Frank Graziano

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Undocumented Dominican Migration is a remarkable contribution to the study of Dominican, and, more generally, Caribbean migration, providing a fresh perspective through interviews of undocumented migrants who have traveled by boat to Puerto Rico. Building on cumulative-causation theories, neoclassical economics, and world system theories, along with histories of neoliberalism, political repression, and poverty in the Dominican Republic, Frank Graziano develops an analytical lens that complicates common academic explanations of migration patterns. One of the book’s most significant contributions is its attention to the way migrants perceive their motivations and experiences through their own cultural lenses. Graziano demonstrates the need for a culturally-specific approach to migration and the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that inform migratory patterns.

The introduction discusses the theoretical and methodological concerns that shape the analysis of interviews throughout the book. Interviewees consider shifts in the Dominican economy, reports from migrants, the possibility of work abroad, and enforcement of U.S. border protection laws before deciding to migrate. While analyzing migrants’ decision-making processes, Graziano concludes that for his interviewees, migration is a “forced free choice” (p. 27). Even though, unlike political migrants, they have not been forced to migrate, they are nevertheless faced with the prospects of chronic poverty—limited or no access to water, electricity, education, food, health care, or a living wage—without much hope for a better future in the Dominican Republic. “Choosing between chronic poverty and a life-threatening journey that might modestly alleviate that poverty is hardly a freedom of choice. Migrants perceive that they have no choice ... and their departure in this perspective is a willful confrontation of adverse limitations (structural poverty, the ocean, border enforcement) that restrict their freedom and movement” (p. 29).

Chapter 1, “Across the Mona Passage,” describes four kinds of undocumented maritime migration to Puerto Rico: organized smuggling, travelling with a self-employed boat captain (usually a fisherman), viajes de familia organized by migrants themselves, and, the more expensive option, smuggling in pleasure craft. He argues that smugglers and regular people just trying to reach Puerto Rico are not the same and should not be prosecuted on equal terms. The book traces the dangers of migration including trip organizers who steal migrants’ money, the perils of ocean travel because boats are frail and overcrowded, captains who are insufficiently experienced, and the possibility of stormy weather,
shark attacks, or violence in the boat. Graziano points out that, though an outsider may question why migrants decide to travel in an overcrowded and potentially malfunctioning boat, it does make sense to Dominicans who share overcrowded buses, públicos (cars), and motoconchos (motorbikes) in their everyday life.

He also describes how violence, solidarity, and exploitation characterize interpersonal relationships that are created in the boats, in Puerto Rico, and on the U.S. mainland. In the boats, people may share food, even milk from a lactating woman, or be thrown off the boat if dehydration has left them unconscious at a moment of crisis; in Puerto Rico, locals may take them in, offer food, housing, work or transportation free of charge, or keep them until a relative pays a fee. Marriage is also redefined, sometimes becoming a business deal to gain legal documentation, but not necessarily precluding a sexual or love relationship.

Chapter 2, “Culture of Migration,” describes how people come to understand migration as something that informs their daily reality. Illusions of a better life permeate quotidian conversations, including ostentatious—at times, fictitious—descriptions of the lives of migrants abroad, and there are frequent feelings of relative deprivation, the sense that those who have migrated or whose relatives are abroad are doing better. Added to this are recruiters’ stories and media representations of life in the United States, all of which contribute to repeated attempts to migrate. However, that desire also co-exists with stories about underemployment, persecution, and isolation in Puerto Rico or the U.S. mainland, people drowning, and media attempts to deter migration by highlighting catastrophic attempts and multiple deaths at sea. Graziano argues that all of these factors constitute a culture of migration in the Dominican Republic.

Chapter 3, “The Psychology of Migrant Motivation,” explains some of the internal factors that motivate individual migrants. Graziano notes that although U.S. law defines undocumented Dominican migrants as criminals, they tend rather to perceive themselves as responsible family members trying to provide for themselves and their relatives. In some cases people plan for years; in others an opportunity arises and people jump in a boat to try their luck. Rumors or news of immigration reform can propel migration or halt it depending on how individual people interpret them.

Chapter 4, “Border Enforcement,” interrogates the conflation of migrants with terrorism by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. People fleeing poverty are treated and prosecuted the same way as organized criminals or smugglers. Graziano argues that the increased resources, such as biometrics, currently used to find and prosecute migrants due to the policies arising after 9/11 are a waste. In the end, smugglers, trip organizers, and Dominican Navy