

## San Diego Latino Film Festival 2016—Part 2

# The human cost of the drug war in Mexico and a drama from Venezuela: *Retratos de una búsqueda* and *Dauna. Lo que lleva el río*

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*This is the second of three articles on the recent San Diego Latino Film Festival.*

## ***Retratos de una búsqueda* (Portraits of a Search)**

In *Retratos de una búsqueda* (Portraits of a Search), director Alicia Calderón follows three mothers as they search for their children lost as a result of the drug war in Mexico. For the women—Natividad, Guadalupe, and Margarita—the loss of their children consumes them, day and night.

The documentary shows largely fruitless encounters with bureaucrats, the FBI and even Mexico's president. Through these three individuals—who spend their days going to morgues or walking and driving the streets in search of their children—the viewer becomes witness to the unfathomable sadness and hopelessness experienced by these families, and untold thousands of others.

The film begins in the home of Natividad as she makes a phone call to a government agency—"The Anti-Kidnapping Unit"—ostensibly assisting her to find her daughter. Through this call and similar ones throughout *Retratos de una búsqueda*, it becomes clear she is being given the run around—the government has no interest in helping her. A secretary tells Natividad there are "more urgent matters that we need to attend to today ... Please call back again."

Margarita is also looking for a daughter. Making calls to government agencies, she is told no one can help her find the girl and she is instructed to hire a private detective—which she does. Soon she realizes that there are significant links between the drug gangs, the military and the state authorities, and she faces death threats as a result. She perseveres in her search, and with passion tells the audience, "I am not afraid to die, because I would die for a good cause: the search for my girl." Margarita

is later told the girl may have died a horrible death.

The third mother, Guadalupe, spends her days walking the streets and fields looking for any sign of her son—a shoe or a scrap of clothing, anything that might give her a clue. After encounters at a number of service stations and stores she finally finds a video showing her son's van, but she is unable to see who is driving it.

The women join an organization, "Caravan for Peace," which brings them to Washington D.C. While in the US capital, the women engage in demonstrations and speeches at churches and attempt to speak to members of Congress.

In one meeting with a politician there is notable tension in the room as the parents try to convey their stories. An adviser to the parents tells them before the meetings that "these people are very busy and they don't have much time, you need to keep your statements as brief as possible, just stick to your personal story."

Guadalupe says at one of the meetings, "We aren't collateral damage of the senseless war going on in Mexico."

But so it appears, that is exactly how the situation is viewed by the establishment. Under the tenure of former president Felipe Calderón, there were between 18,000-26,000 reported missing during the "war on drugs," a long-time joint venture of the US and Mexican governments. In both countries the existence of the drug trade speaks to mass social misery, becomes the source of vast profits for various business operators and financial institutions and then serves as a pretext for increased police-state repression on each side of the border—as well as anti-immigrant chauvinism in the US.

After visiting morgues every day searching for their children and waiting months in vain for DNA results from the FBI, some of the women camp out and carry out a hunger strike in front of a government building. In an impassioned conversation, one of the mothers tells the building's director, "We're not looking for dogs! We're looking for our children, that's why we're here."

The whereabouts of 42 of the 43 students who disappeared—and were clearly murdered—in Iguala, Mexico in 2014 is still undisclosed. No one has yet been charged or prosecuted for the disappearances, despite numerous clear links to military intelligence involvement in the attack and detention of the students.

According to a recent Amnesty International report on Mexico, more than 27,000 people remain missing or disappeared. “Human rights defenders and journalists continued to be threatened, harassed or killed. The number of detentions, deportations and complaints of abuse of irregular migrants by the authorities increased significantly.”

The report goes on, “Perpetrators of extrajudicial executions continued to enjoy almost absolute impunity. For the second consecutive year, the authorities published no statistics on the number of people killed or wounded in clashes with the police and military forces, as part of the fight against organized crime.”

Appeals to the collective “conscience” of the Mexican authorities, directly or indirectly responsible for the mass killings, or to their accomplices in Washington will prove entirely futile.

### ***Dauna. Lo que lleva el río (Gone with the River)***

In *Dauna. Lo que lleva el río* (Gone with the River), a young girl named Dauna is a member of the Warao (“boat people”) indigenous tribe on the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela. The fiction film centers on her desire to progress personally and break free from many of the customs she was born into. Her childhood lover, Tarcisio, wants to continue the ways of the old culture, marry, plant crops and build a house in their village.

Dauna is torn trying to do both. She is aware of what life will be like in the village—“I have to have kids and marry”—and as she tries to avoid becoming pregnant, she is taunted and pressured by family and villagers. From her days as a child, a priest named Julio frequents the village and becomes her mentor. As she continues to learn and eventually starts to teach children in a nearby town, her close relationship with Julio provokes additional jealousy and anger from Tarcisio.

Dauna deeply loves her husband but her interest in pursuing something bigger than the village pulls them further and further apart. While picking Dauna up in his boat from her class in the town, a visibly disturbed Tarcisio exclaims, “I waste a lot of time because of you.” She becomes pregnant and decides not to tell her husband. Eventually, there is a dramatic denouement. Tarcisio burns the book that Dauna is working on and she lights their hut on stilts ( *palafito* ) on fire. He pushes her out and lets their home burn down—while he is still inside.

In the somewhat enigmatic sequence of events that follows,

Dauna is apparently accused of murder and is hauled off to prison, blamed by many of the villagers for breaking traditions and ruining their way of life. From prison, she continues her pursuit of learning and the investigation of the culture she grew up in.

There are touching moments in *Dauna. Lo que lleva el río*. Sympathy can be felt for Tarcisio during some of the scenes—in one he visits some friends in a nearby town who proceed to take him to a brothel. He is repulsed by the degradation and, after being approached by an old friend who has started working in the establishment, begins throwing punches. The two are thrown out in the street as the owners and customers curse “those Indians,” and order them not to come back. Other times, it is hard to believe the callousness he shows towards his wife—“One day I’ll leave and you’ll all starve.”

Dauna sees something in the modern world worth pursuing, while Tarcisio only sees its bad aspects. The major weakness is the failure to explore this theme in any detail. There are only small glimpses of what influence the outside capitalist economy has on the lives of the indigenous population. At one point we catch a glimpse of the cover of the book Dauna has written, “The economic influence of the Warao woman,” but not much more.

*Dauna. Lo que lleva el río* also jumps around among different time periods with such frequency that it is somewhat difficult to follow the story. Some of the characters are played by three or four different people and there are animated portions that pop up now and again that also make it slightly obscure.

The film is directed by Mario Crespo who is from the same region, and one senses he has a genuine passion and interest in sharing the stories of the people depicted in the film.

Lacking many modern medical supplies and infrastructure, the Warao have fallen victim to tropical diseases such as dengue fever and cholera. In 2008, a mysterious disease resembling rabies took the lives of at least 38 individuals. In response, community leaders along with researchers from UC Berkeley traveled to Caracas in an attempt to convince the government of the disaster. According to a *New York Times* article, they “were met with disrespect on every level, as if the deaths of indigenous people are not even worth noting.”



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