

“Transformative Borders in Cinema: Evolving Concepts of Migrant Crossings”

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Abstract

The United States’ borderlands as a geographic location, constantly evolves over time as people cross and re-cross political boundaries and consequently constitute and reconstitute ideas- about immigration and immigrants. Increased surveillance leads to higher dangers for both migrants coming to the U.S. and the living conditions along the multiple borderlands. This paper analyzes two main films; “Voces Inocentes” directed Luis Mandoki and “Sin Nombre” directed by Cary Fukunaga, along with other films that are in dialogue about the socioeconomic and political forces that drive migrants across boundaries and the way that immigrants are depicted in film. These films represent borders as more than points of intersection or crossings but as “border chronotopes.” “Border chronotopes” as represented through multidimensional social relations, economic processes and cultural formations. The films presented in this project are transnational by construction, with aims at presenting the geopolitical journey realities that are entailed in “border crossings.”

In the past ten years, visual artists have turned their cameras to the subject of Latino immigration, migrants, their borders, and border crossings as phenomena resulting from neoliberal economic development in the Americas. Films highlighted and discussed in this paper such as *Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre*, center the struggles of immigrants in overcoming geospatial and symbolic borders, poverty, and violence. These films have challenged and problematized stereotypical notions of who is an immigrant, how borders are constituted, and the use of borders as metaphors for social control the regulation of bodies and economic flow management. Both of these films implicate U.S. imperialism as an instigating force of violence and the U.S. as a refuge for those who are unsettled by imperialism.

Filmmakers offer critical visual depictions and deconstructions of physical and imagined representations of borders. The films *Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre* represent borders as more than points of intersection or crossings but as border chronotopes. In this paper, I define a border chronotope as a social domain that is constituted through multidimensional social relations,

economic processes and cultural formations. The two films provide a lens into the social, political, and economic forces impelling immigration and migrants, while at the same time offering polemic constructions of family life, gender issues, modern technologies and illicit activities. The “border chronotope” at play in the two films *Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre* works cinematically to redefine temporal, spatial, and relational dimensions across transnational spaces.<sup>1</sup> These films reveal the transnational process of migration that expands identities of migrants, concepts of multiple borders, and underlines the socioeconomic issues that have developed a transborder network of migrants and border crossings.

*Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre*, contribute to scholarly discussions of the construction of immigrants, migrants, and borders. Mexican American scholars have problematized the idea of fixed borders who alternatively imagine borderlands as possessing fluid characteristics like the notion of *Greater Mexico*<sup>2</sup> (Paredes 1976). More recently, the aim of borderlands studies scholars and immigration scholars, has been to decenter static constrictive physical borders, and instead demonstrate how everyday cultural practices destabilize fixed structures. Immigration studies remind us that migrations have long historical patterns across generations, populations, and time frames<sup>3</sup>.

### **Borders and Border Crossers**

The U.S.-Mexico borderlands as a geospatial configuration has evolved over time as people cross and re-cross political boundaries and consequently constitute and reconstitute ideas about immigration and immigrants. From the 1950s onward, the typical laborers arriving in the U.S. were young males from Mexico and Central America. Binational agreements such as the Bracero Program between Mexico and the U.S. stimulated Mexican immigration to the U.S.

Moreover, U.S. intervention in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala left Central America war stricken with the displacement of rural inhabitants leading to increased levels of Central American migration to the U.S. Similarly, neoliberal economic policies like NAFTA (1994) proved to be yet another way in which U.S. interference resulted in economic displacement, internal migration and out migration whether in Mexico or Central America. Many rural farmers in Mexico's interior left towns and villages, their exodus created practically ghost towns. Those left behind suffered the effects of economic depression instigated by the neoliberal policies of NAFTA. Migration patterns today encompass more countries and individuals than simply Mexico. Many women and children became dependent on the traditional pattern of male migrants living in the U.S., which created an economic system of reliance and remittances for migrant families. However, over time, the economic pattern of the enterprising of young male immigrants, gave way to other patterns of migrations involving whole families, single women, and eventually child migration. Many of such efforts have been for family reunification purposes.<sup>4</sup> Latino immigration is a process in flux and in interplay with U.S. domestic and foreign policy and crossing and inhabiting the U.S.-Mexico border is as much a reality for Central Americans as it has been for Mexicans.

Over the past ten years, intense surveillance of the U.S./Mexico border has deterred but not halted immigration. Border scrutiny resulted from domestic fears of economic and demographic impacts from immigrant numbers and alleged concerns about terrorism and the effects of the drug war.<sup>5</sup> The events of September 11, 2001, became a historical landmark impacting this generation of immigrants, policy makers, and scholarship production. After September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush pushed congress to pass the U.S. Patriotic Act (2001)<sup>6</sup> that essentially provided funds to militarize the country and provided for border defense

construction. Increased surveillance has led to dangerous conditions for migrants crossing into the U.S. and for migrants living conditions along the U.S./Mexico borderlands. Intense border security measures have slowed the return of immigrants from the U.S. to their homelands but not immigration into the U.S.

Immigration activism and arts advocacy has developed and addressed the complex and problematic nature of Latin American immigration and border crossing. In particular, commercial and independent filmmakers have taken up the U.S.-Mexico border and border crossings as the subject of their films. Since the implementation of punitive immigrant and defense policies, there has been an increase of immigrants, immigrant deaths, and violence committed against immigrants coming to the U.S. Some filmmakers see their work as responding to these social and human rights crisis.

Films such as *Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre* offer visual cultural expressions that underscore how U.S. neoliberal policies create the social and economic problems that migrants flee from, such as poverty, violence, political repression, and exploitation, and yet the U.S. becomes a site refuge that immigrant's claim as a strategy for social betterment. In the two films, borders unite and divide populations because they connect people and goods that move across nation states but are also used as measures of social control. By using the concept of a border chronotope, this paper seeks to explore the complex social domains that entail ideological and economic processes, political ramification, and human and environmental relations as they relate to the lives of migrants, immigrants and border crossers.

## **Push Factors: Constructing a Magnet System in *Voces Inocentes***

The film *Voces Inocentes*, based on the autobiographical experience of screenwriter Oscar Torres, reflects the anguish and violent displacement Salvadorians and Central American peoples experienced beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the early 1990s. As a result of economic, social and political instability, migration from Central America increased dramatically from the 1980s forward. An increase occurred again beginning in 2013.<sup>7</sup> The neoliberal agenda of the 1970s embodied by former President Ronald E. Reagan, nurtured puppet governments throughout Central and South America that backed U.S. neoliberal policies. Reagan's economic policies pushed export-driven economics and deindustrialization. El Salvador's revolutionary party, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), became dissatisfied with the governments exploitation of its people and began to try to undo the negative impact of foreign influence in the country. *Voces Inocentes* captures the experience of families, women, and children that were innocent bystanders during the geopolitical conflicts of the time period. The film narrates the story of the main character, Chava, whose innocence is disrupted by the harsh realities he must face at the expense of the outbreak of the Civil War. The introductory scene reveals the setting and conditions that Chava, and many Salvadorian families found themselves - caught between crossfires. Furthermore, I read *Voces Inocentes* as a film that introduces youth as new migrating population from origin points in Central America as an ongoing historical process since the 1980s.

Luis Mandoki, a Mexican filmmaker, began his career as an independent filmmaker with a variety of Mexican non-profit organizations focusing on issues of social justice. After success as an independent filmmaker with films in Spanish like *El Secreto* (1980) and *Motel* (1984), Mandoki dove into full-length Hollywood productions such as *Gaby: A True Story* (1987), *When*

*a Man Loves a Woman* (1994), and *Message in A Bottle* (1999). Mandoki would have a twenty-year gap between Spanish films from 1984 to 2004 when *Voces Inocentes* was released. He had originally set out to be one of the first filmmakers to work outside of Mexico and produce popular films in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Mandoki was also inspired to produce films that conveyed questions of the human condition, which is what attracted him to working with the writer of *Voces Inocentes*, Oscar Torres.

Mandoki categorizes *Voces Inocentes* as “Cine Reivindicativo” or “re-vindictive film.” A particular style produced in Mexico during the 70s and 80s that centered social justice issues through ideological productions. In the case of *Voces Inocentes*, Mandoki places the film in this genre with the purpose of creating a humanist message revealing the struggle of innocent people facing civil war.<sup>9</sup> The dilemma of innocence is not only posited against the issue of violence and war in the film, but also as the motive for migrating to the U.S. Mandoki had the good fortune of encountering a scriptwriter suitable for the film he would direct.

Oscar Torres, the screenwriter for *Voces Inocentes*, drew on his own experience growing up in El Salvador during the Civil War to write the script for *Voces Inocentes*. At a lecture given at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 2011, Torres described his insatiable need to write *Voces Inocentes*. He states, “I would wake up in the middle of the night sweating, terrified in a panic, unable to explain what was causing this anguish inside of me”<sup>10</sup> recalling as he lay in his comfortable one bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, CA. He remembered feeling lost at this particular time, describing himself as making “films without aim”. His way of life had become “Hollywoodish” and meaningless; that is, until the suppressed memories of his childhood began to emerge during his sleep. At this point, he explains he was in a professional rut, and an eviction notice served as a reminder that he had hit rock bottom. Adding a bit of humor to his lecture he

revealed, “Instead of paying my rent, I bought myself a computer.” The computer served as a form of therapy for his soul and eventually developed into the production of *Voces Inocentes*. “I was a screenwriter writing my emotions in the only way I knew how to do so.”<sup>11</sup>

As director and screenwriter he effectively captured the cyclical forced migration of one generation to another as a result of the U.S. backed civil war in El Salvador. The film begins with a dark image and the sound of heavy rainfall; a few young boys walk into formation with their hands raised over their heads as army soldiers are leading them away. Chava’s narration reveals the miserable and uncertain fate that awaits these captive youth. The scene then dissolves in to a memory of Chava at the doorsteps of his home as he approaches, his father leaving the family for “El Norte,” never to be seen again. In the same sequence Chava announces, “She told me I had to be the man of the house...But first, I had to pee.” This moment in the film illustrates to the audience that Chava is caught in the middle of a stark reality. Chava’s childhood innocence is sacrificed as he assumes new responsibilities following his father’s departure.

The father’s departure is not explained directly in the film. However, through the film’s context, the audience is led to assume that the father fled for his life as a result of the Civil War. Early on in the film the issue of war is introduced in a breakthrough scene where Chava is sitting inside the classroom admiring the beauty of one of his classmates, Rosita who he has a crush on. Unexpectedly a bomb goes off outside the classroom and sends everyone into a panic. The teacher orders everyone to take cover, but then we see a military soldier come into the school, ordering everyone to get in line outside with the rest of the students. Outside the children are being placed in the back of trucks and hauled away. This scene depicts how every available male older than twelve years old during the Civil War was forcibly drafted to the national army<sup>12</sup>. In later scenes, the audience sees that although Chava has escaped the national army draft, his uncle



attempts to convince him to join the revolutionary forces. These two scenes visually depict the conflict that Salvadorian youth faced, forced to choose between two sides.

The remainder of the film depicts Chava's journey to escape persecution as the conflict intensifies and thousands of people are forced to migrate and leave their lives behind. The culminating scene shows Chava saying goodbye to his family as he is placed in the back of a pickup truck. As he leaves for El Norte, his mom tells him to promise that he will be strong. When Chava moves further from his family on the pickup truck, his younger brother innocently shouts, "I am now the man of the house!" in a joyful tone. This scene reveals the cycle of forced adulthood and migrations across generations in violence stricken countries like El Salvador.

Rosa Linda Fregoso describes the construction of this type of forced migration narrative as, "a nonlinear pattern, ricocheting back and forth between different narrative spaces and times"<sup>13</sup> (Fregoso 1993, 72). Forced migrations are part of the U.S.-Mexico border chronotope apparent in *Voces Inocentes*. Chava's father was forced to leave, and later we see that Chava is the second displaced generation in the family, who will be followed by his younger brother. Chava declares, "I don't want to go the United States. But if I stay, they're going to kill me," which reveals the push factor that many Central Americans experienced during this time period. Many young men had no other option but to flee north for survival as U.S. imperialism and neoliberal economics had direct consequences all over the hemisphere, which include economic displacement, internal migration from rural areas to the city, and eventual forced migration from Latin American countries to the north. *Voces Inocentes* captures the irony of how the U.S. becomes the site of settlement or refuge for migrants who are destabilized by U.S. supported neoliberal policies resulting in are a large magnet for refugees and migrants seeking shelter in the

land of the “free”. Thus, the U.S. produces the conditions of migration and the discourse that reproduces its image as the land of the “free,” as is foreign policy limits freedom elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

The “border chronotope” illustrated by *Voces Inocentes* expands previously held concepts of border crossings and immigrants. The typical migrant depicted in traditional film was the poor male Mexican crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. However, *Voces Inocentes* forces the audience to break away from such notions of fixed borders or border crossings limited to Mexicans, allowing us to consider the transnational dynamics that occur across trans-American routes.<sup>15</sup> The chronotope in the film stretches the idea of a U.S.-Mexican border to inform the audience of hemispheric displacement and the crossing of multiple borders for safety. Over time, borders have come to be imaginary or important only for political purposes. The pressing realities of women, men, and children like Chava are downplayed in the dominant political discourse, which focuses on legal violation of immigration laws.<sup>16</sup> The direct consequences and impacts of geopolitical formations become a reality, making the U.S. a magnet for immigrants by design.

### **Dark Journeys – Sin Nombre’s Middle Passage**

*Sin Nombre* is a story directed by Cary Fukunaga that highlights the dangerous migration conditions experienced by Central American and Mexican immigrants as they plod along Mexico’s railroad system on their journey to the U.S. In several ways *Sin Nombre*, a contemporary story, is in conversation with *Voces Inocentes* because it picks up the historical trajectory of Central American migrants where Mandoki’s film left off. In other words, *Sin Nombre* is a film that presents the stories of Central American subjects who face social ills that the region has encountered since U.S. intervention increased in the 1980s.

When the first wave of Central American immigrants arrived in the U.S. in the 1980s, many were young males entering urban cities like Los Angeles, Dallas, and Washington D.C. Faced with integration challenges and the lack of supportive social units, many immigrant youth turned to inner city gangs, like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13), to find a sense of belonging.<sup>17</sup> The depiction of the Mara Salvatrucha as a menacing force sheds light on the overarching socioeconomic conditions that have escalated organized crime in the hemisphere. *Sin Nombre* shows how the gang has developed into a transnational network operating across nation-state borders, from its beginnings in Los Angeles. As gangs grew in numbers and in influence, the U.S. government began deporting many of its high-ranking members back to Central America. Thus, the U.S. created a “double displacement,” first through economic push factors, and second by deportation and regulatory practices. After the U.S. washed its hands of gang members through removal by deportation, not only were people displaced, but this generated social issues in home countries of immigrants. The U.S. created the setting for a Frankenstein-like structure developing seasoned gangsters then transferring the madness of its creation to a region already plagued with overwhelming problems. Gang violence and organized crime added a new dimension to the concepts of migration routes, bringing new dangers to immigrant populations who keep getting younger and younger.

*Sin Nombre*’s filmmaker Cary Fukunaga captured the complex nature of immigration and border crossers. Fukunaga served as the director and wrote the screenplay for *Sin Nombre*, the first full-length film in his career. Prior to *Sin Nombre*, Fukunaga was a successful writer and director of short films that won praise and recognition. In an interview Cary Fukunaga, he states that “this movie ten years from now, should feel like a window into this time period,”<sup>18</sup> highlighting *Sin Nombre*’s effort to capture this moment in immigration history. And he goes on

to state, “the universal aspect of people coming from a place of struggle to improve their lives,” is a way that the film aims to bring dignity to the immigrant subject. Cary Fukunaga received the backing of Focus Films, a large production company, enabling a wider release of the film. In his effort to produce realistic depictions of immigrant life, Fukunaga was granted creative license to include actual immigrant populations as extras in many of the scenes of the film.

Fukunaga describes the film in the genre of realism due to its pressing need to convey the message of the dangerous paths immigrants face. In another interview he declares, “The more I did the research, the more I had the need to finish it and the responsibility to do it well,”<sup>19</sup> in reference to the beginning stages of his screen writing for the film. In that same interview Fukunaga reveals that his consciousness about immigration developed greater concern when he read an article about a group immigrants in Texas that were trapped in a trailer truck and died from heat exposure.<sup>20</sup> Fukunaga’s efforts to direct his first full-length film demonstrates a need to bring awareness to the dangers immigrants face when crossing multiple borders.

The subject of Central American migrants gained increased attention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the 2006 publication of *La Travesía de Enrique*, offering a poignant account of a young migrant driven to cross the border in search of his mother. The author, Sonia Nazario is a reporter who brings to life the story of one Honduran migrant teen (Enrique) whose experience parallels many others. Fukunaga was influenced by Nazario’s work as it provided him with insight into the dangerous networks that exist from migration routes from Central America to the U.S.<sup>21</sup>

Once Nazario began her research, she realized that child migrants swarmed to the north by the thousands each day in a way that expands our current understanding of a border

chronotope. She was appalled that these stories were not known in the U.S. and that no human rights warnings were being raised. So in 2000 she set out to capture the tragic stories of migration first hand. She met Enrique in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico with the objective of documenting his story and witnessing the dangerous conditions experienced by migrants. Her work reveals the structures of displacement that separates millions of families across borderlines and is helpful in analyzing the film *Sin Nombre*'s theme about how immigrants seek refuge and security in the U.S.

The film's introduction of the main characters: Casper, Lil Mago and Sayra follows a transnational imagery that depicts social issues as push factors from the origins of Central American migration. Casper lives in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. The introductory scene begins with Casper focused on a wall-size poster of a lush, beautiful forest. The beautiful scenery is contrasted by the harsh urban barrio of Tapachula where Casper lives. In the scene, he is preparing to leave his home. His face is stern yet emotionally driven expressions that reveal his bottled up anguish. After Casper's introduction, the camera cuts to a direct intimidating close-up low-angle shot of Lil Mago's tattoo covered face. The camera's proximity to the subject and the tattoos are meant to present the intimidating presence of the Mara Salvatrucha in the region<sup>22</sup>. Lil Mago's introduction as the leader of the gang also serves to signify the violent and menacing lifestyle of the Mara Salvatrucha. The next scene introduces Sayra and her family. The scene begins with the image of Sayra looking out in to her massive *favela*-style neighborhood in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa. The sheer mass of the urban landscape places the miniscule figure of Sayra in proportion to her surroundings. However, the next scene is a shot of "La Bombilla" in Tapachula that demonstrates the massive immigrant hub that surrounds this train station in southern Mexico. The transnational imagery used in the beginning of the film operates

as another example of a border chronotope in contemporary cinema. The blurring of borders, time, and space in this film also reminds the audience that borders and migrants are not fixed constructions, but rather part of an, “illegitimate and artificial geopolitical border”<sup>23</sup> (Fregoso 1993, 66).

Historically and contextually, *Sin Nombre* picks up in the early nineties where *Voces Inocentes* left off. In *Sin Nombre*, the structures of migration have changed to fixed intricate systems and routes with new added dangers that are part of a migrant’s journey. Rosa Linda Fregoso’s point, “the category of border directs our attention to the spaces ‘within and between’ what were once sanctified as ‘homogeneous’ communities”<sup>24</sup> (Fregoso 1993, 65). The majority of the passage is covered by the migrants in what is known as “La Bestia” or “The Beast” – the train that connects southern Mexico all the way to border towns in northern Mexico (the country freighting system).<sup>25</sup> Riding La Bestia itself is one of the dangers of the journey, as thousands of migrants’ lose limbs, body parts and many more lose their lives to the danger of train hopping as they go north. The Mara Salvatrucha represents one of the symbolic and realistic shadow antagonists in the film. Migrants may experience a constant state of fear and intimidation from gang members during their journey. Women and children face the possibility of sexual violence and rape. The Mara Salvatrucha serve as hit man or “middle man” in the larger picture of the drug cartels and the U.S. – Mexican backed drug war. The title of the film *Sin Nombre* translates to “Without Name,” which speaks to the unspeakable or nameless number of dangers, part of contemporary migration routes. Furthermore, *Sin Nombre* also symbolizes a notion of valuelessness, the fact that immigrants become invisible to society and politics while transgressing borders, like ghosts, with no identity, no name.

The representation of the character Sayra and her family depicts the complex relationships created by displaced migrants. In the scene where Sayra is introduced in Tegucigalpa, she is reunited with her father who had left her when she was only a child. When he first meets Sayra after many years away from his country, her father says, “She’s already a lady.” We learn that her father has come take her back with him to the U.S. The scene provides a visual landscape, which informs the audience of the extreme poverty that influenced her father to migrate to the U.S. That same factor served as a motive for him to return for his daughter and rescue her from poverty. Her father hopes that their journey to the U.S. will provide them with a better life. As in the case of many other Central American migrants, economic factors are key in the migrations of Sayra’s family, who migrate to the north with the hopes of being able to build a better future.

The landscape image of Tegucigalpa is nearly identical in imagery to that shown in *Voces Inocentes*; but nevertheless it serves to inform that conditions in Central America have not improved and in fact have grown worse from the period where *Voces Inocentes* leaves up to present day. Sonia Nazario paints a vivid picture when she presents the harsh story of her maid’s poverty in her native Guatemala, “Ella los arrullaba con consejos para calmar las punzadas del hambre. ‘Dormí boca abajo para que no te haga tanto ruido la tripa (I slept mouth down so that your gut does not make too much noise)’”<sup>26</sup> (Nazario 2006, viii). Today, economic conditions continue to serve as push factors drawing immigrants to the prosperity of the center of the magnet. However, new border chronotopes are explored in *Sin Nombre* as new inherent dangers added over time and space that play out in the hemisphere.

Throughout Sayra’s journey danger waits at every corner. While aboard “La Bestia” one of the first nights of the journey, she is almost raped by Lil Mago but is saved by Casper who

ends up killing Lil Mago. The death of Lil Mago represents the point of departure in the film where the audience learns about the dangers involved in crossing different borders. For the rest of the film, Casper will have to face the consequences of his lifestyle as he is hounded by the Mara Salvatrucha throughout the country for killing the leader of his local chapter.

In her investigation, Sonia Nazario finds that migrant deaths are a common occurrence on the trains:

*“Con frecuencia los pandilleros arrojan del tren en movimiento a los migrantes que los hacen entrar en colera porque no tienen dinero o porque se resisten; o los dejan muertos en el techo del tren para que los encuentren los empleados ferroviarios en la proxima estacion* (With frequency gang members throw migrants who upset them for not having money or for resisting from the moving train; or they leave them dead on top of the train so that the employees of the train can find them in the next station) ”<sup>27</sup>(Nazario 2006, 92).

Mid-point in the film, there is yet another landscape shot of a beautiful sunrise over a mountain range as the migrants are nearing the middle of their journey. The shot is contrasted again by the grim realities of migration. These scenes are a contrast to the past and present raising the question of why a country so rich in natural resources is in fact a trap for poverty and alienation. The scene shifts to an immigrant hub, known as “Casas del Migrante<sup>28</sup>.” Casas’ are safe houses, where hundreds of immigrants at a time are given shelter, food, a shower, aid, and supplies to assist them along their journey. The scene visually introduces the audience to the magnitude of the populations involved in these migrant streams. Casas’ represents migrant resources that exist in spite of political ideas and regulations. The border chronotope is also at



play with Casa del Migrante as we see that the border is not in a fixed position or location, but rather creates structures and spaces across the landscape of the hemisphere that connect migrants from one country to another.

Transnational violence forms an important subtext of the film. The film ends with Casper being shot and killed by Smiley, a young boy who he inducted into the Mara Salvatrucha at the beginning of the film. Before squeezing the trigger, Smiley says “La Mara for life, homie” and proceeds to execute Casper with two shots directly to the chest. Casper’s death by Smiley reinforces how violence is unavoidable under these conditions. The common use of landscape scenery by Cary Fukunaga in the film provides the audience with an idea of the immense structures set up in the process of migration. The transnational nature of migration forces us to consider border chronotopes that over time continue to add dimensions of violence, economies, politics, gender dynamics and cultures . The film ends showing Sayra now in the U.S. with a backpack and looking out in to the horizon, as a way to signify that she must now get rid of her old identity, and must look ahead at the new possibilities in the U.S. She must now find her own way in El Norte just as Chava in *Voces Inocentes* did. However, the difference in using a female character like Sayra is remarkable because it highlights a gender shift occurring in migrant demographics. Where in the early eighties and nineties marked the migration of mostly young males, by comparison the new wave of immigrants includes young women in notably large numbers.

*Sin Nombre* is another example of a film that leaves the audience with the reality of violence encountered by migrants going north, but one of its unique qualities is that it is able to demonstrate the direct transnational impact that violent structures have on hemispheric communities. Charles Ramírez Berg suggests audience participation as “Individuals close

readings are needed to investigate more fully the Anglo-centered films and the Chicano-centered ones”<sup>29</sup> (Berg 1992, 48), pointing out that both sides of the film industry must be held accountable. As a critical audience, there must be interaction with the sociopolitical and historical discourses that highlight the problematic meaning of transnational routes that negatively impact hemispheric and global communities.

### **Reflection on Border and Migrant Transformations**

Films like *Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre* expanded border chronotopes over time and geographic space since earlier films like *Alambrista* (1977). When *Alambrista* was released in the 1970s, it was a film that presented the original notion of the male Mexican migrant pursuing economic independence and prosperity. In 1990, critical cinematic reviews by David R. Maciel praised films like *Alambrista* and asked border films to “offer an alternative cinematic language, style and ideology” (Maciel, 71). Similarly today, critical audiences demand that moviemakers continue to use this formula with the incorporation of new border dimensions that remain relevant to present immigrant issues.

*Voces Inocentes* demonstrates that the depiction of the traditional Mexican male migrant is an outdated notion that must be revisited to include the larger processes at work that includes the displacement of women, children, and other Central/Latin Americans. Chava’s story visually and artistically showcase the violence that affected the Central American region pushing many children, families, man and women alike to the north escaping persecution. Migration patterns from Central America exist in large numbers from the 1970s to the present day. *Alambrista*’s focused on a particular trope of individual migration stories rather than a larger border

chronotope focus. The films presented in this paper are transnational by construction, with aims at presenting the realities about geopolitical journeys that are entailed in “border crossings.”

*Sin Nombre* is a film that shows the new dangerous dimensions that did not exist during *Alambrista*’s release. One of the successes of *Alambrista* is the ability to capture the inherent dangers of the migrant’s journey north and introduce an audience to the topic of immigration. David R. Maciel concludes “Roberto receives quite an education during the course of the film” (Maciel 1990, 71), to show that the dangers along the journey are part of the migrant’s crude educational process. Similarly, the end of *Sin Nombre* shows Sayra reflecting on the heartbroken journey endured after going from southern to northern Mexico. Both films end showing their main characters in a state of reflection, leaving the audience to draw their own conclusions about whether economic prosperity is worth the migrant lifestyle. *Sin Nombre*’s title suggests that there is simply no vocabulary or words for the unspeakable or unnamable violent crimes, and rather remain - *sin nombre* (without name).

Perhaps the idea of a film that encompasses a full length border chronotope is realistically impossible in cinematic dimension, but it is only by maintaining the dialogue between cinematic representations of borders in communication with literature that we can fully represent new and dynamic dimensions of borders. Films like *Voces Inocentes* and *Sin Nombre* continue to engage audiences with new critical ideas of borders and migrants on topics of deportation, displacement, gangs, children soldiers, and civil war. We continue to see that a transnational and trans-American scope is needed to understand the historical processes that develop along migration patterns at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and beyond. Rosa Linda Fregoso declares, “The normalcy of state terrorism in our own historical moment makes the movement for global social justice more urgent than ever before”.<sup>30</sup> Fregoso underscores an imperative in new border

studies. The stakes are high, and the number of people affected continues to rise; thus, the evolution of border and migrant identities continues in a cycle. The world continues to be more interconnected than ever before, and cinema can be a helpful tool used to bring humanity towards a more harmonious future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I draw on and modify the concept of “chronotope” by Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin used the concept of chronotope as change over time and space. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (1981). I use “border chronotope” to analyze the fluidity of time and space in the US-Mexico borderlands region.

<sup>2</sup> Americo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (University of Texas Press, reprint edition 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Recent immigration studies scholars that are pushing the boundaries of critical border studies are Erika Lee in *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Mae Ngai in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), Alicia Camacho in *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (NYU Press, 2008), Ana Pegler-Gordon in *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Many other efforts have also been the result of the exportation of the American Dream through media, other migrant experiences, notions of development and progress based on U.S imperialism, etc. This observation is supported by the work by Inderpal Grewal's *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> The conflation of patriotism with xenophobia, as established by the right wing conservative agenda.

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. A. Patriotic Act of 2001,” *U.S. Financial Crimes Enforcement Network a U.S. Department of Treasury*, [http://www.fincen.gov/statutes\\_regs/patriot/](http://www.fincen.gov/statutes_regs/patriot/).

<sup>7</sup> Jens Manuel Krogstad, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Number of Latino children caught trying to enter U.S. nearly doubles in less than a year,” PEW Research Center, June 10, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/10/number-of-latino-children-caught-trying-to-enter-u-s-nearly-doubles-in-less-than-a-year/>. The article brings important data on the high numbers of Latino children apprehended at the border. Furthermore, the article also demonstrates why the media categorized 2013 as a year of Central American immigrant crisis. The article also brings into conversation push factors like violence and economic ills as reasons for migration.

<sup>8</sup> “El Cinematograf “Voices Inocentes,” YouTube Video, 9:35, posted by “Quim Crusellas,” on September 20, 2007, <https://youtu.be/VPPQuyzYaVE?list=PLh3ihWGCrVWZ8EJxzxWx1IccxDWzeNWls>.

<sup>9</sup> Entrevista con Luis Mandoki para CorreCamara parte 1 de 2,” YouTube Video, 21:30, posted by “CorreCamara Cine,” February 13, 2014, [https://youtu.be/h\\_uwVzeEt48](https://youtu.be/h_uwVzeEt48).

<sup>10</sup> Torres, Oscar. “The Making of Voces Inocentes.” Public Lecture at University of California at Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, Feb. 09, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Torres, Oscar. “The Making of Voces Inocentes.” Public Lecture at University of California at Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, Feb. 09, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> In the interview on endnote number 5 by “CorreCamara Cine,” Luis Mandoki mentions that the Salvadoran government did not allow the production to be shot in the country due to its mention of drafting children during the Civil War. The film was then shot in southern Mexico.

<sup>13</sup> Fregoso, Rosa Linda, *meXicana encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (University of California Press, 2003) 72.

<sup>14</sup> The argument of liberal discourse and body management is informed by Mimi Thi Nguyen in *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012). In this book, Nguyen outlines how biopolitics and necropolitics function in the liberal discourse of freedom specifically in relation to refugee/migration passages.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the usage of the “trans-American” term read: José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2011).

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<sup>16</sup> Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*.

<sup>17</sup> A good treatment on the creation of transnational gangs: Tom Diaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (University of Michigan Press of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> "Interviewt Cary Fukunaga 'Sin Nombre,'" YouTube Video, 9:56, posted by "MovieCollege," on May 3, 2010, <https://youtu.be/bId-YNWjiek?list=PLh3ihWGCrVWZ8EJxzxWx1IccxDWzeNWls>.

<sup>19</sup> "Cary Fukunaga Sin Nombre interview Karlovy Vary," YouTube Video, posted by "Boriboj" on July 26, 2009, <https://youtu.be/zF7QdLl4PRM?list=PLh3ihWGCrVWZ8EJxzxWx1IccxDWzeNWls>.

<sup>20</sup> John W. Fountain and Jim Yardley, "Skeletons Tell Tale of Gamble By Immigrants," *New York Times*, October 16, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/16/us/skeletons-tell-tale-of-gamble-by-immigrants.html>. In the interview Cary Fukunaga does not specifically detail which source was the article he read of the immigrants trapped in a train, but I would infer it might have been the popular article disseminated by the *New York Times* who caught media headlines.

<sup>21</sup> Conon O'Brien, "Cross the U.S.-Mexican Border In 'Sin Nombre,'" *National Public Radio*, April 02, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102656686>. In an interview for the Conan O'Brien Show, Fukunaga talks about his influence by Sonia Nazario's book.

<sup>22</sup> For further reference to gang and immigration work look at: Tom Diaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement*, (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 66.

<sup>24</sup> Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen*, 65.

<sup>25</sup> For further reference, see "Ante La Bestia" in Sonia Nazario *La Travesía de Enrique* (Random House Paperbacks, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Nazario, *La Travesía de Enrique*, VIII. All Spanish to English translations are my own interpretation throughout the paper.

<sup>27</sup> Nazario, *La Travesía de Enrique*, 92.

<sup>28</sup> This scene of the film is informed by the non-profit organization, "La Red de Casas del Migrante Scalibrini," *Red Casas del Migrante Scalibrini*, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://www.migrante.com.mx>.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Ramirez Berg, "Bordertown, the Assimilation Narrative and the Chicano Social Problem" in *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*, ed. Chon A. Noriega, (Girland Publishing, Inc., 1992) 48.

<sup>30</sup> Fregoso, *meXicana encounters*, xv

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