

MEXICAN MIGRANTS IN THREE CANADIAN FILMS: A MINIMUM FILMOGRAPHY

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This chapter studies two documentaries and a fictional short subject produced by Canada's National Film Board (NFB) in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. In all three, Mexican immigrants are leading characters in different ways relating to their immigration status. These films are examples of the determination to critically analyze certain government policies, both in Mexico and in Canada, and certain de facto situations in which filmmakers who represent one of the most respected Canadian institutions, the NFB, find themselves. Their productions offer us their personal interpretations based on an explicit commitment to the films' protagonists. Today, the National Film Board's mission is to ensure that films reflect Canada and the issues important to Canadians both at home and abroad, through the creation and distribution of innovative, distinctive audiovisual works based on Canadian points of view and values. In the catalogue, of the films dealing with Mexico (in addition to those I will analyze here), we basically find productions that analyze the economy and its social and political consequences.¹

In their book *Candid Eyes. Essays on Canadian Documentaries*, Jim Leach and Jeannette Sloniowski underline how important it is when evaluating filmmakers' strategies to realize that very different factors are at play.

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¹ Among them are *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Magnus Isaacson, 1995), about the consequences of signing NAFTA for workers in the auto industry in both Canada and Mexico; *Democracy à la Maude* (Patricia Kearns, 1998), which documents the life of activist Maude Barlow, the leader of Canada's largest citizens' rights group, which, at the time, opposed Canada's signing NAFTA; *Les oubliés du XXI^e siècle ou la fin du travail* (Jean-Claude Bürger, 2000), about the consequences of the technology age in the workplace; and *View from the Summit* (Magnus Isaacson, 2002), about the meeting of heads of state in Quebec to deal with creating a free trade area in the Americas and the simultaneous Peoples' Summit. The other two categories that bring up Mexico in an online search involve the migration of monarch butterflies and culture and art; but this is a short list.

These include their own personal interests, institutional policies and ways of accepting or challenging them, budgetary restrictions, the fact that documentaries depend on an audience perspective, and a willingness to disseminate them among a well-informed citizenry.²

Canadian documentaries' interest in social and political issues is nothing new. And the interest sparked by the analysis of documentaries depicting migration around the world is very broad and reflects how important they are as a source of information. They include the issues unfolding along the Mexico-U.S. border, migration to Western Europe, the Latin American diaspora, and the consequences of the feminization of migration, among others. The case of Canadian documentaries is particularly representative in that they combine documentary-making with social activism. It should be mentioned that, from the earliest productions until today, many of these documentaries have been financed by the National Film Board (NFB), a governmental cultural institution whose main objective has been to promote a Canadian point of view about the country, on a provincial, national, and international level.

Despite the illusion of contextual reality that documentaries offer us, we must not forget that audience members receive what the filmmakers have decided to document or narrate. In this case, we are dealing with events situated in a sociopolitical and economic context of the region of North America after NAFTA was signed, which made Mexico more visible in Canada and vice versa. And, given that they are funded by the NFB to that end, we must not forget that they do so from the vantage point of Canadian values.

The Political Refugee: Mexico Dead or Alive/ Mexique mort ou vif

Mexico Dead or Alive (1996) is a fifty-two-minute documentary by filmmaker Mary Ellen Davis.³ The credits sequence reveals that the subject of her

² See the introduction to their book (Leach and Sloniowski, 2003: 3-12), in which each chapter is dedicated to analyzing a specific documentary.

³ Born in Montreal in 1954, Ms. Davis has lived in Paris and Latin America. In the 1990s, she filmed *The Devil's Dream*, and *Tierra madre* in Guatemala, and, in 2001, *Haunted Land*, to denounce the injustices afflicting that country and to honor both its citizens and their traditions. In that same spirit, she filmed the movie analyzed here and, later, *Los músicos* (The Musicians)

research is political refugee Mario Rojas Alba living in Montreal as the film unfolds. Putting his name immediately after the title with the word “*con*” (with) turns him into the protagonist of his own story.

Although the film’s title could be interpreted as a question, it has no question mark, so, the viewer reads it as a declarative sentence, but, in addition, the word uniting the adjectives in both languages is a disjunctive conjunction, and it can denote either equivalence or difference.⁴ The title in green, white, and red words stamped on a nopal cactus leaf invites us to consider the paradox: Is Mexico alive or dead? Does it live through death? Or does it die to live? The nostalgic original background music is played on guitars.

At the start of the movie, the filmmaker uses archival clips and her voice in narration to situate the viewer in the historic political context of 1994, when NAFTA came into effect and the Zapatista uprising began in Chiapas. The transition to Canada with a fade to maple leaves will lead to the introduction of the characters, the Canadian filmmaker and the Mexican refugee. We see them in a full shot, sitting on a park bench talking together as equals. She interviews him so we can situate him.

Mario Rojas Alba (1954) is a doctor and politician from the state of Michoacán; he was an activist in different left parties and, at the time of the film, after being a senator, he was a member of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the state of Morelos.⁵ The film, however, gives no details of his life before he was exiled. We see him in a Montreal park, surrounded by young people, who we assume are his children. We know—because he tells us—that he left Mexico because his life and family had been threatened by a repressive government.

The documentary does not cover the process of Rojas and his family requesting and being granted asylum; he is already exiled in Canada, and we do not know if he has residence status or if he is a citizen. However, clearly, he is a migrant who enjoys refugee status for political reasons.

Throughout the film, the filmmaker’s voice (speaking in Spanish with interviewees and providing some historical/contextual data in English) alter-

(2007), about Mexico’s musical traditions. She has taught at Concordia University and is the owner of B’Alba cinema and video production company, which produces independent autochthonous films. See maryellendavis.net, accessed September 25, 2020.

⁴ “Expressing an alternative, contrast, or opposition between the meaning of the words or word groups that it connects” (Gove and Merriam-Webster Staff, 2002).

⁵ In the recent elections, the Humanist Party ran him as their candidate for governor of Morelos.

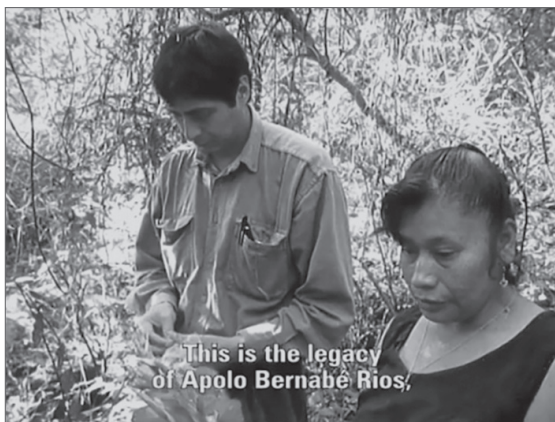
nates with—to the point of almost dissolving into—that of Rojas. This makes their speech take on a personal tone.

The film has two thematic threads: one is the Day of the Dead tradition in Mexico; the other is Rojas's temporary return to investigate the deaths of some of his party comrades at the hands of a Morelos political policeman, Apolo Bernabé Ríos.

By using traditional documentary film techniques (photo inserts, both of the victims and their murderers; archival footage from different eras, both from the Mexican Revolution and from clashes between demonstrators and police contemporary with the development of the film; and interviews), the film narrates Rojas's return to Mexico accompanied by Davis and a Canadian film crew to discover the dark side of violence in Mexico, specifically Morelos, and the political murders of opposition members.

The film shows us a rough Mexico, plagued with ancestral violence, a country of killings and dead bodies, depicting a succession of struggles against repression.

The Day of the Dead is an ancestral tradition not portrayed here merely as folklore, but precisely because one of the documentary's objectives is to commemorate the dead, to give back names and faces to victims of political repression. For example, the wives and children of the murdered men not only place offerings at the cemetery, but also in the places where Apolo took their husbands; that is, where their road to torture and death began.



Mexico Dead or Alive/Mexique mort ou vif. Dir. Mary Ellen Davis.

This is how the text of the film oscillates between denunciation and a personal log. While the filmmaker interviews academics, pro- and anti-government Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) politicians, the main character, Rojas, talks to his friends (in many cases, opposition politicians, and in others, activists), narrates the events in first person off camera, recites poems by Nezahualcōyotl, and wanders through a street market with his family purchasing little traditional candy skulls. Basically, whether through interviews or some of the voiceover fragments, the background of it all is the great allegory of Mexico's past and present interpreted in Diego Rivera's mural, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Central Park*, and several local music groups singing history from the point of view of its protagonists-cum-legend, with the Morelos hills as backdrop.

The question of whether the demand for justice is valid from the other side of the border is presented twice during the film, with two different intentions. On the one hand, then-Governor Carrillo Olea states that Dr. Rojas is a voluntary self-exile, a frivolous person who is only taking advantage of the Canadian government's generous refugee policy. On the other hand, Antolín, Rojas's lawyer friend gets him to reflect on his situation as a migrant and on the conditions he would require to return to continue his struggle for democracy in Morelos and the country.

No editorial comments are made; the viewer must come to his/her own conclusions. However, the fact of making Rojas the protagonist, of giving the murdered men first and last names, of presenting their families and paying them the same homage that is paid in so many homes to the dead everyone weeps over, and the fact that the filmmaker appears not as an authority figure but as a fellow traveler allow us to deduce where the text's commitment lies: in the denunciation of injustice, in the presentation of the context, and in showing the state of things with respectful involvement from a vantage point of equality.

The Regulated Migrant: *El Contrato* (The Contract)

El Contrato (2003) is a medium-length production by Korean-Canadian filmmaker Min Sook Lee.⁶ The original Spanish-language title alerts us from

⁶ *El Contrato*, which means The Contract, is purposefully titled in Spanish, although the film is produced in English.

the start that the predominant view is that of the Mexicans who, as we see from the initial sequence, enrolled in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program for Mexicans wishing to work temporarily in Canada.

In the tradition of social activism productions from the National Film Board, the documentary follows the school of thought that empowers individuals through their participation in the production, while, through its distribution, the filmmaker gives voice to the workers, who, as this film makes clear, are only apparently privileged, even though they have been hired and are traveling and working with a visa.⁷

The film documents a complete season; it begins and ends following the main character, Teodoro Bello Martínez, from the poor neighborhoods in Mexico City's outskirts, and who, along with another 4,000 of his countrymen, moves for eight months to Leamington, Ontario, the largest greenhouse-tomato-producing region in North America. In this work, Lee benefits from the contradictions inherent to filming with the NFB as the main producer: with public money, she fiercely criticizes a program that is one of the success stories of bilateral relations between the governments of Mexico and Canada. When the documentary was filmed, women were not eligible for this program. Today, almost 24,000 Mexicans work through it in several Canadian provinces, but only 700 of them are women.

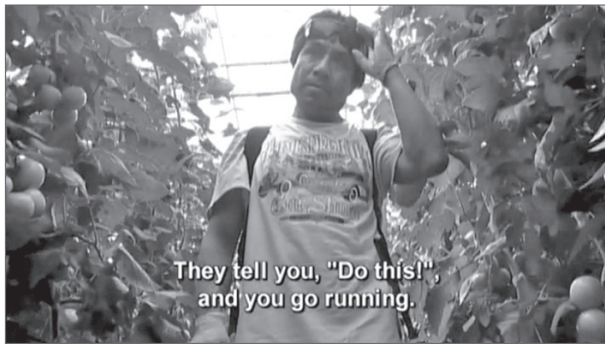


El Contrato. Dir.: Min Sook Lee.

⁷ The documentaries from the Challenge for Change/*Société Nouvelle* program share “the common aim of community empowerment through media, which together test a wide variety of technological and aesthetic approaches to activism” (Baker, Waugh, and Winton, 2010: 6).

Although an apparently obvious symbol, the Monarch butterflies, the metaphor for migration from Canada to Mexico and back, are used as a transition in several parts of the journey and in the sequences of the film. However, the metaphor—in a sense—is ironic, given that butterflies travel freely without borders and workers do not because, on arrival at their destination, they are enclosed in “las farmas,” the farms,⁸ in their dilapidated, insecure rooms, with permission to visit the local village only one afternoon a week, thus being inexorably tied to the farm owners who signed the contract with them through an international agreement. And for eight months, the filmmaker documents how they work and live in a secluded, exclusively male Mexican community, similar to a prison.

Min Sook Lee explains that workers are segregated by gender and nationality so that the farm owners can apply the politics of divide and conquer. If men believe that women can have more privileges, or if Mexicans hear that people from Central America and the Caribbean will get their jobs if they are seen as troublemakers, they will be suspicious of one another; they won't gather or talk or get to know their shared rights and expectations. They will never become a community, despite activists' efforts in their favor.



El Contrato. Dir.: Min Sook Lee.

⁸ “In 1974, the governments of Mexico and Canada signed a Memorandum of Understanding through which Mexico commits itself to provide agricultural workers to small and medium-sized Canadian farms, due to the lack of labor within this Canadian sector. The program began by providing 203 workers in 1974; since then, the numbers have increased year to year until, in the 2013 season, the total reached 18,499 workers. This means that since its introduction, no fewer than 261,301 Mexican workers have gone through this program, benefitting nine Canadian provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. This proves its success over the last four decades” (Consulate General of Mexico in Toronto, 2017).

A female voiceover representing Lee explains the details of the temporary workers program to the audience, along with the conditions entailed in the program in Ontario, a province where agricultural unions are prohibited and where the migrants, despite having paid their taxes and contributed to their pension funds (some of them for more than twenty years), receive neither the medical nor social benefits to which they are entitled.

And something that comes to mind while seeing the film is that, even though it is called *El Contrato*, no one—not the subjects documented, nor the spectators—ever see the full contract. In the narrative, this is quite significant because it is the object that ties one side to the other, which, on paper, forces both signers into obligations that must be met; the reason these migrants move to another country is left out of the narration.

The film documents the daily lives of Mexicans not only on the farm, but also at church, in stores, and their houses, and their difficult, tough meetings with the consul general.

Even though this is not the general tone of the film, as an irony, utilizing fragments with archive images of the Tomato Festival, with only white attendees, one of the sequences in the documentary is scored by Stompin' Tom Connors's "The Ketchup Song" (1970), giving it a certain temporal ambiguity: the spectator is never sure if these are scenes from the past, when tomatoes were harvested by Ontarians, or if the festivity is contemporary to the film narrative and Mexican workers are not welcome to join in, even though it would be impossible without their active participation.



El Contrato. Dir.: Min Sook Lee.

The film includes a very wide range of interviews: with bosses and supervisors; with a masked character who denounces the bad treatment workers receive; and with migrant workers who speak directly to the camera about their experiences in these distant lands, taking the opportunity to send greetings to their families. Since the documentary was filmed before cellular phones became ubiquitous, these greetings replace the postcards in which travelers tell their loved ones their adventures on the road and are all personal and nostalgic.⁹

From every point of view, the time the Mexicans stay in Canada is narrated in the film by all the characters involved as a necessary evil. The narrator states that the program seeks employees, a cheap temporary workforce, not probable future citizens, agreeing with what NGOs involved with temporary migrants say. She makes the audience aware of the program's rules: to be accepted, applicants must be married with children—that is, they must have someone they miss who is a reason not to stay—and have little education, meaning that they would not be able to look for another kind of job in Canada. Some scenes portray this necessary evil. In the village where the documentary was filmed, shots are taken of the people looking askance at the river of male workers crowding the streets and stores. And the Mexican agricultural workers underline to the voice behind the camera that twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, plus insults and bad treatment are too much to sacrifice for such low wages, though they are, of course, much higher than they could get in Mexico.

The documentary follows three interwoven stories, whose participants are mostly male, providing the audience with a multifaceted vision of the program and its realities: the story of the protagonists, Teodoro and his colleagues; of the bosses and Mexican government authorities, portrayed as a single team; and the story of M., a Mexican who denounces the injustices that he and his compatriots experience during their stay.

The film's context is the economic crises that expel the Mexicans from their homes and force them to emigrate far from home to do the jobs Canadians themselves refuse to do. The narrator is very clear when she explains,

⁹ It is very important to note that, when this documentary was filmed, cellular phones were not a part of these characters' lives. In *Migrant Dreams* (2016), communication between the migrant workers and their families takes place via video-chats, which makes the yearning even worse, although the fantasy of nearness is part of each call.

as we see the temporary workers laboring in the greenhouses, that they work twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, for Can\$7 an hour.

The interviews with the bosses, who signed waivers so that the filmmaker could shoot on their farms, reveal the naiveté of a certain latent discrimination due to race and class. We become aware of the wealth they amass from the 100-percent male Mexican workforce who they hire “because there’s no other choice.” Local storekeepers are happy, because every Friday afternoon their sales shoot up. However, the Leamingtonians feel they are being invaded; one of the owners talks about problems rooted in nostalgia and alcohol: “The policemen call their owners and they come to pick them up.” She refers to them as “things” and to their bosses as if they “owned” the workers, bringing to mind the days of slavery. Lee has written:

Upon [the film’s] release, the growers in Leamington who appeared in the documentary launched a million-dollar libel suit against me. In the libel suit I was named, as were the producers of the National Film Board of Canada, and any venue that attempted to screen the documentary was served with a libel notice. The growers alleged I had defamed them. And they were using a tried and true tactic of corporations to muzzle media—a strategic lawsuit against public participation, a SLAPP suit. SLAPP suits are used to intimidate and censor critics by burdening them with costly legal expenses that drain resources and ultimately silence the public debate. For a year, *El Contrato* sat on the shelf while lawyers hashed it out. No broadcaster would touch the film, despite initial interest from the provincial broadcaster TVO. The legal threat embargoed the release. Eventually, after a year, the NFB lawyers agreed to release the film with the proviso that I include cards at the front of the film that clarified that the footage had been shot with permission from the participants in the film. There was no hidden-camera footage and the growers had signed off on participant waivers during production. (2018: 170-171)

In one of the most violent scenes, the Mexican diplomats visit a farm and, instead of attending to workers’ needs, tell them that anyone not satisfied with the work can return to Mexico, thus signaling that they are unwilling to start a fight with the owners since, contrary to arguing with them, they want to invite them to invest in Mexico, as we are shown in a later scene.

Because *El Contrato* is committed to the reality it is documenting, Lee has chosen to focus on an individual protagonist who represents the whole group of men, someone who is the face of a collective that is valuable only commercially.

In Mexico, at the Ministry of Labor, as Teodoro applies for the program, in the background are stands full of thousands of folders, a metaphor for all the men whose lives are only numbers and statistics for the agroindustry that is a very successful bi-national achievement.

In Canada, as Teodoro and his fellows talk about everything they had to leave behind in Mexico, in their bunkhouse, they reproduce the practices and intimacy of sharing a home: they cook, they clean, they cut each other's hair, they sing, they confide in each other, they attend Catholic church together. Because the contract forces them to be secluded, because it segregates them in conditions similar to a prison, but because they don't want to define themselves by these circumstances, they choose the concept of family to name their isolated, same-sex community, where their Mexican-ness and their condition as wife-less, childless fathers is involuntary and compulsory, due to the fact that neither their wives nor their children are eligible for tourist visas to Canada—another restriction enforced by the program.

Interwoven throughout the plot, the masked Mexican man, M., testifies to the mistreatment at some farms and the paradox in which the workers must live: anonymity is the only way to make a complaint, because opinions or grievances are considered signs of rebellion. Therefore, they lead directly to expulsion from the program, a luxury these men cannot afford if they want to continue participating in it in order to make a living earning their wages in dollars.



El Contrato. Dir.: Min Sook Lee.

Life in the Ontarian agricultural region does not include the Mexican immigrants; instead, it marginalizes them. We must keep in mind that the “construction of the regions” always implies normative components, given that institutional structures are constructed with rules, power, and confidence, and that these limitations, symbols, and institutions converge by way of the material practice in the Leamington tomato-producing region, under the institutional structure of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. This program obliges the Mexican workers to live like recluses within the confines of the farm that employs them, under strict rules regulating their movement, amid symbols such as the language and the local religion that differentiate them from the community of local residents.

On screen, the viewer sees the full sequence of time the workers experience: we see the beginning of a frozen spring, a summer full of intense activity, a short autumn that gives way to a snowy winter. We see the harvest cycle and the distribution of the packed tomatoes. We witness the short homecoming and the sad deliberations with the families about travelling back up North.

The Economic Migrant: *Taxi Libre*

Taxi Libre (2011), directed by Kaveh Nabatian,¹⁰ is a fictional short subject that exploits the urban myth—based on reality—that all over-qualified migrants end up driving taxis.

Here, the initial sequence is also accompanied by extra-narrative Mexican music, this time a bolero. José García, dressed in a suit and tie, is exiting a job interview. The interviewer congratulates him for his high academic achievement; in a chair, another young man dressed in a T-shirt and jeans follows along. García, now graying, goes to the parking lot and transforms himself: tie and jacket go into the trunk and the PhD becomes a taxi driver.

Aside from the music, the car shows other signs of his Mexican-ness: hanging from the rearview mirror is a little Our Lady of Guadalupe and the photo of his girlfriend, plus a foul-mouthed guardian angel dressed as a

¹⁰ Kaveh Nabatian is a Canadian-Iranian filmmaker and musician who lives in Montreal. One of his film scores, *Bell Orchestra*, won a Juno Award. His work can be seen on his Vimeo channel, where he explains that it is an attempt to explore the gap between music and video.

northern Mexican, who tells him what's going on at home in Mexico and reminds him why he mustn't drift away from his loved ones, since those left behind get on with their lives and, sooner or later, forget.

The taxi is a micro-universe of Quebec.

Given that the short has a farcical tone, it uses stereotypes to underline the drama of the protagonist's situation. Both the colloquial language used and the conversation with the guardian angel make references to the violent Mexico of the second decade of the twenty-first century.



Taxi Libre. Dir.: Kaveh Nabatian.

In a scene in which a woman gets into the cab and remarks on the “beauty” of the driver’s accent in French—that is, she refers to his being a foreigner—the mention of Mexico invokes several stereotypes: that our country is a beach paradise for tourists, crawling with gallant macho-men, but also that the tourists who travel to Mexico are banal and ignorant and have no interest in or capability of understanding that Mexico is much more than an enormous beach resort where the natives are willing to play at seduction in exchange for a hefty tip. The film subtly points out how, beneath that friendliness is a trace of class prejudice and racism. All of this is underlined with a score of that mariachi music imagined by U.S. productions like *Speedy González*: a mariachi that sounds completely false to us Mexicans.

The most serious case of disdain toward the immigrant is that of the principal of the school where the protagonist was interviewed. This involves not only the position of power of making the decision of who to hire, but also of having cultural codes and conventions alien to the interviewee. In the scene, José’s taxi breaks down in the school parking lot and the principal comes over to help him and actually gets the car to start. By way of thanks,

José offers to drive him home. On the way, the principal is trying to figure out who José is, and when José identifies himself, the principal is surprised that someone with a doctorate is driving a cab and that they had not notified him that he had not gotten the job. The principal tells him that his teaching style is nothing like what they need in a high school, that he's overqualified for the job, and that he was dressed too elegantly for the interview and the test.

"Don't you see how I'm dressed?" he asks him, and then says, "The next time, it would be better if you looked more like us." Sarcastically, José asks him if he should look like a white Quebecois...



Taxi Libre. Dir.: Kaveh Nabatian.

Once again, from another perspective and in another tone, the issue is whether everything comes down to "them" and "us." Even though the film gives us no direct background about why and how José came to Canada, by inference, it lets us see that José García is an economic immigrant. A PhD who can't get a job in his own country, he goes after the possibility of teaching in a high school in Quebec. With the idea that his studies will give him the chance for social mobility and financial improvement, his girlfriend must not see him working as a cab driver because that will lower her opinion of him. His idea is that outside Mexico, the world of work could be what he wants. However, the reality is that, for a Mexican immigrant, both his studies and his appearance are too much, and, therefore, they put him back in the place where he belongs, which is not precisely the profession he specialized in.

Paradoxically, says Camelia Tigau, the skilled migrant is part of "a minority within minorities":

On the one hand, professionals are exceptional minorities, who enjoy privileges of social and economic status but, on the other, when they emigrate, they also become ethnic minorities, susceptible to being compared or confused with migrants with less education and economic resources. (2020: 33)

Mexican migrant professionals, then, in addition to experiencing discrimination due to overqualification, as happens to the main character here, never cease to be marginalized by ethnic and racial discrimination. Minorities, as is well known, “tend to [have to] fight more than natives against aspects related to perception, such as stereotypes, especially when they try to position themselves in leadership positions” (Tigau, 2020: 50).

The short’s farcical tone may be irritating when you see the film for the first time; but, if you analyze it carefully, the little subtleties give meaning both to the exaggeration needed for a farce and the presence of the foul-mouthed angel, who represents the attachment to the sending country, the language, and family.

The circle closes with the bolero “Cuando estemos juntos” (When We’re Together Again), sung by the Tecos trio, interrupted by the taxi dispatcher. We see García’s tired, frustrated face and, flying beneath the rear-view mirror, the Our Lady of Guadalupe that accompanies him, to the tune of the nostalgic voices that sing, “I feel so lost / loneliness frightens me / I’d like to be with you / that’s what I like.” The decision to stay in Quebec, to remain alone, is his alone.

A Minute Epilogue

Migrating is every individual’s right. Migration narratives are often disturbing. Here we have three versions whose commitment to that right as a first premise shows us that those narratives will always be disturbing.

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