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Ya Me Voy (*I'm Leaving Now*)

by

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1. Abstract

Ya Me Voy (I'm Leaving Now) is 54-minute documentary about Felipe, an undocumented Mexican living in Brooklyn who struggles over whether to return home to Mexico. Felipe plans to reunite with his family in Mexico and reconnect with his youngest son, César, who was just 8 months old when Felipe left. When he discovers his oldest son has a serious debt with the bank, however, he is forced to postpone his return in order to help his son pay off the debt. Felipe feels lonely, disappointed and betrayed by his family until one day an unexpected love affair makes him rethink his situation.

2. Project Description

When Felipe first crossed the border and became undocumented, he never intended to stay long in the US. Sixteen years later, he still lives in Brooklyn and struggles every day to make ends meet. He wants to return home, but year after year circumstances force him to postpone his trip. But this year is different. Felipe has decided that he will finally return to Mexico and rebuild his relationship with his youngest son César, who was just a baby when Felipe crossed the border. He fears that if he waits any longer, their relationship may never be able to be repaired.

In New York, Felipe juggles three low-paying jobs and collects bottles on the streets to send money to his family in Mexico. With his earnings his family built a house, sent four children to school and even started a business. On the eve of his 17th year in the

US, Felipe is ready to return to the life he left behind in Mexico, and to the wife and children he has come to know only over the phone.

But does Felipe's family even want him to come home? As he prepares to leave New York, his absence from his family's daily life becomes more and more apparent and they become more assertive in encouraging him to stay in the US. Is Felipe a respected father figure, or is his family using him for the money he sends?

When he finds out that his oldest son, Alejandro, owes the bank a large sum of money and might lose the family house or even end up in jail, Felipe questions his decision to return to Mexico. Should he stay in New York City and earn money to help pull the family out of debt, or return home to a family he no longer really knows in the hope that it's not too late to become a husband and father again? Consumed with loneliness and feeling betrayed by his family, an unexpected love affair causes Felipe to rethink his situation and confront the true meaning of family and responsibility.

3. Background

Timing one's departure from America is a precarious decision. For many undocumented workers, once you leave the United States, it's impossible to come back. Like other illegal immigrants working abroad, Felipe talks about his return to Mexico as a kind of afterlife, a joyous retirement, an endless celebration where he will finally be able to enjoy the rewards of his sacrifice. But in reality, Felipe is confronted with difficult questions. Will the family he left behind even accept him upon his return? And if he leaves prematurely, will he return home only to find the money has run out and a life in

poverty awaits him? Felipe's story sheds light on the challenges confronted by an often misunderstood, overlooked and under-represented population. He must navigate and negotiate many personal and political obstacles. He has high expectations, and yet he is living in the margins, fearful of being deported and losing everything.

Since the 1980s, the undocumented Mexican population in the state of New York has increased by more than half a million (Smith 2006, 4). Throughout American history, immigration laws and politics have been interwoven with racial prejudice against recent immigrants (Balkaran 2016, 2). Immigrants find themselves suspended between two worlds, unable to leave their past lives behind yet incapable of building a satisfying life in the country they've adopted. Undocumented immigrants are still waiting for the much needed immigration reform that has eluded them under both Democratic and Republican administrations (Balkaran 2016, 3).

In the US, 6.4 percent of the workforce are like Felipe in that they lack documentation (Nelson 2016, 2). According to the Pew Research Center, growth in border patrol surveillance and new physical barriers have failed to prevent a steady growth in the undocumented workforce from the 1990s through the mid-2000s. What started for many US employers as a short-term solution to fill a labor gap has turned into a preference for hiring undocumented Latino workers. According to a study by Lise Nelson, employers describe the undocumented Latino immigrants they hire as their most reliable, honest and hardworking employees (Nelson 2016, 2). Employers see in undocumented low-wage workers a loyal and flexible workforce that is very attractive

because they become compliant workaholics in order to survive (Harrison and Lloyd 2011, 378).

Undocumented workers who enter the US are usually motivated by a profound economic need that prompts them to embark on a dangerous journey across the border. Poverty places them in a vulnerable position that proves to be an asset to their US employers. Eager and in need of employment, they often accept difficult, irregular, low-paying jobs they can do without being fluent in English (Nelson 2016, 3).

Nelson further explains that this research contradicts assumptions about the criminal character of undocumented low-wage immigrants. It also sheds light on the reality of their role in a wide range of economic sectors across the US, where over the past two decades low wage industries have increasingly come to rely on undocumented immigrant workers.

Even though studies like Nelson's prove there is a clear economic logic to the presence of millions of undocumented workers in the United States, the current immigration system fails to provide a path to citizenship or even a decent life for low-wage immigrant workers like Felipe. A comprehensive immigration reform that provides better wages and working conditions for undocumented immigrant workers is not only ethical but economically sensible (Nelson 2016, 5).

There are many documentaries that represent the plight of undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the US. *Ya Me Voy* is unique in that it's an intimate multi-faceted character portrait of one undocumented worker on the margins. It does not reduce

Felipe to a symbol of the need for immigration reform—instead, it delves into the many very personal dilemmas he and others like him face. How does Felipe confront his loneliness and lack of companionship in New York? What is his long-distance relationship with his family in Mexico like? These are questions that will be highly relevant to many in his situation.

In addition, as I will explore later in this paper, I engaged Felipe in the process of crafting the story so that the representation is even more true to his experience than a traditional documentary would be. Political without mentioning politics, *Ya Me Voy* moves beyond statistics to illuminate some of the central questions and themes that confront illegal immigrants in the US: the nature of home and belonging, the impact of migration on family members left behind and their reliance on the support of migrant family members living abroad, and the true personal costs undocumented workers incur to make a life for themselves in the US, and for their families back home.

4. Meeting Felipe

I first met Felipe on the South Side of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2013. He was collecting bottles, singing popular Mexican songs and wearing a faded velvet Mariachi hat with sequins falling off of it. I was immediately captivated by his charisma and sense of humor.

Many years of working in factories taught Felipe that he doesn't like to be locked up doing the same thing every day, so now he does multiple jobs a day, including cleaning apartment buildings and a Jewish Synagogue. Felipe complements this income

by picking up bottles. He is a free spirit and loves to wander the streets, talking to people and exploring the city.

I would often see Felipe collecting bottles in my neighborhood and we would talk about how he wanted to go back to Mexico within a month or so. He would see me running around with the camera and one day he asked me to make a video of his life in New York so that he could show it to his family in Mexico. We did a short piece of him collecting bottles and singing in the streets and I uploaded it to Facebook for his family to see.

Since Felipe was always talking about going back home, it never occurred to me to do a longer documentary about him. Weeks, months and years passed and I kept running into him. Eventually I asked myself, “Why does Felipe keep postponing his trip back to Mexico year after year?” That question was the genesis of this project.

5. Style and Approach

Ya Me Voy is a blend of documentary and fiction. Its observational shooting style allows events to unfold in front of the camera and the characters to speak for themselves. This cinematic style—a blend of Cinéma Vérité elements and highly stylized fictional moments based on real events of Felipe’s life—allows the audience to immerse themselves fully in Felipe’s story and creates a deeply personal narrative that puts a very human face on a highly-politicized issue.

At the core of my production process I incline toward the theoretical approaches and techniques of both Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité. Both practices are committed

to a realistic observation of society as a way of bringing the filmmaker and the audience closer to the subject (Barsam 1992, 303). The differences between Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema, according to documentary historian Erik Barnouw, lay in the filmmaker's approach:

The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of *cinéma vérité* tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch *cinéma vérité* artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the *cinéma vérité* artist espoused that of a provocateur. Direct cinema found its truth in events available to the camera. *Cinéma vérité* was committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface (Barnouw 1993, 2254-255).

During my production process I incorporated characteristics of both Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema. Without intervening, I followed Felipe as he joked with the Chinese people at the recycling depot, sang mariachi songs to the Puerto Rican cashiers at the local supermarket, and interacted with the Jewish community as he cleaned the synagogue. After following Felipe for a couple of months and recording the same patterns of his daily routine over and over again, however, I realized that I couldn't keep waiting patiently for a situation of crisis to unfold and provide a narrative arc for the film. I decided that I had to start provoking situations in order to give the story a structure.

Looking back at the tradition of documentary filmmaking, it's evident that blurred boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, narrative and rhetoric, and poetry and spectacle are part of the form itself (Nichols 2001, 143). An early example of this is Robert Flaherty's seminal documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922), about an Eskimo (Inuit) and his life in Northern Canada. In a now-famous exchange, Flaherty's colleague

John Grierson criticized his “romantic” approach because Flaherty was not portraying Nanook’s actual way of life but recreating a traditional way of life that no longer existed. Flaherty countered that his intention was to show Nanook’s noble struggle to survive in a hostile environment, and that this was ultimately a more valuable representation than documentation of the actual reality faced by contemporary Inuit.

Jean Rouch’s early film *Moi, Un Noir* (1959) is also an example of how filmmakers were experimenting with the form, integrating fiction and non-fiction. Importantly, however, Rouch also attempted to expose the fabricated nature of all filmic representation. *Moi, Un Noir* is the story of a young Nigerian man who left his country in search of work and migrated to Treichville in the Ivory Coast. Rouch approaches the film through the lens of his main character Edward G. Robinson, who presents a subjective account of his life as an immigrant. Rouch’s interaction with this “Other” is included in the film in order to foreground his presence as a filmmaker, intruder and provoker. Rouch shot the film without sound and then added Robinson’s comments and reflections as he watched himself on film for the first time. The narration describes his aspirations, worries, uncertainties and day-to-day reality, as well as his fantasies. Robinson’s improvised dialogue strikes the spectator for its honesty, intimacy and intensity (Loizos 1993, 53). Spectators asked themselves if the characters were actors or real people, whether they were premeditated sequences or spontaneous life “caught unawares” (Stolle 1992, 142).

Each of these films experimented with the conventions of realism and truth in its own way. In both cases filmmakers invited their characters to participate in the making of

the film. In the same way, Felipe became a collaborator and co-writer of his own story in *Ya Me Voy*, while I retained control of the form and artistic vision of the film.

According to Michal Renov in his book *Theorizing Documentary*, non-fiction always contains fictive elements. Among these are the construction of characters and dramatic arcs, the use of poetic language, narration, music, the creation of emotional impact and suspense, and the use of camera angles and framing. People and objects placed before the camera succumb to the demands of a creative vision, blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction (Renov 1993, 3).

Recreations were a stylistic choice I used throughout the documentary to bring important plot points and information about my character's life and psychology to the surface. This wouldn't have been possible to achieve using a purely observational approach, since a major turning point in the story—the debt—happened a year before I began filming. I knew I didn't want to reveal this information through narration or an interview, so I decided to look into other strategies. I ended up recreating a phone call where Felipe first received the information about the debt from his son Alejandro. The process of filming was cathartic moment for Felipe, as he relived the experience with intensity, passion and realism. Afterwards, when I conducted an interview with him, he referred to the staged event as if it were real.

I was always curious to know how people in Felipe's position define love and deal with loneliness. I often heard stories about men leaving their families behind in Mexico and starting a new life and family abroad, and wondered if Felipe had ever confronted such a situation. Felipe, being a man of convictions, always knew that he

would never abandon his family in Mexico the same way his brother had, and that he would always look after them and be an economic support. However, he did have a brief romantic relationship with another woman.

Felipe met María while collecting bottles. They started a friendship that soon blossomed into a romantic relationship. They kept each other company and spent time together. But when María wanted the relationship to become more serious, Felipe decided to step back because he knew he had a responsibility to his family in Mexico that was much more important to him. I talked to Felipe and we both agreed that to be faithful to his story here in the US, and raise the stakes of the story, we would recreate his romantic relationship with María, or something like it, for the film.

We met Guadalupe at the Mexican Day Parade on Madison Avenue. Felipe and Guadalupe were both wearing traditional outfits and when I saw them dancing, laughing and joking around together I immediately saw the chemistry between them. I talked to Guadalupe about the project and asked for her contact information. The next day I called her up, and we met and started working on scenes with Felipe.

At first I wanted to recreate the story of Felipe and María exactly as it had happened, forcing María's life onto Guadalupe's character. I soon realized that wasn't going to work, however, because the performances lacked authenticity. I decided to go back to a more observational approach and plan scenes based on Felipe and Guadalupe's regular real life routines, allowing them to get to know one another organically through casual conversations. In a strange way, Felipe and Guadalupe were two lonely souls who

found one another in the process of making the film. They developed a strong friendship and a great appreciation for one another, and this surfaced in their performances.

Even though the character of Guadalupe is based on real facts, and represents a romantic relationship Felipe had with another woman, the relationship between Guadalupe and Felipe is the most fictional element of the documentary. The idea of incorporating María and Felipe's relationship into the documentary was a collaborative decision between filmmaker (myself) and the subject (Felipe). We brainstormed about how we would develop a storyline to represent the relationship Felipe had with María. In Felipe's understanding of things, he was a conquistador, out to make Guadalupe fall in love with him. The scene at the deli, where Felipe and Guadalupe are eating, was the second time we all worked together and Felipe's performance for the camera feels so real and authentic it's hard to tell if he was acting for the camera or really falling in love with Guadalupe.

My collaboration with Felipe brings to mind David Riker's film *La Ciudad* (1999). *La Ciudad* is a collection of stories about love, hope, and loss among Latin American immigrants living in New York. In a "making of" video, Riker describes his method of working with non-actors. For 6 years Riker and his crew established a high degree of trust within the Latin American immigrant community, doing research and conducting acting workshops where they collectively wrote stories based on the participants' experiences of loss, longing, loneliness and adaptation.

Riker tells us that in order to distill the feelings and emotions of his characters, and represent the difficulties of their lives, he had to rethink his role as a filmmaker and

“direct from below,” allowing the immigrants to give him direction about how to tell their stories. Riker’s ideas resonated with me because of their collaborative nature, and because breaking with the idea of the director as the possessor of the ultimate truth and intellectual property by inviting the subjects to be creators of their own stories appealed to me.

Ya Me Voy is a political documentary that addresses central questions and themes confronting undocumented immigrants in the US, without referring overtly to politics. In making it, I was inspired by the way that contemporary Iranian Cinema blends fact and fiction to create a hybrid cinema that addressed the nation’s social and political issues without being overtly political. The films of Abbas Kiarostami, for example, embrace simple and poetic moments in the lives of individuals who survive in difficult environments (Sheibani 2004, 535). Kiarostami deliberately fuses fact and fiction to remind the audience that facts can be fabricated, and he attains this goal through an ironic and witty cinematic language that is self-critical and self-reflexive (Sheibani 2004, 153).

Kiarostami’s cinema also erases the lines between the mundane and the Ideal, allowing reality and fantasy to play equal roles (Salhoghi 2008, 190). In a similar way, Felipe’s dreams serve as another narrative element in *Ya Me Voy*. He dreams of returning to Mexico and becoming a famous singer, performing with his own mariachi band, charming women like Pedro Infante, a Mexican singer and actor who represents the fun-loving *charro* and the urban hero of the working class. These dreams are represented through magical realism. In the opening title sequence of the film we see Felipe in the film’s various locations, dressed up in his *charro* suit singing *Puente de Piedra*, a song

about the sadness of leaving. Felipe is running after a boy with a green sweatshirt who disappears right when he is about to catch up with him. This young boy represents his youngest son Cesarín, as their reunification is an unreachable dream. The magical realism in the title sequence of *Ya Me Voy* contrasts with Felipe's quotidian multicultural life of Brooklyn, a global city where despite his lack of power he is able to emerge as a significant subject.

6. Challenges

Because I experimented with different techniques and modes of production, one of the biggest challenges I faced was trying to find a unified stylistic approach. At one point I wanted to include the filmmaker (myself) in the film interacting with the film's subjects, to show how I provoked moments of reflections on their part. I edited several versions of the film where I appeared, interacting with Felipe, in three places. I soon realized, however, that this wasn't a documentary about the blurred boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Nor was I interested in making it a story about my relationship, as a filmmaker, with my subject. Felipe's story was strong enough to stand alone and speak for itself, and adding those elements took away from the power of his story. The result is a film that appears to be documentary but in fact includes scenes that were constructed by me and the main characters, who then appear as actors in their own lives.

There is a fine line between truth and fiction in my documentary. I did not write a script with dialogue for Felipe and Guadalupe to memorize, but we did develop the outlines of a clear story line that they followed. All the staged scenes were inspired and

built around Felipe's daily routines, but had the purpose of creating key story beats. The biggest challenge was representing the relationship of Felipe and María through the character of Guadalupe. The idea of them falling in love raised many ethical questions about fabricating situations based on real events, and about my responsibility as a filmmaker towards my subjects. While they developed great appreciation for one another, Felipe was clear that he was playing a role. Guadalupe's experience was different because she ended up developing feelings for Felipe during the process of filmmaking.

I was also concerned about how Felipe's family and wife would react when they saw the film, being that it's evident in the story that Felipe falls in love with another woman. Felipe says he is willing to show the film to his family because for him it's clear that he is playing a role.

Another big challenge was finding an ending for the film. I always knew I wanted the film to be open-ended and have the audience decide for themselves whether Felipe stays in New York with Guadalupe or returns to his family in Mexico. I also wanted Guadalupe's character to be that of a strong heroine, and built the ending to imply that she ends the relationship with Felipe in the hope that he will gather the courage and strength to go back home to his family. Part of her motivation is that she is ill and has to go to dialysis three times a week. Even though the ending is left open, the last scene—a cathartic call Felipe has with Cesarín on his birthday—hints that Felipe has decided to go back home.

8. Audience and Exhibition

A film like this will resonate with Mexicans and other immigrant populations, not only in New York but in other cities across the United States. Spanish-speaking Latinos are an obvious target audience, as are Americans in general. We hope to reach a wide audience, first through a festival run and then through wide theatrical and semi-theatrical releases. We hope these screenings and the events surrounding them will create a space for lively discussion about the struggles that many immigrants face when trying to go back home to their countries of origin and reunite with their families.

Felipe's story is deeply human and a gripping narrative. It raises questions about immigration issues, but also about loneliness, and how people combat aloneness and find meaning in their lives when they are away from their home countries.

9. Conclusion

Capturing reality is an incredibly complex process. As a filmmaker I strive to be an open and honest observer and to respect the long process of acquiring information and building trust with the characters I collaborate with. The most important aspect of my work is getting to know my subjects and immersing myself in their world in order to better understand and express their complex reality. Through their intimate and personal struggles I want to raise questions and provoke conversations about the universality of their stories and the issues raised by them.

Throughout the IMA program my body of work has focused on Mexican undocumented immigrants in New York. It has touched on themes of immigration,

identity and survival. As global inequality grows and capital and employment opportunities concentrate in the North, low-income families in Mexico have little choice but to divide their labor across the border to protect their families and offer the next generation hope for a better future. Despite their immigration statuses, Mexican communities have managed to successfully insert themselves into the economic structures of New York City by doing what they love and drawing upon their Mexican heritage and traditions. They have high expectations and yet they are living on the margins, fearful of being deported and losing everything. My work allows underrepresented communities—in this case undocumented Mexicans who are constantly battling with their illegal status—to speak out and share their stories with others who find themselves in the same situation, and with a larger audience.

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