

## REVIEW

### ***Border South/Frontera Sur*, directed by Raúl O. Paz Pastrana**

83 min. Oley, Pennsylvania: Bullfrog Films, 2019.

Melissa Gauthier

University of Victoria

*meligau@uvic.ca*

Told against the backdrop of the North American migrant trail, *Border South* documents the lives of Central American migrants as they cross through Mexico en route to the United States. This documentary film is an intimate portrait of a young Nicaraguan man named Gustavo whose journey north is violently interrupted when he is shot while travelling on the roof of “*La Bestia*” (the Beast), the nickname of a network of freight trains that runs through Mexico from the southern border with Guatemala to the United States. Gustavo’s highly politicized misfortune finally turns into a golden ticket upon receiving the humanitarian visa that he has been so patiently waiting for while recovering from his injury in a migrant shelter. After several months stationed at the shelter and with a visa in hand, Gustavo is ready to move forward without having to hitch a ride on the northbound train.

The journey of Central American migrants in transit like Gustavo is rarely “unidirectional or continuous” (Frank-Vitale 2020, 3). It is unpredictable like the train schedules and reminiscent of the back and forth movement of departing trains. Gustavo’s story is a window into life in the “space of transit,” “a complex space where movement can be multidirectional, circuitous, and intermittent” (Frank-Vitale 2020, 8). It is also a space populated by migrant shelters that dot the map between Mexico’s southern and northern borders. The “space of transit” inhabited by migrants like Gustavo is a “world of endless waiting” (Anderson 2014, 796) where “formal humanitarian recognition through state bureaucracies” (Doering-White 2018, 434) in the form of a humanitarian visa can translate into movement.

Raúl O. Paz Pastrana’s first feature film takes an up close and personal look into the lived realities of transit migration (Vogt 2018). What really sets it apart from other immigrant rights documentaries (Cheyroux 2019) is the filmmaker’s deep sensibility for the intimacies of people’s everyday lives. The Mexican immigrant filmmaker spent four years following migrant routes from southern Mexico to the U.S.-Mexico border. *Border South* is a thought-provoking and aesthetically pleasing documentary resulting from Pastrana’s mix of visual ethnography, *cinéma vérité*, and creative sound design. The outcome is a poignant tale of resourceful train-hopping migrants and instant coffee drinkers living and moving along the railroad tracks who use homemade tattoo guns

running on computer ink cartridges and cell phone batteries. The film vividly captures the endless ingenuity of Central American migrants moving across “Mexico’s increasingly militarized transit corridors” (Doering-White 2018, 433).

The film could not be more timely given the ever-expanding efforts made by the Mexican government to beef up its migration enforcement in an attempt to slow the movement of Central American migrants through its territory. The drastic increase in patrols along the train routes observed in the film is a direct manifestation of this. As anthropologist and co-producer of *Border South* Jason De León (2019, 102) puts it, “Southern México is starting to look a lot like southern Arizona’s immigration enforcement archipelago.” De León directs a research project focused on human suffering and death in the desert called the UMP (Undocumented Migration Project).

The film follows the anthropologist and his team on fieldwork trips to Arizona and Southern México walking in the footsteps of migrants to collect and record the traces and the things they leave behind. De León’s role in the film is of significant pedagogical value and leaves the floor wide-open for classroom discussion on topics like undocumented migration, fieldwork, the archaeology of the contemporary, and public anthropology. Also featured in *Border South* is Robin Reineke, a cultural anthropologist working closely with both forensic scientists and the families of missing migrants who have vanished while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. I have used other audiovisual resources to introduce their work in my undergraduate classes and this part of the film can certainly lead to stimulating conversations with students about the integration of methods from across the subfields of anthropology and the ethics of anthropological engagement.

*Border South* can also provide an excellent basis for class discussion on a wide range of migration-related topics like the scope and shape of border externalization across a diversity of migration landscapes, the various forms of violence that characterize the social process of clandestine migration, and the complex intersection of humanitarianism and human smuggling. Its value as a teaching tool can be enhanced by asking students to read recent ethnographies of clandestine migration across Mexico (De León 2019; Frank-Vitale 2020; Vogt 2018) and other regions of the world like the Euro-African borderlands (Anderson 2014).

*Border South* had its world premiere at the 2019 Sheffield Doc/Fest in the U.K. The film made the official selection of the 2019 Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York City and won the Best Feature Film Award at the 2019 Society for Visual Anthropology’s Film and Media Festival in Vancouver. Raúl O. Paz Pastrana is actively working with immigrant rights organizations, migrant shelters, festivals, and other institutions to tour the film in Central America, Mexico, and the United States. Pastrana is also collaborating with the Undocumented Migration Project to bring the film to various communities around the world who are participating in “Hostile Terrain 94,” De León’s latest exhibition that pays tribute to the people who died while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Bullfrog Films have just released a DVD that includes both English and Spanish versions of the film.

*Border South* is also available for academic and community streaming through the Bullfrog Films Docuseek website at <http://docuseek2.com/bf-boso>.

## References

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