MEDIA FIELDS
JOURNAL

Producing and Televising Immigrant Stories

A Conversation with Marisa Venegas

Interview by Carlos Jimenez and Bianka Ballina

In March 2016, the University of California, Santa Barbara's Carsey-Wolf Center and the Film and Media Studies department hosted a screening of the investigative television documentary *Muriendo por Cruzar* (Dying to Cross, 2014), co-produced by the Telemundo Network, The Weather Channel, and the Investigative Fund. This Emmy Award-winning documentary captures how increased border enforcement has affected immigration patterns, often forcing immigrants into inhospitable terrains to avoid U.S. Border Patrol checkpoints. In particular, the investigation centers on Brooks County, Texas, located 70 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico Border. With the establishment of one of these checkpoints near the town of Falfurrias in 1994, undocumented immigrants have been forced to walk for days through the most treacherous and isolated desert areas of Brooks County.

Muriendo por Cruzar underscores the hostile physical and legal environment leading to the deaths of hundreds of Latin American immigrants. The Spanish-language documentary combines data gathered by multiple organizations in the area and interviews with Border Patrol officials, Brooks County residents, as well as immigrants and their families. The distress produced by graphic images of bodies found in the desert is compounded by the harrowing recordings of 911 calls by immigrants pleading for help, which quite often does not arrive.

The documentary pays special attention to the traumatic experience of Sigfredo Palomo, who witnessed the death of his younger brother Jose Fernando Palomo as they both attempted to reach their sister in New York. The brothers were forced to leave their home in El Salvador due to threats from local gangs. In addition to Sigfredo's heartbreaking 911 calls, the report includes conversations with Sigfredo, his sister, and their family in El Salvador. *Muriendo por Cruzar* is thus a compelling co-production that addresses multiple key factors that influence migration from Latin America into the United States. In doing so, it speaks to a vast array of media texts that address the relevant issue of migration at different scales and locales. Moreover, as a bilingual production, it carefully negotiates its appeal to any potential English-language viewers with a text that is compelling to a Spanish-language audience who are all too well acquainted with the topic.

The screening at UCSB was followed by a Q and A with special guest Marisa Venegas, the documentary's Executive Producer. While working on the "Media and Migration" issue of *Media Fields Journal* we thought it would add another layer to the issue to hear the

experiences of a producer working in Spanish-language television where the theme of migration is ubiquitous. Specifically, we were interested in hearing the process of filming immigrant stories, of structuring them for Spanish-language television distribution, and of working in a co-production. We, the issue editors, met with Marisa Venegas in early March 2016 for an in person interview in Santa Barbara.

Bianka Ballina: What role does long-format television play in Spanish language media, and what are some of the challenges or benefits?

Marisa Venegas: Well you know in English you have a whole tradition of long form programming. You have *60 Minutes, Dateline, 20/20*. Plus you have *Frontline* on PBS. You have a lot of outlets in English. In Spanish, prior to *Aquí y Ahora* (at Univision) there was a show called *Portada*, which I think was its first attempt at long form. Aqui y Ahora, which we launched in March of 2000, was really more like CBS, *60 Minutes* and *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung*, so I tried to duplicate that format. The program had four or five segments within one-hour, which is really 44 minutes. Doing it live, live intro's and the segments themselves were taped. The challenges are primarily about resources. At *60 Minutes* or *Dateline* you have dozens and dozens of people. *60 Minutes* now, more than ever, crashes stories because there is so much competition, they're forced to get things on the air very quickly. You remember the other day with Sean Penn and the interview that Charlie Rose did was done earlier that week and then turned around for that Sunday. *60 Minutes* is now experiencing pressure to turn things around quickly. But in the past, you know, they took all the time in the world and I think that that is why they are who they are to this day. I think it's still the best, the very best news magazine on television. The challenges for Spanish language networks were always about having enough people to do great stories. I think *Aquí y Ahora* is a wonderful show and it's still going strong after 16 years, which is amazing, but it doesn't have the luxury of *60 Minutes* because, at least when I was there, I was responsible for 50 original hours. Unlike English, where there is an expectation that you'll do reruns during the summer, in Spanish, people don't really respond well to reruns so the expectation was 50 original hours. Imagine what that was like.

BB: There's also that pressure of turning this around quickly.

MV: Very quickly. Because of the smaller resources, you are more dependent on news. And so then what you do is take a breaking news story and you make it into a long form piece. In English, you may have the luxury of developing a story over many many months. It's not that we didn't do that, at *Aqui y Ahora* we had some stories that were percolating over months and you had your breaking stories, but it's just a resource issue. You have to keep the machine going.

BB: Are there particular limits to the types of topics you can cover? A certain default set of topics that are commonly associated or desired by the network?

MV: I think every network, regardless of language, wants stories that are going to resonate with their audience. If I pitch something about global warming it may not get the same enthusiasm as something about the cartels. I'm sure anybody would tell you that about

their respective networks. When I pitched a story at CBS about Latin America, about the PRI political party losing for the first time in 75 years I was told that it didn't say "hello" to the audience. I was much younger and I was shocked that they didn't quite understand the significance of it, but it's the reality. If they felt that it wasn't going to matter to their audience, then they're not going to invest the resources necessary to cover the story.

Carlos Jimenez: Can you give us a sense of what you do as an executive producer.

MV: In my current role, I'm an executive producer and producer balled into one. Because of the way that my position has evolved, unlike what I was doing at Univision, I go out and into the field and shoot. At Univision, as an executive producer I assigned stories, the producers went out and shot the stories, came back with the reporter and wrote the segments, I reviewed the script, and approved it and then it was edited by an editor and went on TV. Here, it's much more hands on and again it's an issue of resources. What I do is, whether it is in partnership with another entity or by myself, I'll actually go either by myself or with a correspondent and shoot the interviews. Then I come back, we send them out to be transcribed or we transcribe them ourselves. Next, we gather all the elements necessary to the story in various segments. What I'm working on are hours. I make sure that I have enough to tell a story in 5 segments or 6 segments. Write it in conjunction with a reporter or by myself and then I sit with an editor while the story is edited. After that, it has to go into post-production and we have to make sure that if we are given 44-minutes or 43-minutes that it fits and then we shoot intros if we need to and then we marry it all together. After that we give it to programming and it goes on the air.

CJ: It sounds like you are really a director. You are overseeing the work that happens in the field, in the editing room, you are really the visionary for these productions. What kind of things are you looking for in the field?

MV: Well, I think in the field, what you want to do is make sure you get the best interviews possible. Let me give you an example. I was present during most of the filming of *Muriendo por Cruzar*. I went to El Salvador to interview Sigfredo's wife and mom and spent time with the family. I went with Carmen Dominicci. Carmen actually did the interviews and we jointly came up with questions. What you want to do is make sure that you get people to give you their story in the most compelling way possible. Make them comfortable and try and balance that you are causing them a lot of pain by reliving whatever they are telling you with giving you a story that people can relate to.

For example, we took them to the cemetery and it's always very tricky for me to do that because you are causing people pain. Obviously, her walking with those tears was genuine. Did we need to do that, maybe not, but I think that it is the one way to get people to understand her grief. The fact that that tomb was supposed to be for her, I think made it even more powerful for the audience. The fact that one of the kids was disabled also gives the audience an understanding of the family unit and why somebody would leave their family to come here so that they could provide for them back there. That was why those scenes were important.

While we were talking to them, we found out that there was video of the young man, Jose Fernando, the brother. Because they're very very poor people, it is one of those questions that you may not think to ask because you make assumptions, but now that all of our lives are dominated by technology, all of a sudden we said, "do you by any chance have video?" And they said, "yes!" Then we thought, "oh my god," because there is nothing that tells you a story like all of a sudden seeing him being interviewed on television. And then also trying to find photographs because you want to be able to contrast the man that you saw lying dead with the living person that he was, and how important he was, and how talented he was to make sense of the tragedy, of the decision to come to the U.S. You always need b-roll, but you don't want to make people do things artificially. When you're out in the field, when you talk to them you want to find out what additional elements you could get that will make the story richer and so that is what I always try to do. I tell them, "if I weren't here, what would you be doing," and try and get them to give you additional access.

BB: I wanted to ask you about the decision to go to Central America and to go to the countries of origin to get the families perspective. What was that like?

MV: Well, yes. First of all, to me, to Telemundo, it was indispensable to go to Central America because how can you really connect the dots unless you see what was being left behind. For our audience, it was important to show what it was visually, how dangerous it is. I had never been to El Salvador. I had been to Nicaragua, I had been to Guatemala, and it was just from the moment we arrived in El Salvador you felt the fear, the poverty, and the evidence of gangs everywhere. Doing the interview with Sigfredo's family was very scary because it was hot, unbearably hot, so we had to have the windows open. The distance to the house across the street was a meter or more and there were all these kids, and they were all listening. You had the sense that you could possible be endangering their lives because they were talking about the fact that they had beaten Jose Fernando Palomo within an inch of his live. That they had left him for dead. You feel this enormous responsibility to the people, for the people you are interviewing, but we couldn't easily take them into a park. The kids were there and so there was no body to leave the kids with. We did one interview there, another with the mom in one location, and then we did an interview with the wife in another location where there was more privacy.

CJ: On that point, traveling to El Salvador, what were the logistics, coordinating movement, or getting approval like?

MV: Well, that's interesting because unlike anywhere else I've worked, and it's a sign of the times, Telemundo has a very strict policy about security and so you can't travel to areas of high risk without them doing a risk assessment and determining whether you need a bodyguard or whether you need a driver with a bodyguard, etc. Each country is evaluated before you travel.

CJ: Did you arrive with heavy security as you crossed the border?

MV: No, on the contrary, you don't want to do that. The idea is to be protected without it being overt. What it could mean is that myself, the reporter, and the photographer are in

one vehicle and then there's another vehicle in front of us or behind us, but everybody is very low-key. You don't want to have any evidence that there are weapons. You don't want to in any way show people that you're armed because that is just going to bring you more danger.

In the case of El Salvador, we were working with a local fixer and a driver who was both a driver and a bodyguard. But again, it was in a very low-key, and you don't want to call attention to yourself, given the presence of the gangs. The bodyguards are there in the background, hopefully to protect you.

BB: You mentioned the collaboration with the Weather Channel and how common these bilingual collaborations are becoming. What other kinds of collaborations are common in Spanish language media, and what are some of the issues that arise?

MV: Well, at *Aquí y Ahora*, for example, we didn't have any external collaborators because we generated all of our own content. When the focus is on investigations, that's where you want to generate collaborations because no one has the luxury of spending 7-8-9 months working on one story, whereas the mandate of these investigation entities are just that: to produce original investigations. That's why partnerships are more common both in Spanish and English and in newspapers and in television. The non-profit investigative entities are looking or distribution platforms and we're looking for content. I approached the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) and said, "I'm interested in developing a partnership. What are you working on that might be of interest to us?" That's how the last special on the Border Patrol came about. We approached them, they said, "well, this might be of interest to you," and we said "yes, that's great." We then found an English language partner, MSNBC, so it was a three-way partnership. Using their reporter, Andrew Becker, a producer and associate producer from MSNBC, and myself and an associate producer, later on, from Telemundo. We all went out in the field and shot the interviews. MSNBC did an English language version called *Clash at the Border* and we did one called *Batalla en la Frontera*.

BB: For *Muriendo por Cruzar*, how did the Investigative Fund become part of the project?

MV: The Investigative Fund and John Carlos Frey had already been working on the topic. At the very early stages, they had gone out to Brooks County to do some preliminary interviews and were in the process of doing the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, of getting the 911 calls and call logs. When they felt that they had enough to interest another partner, they approached The Weather Channel. There is also another partner, Efran Films, a production company, that was generating content for the Weather Channel. Unlike Telemundo, where I am doing the actual field work, The Weather Channel hired Efran Films to do the work. There was a producer, Solly Granatstein, that was attached to Efran Films who was doing the English language version, *Real Death Valley*.

CJ: How difficult or easy is it to pitch a story on immigration to a Spanish language network, given the amount of material that already exists on this topic?

MV: I think that that when we were initially approached we were a little skeptical. This is a topic we cover in the news every day, literally. It was hard to think about why we would want to invest an hour of prime-time programming to something presumably our audience already knew. The tipping point was hearing the 911 calls, for all of us. When we heard Sigfredo's phone call, we knew that we had something that everybody was going to be able to relate to. I cannot listen to that 911 call without tears coming into my eyes. The challenge was, how to go from the 911 call to actually finding the family and that's where our bureaus or fixers in El Salvador proved to be crucial because they were able to go and talk to the family and say look, "Telemundo is interested in doing this. Would you please talk?" Naturally, they were apprehensive, but I think that the good thing is that that because people have this image of Telemundo and Univision they trust us. They see us as these entities that are going to connect them with their families. They understood the importance of talking. For The Weather Channel, initially, it was going to be only about Brooks County. What Telemundo was able to bring to the table was the vision that without this other human element it wouldn't be such a rich and powerful story. When we finally finished, both films were richer for having been part of this collaboration. We were all very happy, and that's why we are now doing a second collaboration because we saw that we could tell these great bilingual documentaries.

BB: What audiences did you have in mind and how did that inform how you organized your segments?

MV: When we did this project, you envision that your audience is your own audience; you don't necessarily envision that it is going to have a more far-reaching audience. Fortunately, when we submitted this film to various awards we had to have it translated and subtitled. As a result, it has had a broader audience than it would have had originally. The fact that it was shown last night, again, it reached a wider audience and maybe it can reach people who have more power.

For us, the decision to have those 911 calls and the families, even though the audience may know the story or they may have experienced the story, you're asking somebody to commit 44 minutes of their time to watch something. How are you going to get them to do that? After all, this is television and television has to inform and entertain you. Nobody is going to sit for an hour full of statistics, interesting as they may be. The decision wasn't to try to exploit the length of those phone calls for a broader purpose, but really to make the audience sit through them and experience the pain. Even though they may be familiar with the pain, it will still keep you there because you can't be human and not relate to those phone calls.

CJ: How did you structure the film, and what were some of the differences between the Spanish-version *Muriendo por Cruzar* and the English-version, *The Real Death Valley?*

MV: The discovery of the body while we were shooting, in my mind, immediately determined the structure of the first segment because it happened while we were there. Likewise, while we were out shooting, the family of Paola came in and you may have noticed that the quality of that was quite poor because at that moment the crew was out

shooting with the C300 cameras. They were out shooting this other finding, so the producer and reporter were there. They had a small camera and in an impromptu fashion starting shooting this interview. That interview did not make it into *The Real Death Valley*. I decided to include it in *Muriendo por Cruzar,* even though the quality was not optimal, because it was so immediate. In fact, we were trying to get Paola's family to talk to us. When we found out that Paola's remains had been identified we wanted to go back with the body to Guatemala and ultimately we couldn't persuade the family to let us do that.

My decision about structure had to do with immediacy, with bringing you into the immediacy of the discovery and the anxiety of what could be the case. Likewise, we decided to go the Honduran Consulate, which is also not in the English language version, because for our audience so many of them connect to this, to the fact that it is through the Consulates that they get information. We found out about Carol Barahona and that her job is to keep track of all the people reported missing. She has to try and piece together the missing person's report with any clues from the various county morgues. Neida Sandoval is from Honduras so the choice to have her do that segment was also deliberate because the audience knows her very well. Again, there was an additional connection.

The segment of this trek shadowing the migrant journey, that was obviously something that in the English version was much longer. We thought that it would be interesting to the audience to see these journalists trying to experience just a minute fraction of that suffering. I didn't want to make it too long either because I thought it might be exploitative to do it. We made the decision to have Sigfredo at the end, whereas in the English version you see him throughout. I wanted to keep his version of the story till the end, as a kind of a reveal and so that every segment had something different to offer.

BB: That also gives a sense of what happens once a family member is found by border patrol and then gets stuck in the detention center. You often can't reach them for a long time. Even after this person is found it takes a long time to communicate back home because of the way the system works.

MV: Then there was the additional thing of the family getting him the money for the bus.

BB: For the bus, yes! And then they have to wait the time it takes to travel.

MV: It took a while. We had to wait until he got out to be able to document that journey. In an ideal world you would have been able to give Sigfredo a camera or some way to record his journey on that bus and his thoughts and all that. That might have been interesting, but it wasn't practical. You have to always balance that. You don't want to exploit the situation more than it already is by the fact that you are asking to be a witness to something that is painful and very raw for them.

BB: The decision for Sigfredo and his brother Jose Fernando to leave El Salvador was informed certainly by the fact that they were threatened and that they were in danger, but so much of the response that we got from the audience last night seems to be legitimizing

their trip because they are refugees, not immigrants. Is it important to make the distinction?

MV: I think in Spanish language television you don't have to get into that discussion at all. I think it's understood that in some cases it's a refugee situation and in some cases it's an economic situation. I just don't think it has to be explained or analyzed further. I think the tradition of people crossing over is so long standing.

Whereas the English language audience likely does need clarification and that's why the two films are so different and why I mention that, in a way, it had a more didactic tone because you're giving them a primer on immigration and why people undertake this horribly dangerous journey. In Spanish language television our emphasis has to be more on bringing you in through a very dramatic story. The way we would bring you into a telenovela or any other program that you are asked to watch for an hour.

CJ: It sounds like a lot of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests started with the Investigative Fund and John Carlos Frey and it sounds like they came to the pitch with the 911 calls as part of the way to sell it. At any point after that, did you have an involvement with FOIA being used?

MV: I've dealt with FOIA requests forever. Sometimes you get lucky, and sometimes you don't.

CJ: And so the Border Patrol it seemed was not willing to budge on the requests you made?

MV: No.

CJ: What was that process like?

MV: Well, recently I've worked with the Border Patrol more closely on this other project. And I have to tell you they were incredibly cooperative—as far as they could be. They were incredibly wonderful as far as giving us access to ride-alongs. We did a ride along by air, by land and different ports of entry in Arizona and Texas and at the Calexico crossing in San Diego. Where it got thorny, because the focus of *Batalla en la Frontera*, was about border shooting where the Border Patrol union was involved in the defense of various officers. That's where it gets a lot more difficult. We were asking them to give us data and that was really hard to come by. FOIA or no FOIA, it's just being protective of their data. Wanting to analyze the data and ultimately it took so long that we had to air without it. The relationship with them is a delicate one because they want to cooperate so that they are not seen as the enemy, but they know, especially with Spanish language television, the power of perception. They are trying to combat this perception by being as open as they can, but it's difficult. Getting things out of the government, in general, is difficult.

CJ: It sounds like initially the director of the Border Patrol gave the interview for *Muriendo por Cruzar*, but then didn't agree to a follow up?

MV: There is a very interesting story about that. Because this was done in English and Spanish, a decision was made by the folks at The Weather Channel to do the Spanish language version of the interview first in which no hard questions were asked. They figured, rightly so, that once they got into the heated accusations about possible longer than average time lags between the 911 phone call for help and the response time that the person was probably going to get really upset and walk out. And that's what happened.

It was one of those situations where you have to make a decision about what language to use, because you are only going to get one shot. I wasn't there, unfortunately, at that moment I was in El Salvador. If I had been there, there would probably have been more discussion about how we would have done this so that I would have gotten some good answers in Spanish as well. That's the tricky part of doing bilingual collaborations because everybody wants to have the best sound and when you have controversial interviews you're going to have very few people who're going be willing to be pummeled in two languages.

CJ: I have a question about the media platforms that distribute stories on immigration. You have films, you have radio shows, and television shows. In your experience as both a producer and consumer of these stories on immigration, where does the platform of television differ? What does television bring, in terms of production or content, etc., compared to these other media platforms?

MV: Television brings to you the immediacy of the experience, if you tell the story properly. I think it is very different to tell an immigration story in 1 minute than to tell it in 44 minutes. I think that I as a consumer if I'm watching an immigration story where I have a sad tale in a 15 second sound bite and then I have the obligatory sound bite with a lawmaker or an activist, I'm not going to respond the same way to that story as I would to *Muriendo por Cruzar*. I think that that's more of a reflection on whether it's radio, television, or any medium where you get to tell the story in a short format or a long format. I personally get bored watching a very formulaic immigration story.

CJ: What about producing an immigration story or distributing it in the digital age?

MV: Well that's the challenge of digital media. You have to figure out how to bring that story to life not only on screen or on your television screen, but also to extend its reach via a digital platform and that's a challenge for everyone. Newspapers are now including video links, and we're including written articles. We're all trying to figure out a way to do that cross-referencing of mediums via different platforms. You cannot ignore it, and its difficult when you are a producer focusing on getting interviews to look beautiful and compelling to also think about taking pictures because you want to have pictures so that when you want to promote the encounter you have other ways of illustrating it. It's become a very difficult process because you have to keep track of all these things and then you have to know that when you are preparing it for air, while you're in the editing room, you have to be thinking about promotions, you have to be thinking about Twitter, you have to be thinking about Facebook. You have to think about all of those things and it's overwhelming, but if you don't

then all that hard work that you just expended is for naught because it's not going to reach all those other platforms.

BB: Having the text messages of family being stranded in the desert also brings this extra affective dimension because you imagine the frustration that it must be to be getting all this through texts. And through the call you sense a frustration that is direct when compared to the texts. At least for me, all I could imagine was the frustration that they must have not just with the situation, but also with how they were trying to communicate with one another.

MV: And also trying to get money to his phone because he kept running out of money. That's a whole other thing. His sister, and I don't know how that worked, would have to get credit added to his pre-paid phone so that he could continue to communicate. And I don't even know how that works so I couldn't even explore it further, but I know that part of the horrible anxiety was finding the coyote's number. Because obviously the subtext of all of this is the coyotes is in some ways in communication.

BB: Also that technology under a migrant situation might seem to be helpful, and yet it might fail. Somebody from the emergency call center was saying that when you have cellphones from Mexico you can't locate them through the GPS. There are certain instances where that technological safety net that you might be counting on doesn't really work.

MV: But it's amazing that it is even there because in the past how did people do it? They didn't. So just the fact that there is now that possibly is mind blowing.

Marisa Venegas is an award-winning television producer, writer and environmental journalist, who has worked in broadcast media for the past 26 years. Most recently, she was Executive Producer of Investigations and Long Form Programming for Telemundo Network, where she spearheaded successful bi-lingual documentary co-productions with The Weather Channel, MSNBC, The Center for Investigative Reporting and The Investigative Fund. Prior to that, she was Executive Producer of Univision Network's award-winning, prime-time newsmagazine, *Aqui y Ahora (Here and Now)*, where she oversaw the show's growth into one of the highest rated programs at Univision, as well as its diversification into new media platforms. Before relocating to Miami, she was a producer at CBS News in New York, where she supervised the science and medical unit of the *CBS Evening News with Dan Rather*, and also worked as a producer on the prime-time newsmagazine, *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung.* She was recruited to CBS from NBC News, where she leveraged her considerable academic credentials as a researcher for the network's chief science and medical correspondent. Prior to her broadcast career, Ms. Venegas was a staff writer for *Medical Tribune*, as well as a contributor of science stories to the *New York Times*. She also worked in the epidemiology departments at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and the American Health Foundation. She has a Master's degree Master's degree in Science and Environmental Reporting from New York University and a B.A. in Anthropology, with a specialization in Medical Anthropology, from Barnard College.