

**Anna Tybinko reviews Raquel Vega-Durán's *Emigrant Dreams, Immigrant Borders: Migrants, Transnational Encounters, and Identity in Spain* (Bucknell University Press, 2016).**

What are the limits of emigrant identity? Under what conditions does one cease to be an emigrant and instead become an immigrant? Where does such a border lie? These are the questions that Raquel Vega-Durán wrestles with in *Emigrant Dreams, Immigrant Borders: Migrants, Transnational Encounters and Identity in Spain*. She points to lack of a noun comparable to “migrant” in Spanish, an absence that exacerbates the conceptual separation of the “immigrant” and “emigrant.”

Readers familiar with the Spanish context will know that during Spain's transition to democracy (1978-1985), the massive waves of emigration that had characterized the Franco dictatorship dissipated. The tide turned completely with the adoption of the first unified immigration law in 1985, which paved the way for Spain's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) the following year. Now, thirty-odd years after these initial measures were taken, around 12% of the Spanish population is of foreign origin. At the core of Vega-Durán's book lies a search for new understandings of Spanishness in the midst of these rapid transformations. By extending Juan Goytisolo's “ethic of solidarity” that links similar experiences from Spain's past with the immigrants' present, she sets out to demonstrate that migrant narratives in contemporary Spanish novels, films and visual art are meant to counter “historical amnesia” and elicit empathy.

This project has already garnered scholarly attention for its ambitious scope,<sup>1</sup> and I would add that *Emigrant Dreams* expands our understanding of migrancy itself by placing recent arrivals to Spain within the context of a long history of human mobility: movements which brought people to the Iberian Peninsula and also led them far beyond. Vega-Durán repeatedly cites the Greeks, Romans, Carthaginians, Phoenicians, Goths and Berbers who, early-on, populated the space that would come to be known as Spain. This wide lens allows her to consider phenomena often treated as disparate areas within Hispanic Studies in terms of their resulting migratory flows. These include the “Reconquista,” the expulsion of the *moriscos*, the colonization of the Americas, and even the long ensuing legacy of *indianos* – Spaniards who, up through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would amass great fortunes in the colonies in order to gain a new socioeconomic status at home.

The format of the book is innovative as well. Rather than following a typical chronological sequence, the six chapters unfold in an order that evokes the stages of a migrant's journey. Starting with notions of a “Madre Patria,” or motherland, chapters 1, 2 and 3 take on encounters at and, as the author is careful to clarify, “in” the border (52). Referencing border studies greats like Gloria Anzaldúa, Vega-Durán proposes that instead of a presumed boundary, the border be examined “*in relation to the migrant* as an encompassing space that incorporates the features of the borderland and the borderline, separating and uniting at the same time,” effectively becoming “the place where the *emigrant* and the *immigrant* meet and blend into the single identity of the migrant” (54). The Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla, which constitute Europe's only land border with Africa, exemplify this type of heterogeneous space.

Chapters 4 and 5 look at the case of the migrant in Spain through contemporary film. It is here that Vega-Durán's primary intervention in the field, her notion of an “ethic of solidarity,” starts to gain

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<sup>1</sup> Ricci, Cristián H. “Emigrant Dreams, Immigrant Borders. Migrants, Trans-National Encounters and Identity in Spain by Raquel Vega-Durán (Review).” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 51, no. 3, Dec. 2017, pp. 737–39.

traction. In contrast to media representations and legal discourse which have consistently framed immigration to Spain as a threat, or even as an invasion, Vega-Durán examines how migrant narratives in a range of contemporary cultural production instead operate out of a common experience of displacement. According to this reading, portrayals of the immigrant are purposely vague because they are not trying to take on the silenced voice of the “Other.” Rather, they should be interpreted as a bid for empathy and a “vehicle for self-understanding” (xxx). More specifically, in the case of an iconic movie like *Bwana*, the Spaniard is made to be “the object of study and spectacle, showing how the agent of racial discourse turns into the object of his own rhetoric – and, we could hope, thereby prompting self-reflection by Spanish viewers” (144).

The inclusion in Chapter 6 of novels written by immigrant authors living in Spain brings this line of analysis full circle, because, as Vega-Durán explains, “their perspective reveals Spain and Europe as other and it is up to the reader to discover who that Other is” (216). For such a wide-ranging text, *Emigrant Dreams* manages to stay balanced, never dwelling too long on either Spanish or migrant identities. This constant movement aids Vega-Durán’s aim to disrupt these monolithic categories and reveal a Spanishness in evolution. However, this same framing technique leaves some important details in the dark.

The discussion in the first chapter of Spanish émigrés both in Latin America and Northern Europe, where they were often treated as a racialized other, creates a firm base for the case of an ethic of solidarity meant to challenge the “pact of forgetting” that would seek to enshroud these experiences during the Transition to democracy. Yet, whether it be jumping the fence in Ceuta and Melilla, or dangerous Mediterranean crossings in *cayucos* and *pateras*;<sup>2</sup> the quick leap to forms of illegalized immigration to Spain in the following chapters inadvertently re-affirms stereotypes of who a “migrant” is in the first place. Nowhere does Vega-Durán mention that the first influx of “immigrants” in the 1980s came from predominantly wealthier and economically more developed countries.<sup>3</sup> Even in 2015, a year before the book’s publication and at the height of the so-called “migrant crisis” in Europe, almost half of the non-Spaniards residing in Spain came from the EU or other parts of Europe.<sup>4</sup> One wonders whether this was a deliberate choice on the part of the author to narrow her focus, or a simple oversight. Regardless, more explanation is needed before jumping straight to racialized African or Latin American immigrants as the primary challenge to a Spanish sense of self.

Nonetheless, Vega-Durán’s efforts to locate the “missing-migrant” in Spanish narratives is groundbreaking. It is a solid contribution to a small, but burgeoning, field of criticism specifically addressing Spain as a host country for immigration in which works like Daniela Flesler’s *Return of the Moor*, Susan Martin-Márquez’s *Disorientations*, Cristián Ricci’s *¡Hay moros en la costa!*, and Michael Ugarte’s *Africans in Europe* already form a formidable foundation. Given the true depth and breadth of sources Vega-Durán draws upon, this book is soon to become a staple in many classrooms. As a truly interdisciplinary work, it will be useful to those in and out of Peninsular literary studies.

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<sup>2</sup> These two terms refer to distinct forms of fishing boats that are used instead to transport migrants from the coast of Africa to Spanish territory.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5 “The Intersection between Integration and the Legal Framework on Nationality in Spain” in Carrera, Sergio (Political scientist). *In search of the perfect citizen?: the intersection between integration, immigration and nationality in the EU*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> This data can be found via the INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) website which Vega-Durán herself references or the “Anuario CIDOB de la Inmigración” for 2015 published by CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs).