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And What About Children?

Representations of Infant Migration in Latino/a Cinema

Abstract

The conceptualization of the border as a living, fresh wound has become the foundation of numerous studies that have described and tackled the issue of immigration from myriad perspectives: social, economic, cultural, and political, among others. Similarly, this 'herida abierta' has been the focus of diverse written, visual, and aural representations, in artistic manifestations of all kinds. In particular, in the case of Latino/a cinema, the act of migrating has been exposed in movies such as El Norte *and/or* Sin Nombre*, among others. However, as noted by Katharine M. Donato Vanderbilt and Blake Sisk, "although studies point to children and young adults in the Mexico-US migration process, most do not focus on children's experiences per se" (2015, 61). Following this line of thought, this essay intends to explore the way immigration (understood as a process which involves a point of departure, a journey, and the arrival and settlement of migrants) is represented in Latino/a cinema, paying special attention to the way children are affected by it. The essay will look at several audiovisual texts, ranging from the documentary film* Which Way Home*, to movies such as* Under the Same Moon *and* Entre Nos.

Keywords: *immigration, children, US-Mexico border, Latino/a, cinema*

The US-Mexico border—often called "*la herida abierta*" (Anzaldúa 1987), or the bleeding open wound—has been represented as a concept and a reality in multiple artistic forms, including cinema. In some of these representations, the border as a space is the focus. In others, the crossers, and the harsh effects they experience while crossing the border, are protagonist. However, in most of these cases, as noted by Katharine M. Donato Vanderbilt and Blake Sisk, "although studies point to children and young adults in the Mexico-US migration process, most do not focus on children's experiences per se" (2015, 61). In this context, this essay attempts to observe the way Latino/a cinema has represented the presence of children in the migratory phenomenon.

1. US-Mexico migration: a brief historical review

The relationship between Mexico and the United States precedes the founding of these countries. The border delineated after the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 caused great conflicts, and it became that "bleeding wound" (Anzaldúa 1987) which would mark the relationship between the two nations. In the 20th century, more and more migrants crossed that border, from Mexico into the US; laws were subsequently enacted either to control the arrival of these migrants, most of whom were laborers, or, ultimately, to deport them. In fact,

> During the Great Depression, along with other immigrants, as many as 600,000 Mexicans (although some were U.S. born and citizens) were sent back to Mexico in an effort to reclaim jobs for American citizens (Acuña 1995). During World War II, when those same jobs needed to be filled, the federal Bracero Program allowed Mexican workers to enter the U.S. legally for seasonal work—a guest worker program. In the 1960s, that program was eliminated because again it was feared that Mexicans were taking economic opportunities away from U.S. citizens. In 1986, the Immigration and Reform Control Act was passed in Congress that granted amnesty to more than 2 million undocumented residents of the United States, the vast majority of whom were Mexican. (Shannon and Escamilla 1997, 352)

Today, as a result of the policies of the Trump administration and of the former President's preoccupation with closing the country's southern border, the situation of the migrants attempting to cross this geopolitical line has become increasingly difficult. The desire to close the border through the building of a wall—a wish that is often attributed to Donald Trump—actually dates back to 2006, when President George W. Bush signed the Secure Fence Act into law. This was similarly reminiscent of the 'Operation Wetback,' implemented in 1954, whereby an estimated 1.1 million people of Mexican origin were sent back to Mexico. The act also included

> a) systematic surveillance of the international land and maritime borders of the United States through more effective use of personnel and technology, such as unmanned aerial vehicles, ground-based sensors, satellites, radar coverage, and cameras; and b) physical infrastructure enhancements to prevent unlawful entry by aliens into the United States and facilitate access to the international land and maritime borders by United States Customs and Border Protection, such as additional checkpoints, all weather access roads, and vehicle barriers. (Secure Fence Act 2006)

Within this context, the mere existence of the border and the subsequent conceptualization of the crossers as illegal aliens—similar to Agamben's notion of individuals being reduced to "bare life" (1998) without political rights or protections—has been essential for the construction of the US as a nation as well as for the elaboration of the notion of American citizenship. As Jessica

Auchter explains, "the state is defined by its citizenry and by those who do not fit into the requirements for citizenship. The immigrant, documented or not, is that which is different from the citizen, the constitutive outside to the citizen, the other to the state" (2013, 296).

Not only the crossers themselves, but the border as a geographical space, a reality, and a concept has been approached from myriad perspectives, ranging from theoretical treatises to artistic representations (Anzaldúa 1987; Acuña 1991; Noriega 1992; Paredes 1993; Dunn 1996; Saldívar 1997; Maciel and Herrera-Sobek 1998; Fox 1999; Saldívar-Hull 2000; Casey and Walkins 2014; Torres 2014; Ganster and Lorey 2015; Chávez 2016, among others). These investigations have defined the border from a sociohistorical and cultural viewpoint. Likewise, Mexican, Chicano/a and other Latino/a writers and artists have found a source of inspiration in both this space and in the people who cross it (Mora 1986; Gómez-Peña 1996; Urrea 2004; J. Herrera 2015; Solís 2018; Y. Herrera 2015; Cantú 2018; Zamora 2018; Sánchez 2019).[1]

Cinema, as one of the most influential forms of popular culture, has addressed the existence of the border and of the migratory process of people from Central/South America and from Mexico to the US, from different perspectives and ideological standpoints. As noted by David Maciel as early as 1995, the representation of Mexico-US migration by the Hollywood mainstream cinema was "greatly responsible for the current rise in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S." (1995, 24). The author then listed the essential characteristics of what he defined as the "Hollywood immigration genre": these films tend to follow the formula of western hero action movies, where the protagonist overcomes the threats posed by drug- or people-trafficking gangs; they rarely focus on the causes of immigration; moreover, their overall effect is to encourage the hardening of border controls. Among other characteristics, finally, Maciel also highlights that women are always secondary characters in these movies (1995, 24-25).

From a more contemporary standpoint, Guido Rings explains that immigration (and/or its effects) is a recurrent theme in contemporary Chicano/Latino/a cinema, which has facilitated the presentation of a different viewpoint on the issue of migration to mainstream US audiences (2012). However, he suggests that there are risks involved in the accessibility of 'immigration movies' because

> the ever growing number of directors and scriptwriters who have focused on Mexican migration to and diaspora life in the US have managed to bring migrant perspectives into numerous Hollywood productions as well as TV, therefore reaching North-American mainstream population on a regular basis now. While such a popularity was clearly unthinkable for the producers of the predominantly documentary-style first phase of Chicano

[1] These are just a few of the numerous thinkers and works that have dealt with the US-Mexico border.

> Cinema, […] there is also a potential downside to this success, which includes the danger of assimilating filmic messages to the taste of mainstream audiences. (2012, 4)

Rafael A. Martínez, for his part, in an undated essay for the "Working Paper Series" of the University of New Mexico states that commercial and independent filmmakers have taken up the US-Mexico border and border crossings as the subject of their films (4). Martínez highlights the fact that "some filmmakers see their work as responding to these social and human rights crisis" (4), thus turning their movies into ideological statements.

However, as noted by Katharine M. Donato Vanderbilt and Blake Sisk, the direct effects of immigration upon children are not considered in the myriad of studies which address the issue (2015, 61). And neither do 'immigration movies,' I would add. In this context, and acknowledging the fact that a growing number of children are migrating to the US, this essay focuses on the way (some) Chicano/Latino/a cinema represents child migrants. Similarly, and following Rings, this essay attempts to evaluate the degree to which these films try to adapt their content to meet the tastes of more mainstream audiences or, on the contrary, as expressed by Martínez, aim at responding to the human right crisis of immigration.

2. Children and immigration: causes and consequences

The large flow of people crossing the US border has piqued the interest and concern of numerous scholars and institutions. These have attempted to quantify the number of migrants and, subsequently, to define the causes and consequences of these migratory movements. They aim to raise awareness of the need to implement aid programs to support migrants both in the original and host countries. In the case of children, studies such as Donato Vanderbilt and Sisk's (among many others), show that, as for the year 2014, for example,

> the number of unaccompanied children detained at the Mexico-US border for attempting to cross without legal documents rose dramatically to almost 68,000. The US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported a surge in the number of children (up to 17 years of age) from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from approximately 1,000 per nation in 2009 to between 16,000 and 18,000 per nation in 2014, and high numbers from Mexico (averaging close to 15,000 per year) (CBP 2014). In prior fiscal years, total apprehensions of unaccompanied children increased from 16,067 in 2011 to 24,481 in 2012 and 38,833 in 2013 (Chishti and Hipsman 2014). (2015, 59)

The legal status of migrant children varies depending on how and when, and even why they arrive in the US. In the case of unaccompanied children apprehended at the border, scholars state that among the reasons for these children to migrate are an exposure to violence, their

parents' migration experience and legal status, and the particular situation in terms of the host country's (the US) migratory jurisdiction at the specific moment of their migration. In the case of migrant children who manage to arrive in the US with their relatives or to reunite with them, they generally become "illegal," as a result of their family's status of "illegality" (Donato and Pérez 2017, 121). In some other cases, the children of migrant families are born in the US after their parents' arrival, and they become US citizens. Passel and Cohn state that

> Most children of unauthorized immigrants—73% in 2008—are U.S. citizens by birth. The number of U.S.-born children in mixed-status families (unauthorized immigrant parents and citizen children) has expanded rapidly in recent years, to 4 million in 2008 from 2.7 million in 2003. By contrast, the number of children who are unauthorized immigrants themselves (1.5 million in 2008) hardly changed in the five-year period and may have declined slightly since 2005. (2009, ii)

Regardless of whether these children travel alone, with their families, or were born in the US to families who are in a situation of undocumentation ('illegality'), research shows that the causes and the subsequent effects of migration on them have a severe negative impact on their psychological and emotional well-being. Many of the children crossing the border embark on this dangerous journey because they live in harsh environments, and they dream of a better life. Most of them experience poverty and have few educational opportunities; others try to escape violent sociopolitical situations. In the case of children whose parents have already migrated to the US, they lack a supportive family structure. Finally, when they eventually try to make it to the border, they often encounter violent situations in their way. In sum, upon their arrival, the children and their families' levels of anxiety are high and can last for a long time.[2]

The fear associated with the initial stage of immigration can result in depression and anxiety, while individuals who experience significant trauma during the migratory process may develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Smart and Smart 1995). Once in the new country, families continue to experience tension resulting from language barriers, unfamiliar customs, and the loss of previously established support systems (Hancock 2005; Solis 2003). While many of the challenges new immigrants face are tangible (finding employment, shopping, paying bills, navigating school and medical systems), each of these challenges can result in further anxiety (Segal and Mayadas 2005). Undocumented immigrants may experience additional stress, as

[2] Dr. Joseba Achotegui defines the multilayered levels of anxiety experienced by immigrants as "The Ulysses Syndrome," "a picture of extreme migratory grief, not a mental disorder, that appears in immigrants who live very adverse situations (loneliness, exclusion, fear and helplessness)" (Achotegui).

they live with ongoing fear of being discovered and deported. These immigrants may have difficulty obtaining employment, and are vulnerable to many forms of exploitation, particularly by employers who may use their undocumented status as leverage to pay below-market wages or to refuse payment once the work is completed (Dettlaff et al. 2009, 776). As observed, once in the host country, the situation of the families and the children does not improve. For the minors, the fear of abandonment and separation never ceases, either. In all cases, both if the families are separated or they manage to remain united, the negative psychological effects of migration on children are evident.

For Gulbas, Zayas and others, the deportation of the parents, if it occurs, becomes a "major life trauma" (2015, 228), which will affect the social development of these children forever. In fact, when families are separated, feelings of resentment and anxiety occur among the children. Joana Debry argues that these feelings emerge regardless of the fact that the separation of the children from their parents is due to "constrained choices" (as in the case of deportation) or is a "voluntary separation" (when parents 'choose' to leave their children behind):

> In the case of separations due to constrained choices, children experience resentment related to parents' abilities to fulfill the expectations of migration, especially acute when children live apart from mothers. In the case of involuntary separation, they experience great economic instability and emotional anxiety when separated from fathers. (2015, 245)

On the contrary, as Jorge Partida states (1996, 246-248), when and if the family gets reunited and manages to stay together in the US, children are very likely to dissociate from their parents' cultural and social experience. Their need to assimilate into the host country's culture as a means of personal and social survival creates clear gaps between parents and children, which will eventually cause distress among all members of the family. In all these cases, migrating is perceived and experienced (both before, during, and after) as a traumatic experience, particularly for children migrants. The following sections aim at observing how such a painful life situation is portrayed in three Latino/a movies, paying special attention to the way children act and react in such harsh circumstances.

3. Latino/a cinema and the infant migratory experience: three examples

As explained before, the migratory flows from/through Mexico to the US have been present in US cinema since the beginning of the 20th century and there exists, within mainstream Hollywoodian productions, an 'immigration genre,' including titles as *Her Last Resort* (1912), *The Mexican* (1914), *Border Patrol* (1943), *Border Incident* (1949), *Illegal Entry* (1949),

Borderline (1980), and *The Border* (1982), among others (Maciel 1995). In all these examples, the protagonist-migrant overcomes many difficulties and thus acquires the status of a hero. There are also works that deal with immigration from a Latino/a standpoint and which offer a more realistic view of migration, such as Robert M. Young's *Alambrista!* (1977) and Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983). The former accounts of the hardships of a young Mexican man, who departs from his humble, agrarian hometown in Mexico in search of the American Dream and experiences all kinds of difficulties and discriminations; the latter, by Nava, tells the story of two Guatemalan siblings who, after going through the terrible experience of crossing the border through a sewer, finally make it to the US. Once there, their lives take different paths, hence representing the diverse effects of migration on its protagonists. In the case of *El Norte*, the two main characters are young immigrants who, despite them not being children, portray the psychological effects of crossing the border and experiencing a clash of cultures from the immigrants' perspective. In Catherine Leen's words, the movie "powerfully depicts the hardships involved in immigration and the alienation felt by undocumented immigrants whose worth as individuals is ignored by the ruthlessness of the U.S. legal and economic systems" (2002, 89). Similarly, in the 21st century, the border, life in the borderlands, and/or immigration have been represented in movies such as *Sin Nombre* (2009), *Babel* (2007), *Sleep Dealer* (2008), among many others. However, none of the movies mentioned so far have children as their main characters.

This essay examines three movies that do include children as their protagonists. Rebecca Cammisa's documentary *Which Way Home* (2009) follows two Honduran kids on their harsh journey towards the US on board of *La Bestia*; Gloria Lamorte and Paola Mendoza's *Entre Nos* (2009) portrays the story of a Colombian mother and her two children who have just arrived in New York City. After being abandoned by her husband and the father of her children (who leaves them in New York and moves to Miami), the protagonists go through several adversities in the city, which is represented as inhospitable to undocumented migrants. Finally, Patricia Riggen's highly acclaimed *La Misma Luna* (*Under the Same Moon)* (2008) recounts the story of a nine-year-old boy, Carlitos, who starts a long journey to the US in search of his mother, who had previously migrated to the US seeking a better future for herself and, ultimately, for her son.

La Bestia ('The Beast') is the name that Central and South American migrants use to refer to the set of freight trains on which they ride on their journey toward the US. While travelling on the top of the trains, migrants face all sorts of hardships, e.g., caused by natural forces and the intrinsic dangers of the journey. They also face threats from gangs and cartels, which kidnap,

kill or, in the case of women, rape them along the way. Regardless of these obvious dangers, "as many as half a million Central American immigrants annually hop aboard" *La Bestia* every year (Domínguez 2014), and many of them die in the attempt. The harsh reality of the riders of *La Bestia*, their reasons to embark on such a dangerous voyage, and the dangers they face during their journey have been confirmed in works such as Amnesty International's documentary *Los invisibles,* directed and produced by Mexican actor Gael García Bernal and Marc Silver (2010), and the above-mentioned *Sin Nombre* by Cary Fukunaga (2009). In Fukunaga's work, the director intermingles the stories of Sayra, a young Honduran girl, and Casper, the member of a gang, on their personal journeys: Sayra's towards the US, and Casper's towards his death.

Rebeca Cammisa, in her documentary *Which Way Home* (2008), addresses the issue of immigration from the perspective of migrant children. The documentary follows Kevin and his friend Fito as they move towards the United States, unaccompanied, riding *La Bestia*. On their way, they meet other boys who join them on this difficult journey. The documentary estimates that 5% of the riders of these trains are unaccompanied children. The director and her crew took six years to collect data for the filming, and they followed the children with permission of their parents—Kevin's mother, for instance, was relieved he was accompanied by an adult. Similarly, they got the consent of the rail company, which hoped the movie would incite some government action on the matter (Preston 2009).

Cammisa and her team offer a realistic and harsh depiction of this terrible journey, and as the movie evolves, the destinies, fates, and reasons for each of the boys to embark on such a journey are revealed. In an interview with Julia Preston in *The New York Times*, Cammisa said they accompanied the boys and shot their daily experiences on the train. However, the director stated that her team acted like guardians for the boys and never encouraged them to engage in dangerous situations as a consequence of their presence and the fact that they were being filmed (2009).

The documentary exposes the complexity of the migration process, which encompasses not only the journey towards the North and the dangerous act of crossing the border, but also the migrants' return home once they are apprehended and deported. At the beginning of the documentary film, no matter how obviously harsh and dangerous their trip is, the boys discuss it in a kind of naïve way, describing it as the perfect adventure for them. Preston explains that "as the documentary's director, Rebecca Cammisa, follows them toward the United States border, her camera shows that a freight car roof can give them moments of freedom, even joy, in between the harsh lives and terrible choices at either end of the trip" (2009).

Cammisa's work illustrates the complexity of the lives of these migrant children, of their dreams and desires, of the reason for them to leave their lives, and of the clash between their childhood and their forced maturity. Some of these complexities are made obvious through their acts and thoughts throughout the documentary film. As an example, regardless of the necessarily brave face they put on the dangers they are exposed to, they are still just children, whose dream to arrive in the US may have been triggered by watching movies. This is the case of Kevin, the fourteen-year-old Honduran protagonist of the movie, who says he decided to migrate to the US after watching a Spiderman film. Similarly, the boy states that "Times Square would be a perfect location to set up a shoe-shine box, like one he had used to earn food money in his village" (Preston 2009). However, the documentary also reveals a more painful reason for Kevin's desire to leave Honduras: to escape not only the poverty of his childhood, but the problematic behavior of his mother's new boyfriend towards him. Hence, Kevin's personal story becomes symbolic of the poverty and harsh life of migrant children, and of how these situations encourage them to embark unaccompanied on a difficult and uncertain journey towards the US. As the data reveal,

> In 2014 alone, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection reports that 15,634 unaccompanied children from Mexico were encountered at the border, versus 16,404 from El Salvador, 17,057 from Guatemala, and 18,244 from Honduras (2015). These numbers reveal dramatic growth in unaccompanied minors from Central America, but since 2009 also show that the number of unaccompanied children from Mexico well exceeds those from other nations. Together, they signal that children are migrating in large numbers to the United States. (Donato and Pérez 2017, 116)

Within this context, Cammisa's movie aligns with Rafael A. Martínez's idea that some filmmakers wish to draw attention to the social and human rights crisis of immigration through their work (4). Moreover, Cammisa fills a void that many studies and movies have failed to address—that of unaccompanied children. It is interesting to note, however, that the fact that these children sometimes act their age mitigates the drama of their situation by exposing their feelings of freedom and agency. Nonetheless, the development of the movie, as well as the gradual inclusion of other testimonies, shows that Cammisa's aim is to avoid any kind of paternalism or melodrama in her film, to portray reality as it is, as evidenced by the case of José, a ten-year-old boy who is recorded at an immigration detention center, about to be deported. He cries when he explains how he managed to get there with the help of different *coyotes*, until he was left alone. His destination was New York, to meet his mother, who had been away for three years. José's dramatic story, and the fact that he becomes the voice of

thousand others, gives the documentary a harshness that no fiction movie can ever emulate, regardless of its faithfulness to reality.

The documentary also introduces Juan Carlos, a Guatemalan boy who attempts to get to the US after his nine-year-old brother has already crossed into California to live with his grandmother Gloria. She has paid 3,500 dollars to bring him to the US. Juan Carlos' story represents the story of many migrant families as well. Gloria, his grandmother, had also left Juan Carlos' mother when she was only one. The woman, who does not show her face in the documentary for fear of deportation, explains that the price migrant women pay when leaving their children is too high, as they lose their love forever. After being apprehended and returned to Guatemala, Juan Carlos starts working at his uncle's bookstore and builds a life in his home country.

It is interesting to observe the way the wheel of immigration never stops and the kids, who were once left by their parents, keep dreaming about a better life in the US. Cammisa also gives evidence of the obvious dangers of reaching the border in *La Bestia* in an attempt to prove the supposed inevitability of northern migration, regardless of its risks. This is the case of a woman who lost her legs as a consequence of an accident when she was on top of a train.

The end of the documentary, which follows Kevin back home in Honduras after being apprehended, uncovers the personal, social, and economic realities of these children and their families, and shows the social and personal situations which push them towards the journey north. The film closes by providing information about the way Kevin's life, as well as those of the rest of the kids involved in the movie, evolved. Most of these children tried to enter the US again. In the case of Kevin and Fito, we learn that they attempted to return to the US, and Kevin ended up at a shelter in the state of Washington.

In sum, the documentary has an evident political strength. First, for the intrinsic characteristics of the genre, where "the status of documentary as *evidence from* the world legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge. […] Documentaries provoke or encourage response, shape attitudes and assumptions. [… they] have a powerful, pervasive impact" (Nichols 1991, ix-x). Second, because it serves as a testimony of the lives of the growing numbers of migrant children at the US-Mexico border. It makes them visible and it denounces the causes and consequences of their personal and social situations, turning them into representatives of the 'human and social crisis' of migration.

Lamorte and Mendoza's film *Entre Nos* (2009) is of a different nature. Partly based on Mendoza's real-life story, it is a tribute to her mother. Despite this semi-autobiographical origin, it is a fiction movie. It tells the hardships endured by a young mother and her two sons, Gabriel and Andrea, as they migrate to the US. After their arrival in New York City from Colombia, the

father abandons them and leaves for Miami. The mother's strength and courage help the family overcome their initial helplessness and shock, as she works hard to feed her children and give them a chance to have a decent future.

The movie, thus, focuses on the last part of the immigration process: settling in the host country. Theoretically, this final step may well be understood as the ultimate achievement of the American Dream. However, as the movie shows, the physical and psychological hardships that migrants come across are many and of diverse nature. Among these difficulties is the turning of migrants into the conceptually void but similarly essentialized notion of "illegal alien," or "bare life," in Agamben's terms (1998)—just as the *homo sacer*, who

> has been excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his *gens*, nor (if he has been declared *infamis et intestabilis*) can he perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death. (Agamben 1998, 89-90)

The migrant experiences the same state of exclusion, whereby his/her life is deprived of all rights. This state of exclusion produces obvious situations of stress and anxiety, together with the more abstract feelings of social invisibility and ostracism that the undocumented migrants go through. In the case of Mariana, the protagonist of *Entre Nos*, it all starts with the absence of her husband, which evokes that of other men who leave their countries in search of a better future for their families and end up building new ones in the US, such as the case of Sayra's father in *Sin Nombre,* and of the protagonist of *Alambrista!* (where the main character starts a relationship with another woman). Ironically, in Mariana's case, the husband opts to leave his family in New York and to settle in Miami, where he starts his new life devoid of any responsibilities. The distress the mother goes through increases gradually throughout the movie. First, it is characterized by feelings of anger and even rage towards her ex-husband, which soon turn into despair and anxiety when she faces the hardships of not being able to provide shelter and food for her kids. Unable to find a job to pay rent, they are evicted from their apartment, and they end up sleeping on the streets. By selling the empty cans that they collect from the trashcans in the city, they earn a few dollars on a daily basis, with which they can pay for a humble room to sleep in.

The movie stresses the negative psychological effects of trying to live in a society that does not even acknowledge the existence of the undocumented workers who, through their invisible yet

socially essential work, maintain the socioeconomic *status quo* of the country.[3] For Mariana, these negative effects stem from the reality that she cannot take care of her children; moreover, she is afraid that social services will take her kids away or that they will be apprehended and deported.

The case of Gabriel and Andrea is no different: they experience a double kind of pain. On the one hand, their family structure is broken: they have lost their father, their masculine figure (considering traditional patriarchal parameters), a void Gabriel believes he has to fill. On the other hand, the children have to put up with their mother's stress and anxiety. For this reason, both of them rapidly become mature, since their life transforms into a difficult path to survival. Their intention, as fully aware children, is to help their mother in her desperate attempt to keep them afloat. The children also have to face poverty and need, something which, as inferred from the movie, they did not experience in their home country. Similarly, they can feel their mother's fear of their possible deportation. According to Gulbas and Zayas, "a growing number of citizen children face the harsh realities associated with parental deportation: forced family separations, material deprivation, anxiety, and depression" (2017, 53).

The fact that the movie is a tribute to Mendoza's mother is important. In this sense, not only does the film work as an exposition of the situation of undocumented immigrants in the US, it is also a vindication of the strength of women and children of migrant families as well as the solidarity existing among women. In fact, at the end of the movie, we observe Mariana working at a food truck, whose owner is also a woman of Latin American origin who had already helped the family by providing them with empty cans. Prior to this somewhat happy ending, another female figure is essential to the survival of the family. Preet, a woman of Indian descent and a single mother herself, helps Mariana by offering her a cheap room to rent. She also helps her stop an unwanted pregnancy, which she knows she cannot afford, psychologically and economically.

In the film's final scene, we see Gabriel attending school for the first time, a sign of hope for both Mariana and her children. Gabriel's mature and intelligent response when asked about his summer—"My name is Gabriel and this has been my first summer in New York City"—foreshadows a prosperous future for the family, with many more summers to come. However, this ending does not necessarily (or fully) relate to Guido Rings' idea (2012) of movies that

[3] An example of this is Sergio Arau's mockumentary *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004). The story describes the enormous impact of the mysterious disappearance of every person of Mexican descent in California, which brings total chaos and economic decline to the state's economy.

clearly respond to the mainstream 'the-hero-wins' structure of immigrant movies, as its open ending does not provide enough evidence for such a happy future.

A different kind of immigrant film is Patricia Riggen's *La Misma Luna* (*Under the Same Moon)* (2008). The film differs from the previous two not only in terms of genre (*Which Way Home* being a documentary and *Entre Nos* a partly autobiographical, realistic movie), but also in the development of its plot, of the choice of characters, and of its overall tone and style. *La Misma Luna* tells the story of a young nine-year-old Mexican boy, Carlitos, who after being left in Mexico by his single mother decides to go to the US to look for her. The sudden death of his grandmother, which he knows will be followed by his legal adoption by an uncle he dislikes, triggers the boy's migration to the US. On the way, he encounters all kinds of difficulties, such as being abandoned in the trunk of a car by a couple who intended to take him across the border, working in a greenhouse with other undocumented people and having to run from *la migra* (the immigration police), and journeying toward his mother with the help of a grumpy, undocumented man who does not want to take care of him but with whom he ends up building a strong relationship.

This movie juggles two parallel stories: the kid's journey and the mother's experience as an undocumented worker. No doubt, it belongs to Guido Rings' category of immigration movies that want to address mainstream audiences (2012). Viewers may very likely sympathize with the kid and there is a happy ending: Carlitos, after facing all kinds of hardships, finds his mother. Unbelievable as it may sound, Carlitos (the hero) finds the phone booth her mother had used to call him weekly, after recognizing the street corner and the murals and stores that his mother always described to him.

Yet, in spite of its 'American Dream' and 'the-hero-wins' pattern, Riggen also uses her movie to highlight the harsh situation of migrants and undocumented workers. Similarly, the film addresses the business of smuggling people across the border and the role *coyotes* play in the process. However, this is done in a non-aggressive, non-denouncing tone. The character Doña Carmen 'La Coyota' is someone who makes money by smuggling people and has a business centered around *coyotismo*. Nevertheless, she is also the person who tries to contact Carlitos' mother (Rosario) to inform her about Rosario's mother's death and the boy's journey to the US. She is thus portrayed as a caring character. This 'kind' image of *coyotes*, who actually 'aid' people cross the border for money, contrasts with their presentation in Cammisa's *Which Way Home*, which gives real evidence of the work of coyotes and of the situation of those who cross the border with their 'help.'

The situation of undocumented workers is symbolized by Rosario, Carlitos' mother, and Enrique, the undocumented person who assists the kid on his journey to Los Angeles to search for her. The movie shows the poor working conditions of undocumented people—especially of workers in the agricultural sector who toil long hours in greenhouses where the heat is almost unbearable, and of women who are maids in the fanciest houses of the city, for the most capricious women. It portrays them in quite a compassionate, even paternalistic way. For these women, marrying a citizen is described as a way out of poverty and of their situation of illegality. Rosario's friend Alicia encourages her to marry Paco, the guard of the residential complex where both women work as maids, who is already a legal citizen. All in all, the movie and its happy ending offer a watered-down view of the lives of undocumented workers as well as of the dangers they face crossing the US-Mexico border. Its budget and its box office numbers show that it was a mainstream international movie (with approximately twelve million dollars made in the US and twenty-three million made worldwide, as noted on IMDB). The movie even has a cameo of the internationally acclaimed *corrido* band *Los Tigres del Norte*. According to Charles St-Georges,

> Viewers are easily positioned to emotionally invest in the imperative that quickly becomes the film's only possible plot resolution: Carlitos' eventual reunification with his mother. For American audiences, the preservation of the protagonists' small family holds the potential to take priority over any possible ideological concerns about the integrity of national borders. This melodramatic narrative strategy is effective in combating the often crass and dehumanizing rhetoric aimed at undocumented immigrants in popular and political discourse in the U.S., in that viewers of *La misma luna* cannot help but acknowledge the protagonists' humanity. (2018, 81)

In this sense, the inclusion of a child protagonist provides the movie with a softer tone, which differentiates it from the harsh documentary *Which Way Home* and even the auto-fictional *Entre Nos*. However, this fact also catches the attention of the general public, and thus, the movie has reached wider audiences, who have been exposed to the issue of immigration.

4. Conclusion

Today, immigration is one of the most relevant sociopolitical and economic issues that defines the relationship between the US and its southern neighboring countries. Ever since the mid-20th century, when the flow of people between Mexico in particular and the US started to be monitored, immigration has been addressed in the cinematographic production on both sides of the border. But as Donato and Vanderbilt state regarding studies on immigration, cinema does not address the experiences of children per se. In the few instances in which it does, this happens

in either a "too-realistic-for-the-mainstream" way, or, conversely, in a watered-down way. This essay has attempted to observe the way children are represented in three Latino/a movies, and to reflect on the way they approach child migration.

Regardless of the fact that the analysis of these three films cannot provide definite conclusions, it seems clear that *La Misma Luna* (*Under the Same Moon)* best fits Maciel and Rings' definition of the "Hollywood immigration movie," where a hero surmounts all difficulties presented to him/her and the film ends happily. Its 'hero-wins' fictional structure seems to be more accessible to the mainstream audiences, and thus exposes the problem of immigration from a mild, yet accessible, way. However, with its melodramatic tone, aimed at reaching audiences on both sides of the border, the film still underscores the harsh realities that migrants and undocumented workers face in the US. Yet, even though the hero in the film is a child, it does not match the authenticity of the child migrants' experiences portrayed in *Which Way Home* and *Entre Nos*. These two movies, which belong to different genres (documentary and auto-fictional, respectively), present a harsher, but truthful representation of immigration and the lives of migrants, and thus, less mainstream and accessible. What about the migrant children, then? As the data prove, the children are still crossing. As the data similarly prove, they are the invisible among the invisible.

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