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A Review of Aaraón Díaz's Short Documentary *Migranta con M de Mamá*¹

Vicky spins inside a carousel —too old for it, she recalls a lifetime of forsaken rites, of missed graduations, meals, and deaths in the family. In Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo's insightful documentary *Migranta con M de Mamá* (Mexico, 2020), translated as *Migrant Mother*, three women in the Mexico-Canada Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program portray themselves as trapped in a vicious cycle of family separation, but also of resistance.

Vicky's narrator voice accompanies the opening shot as horses and giraffes run in endless circles, mouths gaping as if in a frenzied rush, despite the carousel's slow pace. Like lives spent waiting for family reunification, time seems

warped. Vicky laments that her grown son is now in Leamington, Canada, the same place where her husband died as a migrant worker. Her husband, she explains, sacrificed years of family life to travel to Canada as a temporary migrant worker so that his children could study and have a better life. His son, however, “no quiso estudiar,” “didn't want to study,” and is now repeating the cycle: off to Leamington, he's left his one-year-old daughter behind.

As the migration expert Luciana Gandini pointed out at the documentary film's showing at the UNAM Seminar on Internal Displacement, Migration, Exile, and Repatriation (SUDIMER), academics often analyze migration at the systemic level. Perhaps we'd be tempted to analyze what it means to “not want to study”: Is not studying a true desire? Is it the consequence of a myriad of systemic fac-

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tors that propel the *status quo*? And could considering the latter question in fact remove the subject's agency, rendering the sociological perspective somewhat questionable?

In this documentary, Aaraón Díaz goes against the grain of academia by inviting us into the lives and subjectivities of the women themselves, as they share their feelings of guilt at leaving their families for many months at a time, but also how they resist and describe the oppressions bearing down on them. These women are mothers facing family separation; they cut holes in the barbed wire surrounding their dormitories in Canada to escape for coffee; they invest in their houses and in their children's educations in Mexico so that future generations might have a better life.

The women emerge as critical subjects. Letty denounces racism when she makes clear that she will defend her son if he's born with brown skin. In another appeal to cycles, Betty notes the similarities between herself, a temporary migrant worker in Canada, and the Tlamango people who are discriminated against for working the fields of her hometown in Mexico. In the mesh of North America, a region where racial and economic inequality is replicated in never-ending turns of the carousel, the women speak critically, fully aware of the uncertain business of sacrificing emotional ties in hopes of changing their children's futures.

Shy of twenty-five minutes long, the documentary leaves out hard data about the Mexico-Canada Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP, or PTAT in Spanish) and its historical context, keeping the film refreshingly short, but also proving that subjective incursions into emotion suffice to make clear the systemic inequalities propagated by SAWP.

Still, for context, it is worth noting that, since 1966, temporary agricultural workers have migrated seasonally to Canada's fields via the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP), which includes the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). According to the report *Unheeded Warnings* (2020) by the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, in 2019, nearly 57,000 migrant agricultural workers came to Canada. In 2017, 27.4 percent of the country's agricultural workforce was foreign, with this percentage reaching 41.6 percent in Ontario. Regarding Mexico specifically, the Mexico-Canada Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program included 25,331 workers in 2018.

Canada is often conceived of as one of the world's most migrant-friendly countries, welcoming upwards of

300,000 migrants in 2019. Starting in the 1970s, when the feminist and contraceptive movement put a wrench in Canada's birth replacement rate, multiculturalism and immigration emerged as a solution to keep population rates up, ultimately ensuring the retirement and social security of aging generations. Using a points system that evaluates economic and human capital based on education, linguistic abilities (especially in English and French), and age, migrants are vetted and chosen as future permanent residents and citizens. The country planned to invest upward of Can\$1.5 billion for the 2020-2021 period in support of settlement services for immigrants and refugees, though we may expect a mismatch in the actual figure due to COVID-19. As progressive as it sounds, this entire system excludes temporary agricultural workers, who have no path to permanent residence and citizenship despite their crucial role in Canadian food security (the country's agriculture industry has relied on temporary workers for more than half a century). Certain migrant categories in Canada experience what is known as the "revolving door": many have heard of the Haitians who crossed the border into Canada, were welcomed for several months, and even given health care and a stipend, only to end up deported. And as this documentary shows, temporary workers can spend fifteen years seasonally migrating to Canada but see no benefit in terms of citizenship, keeping families apart for up to eight months at a time while barring permanent family reunification in Canada.

According to *Unheeded Warnings*, the laws in several Canadian provinces actually exclude migrant workers from the right to minimum wage, holidays, overtime compensation, and maximum working hours. Furthermore, temporary workers require a yearly invitation from their employers in order to return to Canada, which heavily disincentivizes workplace complaints and labor organizing. If temporary agricultural workers weren't excluded from a path to citizenship, they might come together and

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organize against unpaid overtime or protest living conditions grouping fifteen to twenty people in the same room.² These workers wouldn't be as lucrative for Canada's agricultural industries as they are now. Needless to say, the wage difference between Mexico and Canada, despite all the labor violations, keeps the wheels of migration turning.

The women in the film express their desire for their children to come to Canada and spend time with them, but this idea remains far-fetched. Despite the fact that Canada relies on agricultural workers from Mexico and other developing countries, temporary agricultural migrants are barred from permanent residency and kept in precarious positions that permit their exploitation. Aaraón Díaz's film casts light on the program's flaws, as the women in the program are subject to surveillance in their living quarters with limited opportunities for socializing and no visitors allowed, while their prospects of integration into Canada as residents appear to be nil.

It is in addressing temporary migration's gender-specific consequences that director Aaraón Díaz's sensibilities shine through. His gender perspective casts light on the double precariousness of his subjects, first, as migrants, and then, as women, as he addresses contraception, hints at sensuality, and delves deep into long-distance motherhood.

In the film, Betty shares that admitting to an employer to being pregnant would bar her from being hired for three years. So, pregnant women work the fields without going to checkups or taking extra vitamins. "*Que pase lo que tenga que pasar*," or, "let whatever needs to happen, happen," she says, hinting that perhaps a child may be born during the woman's four-month rest period in her home country, or that miscarriages can and do occur. Letty then talks about her experience with several contraceptive methods (the IUD and the arm implant), sharing that the hormones took a toll on her body, leading her to stop using them. She explains that she then became pregnant despite

being told by her health practitioner that she was unable to conceive due to cysts. Once pregnant, Letty requested a six-month, rather than eight-month, working period from her employer so that she might spend more time with her children. In the film, her petition appears unresolved.

Díaz skillfully portrays the erasure of the mother. For his subjects, the act of mothering unfolds in Mexico, only to be retracted once in Canada. Betty speaks of all the "logros" or accomplishments in affection from her daughter that she's secured when in Mexico, afraid that it'll all be erased when she leaves and is relegated to chatting and singing sessions over video calls.

Díaz also follows Betty into her dancing world—to the dive bar where migrant women slap on a pair of shimmering heels to go dance a northern-Mexican *quebradita* in Canada, but also to the cumbia group for toddlers where she takes her daughter.

All in all, this documentary is articulate in its symbolism, with the carousel spinning just like the vicious cycle of truncated parenting that would have a mother sacrifice herself for her children, only to see her grown son go off to Canada and leave his own children to be reared by other members of the community. The three subjects also wear indigenous masks, with intricate Otomí embroidery, meticulous Wixárika beading, and the lush flowers of the Zapotec. Díaz does not explicitly address how indigenous identity weaves into migration. However, these exquisite masks celebrate indigenous dignity in contemporary North America, which has especially kept peoples of color exploitable and disposable. The masks also provide a certain degree of anonymity as the subjects speak, before unveiling their true, proud identities at the very end. By only hinting at the importance of the indigenous and scarcely addressing Canadian policy, Díaz keeps the documentary short, insightful, and evocative, fairly and critically portraying the heartbreaking and sometimes tender dynamics of migration and family resilience. ■■■

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Notes

- ¹ <http://www.cisan.unam.mx/proyectos/documentales/index.htm>.
- ² For more specific data and citations, see my forthcoming chapter "El aparato migratorio canadiense: un sistema menos liberal de lo que parece" (The Canadian Immigration Apparatus: A Less Liberal System than It Seems) in *Canadá y sus paradojas en el siglo XXI* (volume 2) (Canada and Its Paradoxes in the Twenty-First Century), Camelia Tigau, ed., CISAN.