

Three Cats, when there is no one there

Report for anthropological involvement with Tres

Gatos Films A.C.

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The anthropological work I did for the MA module 'Engaged Anthropology in Practice' took place in Tres Gatos A.C., a small NGO based in Mexico City that, for the past decade, has been working with Latin-American migrants making their way through Mexico toward the US. The tasks I performed throughout my involvement with them were partially, yet notably influenced by the history and structure of the NGO and its members, which is why I will provide a brief summary in what follows.

The name Tres Gatos, which translates into English as 'three cats,' is an expression commonly used in Spanish to say a place or event is not visited by virtually anyone. If one goes to a party with very few attendants, one says 'there were three cats,' providing a good picture of its utter lack of social success. The original members of Tres Gatos counted amongst their numbers, unsurprisingly, only three individuals. The NGO formed itself around the enormous need and complete lack of visibility the migrant crisis had in Mexico at the time. Two of its members were working in the Human Rights Commission in Mexico City and began to notice the enormous increase in violence and disappearances the government's declared 'war on drugs' in 2006 had brought upon the entire migrant population crossing Mexican territory. The Human Rights Commission was overflowing in reports—alongside with a lack of financial support and institutional corruption on the part of the Mexican government. It was in this context the 'cats' decided to take advantage of the information they had access to, and with the approval of the Human Rights

Commission embarked on a project of their own taking into their hands a portion of what a failed state could not. Their colossal and colossally brave efforts resulted in the production of one of the first reports (in the shape of a full-length documentary) produced to denounce the imminent avalanche the migratory movement in this region was becoming. Since then on, the three original members have become a few more, and continue in their efforts to address and make visible the enormous escalation the violence against migrants in Mexico has had in the past few years.

At present, the NGO, after developing a series of projects and short films, has embarked upon the creation of another full-length documentary. The idea for this project emerged from the circumstances and life-stories the members of the team encountered time and time again in migrant shelters across the country. These migrant shelters are usually gendered, with men and women staying in different areas of the house, or in entire venues altogether. The team took notice of the enormous presence of female migrants, many of them travelling with their children (something extremely rare within the male population), who were fleeing the violence in their hometowns, but also—and very frequently—the violence coming from their own partners. After conducting a series of formal and informal interviews, they began to realise the deep and pervasive violence which permeated almost all of these women's stories. As one of the team members informed me (and also after having just become a father himself), the stories of these women opened the eyes (of the original three male members) to the inescapable inequality of womanhood, and especially of motherhood.

The title of the documentary was chosen: *Te Amo* (I Love You) and was decided out of the profound impression these women's notions of love caused on the members of Tres Gatos. On the one hand, they saw a brutal love—cruel, violent, vicious—'romantic love' which permits male partners all kinds of aggressions, and expects from the female all kinds of permissiveness and submission. On the other hand, they witnessed another kind of love, no less brutal, but in the best sense of the word—fierce, courageous, unconditional—the love these women had for their children, and the immense fearlessness it gave them to face the enormous adversities they encountered throughout their journey.

The three cats have been self-taught, restlessly researching along their way to better understand the underlying motives and outcomes of migratory movements in Mexico. However, having no one in the team with a background on social sciences, they asked of me to help them build the 'argumental script,' or a kind of theoretical story-line for the documentary to help them better support and understand, with the help of social theory, what they already intuit from the ethnographic knowledge they have gathered throughout these years.

The work I performed consisted mainly of two parts: practical and theoretical. The first part involved constant communication with the team members where I mostly listened to their ideas and concerns regarding the entire migrant situation, and where they shared with me a great deal of context and information on the day-to-day lived life of the migrants they worked with. Alongside this communication, the team shared with me many hours of recorded interviews. Most of these interviews had been held at a women's shelter located in the northern city of Tijuana—one of the major and most convoluted cities in Mexico due to its proximity to the US (as the Mexican scholar Nemesio García wrote, 'Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States!'). The team asked me to transcribe as many of the interviews as I could which, though burdensome work, resulted in forcing a deeper and more attentive analysis of their content.

In the interviews I was able to listen to the voices of the migrant women themselves, but also, and also relevant, to the voices of the school-girl volunteers working at the shelters, to religious sisters dedicating their lives to this work, to secular artists trying to make sense and provide some comfort to the many women and children that pass through the migrant shelters. The content of these interviews was both crushing and elevating, portraying the very worst, and also the very best humans can do to each other. I agreed on what the members of Tres Gatos had said about love. However, it became clear to me the real challenge would be to put together the migrant experience (*and context, and roots, and history...*) to the female experience (*and context, and perspective, and politics...*).

There is notoriously less information on the migration of women than there is on the migration of men. Women have not been as thoroughly counted throughout the history of population census, as Sassen proposes, since they could not be enrolled in armies (1996, p. 52). Nowadays, however, when no one escapes being well counted and measured, women migrants are still seen as secondary earners or dependents, which perpetuates scholarly indifference towards the feminisation of migration (Piper, 2003).

As the work performed in the NGO was carried out, along the practical and theoretical, so did the research work necessarily flow along two slopes: that of migrants and that of women. Scholarly sources on both areas always hit the same wall, namely, asymmetrical power relations. The necessary systemic oppression of one group over another is accounted for in nearly every single academic analysis of both population groups making it hard to deny what Žižek proposed when he wrote 'the entire history of humanity [can] be seen as a growing normalisation of injustice' (2008, p.179).

After consulting a significant number of books, articles, documentaries, and art exhibitions, plus also continuously engaging in dialogue with the members of Tres Gatos, it was agreed I would write a report in the format of a bulleted essay as a first draft of the argumental script for the future film. The report was inspired by Lancaster's essay structure

'Planet of Exiles' (2018) in which he numbers paragraphs with seemingly unconnected ideas, like single building blocks, which make-up a solid argument in the end. Based on thorough biographical research, in figurative dialogue with the anecdotal information provided by the interviews, I attempted to construct a report that could serve as a strong foundation for a documentary entwined in two profoundly deep and relevant social phenomenons. A very brief outline is provided below:

1. The beginning before the apparent beginning. The first agrarian states establishing the indelible division between plants and weeds, barbarians and citizens, the domesticated and the wild.

Walls were first built to constrain citizens on the inside—with the added advantage of keeping the barbarians on the outside.

There have to be 'bad' weeds for there to be 'good' plants. There have to be 'bad' barbarians for there to be 'good' citizens.

(Scott, 2017)

2. Nature has to be controlled. Under the logic of the gardener, it is perfectly reasonable to cut, contain, or remove weeds in benefit of plants.

Genocides and xenophobia follow this exact logic.

(Bauman, 1989)

3. Humans belonging to this legendary agriculturist legacy are thus necessarily divided into classes and hierarchies.

4. The myth of man-the-hunter and woman-the-gatherer has caused the conception of women's reproductive work to be reduced to the category of animal fertility. Man-the-hunter's tools are not of creation, but of appropriation and destruction. This is the beginning of the sexual division of labour where nature's and women's work is considered an exploitable resource.

The 'housewifisation' of women further extended this model of capitalist accumulation as a closed circuit, which also includes the work of colonies.

(Mies, 1986)

5. The 'historical defeat of women' in the nuclear family.

Family derives from the latin *famulus*, which means 'domestic slave.'

The nuclear family is the molecular unit for the entire social fabric.

(Engels, 1884)

6. Even if women are now a part of the formal economy they are still collectively seen as non-productive agents, they are still in a position of subjection vis-à-vis men resulting in

‘internal colonisation.’

(Millet, 1969)

7. ‘Dirt’ is what is out of place.
(*Who is more out of place than the ‘stateless’?*)
(Douglas, 1996)
8. The State is the enemy of moving populations and of different ways of existing.
(Scott, 1998.)
9. The Overheating project proposes movement causes friction, which causes things to heat-up.
(Hylland, 2009)
10. Symbolic violence is expressed through language and keeps in place the systems of oppression necessary for the continuation of the status quo.
Systemic violence makes it difficult to place responsibility on anyone in particular. It will be pointless to tear down walls if we don’t tear down the *true* wall.
(Žižek, 2008)
11. Bio-power allows the state unprecedented influence over human bodies.
Insubordinate bodies should not be destroyed, but rather made profitable. Disciplinary power has allowed for the figure of the ‘delinquent’ to appear as irredeemable, yet potentially lucrative bodies.
(Foucault, 1975, 1976)
12. The feminisation of work and of poverty has resulted in the feminisation of migration.
Migratory processes are not gender-neutral.
This has caused and increased vulnerability in women’s already vulnerable position.
(Sassen, 2003)
13. Expelled populations become ‘the other’ wherever they are.
14. The magnitude of ‘differences’ determines nothing. Eastern Germans were described by Western Germans in the same xenophobic terms Muslims are sometimes described today.
The two World Wars resulted in the construction of ‘Nation’ as a biological inheritance instead of a social construct.
Poverty does not cause migration. If it was the case the thousands of millions of people who live in poverty would be moving, and they are not.

Receiving countries have to stop perceiving themselves as passive observers, but as the active participants in the conditions of expulsion of the origin countries of migrants.
(Sassen, 1996)

15. Expulsion:

i want to go home but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home tells you to
leave what you could not behind,
even if it was human.

no one leaves home until home
is a damp voice in your ear saying
leave, run now, i don't know what
i've become
(Shire, *Home*, excerpt, 2015)

16. The Border Spectacle, or an obscene endurance test in which some migrants must die so that others survive and enter the US in further subordinated positions.
(De Genova, 2018)

17. Why now the rhetoric of hate? Was the feminisation of migration allowing the strengthening of migrant communities too much? Did they have to be reminded of their rightful place?

18. The collapse of global ruling systems is giving way to micro-predations on humans which are marked as refuse. Capital must be extracted to the last drop.
(Lancaster, 2018)

19. Migrants are at the borders the same way as colonisers once were. The former are 'dirt,' the latter were heroes. But aren't migrants doing precisely the dirty work European colonisers did? Aren't they pushing further the borders of our advanced economies? When there is no more land to expand into, frontiers are on the inside. (Sassen, 1996)
This overheating has to do with the real wall, the one dividing the garden between plants and weeds.

Pensive I: Mexican, woman, migrant

The shadow of drug trafficking shapes current society. [...] Today, fears feel like needle pricks, which wound us until we are covered with stitches remaking our personality. Tiny pickets that multiply, expanding the pain. Pain that covers. Protective shelter that hides the deafening scream, and its listening. (Márquez Tamayo, 2019)

It is difficult to objectively analyse a situation which (having lived most of my life in Mexico), has not only shaped me and the lives of most of my loved ones but which, by its very nature, would make any human being's foundations tremble. Nightmares have become part of the everyday experience in the flesh of the most vulnerable—and in continuously growing numbers. It is hard to explain the *realness* of fears like these to someone who has fortunately not experienced such a context. Recent policy changes, coming from both, the government of Mexico and the government of the US, seem to be pointing into the direction of worsening even further the already dire situation lived along the hidden paths of the hundreds of thousands of people making their way into the unknown promised land of a better life in the north.

There are several biases which, as I realised along the way, needed to be kept in check as a result of my personal involvement in the overall situation, since they touched me on two sides: on the side of gender, and on the side of migration and the normalisation of violence. On the side of gender, extreme subjectivity was easier to identify by myself and others, therefore easier to balance out. All in all, being Mexican, a woman, and a mother (although disproportionately privileged in all those matters) once analysed, was an excellent advantage for the better understanding of the overall situation. As a recent migrant (again, a disproportionately privileged one) to the Middle East, and as the descendant of French migrants into Mexico has, I believed, increased my capacity for empathy and a sense of sorority towards the experiences of migrating women. It was suggested, by people in Mexico with no involvement in the project or interest in the situation of migrants (in other words, the average anybody), that these two aspects gave me a bias of excessive softness or permissiveness towards a population group which is exceedingly being demonised by political interests. As with everything I did ponder on this suggested bias for a while. Can there be *too much* compassion? How can I deny the inevitability of exchange amongst diverse human populations? How could I ever condemn it? But then again, *how could they?*

The last point of ‘bias’ was the hardest to keep in line, and as could be sensed across the team, is what generated the most tension—what pulls-in like a vortex or spits out like an eruption. The *normalisation of violence* in Mexican society has grown at a steady pace since the government of President Felipe Calderón declared his ‘necessary’ war on drugs thirteen years ago. From then on heads of organisations began to get cut-off, literally—and literally like Hydra, a thousand others have emerged, biting with rage at whatever is unfortunate enough to cross its path. I believe there is not a single person in the country that has not been touched personally by at least one act of this brand violence (I hope though, with all my heart that I am wrong). This personal involvement in the majority of the country’s population is either expressed as the magnetic allure of *doing something about it*—or the utter repulsion at anything that threads along the Hydra’s path.

There are things seen or heard which are impossible to un-see or un-hear. The normalisation of violence creeps up without anyone noticing the numbness inching along as well—and it is numbness the only sensible reaction to the potential fate looming above our collective lives. As we dug deeper into the stories, political and economic motives, social factors, and global influences in both, the migrant and the women’s situations, it became hard not to raise our hands in hopelessness. Getting involved in work like this, and I believe to an extent even living in a context like it, forces one to engage in a risky tightrope walk. On one side, if violence is not normalised and individuals allow for the full powers of human empathy to develop, despair easily sets in. A step back for safe distance is not only understandable but wholly necessary. On the other side, an overly protective and pragmatic approach, knowing full-well individual actions are seldom transcendental, can result in cold detachment or indifference. This delicate balancing act was a significant challenge which, I believe, is never overcome entirely, but rather dragged along any work of this nature.

As I write this report the project is on-going. A summarised and selected version of the report I wrote for Tres Gatos was given to the female migrant shelter Instituto Madre Assunta in Tijuana run by the Sisters of San Carlos Borromeo Scalabriniani, as a short dispatch for the sisters and volunteers to better understand the motives and aims of the project. It is fair to say the members of the institute were genuinely pleased and interested in the development of the project. On a more immediate basis, the Tres Gatos team was asked as well to help out in creating a media campaign for the website page of the same shelter in which I will also contribute as an anthropologist and also as a graphic designer (which is my BA degree). Furthermore, my involvement in the organisation for the production of the film will continue on a mutual modelling of my initial theoretical report, shaping it into visual content and what will hopefully not take too long to become the full-length documentary, *Te Amo*.

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VIDEO

Entre serpientes y escaleras, 2012. Produced by Tres Gatos Films, A.C. Directed by Omar Iturbe, Keisdo Shimabukuro, and Luis Ernesto Nava. Online, viewed 20 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfltnHEXtAc>>

María en tierra de nadie, 2011. Produced by Ruido photo, El Faro, Idheas. Directed by Marcela Zamora Chamorro. Online, viewed 24 May 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kup7ZnDSPBQ>>

The Possibility of Hope in, *The Children of Men* 2006, DVD, Universal Studios. Conceived, written and produced by Alfonso Cuarón.

Which Way Home, 2009. Produced by HBO Documentary Films. Directed by Rebecca Cammisa.