

Francisco Elías Prada*

Text and Photos

FREEDOM HAS NO BORDERS AND NO HUMAN BEING IS ILLEGAL¹

The quest for a social Utopia is a ministry. My human commitment is my central axis and photography is my tool. This innate urge has not changed yet, despite my wishes, but I have. And I think that I have at least managed to contribute questions to others, to pass on to them the feeling of urgency about these times, the need to be moved to outrage in the face of injustice and to bear witness using solidarity as a language, the passion of going after the living stories, trying to narrate from inside oneself, living every process from the point of view of beings of flesh and bloods, almost always as a lone wolf, listening to others with all my senses, accompanying them despite the risks to continue building a life, a testimony, a struggle that goes beyond the image and the consequences it might have and of our own acts.

FRANCISCO ELÍAS PRADA²

A Life Story

Everything began when I migrated to live with our ancestors, without being too aware. I was just a child, preceded by my parents' Utopia and their lifelong quests that I later recovered and have proudly appropriated, adding my mistakes and circumstances. We traveled into the depths of these lands in Capanaparo, to the wonder of the plain, intending to contribute to stopping the violence and historic extermination of the Pume and Kuiva of Venezuela's Apure

Highlands. The attempts at getting justice continued to survive there in the memory of these peoples.

Many believe that migrating is a voluntary decision, that it's just picking up your bags, saying good-bye to your loved ones, and leaving. The truth is that you leave many things behind, and that's why it's so hard. In most cases, it's a matter of waking up and leaving the house in whatever you're wearing and having to do anything to save your life and the lives of your family. In that very instant, you become another human being: an immigrant, a transmigrant, a displaced

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7 duelos (Mexico, 2012).



A young man waiting for a train questions us with his gaze -questions without answers. Thousands like him are awaiting the opportunity to get on the deadly machine (The Beast) to continue their journey through Mexico to the northern border. Tultitlán, State of Mexico, 2012.

person, often a target of political persecution, or someone running from a dire social or economic situation who is only trying to survive.

I've been a migrant all my life, persecuted by my own anxieties and dreams. Mine has been a perennial Diaspora; I've had to leave everything time and again, like a law of life, sometimes as a target of political persecution or by my own decision when I couldn't find a decent place to exist and fulfill myself, and other times because of instantaneous deportation from your own country.

Transmigrants are ephemeral human beings; extremely vulnerable, overwhelmed by the circumstances of their exodus. This is why I try to construct a testimony of those processes in the

quest to somehow desperately contribute to the construction of the urgent social Utopias.

I believe in the image as a tool for creation, for narrating gestures in a moment and certain circumstances. I believe that freedom is a human right: we all have the right to be free, to try by different means to find happiness. And one of those means is migration.

In the United States, I experienced deportation, persecution, family separation, the sadness of uncertainty, direct confrontation with a legal system that judges and executes without listening to reasons. I was separated from my family there. My U.S.-born son and his mother were expelled. I still remember her, handcuffed like a criminal at the door of the plane that was

Faith (Huehuetoca, State of Mexico, 2012).



A solitary man waits for the train to continue the road to the Norte. His only possession: hope.

Nicaraguan Mother (Mexico, 2014).



Atop the train known as “The Beast,” this mother is traveling in search of her daughter, presumed to have been kidnapped on the Mexico-Guatemala border to work in a prostitution ring.

waiting to carry out the verdict surreptitiously, illegally handed down in an underground city located under the airport, where thousands of migrants will be deported and where they wait, rubbing elbows with their captors, their judges, and their executioners.

Mexico, a Vast Territory

Mexico is not a country: it's a vast surreal territory, magical, violent, and mystical. There come together the times from Quetzalcóatl down to the Pachucos; its population; its colors; its 68 original languages; its codices; its diverse cul-

tures; its peoples in struggle; the monuments, mute after so many centuries, that tell us where we come from; poetic and brutal images. The first revolution narrated by photography and cinema, which seduced us all, but then went away betrayed, after the bullets were aimed at its own people. Mexico is an iconic place for me; I had to go there, trying to experience its vastness. Since I was a boy it was part of my imaginary; I wanted to meet up somehow with that profound country, toward which the great photographers turn their gaze. I followed that trail, especially to photograph the First Peoples, the lives of those who migrate, their abandoned towns, the loneliness of their houses, to capture

the transmigrants, daring to cross the hostile territory that takes their lives.

With that emotional burden, we arrived in self-exile from Venezuela. It was like approaching what my life has been, with photography as a medium and pretext to reach that other human being. For that reason, I'm here with the mutilated, with those who take the risk as a last attempt at survival, with the mothers who desperately seek some news of their children, some trace; with the loneliness of their sad towns with their luxurious houses built with the dollars earned in silence, houses empty of emotions and abandoned to time, brothers and sisters in

the cause of those drowned in the Mediterranean, of the little *cholas* of Quiaca, on Argentina's border with Bolivia, and those who cross over the triple South American border, who come and go like ants. No one is illegal. We're all human beings with the right to seek a better life. You cannot persecute or criminalize migration.

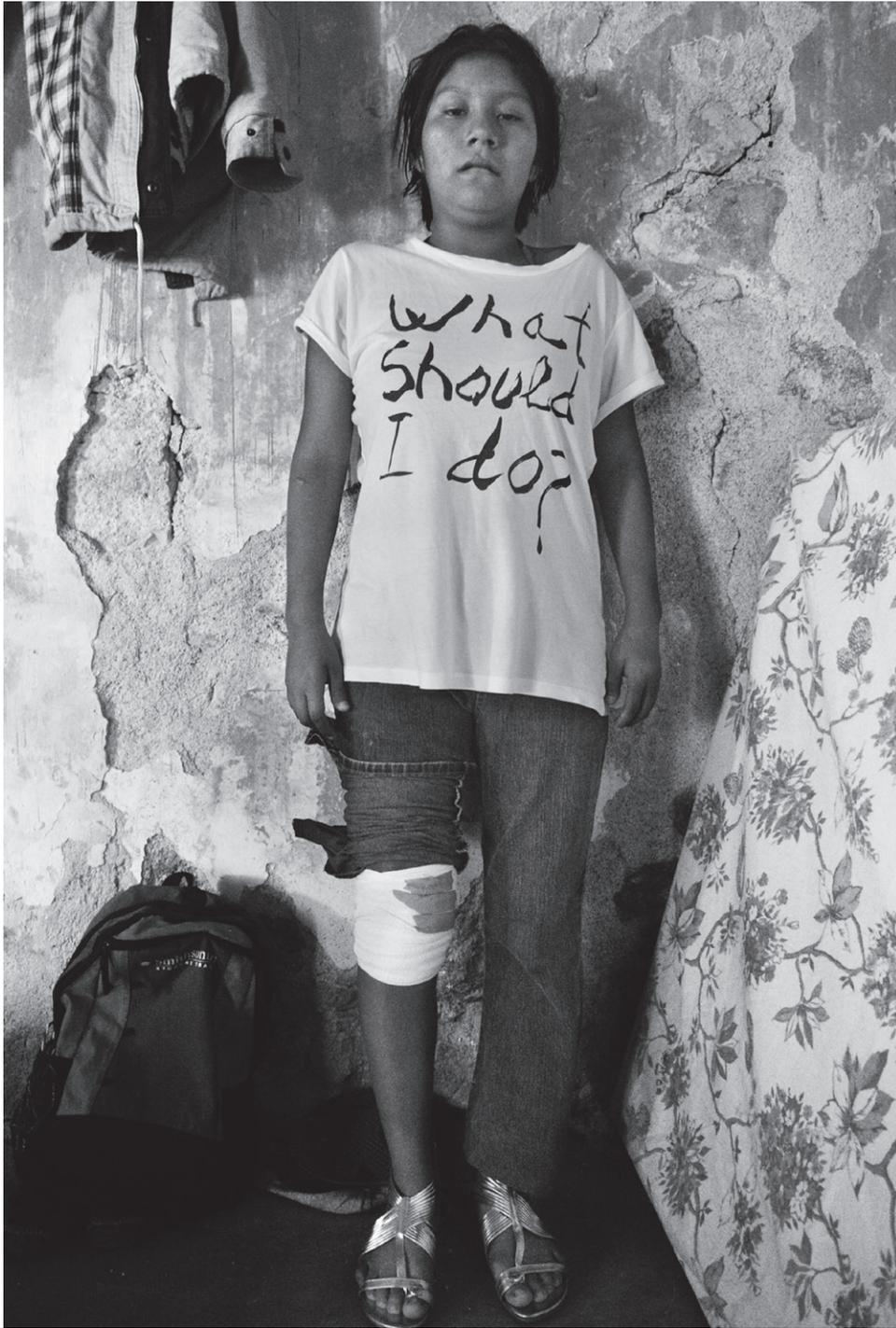
Mexico has traditionally been a migrant-sending nation, to the United States. This is the densest, most important epic drama of today, when huge contingents are exposed to these circumstances: the world has 191 million migrants, 25 million of whom left Latin America in the first five years of the twenty-first century.

Hope as Faith (Tapachula, Chiapas, n. d.).



Mothers, sisters, grandmothers follow the tracks of their loved ones who have disappeared on their way through Mexico as migrants. Nothing in the world can stop this incessant search for answers.

Innocence Lost (Huehuetoca, State of Mexico, 2014).



Beaten indigenous teenaged girl Migration does not distinguish between genders or ages, and hundreds of children, women, and teenagers abandon their homes.

Other Hells (Coatzacoalcas, Veracruz, 2012).



Central American mother, looking for her disappeared migrant daughter.

Transmigration in Movement

It's not just about doing a photo-essay. The intention is to contribute to changing this situation and, through photography, my instrument, I generate other discourses in alliance with processes of struggle and social change. There are so many stories behind the photos, and often they have more weight than the images. The images reflect a small part of my connection to the people in them, and I think that if I manage to transmit that, I can make a difference: experiencing the experience, the mixture of emotions, challenges, fears, and insecurities. Without that emotional connection, the images would not have that which someone perceives even without any references to this or that story.

I was coming from the United States; I've been on "the other side," the side of "the Amer-

ican way of life," with the privileges and dramas of living in the iconic city of New York and with its imaginary. I had also experienced the reality of the migrants, confronting the levels of intolerance in the city; in fact, I had done a series of photographs about police brutality.

Once in Mexico, I began working with the Meso-American Migrant Movement and with I Am a Migrant and Migrant Culture (both NGOs). Among their many activities, they provide economic, logistical, and human support to migrant shelters. And it should be noted that the train known as "The Beast" often runs right in front of some of these shelters.

Many try to get to El Norte on that train, although it's not made for passengers: it's a cargo train that transports manufactured products

from the big maquiladora plants in Mexico and Central America to the U.S. border. The migrants travel on the roof, running all the risks that this implies, beyond just getting on board, which is dangerous in itself, in order to get to a country that doesn't take them into account except as just another commodity.

You have to go look for the migrants at the train tracks. At first, they don't want to go near the shelters, oases of solidarity in the middle of nowhere, because they're afraid to be detained by immigration authorities or caught up by members of organized crime who are on the prowl near them. So, I take photos in the shelters, on the train tracks themselves, at garbage dumps, and in the places where the migrants

protect themselves from organized crime, from the Maras, from the police, from migration officials.

A Work in Progress

I have set out five crosscutting axes for this ongoing project: unaccompanied migrant children, women migrants, people injured on The Beast, Central American mothers looking for their disappeared migrant children, and we migrants ourselves.

Migration is a global drama. Right now I'm in Mexico; I must go to Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Belize, using my own

Witnesses of Exception (Lecheria, State of Mexico, 2012).



At least three migratory routes cross Mexico from south to north: uncertain spaces, full of the most unimaginable dangers.

Eternal Rest (Tapachula, Chiapas, 2014).



Thousands of migrants disappear along Mexico's routes. Here, a mother in search of her daughter puts marigolds on a mass grave in the cemetery.

money. I also need to go to the Quiaca border between Bolivia and Argentina and to the triple border joining Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

This project will be disseminated on several trans-border platforms: a website, where the work can be seen from anywhere in the world, with images, interviews, selected videos, and a section —perhaps the most important— where every migrant who wants to, who identifies with this reality, can contribute with his/her stories and images and where disappearances will be denounced.

Traveling exhibitions will also be organized on The Beast, in shelters, and on the street,

which is where migration is experienced. A photo book will also be prepared. But, to do all this, I will have to make alliances and partner with others to contribute to the knowledge about one of the most complex human processes of our time. **VM**

Notes

- 1 Photographs in this article, by Francisco Elías Prada, are part of the photographic essay *7 duelos. Transmigración en movimiento* (7 Duels. Transmigration in Movement). [Editor's Note.]
- 2 <http://franciscoeliasprada.wixsite.com/franciscoeliasprada>, 2016.