

BOOK REVIEW

Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2016; pp. 312.

While writing about immigrants and border crossings arguably dates back to the signing in 1884 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which resulted in the annexation by the United States of almost half Mexican territories, Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper* (2016) focuses on the emergence of texts that came to be known as post-Gatekeeper narratives. These refer to texts written after the launch in 1994 of Operation Gatekeeper in California, which was followed by similar operations, including Operation Safeguard in 1995 in Arizona and Operation Río Grande in 1997 in Texas. Those operations marked the start of an era in which heavy policing of the US-Mexican border drove potential immigrants away from the relatively safe crossings, mostly located in urban areas, and forced them into taking dangerous routes through deserts and mountains, often with fatal consequences. In addition to doubling the number of immigrants who do not survive the journey, the experience to which those who make it to the other side or back to their homelands are exposed is more scarring, hence increasing the intensity of the resulting trauma. Documenting this trauma, which not only includes the actual crossing but also encompasses its impact on victims' families and border communities, is the focus of Caminero-Santangelo's study on narratives of the post-Gatekeeper era.

Caminero-Santangelo brings together different types of narratives about undocumented immigrants that include fiction, literary journalism, and testimonials. Whereas the main focus of the book is actual border crossings from Mexico, Caminero-Santangelo also tackles the case of Caribbean immigrants, how different they are from their Mexican counterparts, and the impact of metaphorical borders on their experience. Chapter 1, "Narrating the Non-Nation: Literary Journalism and 'Illegal' Border Crossings," deals with three works of narrative journalism: Luis Alberti Urrea's *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (2004), Rubén Martínez's *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001), and Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (2006). In this chapter,

Caminero-Santangelo underlines the discourse adopted by the three authors in order to subvert official accounts of undocumented immigrants as a national threat and expose the human cost of new border policies. Chapter 2, “The Lost Ones: Post-Gatekeeper Border Fictions and the Construction of Cultural Trauma,” Caminero-Santangelo deals with three novels that tackle border crossing deaths, disappearances, and separations: *The Guardians* (2007) by Ana Castillo, *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006) by Reyna Grande, and *Highwire Moon* (2001) by Susan Straight. Caminero-Santangelo focuses on the way the three novels underline the traumatic aftermath of border crossing, manifested through death/ disappearance of loved ones, disruption of border communities, familial separations, and threat of deportation. In Chapter 3, “The Caribbean Difference: Imagining Trans-Status Communities,” the author shifts to the hardships of undocumented living in the US through literary texts by American writers from the Hispanic Caribbean: Junot Diaz’s short story collection *Drown* (1996), Julia Alvarez’s novel *Return to Sender* (2010), and Cristina Garcia’s novel *A Handbook to Luck* (2007). While Diaz’s semi-autobiographical, coming-of-age collection gives insight into the life of Dominican immigrants in the United States, Alvarez and Garcia write about an undocumented Mexican family and a Salvadoran refugee, respectively, in what Caminero-Santangelo considers a form of solidarity that transcends national origins and creates awareness of a shared crisis among undocumented immigrants from different Latino communities.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on first-person narratives by undocumented immigrants. Chapter 4, “Selling the Undocumented: Life Narratives of Unauthorized Immigrants,” tackles two collections that document the oral testimonies of undocumented immigrants: Alicia Alarcón’s *La Migra me hizo los mandados* (2002) and Peter Orner’s *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives* (2008). Chapter 5, “Unauthorized Plots: Life Writing, Transnationalism, and the Possibilities of Agency,” focuses on the extended narratives of two undocumented immigrants: Ramón “Tianguis” Pérez’s memoir *Diario de un mojado* (2003) and Dianne Walta Hart’s recording of an Nicaraguan refugee *Undocumented in L.A.* (1997). In Chapter 6, “Undocumented Testimony: American DREAM-ers,” Caminero-Santangelo focuses on collections of narratives by undocumented youths who are members of the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act. These include *Underground Undergrads: UCLA Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out* (2008), and *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students*

Pursuing the American Dream (2009) as well as interviews the author conducted with undocumented students.

The book manages to provide an overview of writings that are most representative of the post-Operation Gatekeeper era, hence making a powerful statement about the disastrous repercussions of recent enforcements and the resulting humanitarian crises. This is done through “stories told both by and about so-called illegal aliens – the term itself designating this population as *not fitting* into the narratively constructed boundaries of the American ‘nation,’” as Caminero-Santangelo puts it (9). It is, in fact, the issue of “illegality” that ties different parts of the book together through questioning the automatic association of undocumented immigrants with breaking the law and threatening national security while giving those immigrants the voice they are robbed of by virtue of being “illegal,” hence challenging mainstream narratives about immigration. It also highlights a major shift in literature written by Americans of Mexican origins, where the “undocumented experience” is fully embraced as an integral part of Chicano/a identity, which could explain why the author chose to include literary, journalistic, and testimonial texts in the same book and present them all as different channels of advocacy through which undocumented immigration is analyzed by and on behalf of immigrants.

Documenting the Undocumented creates what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics,” in which groups that are not allowed to speak for themselves acquire a voice to subvert hegemonic narratives. In a context where citizenship or “legal” status becomes a prerequisite for participation in the public sphere, the stories of undocumented immigrants are always suppressed, overlooked, or challenged. Through bringing those stories to the light, Caminero-Santangelo examines the complexity of the border crossing process to challenge the simplistic rhetoric adopted by the mainstream not only through underlining the impact of this process on immigrants and their communities, but also by looking into the role of globalization and neoliberal policies in initiating such a crisis in the first place. This explains the inclusion of the phrase “social justice” in the title of the book, which is introduced by the author as a form of activism on the part of writers, journalists, and immigrants whose texts the book tackles and the author herself as well as a call for “ethical engagement and social action” (15) on the part of the readers. That is why Caminero-Santangelo notes that one of the three focal point on which her analysis of the stories of undocumented immigrants relies is “ethics” in the sense that endowing immigrants with agency through these stories becomes an ethical obligation and so does making those stories the first step towards effecting a real change on the ground.

The other two points Caminero-Santangelo's focuses on in her analysis are trauma and testimony. She examines how the stories presented in the book, fictional and nonfictional, underline not only the individual trauma of crossing, deportation, and raids, but more importantly the collective trauma of communities whose members die, disappear, are raped, killed for their organs, or separated from their families. The narratives included in the book, in fact, demonstrate that immigration constitutes the collective trauma of entire communities on both sides of the border. They also link the trauma of border crossing to other traumas in Latin American collective memory, especially disappearance. Testimony, through which trauma is narrated, is also an integral part of the Latin American experience. Texts featured in the book invoke the "testimonio" genre not only to document the trauma, but also to empower the victims. In this regard, Caminero-Santangelo stresses that "testimonios" do not only aim at bearing witness to a traumatic event, but also act as instigators of a process of change. The combination of trauma and testimony, that is writing testimonies about traumas, is expected to trigger the afore-mentioned ethical stand that, the author argues, is the anticipated reaction to the counter-narratives included in the book.

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