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The War on Drugs is a War on Migrants: Central Americans Navigate the Perilous Journey North

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The War on Drugs is a War on Migrants: Central Americans Navigate the Perilous Journey North

Abstract

Propelled by deep structural violence and the highest homicide rates in the world, each year hundreds of thousands of people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala make their way across Mexico in search of a better and more secure future. As state and transnational security regimes tighten, migrants are funneled into more dangerous routes where they risk abuse, extortion, kidnapping, rape, dismemberment and death. Based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork working in migrant shelters and transit points, this photo essay examines how present-day violence against migrants cannot be separated from longer trajectories of political, criminal and structural violence including war, neoliberal restructuring and the hemispheric war on drugs. I pay particular attention to the ways state and transnational immigration and security policies impact the everyday vulnerabilities experienced by migrants in transit. Along their journeys, migrants are caught within a clandestine cycle of violence with little recourse to law or human rights protection. Immigration discourses and policies that are governed through a paradigm of national security come into conflict with the on the ground realities of human security and safety. This raises crucial questions on the role of the state and international bodies in moving forward to secure human rights for unauthorized migrants in active transit. The photographs included in this essay document the everyday landscapes of the migrant journey across Mexico. While the focus is on the intersections between policy and violence, I also reflect on the growing migrant rights movement in Mexico and new openings for political change. While the migrant journey has become more dangerous, it has also become a crucial space for collective struggle and solidarity.

Keywords

central america, drug war, migrants, violence

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Author Biography

Wendy Vogt is a cultural anthropologist with research interests in migration, violence, illicit economies and human rights in Latin America. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona in 2012 and is currently Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. She is preparing a book manuscript based on her long-term research with unauthorized Central American migrants and humanitarian aid shelters in Mexico.



A mural on the wall of a migrant shelter depicts the continuities of violence and militarization between Mexico's southern and northern borders, what some have dubbed the "vertical border".

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt



After a local migrant shelter was forced to close its doors in Orizaba, Veracruz, migrants must rest and wait along the train tracks where they are more vulnerable to violence and kidnappings.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt

Despite recent attention to the influx of Central American children arriving to the US-Mexico border, Central Americans—both children and adults—have been fleeing conditions of economic uncertainty and unimaginable violence for decades. A constellation of historical forces, including legacies of civil war, neoliberal restructuring, and transnational circulations of criminal violence propel their mobility. Yet, before reaching the deserts of Arizona or the waters of the Rio Grande, they must first cross Mexico, a paradoxical land of resource-rich natural and ethnic diversity, striking economic inequality and the center of a hemispheric war on drugs and trafficking.

The journey is perilous. As state and transnational security regimes tighten, migrants are funneled into more dangerous routes where they become implicated in economies of smuggling, kidnapping and organized crime. Migrants must navigate complex physical and human terrain, where they are enmeshed within clandestine cycles of violence with little recourse to human rights protections. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2013, this photo essay engages the everyday landscapes of the journey to explore how the violence of transit is both produced and contested by local, state and transnational actors and policies.

Violence along the migrant journey in Mexico must be understood within a longer trajectory of security initiatives across the Americas. Under the guise of Plan Colombia, US military aid redirected drug flows from the Caribbean corridor through land routes in Central America and Mexico, empowering a new network of cartels. As the drug war intensifies, the US continues to expand its multi-billion dollar security-industry, including the Mérida Initiative and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) to train, fund, and equip military and police units in Mexico and Central America. Despite their claims to the contrary, such programs do not increase citizen security, but rather fuel new markets for the illicit movement of drugs, weapons and people.



Photo, left:

Already on the road for several weeks, a migrant is disheartened when he realizes he has traveled less than a quarter of the journey across Mexico. Nevertheless, he studies the map inside a local shelter, planning the next stages of his route to el Norte.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt



Through holes and openings in the US-Mexico border wall, potential border crossers can view the US Customs and Border Patrol vehicles that wait in anticipation of their arrival.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt



Photo, top left:

Heavily armed police and military patrols, which are often implicated in human rights violations and corruption, are part of the everyday social fabric in Mexico. Here, a municipal police truck makes its rounds near the US-Mexico border.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt



Photo, bottom right:

Increased policing and military checkpoints along major highways funnel migrants into more clandestine and dangerous transportation routes, most notably the freight train, known as *La Bestia* (the Beast). Local residents look on from their storefronts as migrants hop a moving freight train near the archaeological ruins of Palenque, Chiapas.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt



Female migrants often travel in groups with male migrants who they hope will offer protection from organized criminals and kidnappers who prey on migrants riding the train.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt

The militarization of transportation routes in Mexico's interior funnels Central Americans deeper into the grips of organized criminal and human smuggling networks. Drug cartels, often in coordination with local authorities, have diversified their economic activities to control large segments of migrant routes where systematic extortion and mass kidnappings are the norm.

In the wake of several highly visible and brutal acts of violence against migrants, activists and Central American governments began to increase pressure on Mexico to reform its outdated and punitive migration policies. In 2011 a comprehensive Migration Law was unanimously passed by the Mexican government. While the law is thick with language of human rights, social services, equality and family reunification, many human rights activists remain highly skeptical about how the law will be implemented.



Photo, top left:

In-between two of the most dangerous legs of the journey, an open-air chapel at a Oaxacan shelter doubles as a space for exhausted migrants to rest their heads.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt

Photo, bottom right:

Carrying photographs of their loved ones who disappeared while crossing Mexico, Central American families gather at migrant shelter to publicly demand an end to violence and impunity along the journey. Migrants in the midst of their own journeys look on from the train tracks above.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt





During their journeys, migrants embody institutional forms of violence through injury, illness and trauma. In this photo, a migrant dismembered from the freight train recuperates at a shelter in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt



In the Rio Grande Valley Sector of the US-Mexico border, which has become the epicenter of Central American migrant border crossings, the remains of unidentified migrants have been buried in mostly unmarked graves that forensic anthropologists are now exhuming.

Photo Credit: University of Indianapolis, Guy Housewright

The task of defending migrant rights and providing aid has fallen almost exclusively to civil society and religious organizations. A network of over 50 humanitarian aid shelters provides food, protection, medical attention and legal aid to migrants in transit. The shelters have become central nodes in transnational networks of caravans of families from Central America who travel along the route in search of disappeared family members. The movement continues to grow and to cross borders, reminding us that violence against migrants is produced at the nexus of a hemispheric war on drugs and immigration policies based on a paradigm of national rather than human security.

Through ethnographic snapshots of everyday life in migrant shelters and transit points, this essay seeks to bridge the macro-level context of institutional violence with the lived and embodied experience of clandestine migration across Mexico.



In a migrant shelter, a makeshift altar with a cross that reads “No more deaths”, serves as a daily reminder of the dangers migrants face as well as the growing social movement for solidarity and migrant rights.

Photo Credit: Wendy Vogt