

# Resignifying the Northern Border

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Mexico's northern border is very special. Its 3 200 kilometers not only divides two countries, two cultures, and two economies, but also two worlds: what are commonly called the "first world" and the "developing world." And it is precisely that union and dis-union of two very disparate worlds that force us to rethink the definition of the concept of political or geographical border, since Mexico's border with the United States has become a mythologized conceptual framework, and not only for the people who live there. Many Mexican social structures distant from the border itself are influenced by it and in turn have an influence on the resignifications of it through phenomena like transmigration.

The mystifications of the "American Dream," with its recurring promises of well-being, overflow the border and extend it as a place that is constructed vertically from the northern border to the one Mexico shares with the Central American countries to the south.

## TOWARD A REPRESENTATION OF THE NEW TRANSMIGRATIONS IN THE REGION

An estimated 400 000 undocumented people a year enter Mexico on their way to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Most of them are

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Central Americans, and Central American transmigration has been intense for at least two decades. What is new is its current dynamic, which has taken on certain particularities making its study and definition complex.

Not all seekers of the "American Dream" will stay a short time in Mexico or continue on to the United States. This means that they cannot continue to be considered a "passing" phenomenon, peripheral to the constituent processes of our society. Whether "passing" or indefinite, many transmigrants contribute to the "assembly," formation, and maintenance of Mexico's global cities and towns that benefit from their

labor power and services.<sup>2</sup> Until 10 years ago, migrating to the United States required the financial capital and community wherewithal to hire a *coyote* or *pollero*, as smugglers of people to the United States are commonly known. The payment was preferably made on the northern border to reduce traveling expenses. This was even the case for Central Americans since getting into Mexico across the southern border was a simple matter.

The Mexico-U.S. northern border represented a huge line of separation and territorial and imaginary classification between one side and the other of the “American Dream.” The biggest risks of the clandestine crossing were from the extraordinary measures taken to avoid the Border Patrol. With the construction of the border fence between Tijuana and San Diego in 1994 as part of the Operation Guardian immigration control plan,<sup>3</sup> many people were forced to seek other routes and ways of crossing. Instead of crossing in urban areas, they had to traverse deserts, water, or mountains, swim across the Rio Grande, hide in huge inner-tubes and be pulled across to the other side, use secret tunnels dug by human and drug traffickers and human smugglers between the two sides of the fence, or walk thousands of kilometers through the desert, running the risk of sunstroke, dehydration, and death after being abandoned by their guides.

As all this was happening along the northern border, the symbolic reference point of crossing into the land of opportunity, the countries of northern Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua) were seeing a deepening of social inequalities with the resulting steady increase in violence.

As a result, in recent years, hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants have fled the structural, emerging violence and had to deal with toughened regional migratory policies that restrict human mobility with the sophisticated operations they require for enforcement. The most recent example is the creation of the Comprehensive Program for the Southern Border, designed in the United States and implemented along the Mexico-Guatemala border, with an investment of US\$51 million.<sup>4</sup>

Shoring up surveillance on both of Mexico’s borders and creating other programs with the same aim of containing migration in the region, like the Angel Rescue plan and Operation Coyote 1 on the border between Honduras and Guatemala,<sup>5</sup> have had the effect that smugglers seek out more dangerous routes to circumvent the surveillance in areas currently disputed between the Mexican government and groups

of organized crime. Violence is a constant on the journey, not only in the border crossing areas, north or south, but also in the places along the Mexican migratory routes, which constitute a network of territories that are either lawless or where the law is enforced only exceptionally, and where survival becomes the primordial objective, even before successfully arriving in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

If borders designate “a front against a totality,” this border has become de-territorialized from the northern Mexico-U.S. border and, symbolically speaking, currently fulfills its function starting at Mexico’s southern border, with a strong impact on changes in transmigrant plans.

#### THE REBORDERING OF THE NORTHERN BORDER

What we are looking at is an emo-cognitive displacement that organizes the ways of perceiving and experiencing the world and only occurs inside a specific operational economic and political structure. This makes it possible to say that, in the collective imaginary, the width of the border now stretches from North to South because it is an apparatus of tangible differentiation between what is here and what is there, the world prior to and that of the imaginary identity projection constructed on the basis of the idea of the American Dream. The really existing, operating border is the one represented and experienced, sometimes contradictorily, by the actors situated on either side. For Central America, “the other side” does not begin at the edges of Tijuana, Reynosa, or Matamoros. The “other side,” its vicissitudes and dilemmas, its exclusionary legal and social organization, begins to be dealt with as soon as they cross Mexico’s southern border.

The concept of border has been de-territorialized not by its geographical location, but by the historic artificiality of the borders and their configurations of meaning. It is a symbolic construction that must be sought in the processes, disputes, criteria, and dilemmas that occur in the intercultural contact intertwined with powers, inequalities, and hegemony. The

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dilemmas of the new transmigrations produce subjects with hopes, dreams, and expectations of undefined temporalities and destinations. The pervasive violence in the countries of origin, transit, and destination today generate nomadic practices whose only driving force is to achieve a better quality of subsistence or at least an existence different from the precariousness that was previously experienced regardless of the country the migrants have arrived in.

Through the stories of “Emily” and “José” that we will tell here, we exemplify the diversity of motivations and signifiers that characterize human mobility today.<sup>7</sup> We also want to underline the incompatible duality of the geographical political borders officially recognized as the boundaries of nation-states, and the imaginary or symbolic boundaries that today constitute lines of inclusion/exclusion for constituting citizens with guaranteed rights. Recognizing the factual existence of territorial borders for the jurisdiction of sovereignty of states, we want to emphasize the *unnatural state* of the construction of borders and, mainly, argue the hypothesis that, on a symbolic level, Mexico constitutes an imaginary-tangible border that either makes it possible or creates barriers to arriving to the country of the “American Dream” and forces the reformulation of the migratory life project on the way to that dream.

“EMILY” AND “JOSÉ”:

TWO TRANSMIGRANT STORIES

“Emily”

For the last seven months “Emily” has been in Mexico. Originally from Honduras, she wants to go to the United States to get the “American Dream.” “Do you know what I imagine about the United States? The United States is dollars; that’s all I imagine. It’s the dollars that are taking me to the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

“Emily” has three daughters, one 22, who left for the United States one year ago, and two others, 14 and 11, who stayed in

Honduras. She hopes to work and save money to buy a plot of land and build a house for her daughters and her mother. She thought it would take her a month to arrive, but the trip has been longer than she imagined.

She entered at Tenosique, Tabasco, with a young Honduran girl she met on the way. They put up at the House of the Migrant; on the train they followed a group of migrants and learned how to occupy the safest places to avoid falls or possible mutilations. They walked for hours under the sun and sold gum in the towns because that was a safer way of getting money than just *charoleando* (panhandling).<sup>9</sup> When they arrived in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz, some men who controlled the train routes demanded the toll so they could continue. That was when they faced the fear that their lives and freedom depended on strangers and understood that it wasn’t going to be an easy matter to continue crossing Mexico:

When we arrived in Tierra Blanca, they asked us if we had a guide and if we had family that would help us. I said, “No. They only helped us out with US\$100, but no more than that. If you want, I’ll give you the US\$100 to cross.” And he said, “No; it’s US\$400 each from Coatza [Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz] to Mexico City.” So I said to him, “But, we don’t have any money.” And the man said, “Don’t worry about it. You’re not alone.” And with that, he phoned someone and said, “Hey, there’s a lady and a girl here and I want to help them out because they’re alone.” He said, “Don’t worry. Ask your family for US\$100, but for your expenses.” And he took us to buy fresh chicken in a taxi. I said to myself, “This is a kidnapping!” And I said to my friend, “What do you think? Aren’t you afraid of this man?”

And the two of us alone with him. He said: “I’m going to take you where I’m staying so you don’t have to pay for a hotel.” And that made me worry even more. And he said, “Don’t worry; I’m not going to do anything to you.”

When we got there, the man opened the door for us very kindly and everything was calm, and we went into a room and I said, “He’s going to close the door and kidnap us!” And there were two young men that I called “soldiers.” We ate there; well, I couldn’t eat, but he didn’t lock us up or watch us, and I said to her, “Over there, we’ll go along that fence.” But at the same time I was thinking, “And what happens if we leave and somebody out there catches us?”

Then the man came back again and left us money. “Here, this is to send out for food because I don’t know what time I’ll be back,” he said. “Where are you going?”

And I said, “To Mexico City.”

“Why are you going there if you don’t know anybody?”

“I’ll call a friend there,” I answered.

And he says to me, “What’s the number?”

“I lost it.”

So, then he says, “Wait for me. I can help you find a way to Mexico City.”<sup>10</sup>

After two nights, the men told them when the train would be leaving. The same man who had put them up paid for a taxi and gave them a bottle of water. “Emily” was afraid and repeated to herself that if it had been a kidnapping, the man “wouldn’t have given them so much.” Another man took them in a car to Huehuetoca in the State of Mexico. There were never any questions, just instructions to follow. Once there, another man gave them food in a house for guides who arrived every day with people who paid around US\$3 000 to be taken to Piedras Negras, Coahuila, and then to Houston, Texas.

In that complicated atmosphere, ideas and affections got all jumbled up all the time, making it impossible for “Emily” to realize that, in a subtle way, she had entered into the network of the huge machinery of human trafficking.

“Emily” doesn’t know if she’s going to get to the United States. It’s been seven months and, worn out by the wait, she is considering going to Monterrey with a woman acquaintance and staying to live in Mexico. Her decision is definitive: even if she doesn’t get to the United States, she won’t go back to Honduras. She summarizes her experience this way:

I think that when we leave our country, we think everything is easy. Sometimes we say that the television exaggerates a little, so we leave thinking, “It’s easy.” By the time we get to Mexico we see things differently. The guides and truck drivers you hire start telling you that the immigration officers are coming and they start charging you more. They hide you in stables; they tell you the soldiers are patrolling, and you don’t know the soldiers can’t stop us. But they use all that to scare you.<sup>11</sup>

“José”

At 32, “José” is traveling to the United States for the third time. Nine years ago he managed to stay seven years. He had a partner and a daughter. Accused of drug possession, he was jailed and deported to Honduras. Now he’s trying to return to rejoin his daughter. He tells us about his life:

I had a very strange, traumatic childhood, for a start, because my birth mother threw me out when I was eight days old. I was

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very sick when they found me and, thank God, the people who found me put me in the hospital and gave me their name. When they told me that, I was real little, and I began to really hate the person who had thrown me away and many others who were adopted. That lasted until I was 19, when they told me who my mother was. I would see her and run off into the hills very angry until she left. She was really heavy-handed, and, since I would forget that I was supposed to go, she would tie me to a beam and give it to me hard. And that’s how I grew up. When I was about 19, two of my brothers showed up; one of them used to give me money. I was just a kid and I looked like him. One day people came and told us that somebody had killed him. He had been a gang member before and had fallen in love with a girl; she was a Christian. He went to church with her and his in-laws, all covered up so his tattoos wouldn’t show, and the guys in the gang didn’t like that, so they shot him about four times with a shotgun. People told me not to show my face around there because we looked a lot alike.<sup>12</sup>

Following the recommendations of his neighbors, “José” decided to leave his country and set out for the United States. He says that things are different now; in the past there were blockades; you paid a fee to the *coyotes*, but there wasn’t so much violence.

One time he was stopped at a roadblock in the State of Mexico; he managed to escape and ran to a ranch where an older man helped him. He continued to Mexico City. At a market, he got help so he could dress differently and go unnoticed. He hitched a ride, he says, to the Lechería train station in the State of Mexico. As the train went by, he couldn’t catch it because it was going too fast. He contacted family members to ask them to send money; he was extorted by police officers to avoid being deported; he slept in the streets; and he got help from a man who offered him a construction job. He found lodging, food, and a wage, and stayed in the city for four months. He decided to abandon the idea of going to the United States, and continued his story:

I had already forgotten about the American Dream. I was working at a good job; my pay was good. My relatives in the United States sent me US\$100 but one day they sent for me at the park and I was with the boss's kids, when they told me that my relatives from "over there" had sent for me. They said a truck was waiting for me. I remember that along the way the children were hugging me, crying, saying "No, frigging José! Don't go! Don't leave us!" And me with a lump in my throat. The boy who had come for me said, "Go ahead. I'll give you a while so you can take a bath and eat something." Maybe if I had taken that little while I would have thought again, and I wouldn't have gone, but since they caught me all alone, I didn't even want to look at anybody, I was real down, thinking "How can I say good-bye?" And when I left, they said that I had won their trust and that I was like an older brother to them.<sup>13</sup>

Following the instructions of his *coyote*, "José" arrived at the U.S. border. He crossed the river and dodged the wire fences put up by anti-immigrant U.S. ranchers. He had barely gotten in when he was spotted by the Border Patrol and taken to the "coolers," as the places where undocumented migrants are jailed are called.

In an interview with the judges, he explained the reasons why he couldn't return to his country and obtained a temporary permit. He worked in construction for several years until he was deported. Despite a ban on his returning to the United States, he decided to go back. Nevertheless, on this occasion, he was having more trouble. Just to get through half of Mexico he had to pay US\$500, a kind of rent for travelling under a tarp on the train without being beaten, attacked, or thrown off. That is, he came up against a human wall that begins from the southern part of the country and is made up of different actors.

They're Mara gang members; they all have the same tattoo on their necks; they're walking around in the park in Palenque and they even have a list to take down the names of the people who

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get on. They ask the *coyotes* and that's it. The *coyotes* pay them. They have kids who charge you first and if you don't pay, then they come along, armed, and threaten you. Then, after Mexico City, who knows how much you have to pay! The ones after that aren't Maras; from there to the north it's "the company" that's in charge; I think that's what they call the Zetas, and they're the ones that kill you and kidnap you.<sup>14</sup>

With the same stealthy attitude and trying to negotiate with the people who have taken over the train routes, "José" hopes to continue until he gets to the northern part of the country.

#### FINAL REFLECTIONS: THE NEW BORDER, MOVING AMIDST VIOLENCE AND MYSTIFICATIONS

The social and legal order that produces practically nightmarish transit conditions far removed from the American Dream changes conceptually the meaning of "border." Now, before the American Dream comes the Mexican Nightmare. The northern border, a front to be penetrated, now begins in Mexico's South. The migratory policy recently designed by the United States to strengthen the borders from Southern Mexico objectifies the symbolic transformation of the northern border.

Today's transmigrants are no longer those who use Mexico as a bridge to get to the other side. They may live in the country for long periods thanks to an economy shored up by the exploitation of their "invisible" labor power, which assembles the big cities of the transnational circuits. This constitutes an additional factor that "extends the border" because the dynamics of undocumented underemployment are no longer limited as in the past to the northern border areas, but now extend throughout the entire country.

The re-territorialization of the border occurs because Mexico became an in-between territory or space in a world in which national and global cultures develop at the same time but not in synch. The in-between is that place or third space in which infinite differences create a particular tension in border existences. In these in-between spaces, new nomadic migrant forms of mobility are organized, characterized by being expelled by multiple types of violence without having a single fixed destination, with migratory projects constructed along the way, and by identities that are constantly modified in this process. ■■■

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> According to a statement by the International Organization for Migrations, 400 000 pass through Mexico each year. "Pasan por México cada año 400 mil migrantes," *El Universal* (Mexico City), June 8, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> For more details about the assembly of global cities based on transmigrant communities, see an extensive analysis in F. Besserer and D. Oliver, eds., *Ensamblando la ciudad transnacional. Etnografía espejular de los espacios transnacionales urbanos* (Mexico City: UAM/Juan Pablos, 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> Fences began to be built along the northern border in 1991. In 1994, the U.S. government announced Operation Guardian, a surveillance plan that expanded the fence that now stretches across one-third of the border to prevent access by undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants. "Worlds Barriers: US-Mexico," BBC News, November 5, 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Mexican political discourse presented the plan with three objectives: developing strategies for migrants' safety and protection, fighting and eradicating criminal groups that violate migrant rights, and improving the railroad infrastructure on which undocumented migrants usually travel. In reality, the plan translated into greater control and surveillance along the southern border. "Presenta Segob programa Frontera Sur para protección a migrantes," *Animal político*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2014/08/presenta-segobprograma-frontera-sur-para-proteccion-migrantes/>.
- <sup>5</sup> These plans were implemented parallel to the Southern Border plan in Mexico to contain migration of children and teens traveling with a guide or *coyote*.
- <sup>6</sup> The issue of the state of exception developed by Giorgio Agamben and applied to undocumented migratory dynamics can be reviewed in the article by Soledad Álvarez, "¿Guerra en silencio? Aproximación etnográfica a la violencia normalizada hacia los migrantes en tránsito por la frontera sur chiapaneca," Alejandro Agudo Sanchiz and Marco Estrada Saavedra, eds., *(Trans)formaciones del Estado en los márgenes de Latinoamérica. Imaginarios alternativos, aparatos inacabados y espacios transnacionales* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México/Universidad Iberoamericana, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> The testimonies quoted here are extracts from the research project by Joselin Barja, "Migraciones indocumentadas: una etnografía del tránsito por México" (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, unpublished manuscript, 2014).
- <sup>8</sup> Interview at the House of the Migrant in Saltillo, Coahuila state, April 2, 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> "Charolear" is the term used by migrants to mean asking passersby for money.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview at the House of the Migrant in Saltillo, Coahuila state, April 2, 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview at the Guadalupano Deacon Shelter in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz, January 12, 2014.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.