

Living Undocumented, a new Netflix series that gives a human face to immigrant stories

Several days after the hearings of oral arguments and stories from DACA recipients in the Supreme Court of the United States, Mediático is delighted to present an excellent and timely new post by regular contributor and newly promoted Professor, [Dr Deborah Shaw](#) about the new Netflix series Living Undocumented. Shaw is Professor of Film and Screen Studies at the University of Portsmouth, and (from January 2020) will be Research Lead for the School of Film, Media and Communication. Her research interests include transnational film theory, Latin American cinema, and film and migration. Her books include [Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Ten Key Films](#), (2003), [The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón](#), (2013), [The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro](#), co-edited with Ann Davies and Dolores Tierney (2014), and [Latin American Women Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics](#), co-edited with Deborah Martin (2017).

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by Deborah Shaw

Two Netflix series of 2019 have for me most effectively captured the precarious and painful immigrant experience under the Trump administration: *Living Undocumented* and *Orange is the New Black* (series 7). I was moved to write this short piece on the lesser seen of the two, *Living Undocumented*, a 6-episode series released on 2nd October 2019, as through its intimate focus on 8 families it reveals to viewers human and tragic consequences of US immigration policies built on pain, family separations and fear. It achieves this by challenging countless news packages and screen narratives that time and again reduce migrants and immigrants to criminals implicated in drug fuelled violence. It also effectively counters political prejudices and lies about immigrants, and presents powerful and devastating biographical stories of detentions, deportations and the threats of deportations that hang over undocumented immigrants who can be described as (in all but official status)

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Americans living in the United States of different national backgrounds.

Living Undocumented speaks about immigration using a different more humane language. These are people, not 'illegal aliens'. Alejandra, originally from Mexico, has been in the US from 1998, and is facing deportation despite a long marriage to her US marine veteran husband. Luis Díaz came from Honduras in 2012, and both he and his girlfriend Kenia claim asylum, although as the facts given by the programme's experts - immigration attorneys - explain, their chances of success in the current administration are extremely low. Kenia has an adorable 3-year-old son that Luis dotes on, and the two have a new-born baby girl. Deportation is also the most likely outcome for 'Miguel' and 'María' (not their real names) who have come to the US escaping the violence of Honduran gangs. Their young niece whom they parent, has been sent to a detention camp without them, and their story is filled with worry for her. The Dunoyer family from Colombia has been living and working hard in the US since they were granted asylum in 2002 after facing death threats in Colombia yet are now facing the threat of deportation. Mexican Eddie came to the US as a 14-year-old, has a successful business, and is married to his US husband Tyler; the two respond to Eddie's immanent deportation by moving to Toronto in the only happy(ish) ending seen in the series- they still leave behind loved ones.

It is also noteworthy that the featured undocumented families are not all from Latin American backgrounds, although Latin American is the focus of most media coverage about the undocumented. Successful taxpaying Israeli businessman Ron and his wife Karen have raised a family in the US; they are living under the radar and with the constant fear of their status being discovered. Amadou Sow from Mauritania has been in the US for 30 years and has a work visa yet is now in detention following the current administration's push to send back members of the black Mauritanian community who still face slavery in their home country. His story is told by his daughter Awa, who communicates her pain at the separation from her father, also the family's main economic provider. Vinny Phankaysay has been in the US since he was a small boy as a political refugee from Laos. His residency status has

been revoked following a prison sentence for drug offences as a troubled youth. He is now a church-going family-man, married to an “all-American” woman with a small baby, yet he still faces deportation.

What is apparent in all of these stories is that the protagonists are hardworking people who have been living productive, peaceful and happy lives in the US for many years, for the most part (significantly a number of those chosen belong to faith communities). They have much support from their local communities, and in this way, the series does not “other” them – they are presented as our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues, our family members.

They have all lived with insecurity due to their undocumented status, an insecurity which has dramatically worsened with the current Republican regime’s immigration policies and their fostering of a new, much harsher system imposed by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Under the Obama regime undocumented immigrants were only targeted for deportation if they committed a significant offence, yet President Trump’s ICE actively seeks out the undocumented, and this series shows the effects on the hunted: constant fear and worry about deportation and separation from their families. In one harrowing scene Luis, who is bringing his partner’s young son to an ICE facility so that mother and son can be deported together, is tricked into entering the facility and detained. His attorney, Andrea Martinez, is forcibly and violently pushed out of the building and is injured in the process; ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) has [launched a lawsuit](#) against two of the ICE officers responsible.

The techniques applied in the documentary series aim to promote human connections and heighten empathy between the viewer and the subject of each section. As Aaron Saidman, one of the executive producers [notes](#), ‘you should feel as if you are sitting across the kitchen table from these undocumented immigrants and they’re speaking directly to you in their own words’. As characters go to their hearings, or to their ICE interviews, the camera takes the position of a family member or a close friend, having the effect of viewers anxiously

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awaiting news of their fates. The wrong decision for them will mean tearing individuals away from their families because the system leaves no space for compassion. *Living Undocumented* does not follow the conventions of narrative drama. There are no happy endings, and no 11th hour reprieves. Characters stay in the thoughts of viewers as the series ends with some tragedies completed and some pending.

Living Undocumented presents an insiders' chronicle of a rapidly changing immigration landscape from the point of view of those most affected by it. While Trump's regime is not held entirely responsible for the hostile immigration environment (indeed, the series also traces the anti-(im)migrant measures adopted by Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama), it does give life to the daily crises the current administration's measures have brought to so many families that these protagonists come to represent.

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