrants, the films seek to establish representational and affective bonds between viewers and the film's social actors to establish transnational empathetic circuits using discursive and affective testimonies. With a similar objective of international reach as the literary genre *testimonio*, the films borrow from its

director who instructs him about what to say, what to include, and what to leave out from the story of her migrant life that he is to show to her family in Honduras” (2018b, 107).

representational strategies while the cinematic medium also gives space to affective flows and intensities.

If these films are similar to *testimonio* that emerged in Latin America in the 1980s, do they share the same genealogy or, at least, a common impetus? Bill Nichols (1993) addresses this question in his work on documentary film and states: “The politics of location points to the importance of testimonial literature and first-person filmmaking generally. Testimonials are first person, oral more than literary, personal more than theoretical. It is a form of representation that explores the personal as political at the level of textual organization as well as the level of lived experience” (183). Both documentary film and testimonial literature deal with questions of representation, objectivity, veracity, subjectivity, and configurations of power.⁶ Within testimonial literature, representation, survival, resistance against dominant discourses, self-constitution, and politics of location all are central to the genre’s objectives (List 2018b, 208–209).

In his work on *testimonio*, John Beverley (1996) explains that the witness speaks more or less as a spokesperson for a community that finds itself in a similar situation (27-29). Despite this privileged position, the witness is within the same social plane as the collectivity represented. It is understood that the objective is not only an individual affirmation but also a collective one: “Testimonio is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that *any* life so narrated can have a kind of representational value. Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (28). Adolfo’s and María de Jesús’s individual stories represent perhaps similar yet untold stories of migration—something Loustaunau also concludes (2018b, 108–109).

Whether it is the testimonial subjects’ intention or not, their stories, their access to representation through the documentary film become an instrument of power that grates against the social relations constituted through gore capitalism and necropolitics.⁷ As George Yúdice (1996) writes regarding literature, “testimonial writing is first and foremost an act, a tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self-constitution and survival” (46). In “Collective Disruptions of Bare Life in Marcela Zamora’s *María en tierra de nadie*,” Loustaunau coins the term “credence” to refer the importance that migrant women place on their experiences and beliefs that disrupt the precarity in which they find themselves (2020, 104). He argues that the women’s stories, their dreams, values, possessions, relationships with other migrants, experiences, and location—all forms of migrant credence—provide “relief from the lack of credibility of state authorities and the police” (107).

The politics of location and representation in Dirdamal’s and Zamora’s films is a form of resistance and is fundamental within Latin American Subaltern Studies—a field of study addressing lives that are

⁶ See Loustaunau’s 2020 article “Collective Disruptions of Bare Life in Marcela Zamora’s *María en tierra de nadie*” for a further comparison of documentary film and *testimonio*.

⁷ Loustaunau (2018b) argues that María’s refusal to detail her abuses and suffering resists the sensationalist narratives that characterize mediatic production under a gore capitalist logic (104).

negated, as is the case of Central American migrants in Mexico.⁸ The films recognize and represent subaltern marginalized histories.⁹

Alberto Moreiras (2001) and Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) both claim that a limitation of *testimonio* is that it was conceived within the context of the nation-state. *Testimonio* and Subaltern Studies, which hinge upon the national and the failed revolutionary ideals that never came to fruition in Latin America, demonstrate the problematic limitations of *testimonio*. For example, Beasley-Murray (2011) argues that *testimonio* originated out of the intelligentsia's desire to see the genre as a political project rooted in the national and based on the experiences of the subaltern who then speaks for (and comes to represent) the collective (266–268). He ultimately claims that “*Testimonio* was read more by North American undergraduates than by Central American *campesinos*” (268). Both he and Moreiras argue that *testimonio* becomes an instrument that moves beyond the confines of the nation-state to seek global solidarity (Moreiras 2001, 212–213; Beasley-Murray 2011, 266–268). Beasley-Murray writes: “Rather than reading *testimonio* as the authentic voice of a particular Latin American people, it is better to see how it connects with a much more disparate global network, with cultural effects that cannot so easily be mapped on to any individual state formation” (268). If *testimonio*'s call to action fails on a national level, then representation beyond the national context may be found internationally. For Moreiras, “the testimonial subject, by virtue of its testimonio, makes a claim to the real in reference to which only solidarity or its withholding is possible” (2001, 224). If the testimonial works out of Central America in the 1980s did not generate the solidarity within the confines of the state, a focus on an international readership becomes a next logical step.

Salvadoran-Nicaraguan filmmaker Marcela Zamora Chamorro filmed *María en tierra de nadie* over a period of a year between November 2008 and 2009. The film crew included photojournalists Toni Arnau, Eduardo Soteras, and Edu Ponces, documentarian Karen Shayo, and a journalist for the Salvadoran newspaper *El Faro*, Óscar Martínez (Accem 2010, par. 2). Like *De nadie*, we hear Zamora's voice in documentary film as it follows the lives of three Salvadoran migrants in vulnerable situations in Mexico. Both Zamora's and Dirdamal's films have a similar objective in seeking solidarity through a transnational scope.

In *María en tierra de nadie*, the empty gesture of the state is denounced on camera in a public meeting between the El Salvador Committee for Dead and Missing Migrants (COFAMIDE) and Mexican

⁸ Latin American Subaltern Studies seeks to criticize elite culture and the ways in which it represents the subaltern or does not (Rodríguez 2001, 5). According to Ileana Rodríguez: “Subaltern studies are postmodern and postrevolutionary attempts to understand the limits of previous hermeneutics by challenging culture to think of itself from the point of view of its own negations. Another goal is to recognize that in the history and culture of ‘societies’ Others’ we can find, paradoxically, new ways of approaching some of the riddles created by the incapacity of bourgeois culture to think about its own conditions of discursive production” (9).

⁹ This recognition of the Other can be problematic, keeping in mind Pérez-Melgosa's (2016) argument of the double bind.

officials in Tapachula, Chiapas.¹⁰ An unnamed Mexican official responds to the committee's request for the creation of a forensic database to help identify unknown remains by stating: "Estamos trabajando. La decisión del gobernador es muy clara. Es erradicar los delitos que se cometen en contra de los migrantes y le estamos echando ganas." Shortly afterwards, a woman asks to speak from the floor and shares the following:

Cuando empezamos a oír en la televisión cosas que la crisis, la esperanza, que todos dándole vamos a lograr. Es una especie de triunfalismo ingenuo que no permite que de veras se resuelvan los problemas y un poco sentir la misma percepción. Ya estamos componiendo todo, no pasa nada pero también sabemos que no podemos decir qué bonito programa estamos haciendo; ya resolvimos esto porque realmente no es creíble porque la gente está viviendo verdaderas crisis humanitarias, porque los secuestros se están dando todos los días y porque si empezáramos a relatar el anecdotario, no acabaríamos nunca. Eso es mejor no empezar y decirles, por favor, esto requiere personas, no funcionarios, ustedes como personas, comprometidos. Porque si no, podemos cambiar leyes pero todo cambia para no cambiar en este país. (Zamora Chamorro 2011)

Her statement is significant for several reasons. First, when juxtaposed to the Mexican official's statement, she denounces the state for repetitive discourse that never reaches the level of action. In other words, she is pointing out the Mexican government's failure to fulfill its duty to protect those living in its territory. If *De nadie* does not address the state's failure, Zamora does so in her film through the inclusion of the woman's statement. Zamora goes even further in criticizing the Mexican state by using the words of Mauricio Farah from the National Commission of Human Rights in Mexico: "el estado mexicano es todo responsable de esta situación" (Zamora Chamorro 2011).

Second, noting Mexico's failure in addressing the humanitarian crises, the woman in the film appeals to the Mexican officials not in their official capacity but rather as people. She has moved beyond calls for state action and now frames the solution within the context of the humanitarian. Again, for her, the state has failed its obligations.

Third and perhaps most tellingly, her reference to the event itself confirms the criticism that Pérez-Melgosa (2016) puts forth. The repetitious nature of the spectacle of the event, that is, the performance of the event, may hinder true action to address the violence. The performance becomes an object of consumption that reiterates the migrant's precarious position. The woman is speaking about the event represented on screen, but she could just as easily directed her criticism toward films of migration: recognizing the migrant's vulnerability in a state failing to fulfill its duties, cinematic representation as a humanitarian discourse can have pernicious effects on the very subjects that the film attempts to

¹⁰ In Spanish, the organization is known as *Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos de El Salvador* (COFAMIDE). For more information, consult Luis Alberto López-Martínez's 2015 article "Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos de El Salvador."

humanize. As Pérez-Melgosa points out, the performance—the predictable representation—comes with the risk of objectification, reification, and consumption of the violence shown toward migrants and their bodies. Nonetheless, the testimonies and stories of the family members who look for their missing loved ones place them on a humanitarian plane of discursivity that aims to evoke emotional identification and prompt viewers to recognize and take action on their behalf, seeing them, as the woman states, as humans.

Affective Sensibilities: Las Patronas in *De nadie* and *María en tierra de nadie*

We can read these films as circuits that highlight the humanitarian as affective. In the absence of the state’s role in ensuring well-being, the informal circuit relationality grounded in the humanitarian becomes transparent, particularly in Zamora’s documentary. Taken together, both films provide discursive and affective testimony. For example, *De nadie*’s inclusion of Las Patronas—a group of women who live in La Patrona in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. Since February 1995, they have prepared and provided meals to migrants passing through the town on the train. Yet, the train does not stop, and the women do not have the opportunity to meet the people they feed. Nevertheless, they continue nearly every day to feed them (Bruzzone 2012, 2–3). According to Mario Bruzzone, it was Dirdamal’s film that made Las Patronas famous. In a subsequent blog post associated with The London School of Economics and Political Science, he states: “With the release of the documentary *De nadie* in 2005, life changed drastically. By the time I first visited La Patrona in 2011, *De Nadie* had become enshrined as the movie that made their names—which is ironic, because the film doesn’t identify by name the collective or any of its members who appear. All it labels is the town: ‘La Patrona, embodiment of hope’” (2015, par. 2).

This embodiment of hope can be understood in two ways. First, we understand the hope in the collective insurgency and ethical response to the government’s lack of action to protect migrants. The group’s civic action counters the state’s inaction. Nelson Arteaga-Botello (2020) writes that Las Patronas’ actions carry various interpretations: as an ethical response (akin to a heroic act), as an “tragic act” that replicates a gendered division of labor and care and as an act of solidarity through a collective insurgency against the norm (187). Arteaga-Botello cites Luis Gómez Romero, who argues that Las Patronas represent an ethical revolution, as members of civil society take it upon themselves to fill the void left by the absence, disregard, and failure of the state to protect migrants: “Their basic act of decency is an ethical revolution; people do not surrender as easily as governments do” (Gómez Romero 2016, sec. 4, par. 2). Amarela Varela Huerta (2015) (also cited by Arteaga-Botello) understands Las Patronas as a collective action of hospitality and support shown toward migrants that “forma parte del archipiélago de esta nueva geografía de insurgencias” (160). This ethical collective insurgency in a necropolitical, gore capitalist paradigm gives credence—to use Loustaunau’s (2020) concept—to nonstate entities that conceptualize a relationality rooted in the ethical stance of recognition and care for the Other.

Second, hope comes in the collective recognition and response signaled in Bruzzone's (2015) statement that the town was made famous by Las Patronas' actions—acts of exception in a necropolitical system. Dirdamal's documentary provides the medium through which the women's testimony of their actions and experiences emerges, as the film's representational strategy aligns with *testimonio*. Las Patronas narrate their resistance to the dominant configurations of power that negate and make the migrants' lives fragile. They also come to represent a collective insurgency that fights the necropolitical system that "pulverizes" human life. Like the testimonial in Nichols's terms, this is where the personal meets the political (1993, 183). The politics of representation and location establishes the possibility of global networks of support and empathy. If *De nadie* forecloses any blame on the state, it refocuses on the circuits of support that become radical in a necropolitical social configuration. The reason for the absence of state criticism in the film may lie in its projection beyond the national as a means to protect migrants. The testimonies of empathetic circuits of support by Las Patronas and other social actors in the documentary give voice to these collective insurgencies and, at the same time, seek to establish local and global networks of support through the testimonial mode that documentary (and literature) engenders.

Dirdamal's *De nadie* employs discursive, representational approaches, while Zamora's film utilizes the same approaches and also includes an affective, sensorial tactic in its treatment of Las Patronas. Like *De nadie*, *María en tierra de nadie* takes a testimonial approach where viewers see close-ups and medium shots of the interviewed members of Las Patronas as they share their experiences, motives, and some of the stories they hear in their interactions. Zamora's film goes beyond Dirdamal's in its treatment of the group. Viewers witness parts of the meal preparation followed by the delivery to the migrants on the moving train. The cinematography of this particular scene is such that the viewing experience becomes more sensorially focused. The soundtrack and camerawork capture the intensities of the moment: the sounds of the train wheels on the rails, the women's shouts and frenzied actions to pass food and water into the migrants' hands on the fast-moving train, the camera person running with camera in hand jostling the image, medium shots as the women come dangerously close to the train to hand over the food. Viewers perceive the energy and thrill of the moment, and as the train rolls past, breathe a collective sigh of relief after the successful food delivery.

In *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, Laura Podalsky (2012) explores the affective sensibilities imbued in various Latin American films. Her first chapter provides an excellent cartography of affect, its definitions, and its manifestations. Citing Brian Massumi, Podalsky differentiates emotions from affect, largely distinguishing the two based on their relationship to discursivity. Emotions are socially inscribed and codified in a system of signification, whereas affect avoids discursive signification, resting in the material, the corporeal and the presocial "untethered to social and linguistic structures" (12–13). She argues that film analysis should include how films "touch" viewers through affective flows, as opposed to analyses tied up in a system of signification (14). Up to this point in the essay, my analysis has examined the discursive aspects of both documentaries. This last scene in Zamora's film addresses something beyond discourse. Rather than the representational strategies employed by Dirdamal in his treatment of Las Patronas, Zamora opts for a focus on the

intensities and flows of the moment, or, using Podalsky's term, a "politics of situated feelings" rooted in the sensorial responses produced in the viewer (14–15).

María en tierra de nadie uses affect as another axis of articulation between the film, its subjects, and the viewers. Although not laden with ethical and moral implications, the scene has the potential to undergird the film's intent in representing the migrants' and their families' plight and the support they receive along the way, as well as establishing an empathetic and affective circuit between the viewers and the film. The first circuit includes the migrants and individuals: Las Patronas, as well as the priests, migrant shelter staff, and community members represented in the film who help provide safe haven for them. This first circuit serves as a model for a second circuit between the viewers and social actors, making possible affective and empathetic potential in the viewers. Rather than simply using forms of understanding, thought, and discursivity to establish empathy, *María en tierra de nadie* also engenders it through sensation, perception, and affectivity. Understood in this way, therein lies the transformative potential of the films in seeking political and civic action and justice for migrants, at the potential cost of their continued necropolitical commodification and representation in a gore capitalist system.

Conclusion

Borrowing from Roger Rouse's (2002) argument that social realities surrounding migration from Latin America to the United States are better understood through the framework of circuits and border zones (as opposed to the concept of community and the center/periphery model), this essay has demonstrated that *De nadie* and *María en tierra de nadie* represent and foment circuits rooted in humanity. Both documentary films recuperate a humanitarian model that establishes an ethics of relationality constituted in human rights, as opposed to a necropolitical relationality rooted in violence and consumption. Through testimonial and affective strategies, the films attempt emotional identification and affective transmission between the viewer and the films' subjects. Viewers learn more about the harrowing experiences of Central Americans in Mexico, as well as the individuals and support networks that help provide safe passage.

Not only do documentaries raise awareness, but they also aim to establish empathetic pathways between viewers and film subjects through a politics of representation and affect. At the risk of replicating the very notion they are fighting against, taking into account Pérez-Melgosa's (2016) argument, both documentary films become a form of resistance against a necropolitical system that consumes and destroys human life. The films' transformative power exists in their ethical demand to attend to the Other. They engender an outward, or empathetic, thinking that asks viewers to recognize and apprehend their situation, challenging them to comprehend the humanity shared by the self and the Other. Such a demand threatens a necropolitical, gore capitalist model of power that constitutes social realities in Mexico—a risk that the films themselves take in examining and representing migrants on the screen.

Jared List is an Associate Professor of Spanish at Doane University in Nebraska. He obtained his doctorate from Ohio State University in contemporary Latin American cultures and literatures. His research and publications cover topics related to Central American literature and film, including Luis Argueta's documentary *abUSed: The Postville Raid* (2011), Mercedes Moncada's *Palabras mágicas (para romper un encantamiento)* (2012), Ernesto and Antonio Jara Vargas's *El codo del diablo* (2014), and Marcela Zamora Chamorro's *El cuarto de los huesos* (2015).

References

Accem

2010 "María en tierra de nadie,' la realidad del viaje a través de México." *Refugiados en el cine* 18, October 21. <https://www.accem.es/refugiadosenelcine/2010/10/21/maria-en-tierra-de-nadie-la-realidad-del-viaje-a-traves-de-mexico/>.

Amnistía Internacional

2010 *Víctimas invisibles: migrantes en movimiento en México*. Madrid: Editorial Amnistía Internacional. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/36000/amr410142010es>

Arteaga-Botello, Nelson

2020 "Solidary Cuisine: *Las Patronas* Facing the Central American Migratory Flow." In *The Courage for Civil Repair: Narrating the Righteous in International Migration*, edited by Carlo Tognato, Bernadette N. Jaworsky, and Jeffrey C. Alexander, 183–235. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beasley-Murray, Jon

2011 *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Beverley, John

1996 "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (1989)." In *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, edited by Georg M. Gugelberger, 23–41. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bruzzone, Mario

2012 "Las Patronas, Clientelism, and Care." MS thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

2015 "The Work of Sustaining Change: Lessons from Mexico." *Favelas at LSE, The London School of Economic and Political Science Blog*, January 26. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/favelasatlse/2015/01/26/the-work-of-sustaining-change/>.

Dirdamal, Tin, director

2005 *De nadie*. México: Producciones Tranvía.

List – Empathetic and Affective Circuits

Espinoza, Mauricio

- 2016 “Círculos viciosos: migración y violencia en la narrativa y el cine trans-centroamericanos.” *Ístmica. Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* 19: 159–169.

Gobierno Federal, México

- 2010 *Informe del estado mexicano sobre secuestro, extorsión y otros delitos cometidos contra personas migrantes en tránsito por territorio mexicano*. July 16.
https://imumi.org/documentos/informe_secuestro_extorsion_otro_delitos.pdf.

Gómez Romero, Luis

- 2016 “How the US Is Outsourcing Border Enforcement to Mexico.” *The Conversation*, November 29. <https://theconversation.com/how-the-us-is-outsourcingborder-enforcement-to-mexico-69272>.

List, Jared

- 2018a “Documenting Deportable Life: Knowledge, Performance, and Memory in *abUSed: The Postville Raid* and *Sin país*.” In *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film*, edited by Esteban E. Loustaunau and Lauren E. Shaw, 39–66. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- 2018b “La democratización del pasado: silencios afectivos, historias subalternas y la transmisión de la memoria en *El codo del diablo* de Antonio y Ernesto Jara Vargas.” *Imagofagia* 17: 189–216.

López-Martínez, Luis Alberto

- 2015 “Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos de El Salvador.” *Revista Entorno* 60: 37–44.

Loustaunau, Esteban E.

- 2018a “Luis Argueta: Migrant Voices without Fear.” In *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film*, edited by Loustaunau and Lauren E. Shaw, 241–259. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- 2018b “The Unending Journey of the Migrant Mother in *Los invisibles* and *De nadie*.” In *Telling Migrant Stories: Latin American Diaspora in Documentary Film*, edited by Loustaunau and Lauren E. Shaw, 88–118. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- 2020 “Collective Disruptions of Bare Life in Marcela Zamora’s *Maria en tierra de nadie*.” *Diálogo* 23 (1): 101–112.

Montero, Yolanda.

- 2006 “‘De nadie’ narra en San Sebastián el drama de los emigrantes a su paso por México.” *El País*, March 28. https://elpais.com/diario/2006/03/29/paisvasco/1143661218_850215.html

Moreiras, Alberto

2001 *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Nichols, Bill

1993 “Getting to Know You...’: Knowledge, Power, and the Body.” In *Theorizing Documentary*, edited by Michael Renov, 174–191. New York: Routledge.

Pérez-Melgosa, Adrián

2016 “Low-Intensity Necropolitics: Slow Violence and Migrant Bodies in Latin American Films.” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 20: 217–236.

Podalsky, Laura

2012 *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Riediger-Röhm, Lara

2013 “¿México ruta de la muerte o camino hacia una vida mejor?” *Iberóforum. Revista de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Iberoamericana* 8 (16): 167–182.

Rodríguez, Ileana

2001 Introduction. In *Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, edited by Rodríguez, 1–35. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rouse, Roger

2002 “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism.” In *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, edited by Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, 157–171. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing.

Shaw, Deborah

2012 “Migrant Identities in Film: Migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States.” *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture* 3 (2): 227–240.

Valencia, Sayak

2010 *Capitalismo gore*. Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Editorial Melusina.

Varela Huerta, Amarela

2015 “Luchas migrantes’: un nuevo campo de estudio para la sociología de los disensos.” *Andamios* 12 (28): 145–170.

List – Empathetic and Affective Circuits

Villafuerte Solís, Daniel, and María del Carmen García Aguilar

2015 “Crisis del sistema migratorio y seguridad en las fronteras norte y sur de México.” *REMHU – Revista interdisciplinar da mobilidade humana* 44: 83–98.

Yúdice, George

1996 “*Testimonio* and Postmodernism (1991).” In *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, edited by Georg M. Gugelberger, 42–57. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Zamora Chamorro, Marcela, director

2011 *María en tierra de nadie*. Spain/El Salvador: Ruido/El Faro/I(dh)eas Films.