

Film Review: Requiem NN

Though an evocative portrait of a particular place, Juan Manuel Echavarría's slender documentary never feels as though it's telling the whole story.

Oct 9, 2013

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For movie details, please [click here](#).

Clocking in at a barely feature-length 67 minutes, the directorial debut of Colombian-born and bred photographer and artist Juan Manuel Echavarría takes viewers on a trip to the small town of Puerto Berrío, located on the banks of his native country's Magdalena River. Although the waterway is a vital part of the town's livelihood, it's also a steady source of tragedy for the residents as the dead bodies of migrant workers and other victims—many of whom have been killed in the drug and guerrilla-related violence that still roils the region—routinely wash up onshore. Rarely carrying anything in the way of identification, these bodies are officially classified as "No Names" (NN for short) at the local cemetery and kept in individual intermediary tombs before being transferred to their final resting place.

More often than not, that resting place is the cemetery's mass grave—a brick structure where the remains are dropped through a door in the roof to the bone-strewn floor below. But that's not the fate that all unclaimed no-names face; while still in the tombs, the NNs can be and often are "adopted" by local townsfolk, who bestow gifts upon their chosen souls—think a fresh paint job on the tomb as well as flowers and candles and, most importantly, a name to help guide them through the afterlife. In return for these kindnesses, the newly christened ex-NNs will help their benefactors with good wishes and protection from harm. As you might imagine, this is not a formal adoption, but certain rules of decorum are observed. It's rare (though not unheard of, as we'll come to see) for two people to claim the same NN, and once you've chosen one, it's your responsibility to care for him or her as you would a member of your own family, visiting the tomb every day and keeping it clean. Furthermore, it's expected that you'll raise the money to ensure that their remains are laid

to rest in an ossuary rather than the mass grave, thus allowing their souls to pass out of this world secure in the knowledge that, at the end, they had an identity.

Those curious about the origins and general pervasiveness of this particular tradition will have to do further reading beyond the film, as Echavarría isn't particularly interested in exploring that particular terrain. (He also doesn't provide much background for Colombia's societal troubles, particularly the high levels of violence, that are alluded to throughout the film, a topic that local viewers wouldn't need schooling in but isn't necessarily common knowledge abroad.) Neither does he approach the subject with a skeptic's eye; there's only one individual interviewed in the film—a man responsible for keeping track of the bodies fished from the river—who expresses the slightest hint of annoyance about the practice of adopting NNs. All of the other people whom the director speaks to, whose ranks include a mother searching for her missing daughter and son, a man and a woman who share the same NN (though each has given her a different name) and even the keeper of the cemetery, are true believers in this karmic exchange between the living and the dead. Echavarría takes this faith on face value, not really making an effort to contextualize it with the subjects' own personal histories or the history of the region. For a documentary that has the opportunity to open up another country and culture for viewers, *Requiem NN's* gaze remains frustratingly narrow at times.

That said, working in the documentary's favor is the strong sense of place that the director brings to the proceedings with simple but elegant camerawork that captures both the natural beauty and turbulent nature of life in Puerto Berrío. And when viewed through Echavarría's lens, the cemetery where the NNs are buried emerges as a particularly fascinating location, one that's practically a city unto itself. Intended in part as a tribute to the nameless men and women whose bodies remain buried there while their adopted spirits soar away, *Requiem NN* does its best to honor the departed with empathy and respect. It's the living who could use more of the director's attention.