



Contrabando y Emoción: Corridos, Immigration, and Drug Trafficking in *Al Otro Lado* By Claire Frisbie

You know the story. You've heard it on the news for years, especially with the recent buzz about the controversial *Guía del Migrante Mexicano* and the brigade of armed vigilantes hunting Mexican immigrants along the U.S.-Mexico border. The abundant and illegal trafficking of people and drugs across the border has long been pegged by conservatives as one of the biggest threats to U.S. national security and foreign policy, but young filmmaker Natalia Almada's portrayal of the situation in her documentary film *Al Otro Lado* moves to a much different tune.

Framed within the age-old musical genre of the corrido, *Al Otro Lado* gives the dangerous world of drug- and people-trafficking a human face, vividly and honestly portraying it through the stories of those who live it and presenting the situation as the direct and unavoidable result of Mexico's economic crisis.

But *Al Otro Lado*, which premiered at last month's Tribeca Film Festival, is not your typical developing-world, poverty tale. Natalia knew she wanted to create a film about the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa, where she is from, but "doing a story just about the economic crisis is really depressing, and people have seen it and are not that interested," she told NYMosaico. "I really felt that somehow there needed to be culture, a sense of humor, and other things to make it a little more alive and not just a tragic story."

Her inspiration and the subsequent driving force of the film came in the form of a book by American ethnomusicologist Elijah Wald, who collaborated on the film. Wald's book *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerillas* recounts the history and the current world of the corrido—the musical genre of northern Mexico that is part ballad, part musical newspaper, and part gangster rap. Traditional in their sound, corridos chronicle—often humorously—the lives and concerns of the people of the region, covering everything from drug-trafficking to crossing "al otro lado" (to the other side) in search of a better life.

Al Otro Lado features interviews with Jorge Hernández of Los Tigres del Norte, the most famous players in the corrido scene. The film also interviews other corrido stars like Jenni "La Chacalosa" Rivera, Jessie Morales, and composer Paulino Vargas, who share their opinions about both corridos and immigration issues.

Al Otro Lado is composed of shots of Los Tigres del Norte in concert, old footage of people crossing the border, and interviews with corrido musicians, immigrants, drug traffickers, and residents of La Reforma, a fishing village in Sinaloa where much of the film takes place.

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The “star” of the documentary is an entirely unknown corridista named Magdiel, 23, whose lyrics celebrate the local fishermen of La Reforma who use their boats for trafficking contraband for the “gringos”. At the time of filming, Magdiel was weighing the all-too-common decision of whether to stay in Sinaloa in relative poverty, or to brave crossing the border in search of a better life. *Al Otro Lado* chronicles Magdiel’s ultimate resolution to cross, as well as his family’s and friends’ reactions to his decision. He crossed with the aid of a coyote, a guide who helps people make the dangerous trip across the border. Instead of charging the standard hefty fee, however, the coyote offered Magdiel his services in exchange for a song written in his honor.

Most of the people Natalia interviews in La Reforma are young men who make a living as coyotes or traffickers. The bulk of the interviews take place on Magdiel’s porch, centering on a group of young guys in shorts and flip-flops, hanging out—and thus immediately dispelling the stereotype of flashy, beefy drug lords.

“I’m not dealing with big, big drug dealers. These are small-time: like a fisherman ... or a farmer who does it once or twice to get out of a [financial] problem,” Natalia pointed out. “It’s not that these people are inherently evil and greedy. They’re just people who are trying to get by the same way everyone is.”

Only one man—one of the main coyotes—refused to show his face on camera, but he still agreed to be interviewed for the film. The man paints his job in a much more positive light than might be expected, pointing out that many more people would die crossing the border if he weren’t there to help them out.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Al Otro Lado* is just how much Natalia was able to capture on film. In addition to the extremely intimate interviews, *Al Otro Lado* contains footage of Magdiel’s border crossing, the U.S. Border Patrol’s discovery of a truckload of illegal immigrants, and an almost surreal scene of Chris Simcox and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps’ patrol of the Arizona desert as they “capture” four Mexican immigrants hiding under shrubbery

About this scene, Natalia commented, “At first we thought, ‘Oh, this is a joke...’ So we didn’t expect to find anybody, but when we did, it was really, really tough because I was shooting, and it was the first time, for me, that ... I was in a position that I really felt that my camera was making the reality for the people in front of the camera worse. It’s so humiliating for them, and I felt really horrible about that, but at the same time, [I felt], ‘I need to shoot it, I need to show it, and hopefully I’ll be able to talk to them and they’ll understand,’ which is what happened.”

Natalia, soft-spoken and petite, has blond hair and blue eyes and cites her appearance and being a woman, as well as the small size of her crew (at most five people at any given time) and camera (a Panasonic 24p DVX-100), as some of the advantages in the shooting of the documentary: Few people considered her intimidating in any sense, and Chris Wilcox from the Homeland Defense crew never suspected she was Mexican and thus missed her motives for tagging along with him.

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Credit must also go to Natalia's talent and sensitivity as an interviewer, as the honesty and willingness of all of the interviewees—from Magdiel to the coyotes to the scared immigrants hiding in the desert—is absolutely remarkable. It provides the film's unique rawness and intimacy, which drew tears to the eyes of so many members of the audience at the three sold-out screenings at the Tribeca Film Festival.

Al Otro Lado made its world premiere at Tribeca, and will continue on the festival circuit with three screenings at the Los Angeles Film Festival in June. Natalia hopes to reach a broader—and more Mexican—audience, however, by collaborating with community centers across the country, organizing free screenings for people who might not otherwise see the film. She and the crew would also like to show the film in Mexico. None of the people from La Reforma have seen it yet, and Natalie spoke of perhaps touring Sinaloa with a truck, equipped with a projector and a screen, and showing the film outdoors because many of the towns don't have movie theaters.

As for future film projects, Natalia has already begun work on her next documentary, tentatively titled *El General*, about her great-grandfather Plutarco Elias Calles who was president of Mexico from 1924-28. Although Natalia is based in New York, she plans to continue making films about Mexico.

"In Mexico there aren't as many people doing this kind of [documentary film]," she said. "And to have the privilege of having gone to school, to have the skills, and the access, and all that, I really feel that it's important for me to work in Mexico and to deal with issues that have to do with Mexico."