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Migrant bodies as targets of security policies: Central Americans crossing Mexico's vertical border

Christine Kovic¹  · Patty Kelly²

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The Guatemalan border with Chiapas is now our southern border.

Alan Bersin, United States Assistant Secretary of International Affairs.¹

In June 2011 dozens of Central American migrants riding atop a freight train were kidnapped in Medias Aguas, Veracruz, in southern Mexico. The migrants who escaped had witnessed a group of men with high-power weapons demanding that people get off the train. Christine, learned of these kidnappings while visiting the Shelter Home of Mercy in Arriaga, Chiapas, a town 150 miles up the Pacific Coast from Mexico's border with Guatemala. The Central American migrants waiting for the freight train to depart from Arriaga would pass through Veracruz in their journey toward the US border. Migrants and activists have labeled the state of Veracruz the capital of kidnappings and a paradise for organized crime in reference to the dangers that exist as well as the impunity that prevails for local, state, and federal authorities and for common criminals who commit abuses.

After dark, Father Heyman Vazquez, founder and director of Home of Mercy, shared the ominous news with the fifty migrants staying at the shelter that night. He

¹ Bersin was a former commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protections and currently Chief Diplomatic Officer for the Department of Homeland Security. The quote comes from his speech at the 16th Annual Border Issues Conference of the U.S. Mexico Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C. September 20, 2012.

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cautioned them of the many risks they might encounter including not only kidnapping but also extortion, assault, rape, injury, detention, and other forms of abuse. While the migrants were concerned, they were not deterred. Many told me that they had no choice but to continue their journey. They noted the vast disparity between wages in Central America and the USA, and the difficulty of finding work in their home countries. Some had lived in the USA for months, years, and even decades and said that they had to return to the USA “por necesidad” (for necessity). Many had families—including children—homes, and jobs in the north.

As Christine listened to their stories of assault and their hopes for the journey, one man approached to unbutton his shirt and reveal a huge scar across his chest. He explained that it resulted from open heart surgery, a triple bypass, and he had to take an aspirin everyday as well as other medications. He was OK, he insisted, but worried and needed to be careful. He had a wife and three children in Minneapolis, but had recently been deported and planned to jump the freight train to cross Mexico. He would make the journey in spite of all the risks he faced given that it was the only way to cross Mexico, unless one had the money to pay a *pollero*, which can easily cost three to seven thousand US dollars.

The vast majority of those at the shelter, as well as many sleeping elsewhere in Arriaga, would “jump” the freight train, riding atop and on the sides, to travel through Mexico in attempts to avoid myriad checkpoints in the region. As the Mexican and US governments work together to enact new security policies, all of Mexico have become a vertical border for passage to the USA. Central Americans experience their journey through Mexico—a journey of over one thousand miles—as a border crossing with immense danger.

Addressing the intersection of migration, security, and health, this essay explores the ways contemporary security policies produce the violence, including death and dismemberment, Central American migrants encounter in their journey north. Rather than being protected by the state security apparatus, migrants are targets of security forces and policies in both Mexico and the USA. Facing structural violence in their sending countries and unable to obtain visas to legally cross Mexico, let alone a visa to legally enter the USA, working poor migrants do not enjoy the protection from risk and danger promised by security, instead they confront the security of violence.² That is, the policies ostensibly designed to safeguard those living in the USA cause the violence that Central American working poor migrants almost certainly face in attempts to reach the USA.

Violence against migrants is commonly ignored by official discourse and rarely counted as crime. Government authorities not only reject responsibility but often deny the very existence of the abuses, while members of cartels “disappear” bodies—the evidence of crime—in attempts to cover up evidence of the violence, crimes, and even migrants themselves. Finally, violence against migrants is obscured by the label of accidents. The term accident obfuscates the structural

² Farmer (2003: 8), drawing on scholars such as Johan Galtung, Jon Sobrino, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, uses the term structural violence to describe “a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence...”.

conditions that force people to leave their countries of origin and then subjects them to extreme danger as they seek opportunities for survival across borders. It is not immigrants but nations that create the structure conditions that force people to flee and then construct violent obstacles to prevent them from crossing borders to survive.

This essay attempts to make visible the violent state structures erased from the policy purview by the label accident. It draws on feminist scholarship that challenges the trope of security, pointing to the racism, colonialism, economic dependency, and other inequalities underlying war and violence (Bacchetta et al. 2002). Feminist scholars insist on naming and counting the suffering of those who do not count, by making visible state accountability, and remembering the lives and narratives of the targets of security (Riley et al. 2008; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Grewal 2006). The essay unearths the multiple inequalities embedded in security policies, as well as the particular ways policies emanating from the USA and Mexico target and makes vulnerable migrant bodies rather than protecting them. It describes the multiple challenges to these erasures and the public protest from Mexico and Central America insisting on radically different paradigm of security.

Security within and outside the law: Mexico's vertical border

In 2012 Alan Bersin, Assistant Secretary of International Affairs, remarked that the USA's southern border now begins at Guatemala, as quoted in this article's epigraph. His concerns about "insecurity" at Mexico's southern border points to competing insecurities that exist—those perceived in the USA that shape security policies and those experienced by migrants. The overarching focus on the former in the USA obscures the later. Bersin points to a need to "secure" Mexico's southern border by limiting migration from Central America. Concern about closing Mexico's southern border came, not coincidentally, with the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The fact that free trade provided for the movement of merchandise and capital but restricted the movement of workers has been much repeated by scholars and activists. Yet, another critical piece of the integration of "North America" is that the USA has worked to armor itself from that which is perceived to be illicit, dangerous, and violent. Hence, increasing security measures are taken against the movement of drugs, migrants, arms, and other forms of "contraband," even as the policies that generate demand for these items originate in the USA.

Alan Bersin lauds US policies such as Operation Hold the Line, initiated September 19, 1993, in El Paso—for the "restoration of the rule of law to the US–Mexico border." As he notes, the increased enforcement in southern Mexico and at the US–Mexico border began years before September 11, 2001, with Operation Hold the Line, and Operation Gatekeeper San Diego in 1994. The simultaneous increase in border security and passage of free trade agreements is not accidental. David Bacon (2009) documents the devastating impact that free trade has had on small-scale farmers in the Mexican countryside and its consequential link to emigration from rural areas. The budget of the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol

nearly tripled from 1993 to 2000 with significant funding going toward border enforcement in the US southwest.³ With the approval of the 2012 Department of Homeland Security Appropriation Bill, there are five times as many border patrol agents in place as there were in 1993.⁴

In this same period border enforcement was increased in southern Mexico, especially at Mexico's narrowest point, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Security policies with names such as Zero Tolerance against Delinquency and the Anti-Immigrant Steel Programs I, II, and III and the Southern Plan (Plan Sur) were encouraged by, and sometimes directly supported by, the US government.

US support for strengthening security measures at Mexico's southern border was taken to a new level with the Merida Initiative, billed as a "security cooperation package" in which the USA would provide millions of dollars of equipment (including scanners, canine units, helicopters, surveillance aircraft) and technical training and advice to Mexico and Central America. The Merida Initiative, which appropriated funds beginning in 2008, is part of the "Security and Prosperity Partnership" also referred to as the "NAFTA plus" agenda providing security aid to "counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and border security measures" according to the U.S. Department of State.

In June 2011, the same month as the kidnappings described in the opening of this essay, Mexico's Attorney General Marisela Morales visited Chiapas's state capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez and declared that the delinquency on Mexico's southern border was an issue of national security. She asserted that "The illegal flow of people and merchandise that exists and the delinquency it generates demand a strengthened intitutional coordination to improve vigilance, security, and respect for human rights." In her view, migrants are part of an "illegal flow of people" making them targets of security enforcement rather than subjects of human rights.

Just weeks before Attorney General Morale's visit to Chiapas, Mexico and US newspapers reported that 513 "smuggled" migrants had been found crammed inside two trailer trucks at immigration checkpoint outside the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez (Chiapas's state capital). The migrants reportedly paid \$7000 each for transport through Mexico and were mostly from Central America, with some coming from as far away as Nepal and India. Pointing to the high temperatures in the trucks and the overall inhumane conditions of transport, former Mexican President Felipe Calderón stated that the rescue of the migrants was one example of Mexico's work to stop migrant abuse. US and Mexican media widely reported the event, with stories and images appearing in CNN and MSNBC, highlighting the crowded conditions and lack of air and water inside the trucks. As the horrible conditions of transport and the large group of migrants were made visible, much was obscured. As Mexican immigration agents "rescued" migrants from their suffering (and perhaps suffocation) in the trucks, the state policies that close Mexico's southern border and

³ The enacted budget for Fiscal Year 1993 was \$362,659,000 as compared to \$1055,444,000 for Fiscal Year 2000. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/border_security/border_patrol/usbp_statistics/usbp_fy12_stats/.

⁴ According to data from U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, there were 4028 agents in 1993 at the national level and 21,394 in 2012. http://www.cbp.gov/linkhandler/cgov/border_security/border_patrol/usbp_statistics/usbp_fy12_stats/staffing_graph2.ctt/staffing_graph2.pdf.

push migrants to travel in dangerous and clandestine conditions are rendered invisible. As Mexico publicly announced the importance of the “discovery” in terms of protecting the security of its southern border, what remains covered up are the political and economic policies of neoliberal reforms emanating from the global north that push migrants from the homelands. Most recently Mexico’s Southern Border Plan (Plan Frontera Sur), initiated in July 2014, further intensified migration enforcement and control and led to an increase in detentions and deportations (Carrasco et al. 2016). The Southern Plan is supported by the USA with the explicit goal of detaining Central American migrants before they reach the USA.

Structured accidents and the security of violence: dead, dismembered, or disappeared

A train jumps its tracks, a car crash, a capsized river raft—all of these events could be categorized as “accidents” resulting from individual risk. Rendered invisible by the label of accident are the structures that led to these deaths. Rendered invisible are the economic policies of neoliberal economic reforms mandating cuts in subsidies to rural producers and reduced spending for social services such as health care in Mexico and Central America. Rendered invisible are the US immigration policies that violently limit the possibility for working poor migrants to cross the US–Mexico border, travel through, or live in the USA legally. Finally, the collaboration between the USA and Mexican governments to restrict passage of Central American migrants through Mexico is made invisible. In short, political–economic policies mandated by the global north have increased inequality along with unemployment in Latin American nations, and while these same policies have increased demand for migrant workers in the USA, options for the working poor to migrate legally are extremely limited. Describing the new global capitalism in Latin America, Robinson (2012: 17) notes that “The wave of outmigration caused by capitalist penetration and disruption of local communities and of whole national and regional economies, and the social ravages of neoliberalism over the past few decades, is without precedent, comparable to migrations generated by war.” As labor has become a major “export” for Mexico and Central American nations, the national economies rely on remittances sent by those living abroad, as do the families of migrants. Yet, in searching for work, people may lose life or limb.⁵

Numbers that document the dead, dismembered, and disappeared migrants—a counting of those who don’t count—are rare. Partial figures, both incomplete and biased, come from official sources. The Grupo Beta, a task force established by Mexico’s federal government to protect and assist migrants in zones of high risk, records the numbers of migrants it assists. In the 10-year period from 2002 to 2012, it attended to 373 “mutilated” migrants, presumably those who lost limbs to the freight train. In this same period, Grupo Beta assisted a total of 7496 injured or wounded migrants. These figures are far from the total of injured or “mutilated,” as

⁵ Vogt (2013) presents a powerful study of the structural violence of the migrant journey across Mexico and the ways Central Americans are commodified in various economies.

they only count those aided by the Grupo Beta. Migrants might suffer injuries in regions where Betas are not present or may hesitate to call, or even flee from, the Betas, knowing that they form part of Mexico's National Migration Institute. These are at least a minimal attempt to count those who suffer injury in transit. The Mexican government does not keep official data on the number of migrants who have disappeared or died in crossing the nation.

The stories we have heard from Central American migrants in southern Mexico challenge the erasures as they document the difficulties of the journey through Mexico and the structures behind "accidents." While the USA creates structural conditions and mandates security policies that cause death and dismemberment, individuals through Mexico, often with limited resources themselves, seek to ameliorate those conditions and assist migrants. In July 2006, I visited a small private clinic where we sat with Samuel, the pseudonym of a Honduran migrant who had been electrocuted while riding the train. Olga Sanchez Martínez, founder of the shelter Jesus el Buen Pastor (Jesus the Good Shepherd) in Tapachula, brought us to the hospital so that we could see firsthand the outcomes of immigration policies. The migrants, who until the new law passed in 2012, had no right to health care, rely on doctors who volunteer their services. Hundreds of migrants, like Samuel, required surgery to repair wounds, and some required lifesaving amputations when their limbs were run over by the train. Doña Olga works tirelessly to seek out doctors, as well as blood and money to pay for any equipment and supplies needed for surgery.

Samuel had been injured riding on top of a freight car when it passed a low electric wire. As electricity passed through him, it burned the skin off the top of his head. Days after his surgery, as he recovered at the shelter, he explained to us how the many migrants riding atop this rail car had been affected by the electric current. Doña Olga also told us of many others that she had cared for throughout the years who had likewise been burned by electric lines. Some did not survive, others sustained severe injury. Samuel, it seemed, was likely to fully recover. He decided to return to his family in the rural community in Honduras where he worked farming and perhaps to consider a future attempt to cross to the USA. Many in the shelter considered him "lucky" because he had not lost any limbs like many other residents.

Some of these "structured accidents" result from immigration raids of the freight train in which authorities stop the train, demand that everyone jump off, and then attempt to detain (and later deport) as many people as possible. One man who had attempted to reach the USA several times told me that authorities fire guns in the air in an attempt to frighten migrants. Out of fear, many stop in place and are detained and deported, but others run in all directions. In their attempts to escape authorities, many migrants are injured. Nighttime raids on the freight train are particularly dangerous as the lack of visibility adds to the risk of injury.

Another form of violence experienced by migrants is kidnappings. The June 2011 kidnappings in Medias Aguas, Veracruz, described in the article's introduction are one such example. In June 2011, Sixty to one hundred Central American migrants crossing Mexico via the train were kidnapped at gunpoint in Medias Aguas, Veracruz. Catholic priest Alejandro Solalinde, founder and director of the shelter

Casa del Migrante “Hermanos en el Camino” (Migrant House Brothers in the Road) in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, denounced the kidnappings based on reports from migrants who managed to flee their captors. The shelter’s press bulletin narrating the events was available in Arriaga, just south of Ixtepec.

The train left [Ixtepec] and the migrants as well [were] on top with the hope that now it was most certain that they would reach Medias Aguas, but it wasn’t so. When they were about to arrive at this site, after having travelled for over four hours, near the Medias Aguas Station, the train was detained by the conductor and stopped by three luxury SUVs, such as Suburbans, with at least ten people strongly armed that received the train. ‘Get down, sons of bitches, get off fast, and get in the cars,’ they said and one could hear the shouts of the people and the children who were accompanying their parents and who just hours before were at the Shelter, some ran into the bushes to save their lives and others who couldn’t escape were captured by these people and after were taken to an unknown location.

Faced with reports of kidnappings, distinct government officials and institutions often deny the events. In the 2011 case in Veracruz, state government officials, Mexico’s attorney general, and the National Migration Institute (INM) claimed that the kidnappings could not be confirmed and were nothing more than rumors. Several officials insisted that Father Solalinde present evidence of the crime, an absurd request given that this task falls to the attorney general. A month later, Mexico’s Secretary of Defense stated that it had no evidence that any kidnappings had taken place in Medias Aguas, which further underscored the invisibility of people labeled illegal. Migrant erasure through “illegality” has tragic consequences. With thousands disappeared in unacknowledged crimes, it is hardly possible to even denounce the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. Mexico’s National Commission of Human Rights estimates over 11,000 kidnappings in the 6-month period from April to September of 2010, primarily Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans, with 8.9% pointing to the involvement of government authorities.

Resisting the assaults of security, reinscribing life

I will never forget. It doesn’t matter what they do to me. But what they did to these women, this is more painful. There were seventeen, seventeen women who came back every night sadder, more wounded, beaten. I won’t forget what I saw. I am afraid that now that they come from migration for me the other police will see me. The municipal police were at the side of the *delincuentes*.

Testimony from Unnamed Central American Migrant, Report on Disappeared Migrants, Mexico’s National Commission of Human Rights (2011).

The blindness toward violence against migrants is apparent in disregard for physical assault and disappearance, but also through news reports dehumanizing of migrants in both life and death. The common view from media reports is that

Mexicans and Central Americans are enmeshed in an unending, endemic spiral of violence. If recognized at all, the targets of violence are considered nameless, faceless victims. Yet individuals as well as organizations and movements in Mexico, Central America, and the USA challenge this blindness by protesting security models that target migrant bodies. They work to count those who don't count by searching for the disappeared and by naming and locating the dead. They demand that those responsible be held accountable. They demand that that all be able to migrate with full respect for their human rights. Finally, they insist on new security policies that allow for migrants to remain "at home" in Central America, with an economic model that allows for survival.

There are multiple efforts to count and account for those who have died. Perhaps most visible is that of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team which began exhumations at two graveyards near Chiapas's border with Guatemala on August 20, 2012, to identify the bodies believed to be Central American migrants. In Tapachula the team excavated 73 cadavers in thirty common graves. They have gathered the remains of 448 people in total from the Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero as well as from the US states of Texas, Arizona, and California. The work of multiple nongovernmental agencies, immigrant rights activists, and migrants themselves made these excavations possible and pushed authorities for a counting of migrants. Migrant shelters work to document the human rights abuses experienced by migrants, with the Bethlehem Shelter in Saltillo publishing an annual report of violations.

Family members of disappeared migrants have likewise organized searches for their loved ones, but also work to make visible the violence faced by migrants and to demand human rights for all migrants. Their protests often take the form of marches, pilgrimages, or *Via Crucis* (Way of the Cross) along the railroad tracks, or at other sites where migrants encounter danger, to draw attention to abuses. In November 2011, for Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), the mothers of Central American migrants who had disappeared in their journey north gathered in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, site of the massacre of at least 72 migrants in August 2010, for a mass to remember the dead.

A notable effort of family members and immigrant rights activists is the Caravan Step by Step Toward Peace organized with the goal of finding the disappeared and of demanding respect for immigrant rights. Beginning in July 2011 a group of 150 women and men journeyed from Central American to Mexico City in search of their loved ones. As the group crossed the Rodolfo Robles International Bridge, entering Mexico from Guatemala, they carried large white posters bearing the names and photos of their missing family members. At the public (municipal) cemetery in Arriaga, Chiapas, they visited the common grave where unidentified migrants were buried. They carried their signs through the market of Itepec, Oaxaca, the central plaza of Tapachula, the streets of Coatzacoalcos asking "have you seen them?" They locked arms in front of the detention center of Tapachula, making a human chain, to challenge the detention of thousands of migrants in this border city. They held signs of protest in front of the Chiapas state attorney general, demanding that authorities be held accountable and respect immigrant rights. They told their testimonies to Felipe Gonzales Morales, the Rapporteur for Migrant Workers and

their Families of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, as part of creating an “official” record of immigrant rights, but also to journalists, human rights offices, parishioners, and to anyone else who would listen.

Counting bodies must also include an accounting for the ways in which they died and holding accountable those responsible. In writing about the “body count” of the war in Iraq and the differences in how US soldiers and Iraqi civilians are counted, Jennifer Hyndman observes that “Counting bodies is important, but it does not *account* for the remarkable destruction of lives and livelihoods occurring in Iraq today. No metric or measure of trauma and violence should dominate or silence people’s narratives of suffering and loss” (2008: 196). In repeating the stories of their family members, both of their love for them and of the pain of loss, the women and men of the caravan told powerful personal narratives of migrants with names and faces. These publicly shared stories operated much in the way that the Latina Feminist Group writes of *testimonio* “a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (2001: 2). In countering the erasure of migrant lives and bodies, and in stark challenge to the dehumanization of migrants as lawbreakers, one Guatemalan Mayan woman spoke of the difficulty of having to be both mother and father to her young children after her husband’s disappearance. A young man broke down in tears every time he told the story of how his mother left Honduras years ago to journey toward the USA and he’d never heard from her since. A woman from Guatemala told of her dreams of finding her son alive and well, only to wake up and remember that he was still missing.

During the Caravan Step by Step Toward Peace, the individual stories of family members and the pain of loss were tied to security policies which limit the free movement of migrants across borders and within Mexico. The Caravan had clear demands which were repeated at public events and often emphasized in the context of individual testimony. The demands included an end to kidnappings of migrants as well as prosecution for those responsible for such events; an end to raids, especially the dangerous nighttime raids in which many have been injured; and prosecution of municipal, state, and federal authorities for “omission and complicity” in the acts of kidnapping. In addition, the Caravan organizers noted the role of Plan Merida, initiating from the USA, in combining migration control and security and setting the context for violence. As such, the Caravan provided a forum for narratives of suffering, but also demanded an accounting for violence against migrants.

The violations of economic rights of transmigrants within their sending communities are practically invisible as they attempt to make the journey north. These violations—created by global capitalism and neoliberal reforms promoted by international financial agencies—are the very reasons that migrants leave their homes and communities. Fregoso and Bejarano (2010: 20) advocate “rights for living,” pointing to comprehensive justice and linking broad social and economic rights such as “the right to food, health care, and shelter” to the right “to a life free from violence and torture.” It is an exercise of these rights that are the impetus behind much of Mexican and Central American migration to the USA. The immigrant rights movement, in the USA, Central America, and Mexico, increasingly recognizes the right not to migrate, that is, the need for economic conditions

for people to be able to live in their countries. They denounce the assault on dignity entailed not only in the migrant journey, but in working for low wages, in difficult conditions, in encountering racism and rejection, in the USA, while far from their families. One Honduran man spoke of the risks he faced crossing into the USA, of riding the train, of walking with robbers, risks he explained that he was willing to take so that his children would not have to. The right not to migrate points to a different model of security, one that allows working poor Central Americans to live a dignified life without migration, without the threat of death and dismemberment just to find work.⁶

Finally, the violence against migrants who cross Mexico and the US–Mexico border—including not only drowning and auto accidents but also death, rape, kidnapping, extortion, assault, dismemberment, and other injuries—is not accidents. Migrants are not at the wrong place at the wrong time. They are exactly where they are intended to be in times of attrition policies emanating from the USA to protect those defined as legitimate members of the homeland. US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to build a wall on the US–Mexico border, but this essay demonstrates that multiple borders already exist in the repeated acts of violence migrants are subjected to as they flee the structural conditions promoted by US economic policies in their countries. The study of vulnerability requires examination of the historic, political, and economic contexts in which certain populations are rendered vulnerable in detriment to their health as other groups reap political and economic benefit.

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⁶ David Bacon (2013) writes of the “right to stay at home” as a demand of Mexican communities for immigrant rights as well as global labor rights and environmental justice.

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