

Book Review: *The Undocumented everyday: Migrant lives and the politics of Visibility* by Rebecca M. Schreiber

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Visual Culture Studies

Rebecca Schreiber's *The Undocumented Everyday* utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to examine how hypervisibility of the immigrant forecloses the lived realities of the migrant subject thus rendering them as abject or what Alexander Weheliye (2014) terms "not quite human." Her work follows a similar approach to migration scholars including Yen Espiritu who have similarly looked at the potentially violent impact of visibility but also its transformative potentials. While visibility has been seen as a useful strategy toward empowerment and inclusion, she complicates this relationship exposing it as double-edged, heightening vulnerability in the absence of political representation, and therefore requires thoughtful mediation. Throughout the book, Schreiber illustrates how Mexican and Central American undocumented immigrants have used creative strategies to provide a counter-narrative of the immigrant but also countering the notion of belonging or citizenship as operationalized by the state.

Divided into six chapters, *The Undocumented Everyday*, highlighted various technologies utilized by the state to police borders and produce immigrants as illegal aliens. Schreiber makes a strong case of how hypervisibility of the immigrant as criminal simultaneously invisibilizes and robs them of personhood. Each case examined demonstrated

ways undocumented migrants through self-representation and counter strategies of visibility are doing the work to rewrite and rescue immigrants from violent state apparatuses. Schreiber is keen on pointing out that visibility of the quotidian is not an end in itself but a political tactic that requires us to rethink and reimagine the very notion of what it means to be a citizen with political representation. She writes that activists provide “ways of belonging that does not rely upon notions of citizenship” (273). Among her aims is to bring into focus documentary as both knowledge production and a power technique, the possibilities and limitations of self-representation, the problems with the exceptionalism narrative (both of the state and as individual subjects), considerations of how the visual is invested in relations of power and disrupting commonsense understanding of belonging.

Schreiber shows how successive governments have been complicit in making immigrants illegal, even when, on the surface, it might have appeared to be strategies for “inclusion” such as DACA and DREAM. She examines the ways such strategies require citizens to prove their worth, thus reproducing other subjects as unworthy. In a similar vein, she shows how activists over time have recreated strategies to expose injustices produced by the state. Evident in Schreiber’s analysis is attention to the double-edged nature of visibility whether by the state in its creation of the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider,’ ‘citizen’ or ‘criminal’ or the activist who might reproduce narratives that malign undocumented immigrants. Further, is the heightened vulnerability created by being present without protection or inability to seek recourse. Thus she writes about “impossible activism.”

The “Work Place Project” and the “Border Frame” projects examined in section one were used by Schreiber to show how photographic and videographic self-representation are (1) not

neutral but steeped in relations of power and (2) to present “subjective transnationalism” (81) to expose difficulties that often arise from constructions of “belonging”. In her second section, her aim appears to be to map how visibility (specifically through photography) can decontextualize relationships creating “visual equivalence” where they do not exist and the material impact of that, to show how visuals act as both surveillance and emancipation tools and to strengthen her broader point that voices are often foreclosed in visibility. To do this, she examines the “Border Film Project and the spectacle of surveillance” and “Representation Strategies in Macquillapolis: City of Factories.” In her final section, Schreiber shows how migrant activists are using “counter spectacles” exemplified by Sergio De La Torre’s work and counter documents circulated via social media to “counter surveil” and defy state mechanisms that render them as deportable criminals. Schreiber argues that such aesthetic strategies of disappearance and mobility both highlight and contest inhumane and punitive state practices. Without being political subjects/citizens, activists found ways to hold the state accountable essentially.

Schreiber’s elaborate examination and articulation of the utility of such practices by migrant activists was made possible by the conversation she allowed for across disciplines. Her work involves approaches from cultural studies, performance theory, migration studies, Latinx studies, geography, and aesthetics theory which all came together to make visible the risks of visibility itself. Her work is particularly useful for scholars and activists who are doing work in areas where there is little or no legal or institutional mechanisms that protect marginalized populations. I found her work especially insightful for LGBT activism in countries like Jamaica with anti-buggery legislation and other systematic forms of discrimination.

Other References

Weheliye, A. G. (2014). *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human.*