



Central American Female Migration and the Micro-Politics of Border Control

Mobile Ethnography along the Migrant Route in Mexico



Abstract

Every year hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants from mainly Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador embark on a journey through Mexican territory with the hopes of a better future in the United States - estimations suggest that up to thirty percent are women. Transnational migration is due to heightened violence in Central America on the rise. Although earlier research about women's particular mobility is scarce, reports and studies maintain that women to a larger extent suffer violence and insecurity as compared to their male counterparts. The objective with this thesis is to explore current border policy and practices in relation to women's experiences en route. Motivated by mobile ethnography and the need for thorough research in contexts of conflict I follow migrants in transit and explore the various localities pertaining to the migrant route.

Aided by theories about transnational border control, its human consequences and gender norms, I show how migrant women's journeys are funneled to a context of impunity, insecurity and violence and conclude that gender norms and expectations permeate these spatialities. Women are deemed as out of place, have few options but using sex as a strategy for survival, and rape further functions as a regulating mechanism of border control. Violence against women is in this manner highly facilitated, thus serving as yet another feature to the gender-specific policing of borders in this frontier between the Global South and North.

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1 Introduction

1.1 La Ruta Migrante [The Migrant Route]

Due to its strategic geographical position (see fig.1), the increasing numbers of migrants from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala migrating to the United States are required to travel through Mexico. Estimations suggest that between 400.000 and 1 million Central American migrants enter Mexican territory each year with the objective of crossing the border to the United States. This region has in effect become the largest migrant corridor in the world (Soto Castro et al. 2010).



Figure 1 Map Central America, Mexico and the United States (Source: Natural Resources Canada)

The border between Guatemala and Mexico has for long been porous and migration for trade and work opportunities have similarly been an important part

of the regional culture. During the 1990's Mexican territory however became of key concern for United States border policy and adjacent strategies, and Central American migration becoming de facto criminalized (Frank-Vitale, 2013)

In order to avoid being detained by migration officials, migrants travel along the clandestine *La Ruta Migrante* [the Migrant Route]. The route follows 3,200 km of railroads throughout Mexican territory where migrants jump aboard the old freight trains that have been deemed *La Bestia* [the Beast], or *El Tren de la Muerte* [The Train of Death]. Apart from the risks of jumping aboard the cargo trains, the route is increasingly controlled by criminal organizations that have targeted migrants for extortion, kidnapping and trafficking.

In 2010 Amnesty published the report, *Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico* that outlined the humanitarian crisis migrants face en route through Mexican territory. The report especially highlighted women's insecurity - stating for example that six out of ten migrant women are raped during their journeys.

A year later 72 migrants were found dead in a shed in Tamaulipas, Mexico - massacred by the infamous drug cartel *Los Zetas*. These occurrences lead to increased resonance about Central American migration and insecurity in Mexico.

Women and their differentiated experiences however remained underreported.

1.2 Objectives and Research Question

Central American women's vulnerability en route have been constructed as an unfortunate accident, as caused by criminal networks and corrupt authorities in Mexico - essentially as the price migrant women pay for traveling. Few connections have been made in regards to the transnational modus operandi of current border control practices, and how these in reality come to shape women's journeys. Academia has further maintained a safe distance from the crude reality of the migrant route. The breach in knowledge as well as the urgency of the

situation at the humanitarian level nevertheless calls for a deeper exploration into women's experiences en route through Mexico.

The objective for this thesis is two-fold. Firstly, I want to explore the link between modern day border control practices and the insecurity migrant women face in Mexican territory. Secondly I want to visibilize women and their vulnerability. My departing point is here that ethnography can serve as a significant tool for contesting injustice.

With these objectives in mind the main question to be explored in this thesis is:

- *In what way are Central American women's journeys through Mexico towards the United States structured and how do current border control practices shape this experience?*

1.3 Outline

In the next segment I will explore Central American transit migration - looking into the reasons behind women migration as well as earlier research about women's border crossings. In the chapter that follows I present the theoretical framework applied. I then turn to the methodology employed, explaining why it is the most appropriate for this project. Lastly I turn towards Central American migrant women's experiences en route through Mexico. I conclude with a sum-up and final reflections.

1.4 Background

The countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador all share a history of corporate political dominance, with 50 % of the population currently living in conditions of poverty and economic insecurity. Central Americans started migrating to the United States in the wake of neo-liberal structural adjustment programs and political disruptions during the 1970s and 1980s when more than one million women and men left the region (see e.g. Chavez, 1997).

Women's role in migration was in reports and research was either rendered invisible or explained by looking at women's responsibilities and loyalties as wives, as companions to their income-producing husbands or as the mothers and wives left behind (Pessar and Mahler, 2003). Feminist researchers later contested and nuanced these male centered accounts by instead departing from women's differentiated experiences (ibid.). Through a change in perspective a different story took form that instead highlighted single women and mothers, and their increased responsibility to provide for their families and children (Pessar and Mahler, 2003).

The situation for Central American women today shows a similar pattern of greater responsibility for providing for their families. In a context defined by poverty, inequality and unemployment women throughout Central America are forced to look for available alternatives for survival, whether in informal work, subsistence food production or sex-work (Sassen 2002). With an increased demand for women serving the white middle class professional women in the Global North, transnational migration has grown to be an important alternative (Pessar and Mahler, 2003, Sassen, 2002, Sorensen, 2011).

Heightened violence has additionally become a key reason behind Central American migration (see e.g. Frank-Vitale, 2013, Hiskey et al., 2014). The Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are currently the most violent sub-region in the world – a situation largely attributed to the proliferation of transnational gangs, weak institutions and corrupt authorities. Well-organized transnational drug trafficking organizations have similarly turned Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala into transit hubs for the drug trade.

In tandem with this heightened gang activity women's situation has worsened considerably (Fox 2012). El Salvador has the last couple of years had the highest femicide rate in the world (Interpeace, 2012). In Honduras, girlfriends and mothers of gang members have become victims for acts of revenge where women have lost their sons, husbands and boyfriends (ibid.). Violence has in this manner grown to become yet another factor for women's increased responsibilities – further generating incentive for women's migration.

The conjoint rise in violence and migration suggests that there is a relationship between women's increased responsibility and insecurity. In effect Central American women's decision to migrate is more complex than for pure economic reasons.

Albeit numbers are difficult to establish 20-30 % of migrants traveling through Mexico are according to reports female the large majority is between the ages 18-29 (Diaz and Kuhner, 2007).

1.5 Earlier Research

With the feminization of transnational migration, as well as heightened border control - the gendered dimension of women's border crossings have become an important part for understanding women's migratory experience. The gender-specific mechanisms inherent have nonetheless been given far too little attention, which have rendered these women practically invisible (Pickering, 2010, 2014). The process of illegalized migration, and specifically undocumented border crossing and border journeys have equally been regarded as traditionally male endeavors and seemingly little has been done to change the male centered perspective.

Few but groundbreaking ethnographic studies have however been done at the physical border between United States and Mexico, pointing to the differentiated risks women face when crossing the United States – Mexico borderlands. Due to

heightened militarism and impunity inherent in current border control practices - as well as women's greater responsibilities reproduced en route research has shown that they suffer higher incidents of fatigue, abandonment and exhaustion (Falcón, 2001, O'Leary, 2008). In effect women have been 2.70 times more likely to die when crossing the desert (O'Leary 2008, p.112). There has moreover been an increase in women's death, from 9 percent of all deaths in 1998 to 21 percent in 2005 (Pickering and Cochrane, 2013, p.35).

These studies have largely ignored Central American women's border journeys - thus excluding a pivotal facet of insecurity inherent in transnational migration in this region. Studies and texts from Mexico however maintain that women en route through Mexico equally face human rights violations, discrimination, sexual violence and exploitation due to their condition of illegality *and* because they are women. Women's particular vulnerability has in these studies been explained by pointing to the characteristics inherent to the migrant route especially in relation to the proliferation of criminal networks. State and federal authorities and their failure to address the issue and provide protections has also been outlined as a reason behind women's vulnerability (Soto Castro *et al.*, 2010, Amnesty 2010). Little intentions have however been made to connecting women's experiences in Mexico with the larger framework of border control. Neither have gendered norms in terms of mobility and space, which are essential factors to traveling and being on the move, been regarded as significant for understanding women's journeys. In the next segment I go on to presenting a sociological framework for better understanding women's experiences and vulnerability, taking into account these facets that I perceive to be pivotal.

2 Theoretical Framework

The country of departure and destination, or the here and there of migration has been a common focus for academic scholarship concerned with transnational migration. An important departing point for this thesis is however that border journeys and adjacent experiences are pivotal, both for a nuanced understanding of the broader framework of border policy, but also for analyzing and tracing the micro-politics and structure behind women's particular vulnerability.

As outlined in the previous segment, earlier research suggests that Central American women are exposed to a greater risk, and that six out of ten women are raped during their journeys. But how has this vulnerability developed? The estimations imply that violence against women in transit not only is systematic, but moreover highly gendered.

In order to better understand women's experiences I start this chapter out by discussing the geo-political context of transit migration and the migrant journey. I then go on to examine how state power through the means of border control practices has created insecurity and risk for migrants. In order to better understand how women's border journeys differ from their male counter-parts, I conclude by reflecting on gender norms in regards to mobility.

2.1 Global Frontiers

The surge in human mobility has been outlined as a fundamental trait of the current society. In the same manner, people's movements, their travels and journeys have been perceived as increasingly international, transnational and global (see e.g. Castles and Miller, 2009, Bauman, 1998). Saskia Sassen (see e.g. 2000, 2002) has contested this view - stating that globalization in reality implies

the denationalization of economic space, which moreover has occurred alongside a renationalization of politics. States and nations have in a similar manner come to depend heavily upon the notion of borders as time-less and part of the natural order (Khosravi 2010, Yuval-Davis et al., 2005, Sassen, 2002, Weber and Pickering, 2011). Based on the idea of nationhood states have through the use of disciplinary power in this manner been able to re-assert their sovereignty. Borders have equally come to operate as a mechanism for keeping the unwanted out, while at the same time dividing the world into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ (see e.g Anzaldúa 1987).

In his treaty on the human consequences of globalization, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1998) has accordingly suggested mobility becoming a key stratifying factor between the poor and privileged. Due to conflict, exploitation, violence and lack of economic possibilities, Bauman explains that marginalized citizens have been pushed from behind (ibid. p. 89). These travelers, the vagabonds of the global world have according to Bauman had the walls of immigration control grow in front of them. The citizens of the Global North, the privileged of the world, have instead had state borders leveled down in front of them (ibid. p.92). The right to mobility has in this manner been located with the privileged of the world that travel as they please, whereas marginalized world citizens instead have had their international movements deemed irregular in law, or de facto criminalized.

Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers from the Global South have similarly been constructed as threat towards the security and wellbeing of nation-states in the North (Castles, 2007, Cornelius, 2004, Khosravi, 2010, p.4, Bauman, 1998). These constructions have been detrimental for militarizing the border of the Global North which has become one of the fastest growing areas of law enforcement spending while creating “a new frontier of illegality ” and turning borders zones into areas of conflict (Weber and Pickering, 2011, p.13).

Border control policy in the Global North has moreover increasingly focused on deterrence. New strategies have been developed with the objective of keeping migrants from actually reaching state borders. Transit countries such as Morocco

and Mexico have in effect emerged as important buffer zones towards the Global North.

In what they deem to be a global frontier, criminologists Leanne Weber and Susan Pickering (2011) equally maintain that the externalization of borders and the increase in border de-territorialization is the most striking impact globalization has had on the borders towards the Global North. The use of the concept of transit has similarly developed as a technique that through putting pressure on their poorer neighboring countries have been able to externalize their borders and adjacent techniques. Frank Duvall (2012) equally maintains that “transit country” that entered international debates in the mid 90’s as a geopolitical construct, in reality has become a discursive code for “illegal” migration” (Duvall, 2012, p.418). Criminalization of migration in Mexico is accordingly a recent phenomenon that didn’t take off until 1994 when United States border policy in accordance with global tendencies shifted focus towards its southern neighbor, Mexico. Checkpoints throughout Mexican territory, as well as trans-national cooperation between police have since been developed continuously.

Through cooperating policing has taken on a different shape - now occurring both within and outside national borders, reaching “to its very margins and beyond” (Pickering, 2014, p.187). Further it has served as a mechanism for creating apartheid between the rich and the poor world or what most closely could be understood as a contemporary and globalized Berlin Wall.

Central American migrant women’s journeys are placed within this transnational context of border policy where adjacent practices are allowed to take place in uncharted legal terrain, and where border journeys become a mechanism for deterring migration.

2.2 The Micro-Politics of Border Control

As borders and border politics have changed, so has the experience of border journeys. Saskia Sassen equally contends migrations to be an autonomous process

- “ migrations do not just happen; they are produced” (1998, p. 56 in De Genova 2002, p.424).

Giorgio Agamben (1998) has discussed how the system of nation-states through the construction of citizenship, and namely the condition of illegality has come to differentiate between the political form of life (bios), and the bare and depoliticized life (zoé). He uses the term homo sacer to describe the manner in which illegalized migrants are excluded from the confines of the state by increasingly being associated with criminals. The homo sacer is in Agamben's terms a depoliticized body, a non-citizen of the nation state that by being stripped of membership in society has had his or her rights taken away.

Human rights normally guaranteed for by the state are for undocumented migrants in this manner left obsolete, instead they are subjected to inhuman treatment and practices in zones of lawlessness (Agamben, 2005, Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2004). Through regulations, laws and police the homo sacer is left vulnerable, not only to state violence, but also to the violence of those citizens that have been accepted (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004, p. 57). The effect is a differentiation between citizens and others, where citizens and their lives are recognized, whereas lives of “the illegal” can be taken with impunity at any time.

In his writings on the condition of “illegality” anthropologist Nicholas De Genova equally maintains that migrant “illegality” in reality is a juridical political identity, and that it therefore comprises a particular social relation to the state (see e.g. De Genova 2002). According to De Genova experiences of illegality are a product of border policy, which he views to be the apparatus behind migrant vulnerability understood as a wish to maintain their tractability as workers (ibid.).

By looking at increasing migrant deaths on their way to Europe, Australia and the United States, Weber and Pickering (2011) outline the “architecture of risk” as a defining characteristic to transnational mobility in the frontier between the Global South and North. By linking migrant insecurity with border policy they locate the state within the chain of responsibility. Their main argument is that people suffer violence and risk because of the ways the border between the Global

South and North is controlled, and similarly they maintain that deaths in effect are foreseeable. Like De Genova, they also add the role of international economic processes, stating that the conditions of migrant insecurity primarily is driven by state interests but that these interests are subjected to global capital and its demands for disposable workers (ibid. p.2).

Although the subjective and embodied effects of border control mostly remains unseen, the most severe consequences of current border policy have nonetheless affected people that cross borders with the intention of seeking a more sheltered and self-directing life for them and their families, and the numbers of migrant deaths point to that. To understand transnational border policy thus requires an understanding about its local and embodied consequences, and vulnerability in a similar manner requires knowledge about adjacent mechanism of border control. In effect experiences en route and the larger framework of economy and state power must be explored as interconnected.

2.3 Gender and Mobility

As implied above mobility has emerged as a pivotal resource in the globalized society, which has served to construct movement in the global society in a strongly racialized and classed manner. The human consequences for those that have gone against this matrix have been violent and increasingly life threatening. But how can the differentiated manner in which female border travelers experience their journeys be understood?

Common representations of migrant illegality, especially in the context of United States, has been synonymous with the image of (Mexican) male “sojourner,” equally the traditional image of the border crossers has been that of a young, single and risk-resilient male (De Genova, 2002, Weber and Pickering, 2011). In the context of borders and crossings women have instead been depicted as burdens or have been made invisible. But as households and communities, markets, illegal profit and nation-states increasingly are becoming dependent on women for their survival - their particular mobility have become key for

differentially directed border control techniques (Luibhéid, 2002, Shrover et al., 2008). Border regimes have for example monitored women in a differentiated manner, specifically in relation to their sexuality and in terms of their high or low moral standards (ibid.). Equally women's fertility has been used as a scare tactics for the construction on migration as a threat. In this manner gender should be understood as deeply embedded in the everyday realities of border enforcement (Pickering, 2014).

Earlier research about border crossings in this region has attributed the risks women to the presence of organized crime and the large part of studies have assumed gender to be a particularly vulnerable condition, in itself causing vulnerability - rather than as something done and enacted in a differentiated manner.

The power mechanisms inherent to women's particular mobility could offer some clues into the mechanisms that serve to create gender-specific experiences for Central American women on their journeys through Mexico. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler (2009) has equally argued that gender norms are pivotal for understanding how and in what way women are (un)protected by law. She maintains that those that do not live gender in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence and that these norms in this manner reflect the broader relations of power.

As argued throughout this chapter, mobility has emerged as a pivotal dimension to understanding exclusion and vulnerability. In relation to women particular experiences, mobility is central for the performance and enactment of gender as suggested by studies of women in public space for example. Throughout history women's place has been at home with "the cult of domesticity" being central to the maintenance of ideas of nation (Skeggs, 1997, p.5). Feminist scholars have in this manner explained how social spaces such as the nation and urban space have been structured in a gendered manner around the dichotomy between the public and private. This separation has constituted the normalized gender order and has moreover served to uphold differences between men's and women's mobility.

Space and place is in this manner both gendered and sexualized, where men traditionally have had more authority than women in negotiating the use of public space. Throughout modern history the man has been the public figure, with an adjacent freedom and authority to move through public space. As the dandy, the flâneur, or the stranger the man has accordingly passed localities and streets in an independent and unafraid manner (McDowell, 1999 p.148). Through a cult of domesticity women have instead been confined and relegated to the home and the private sphere with housework and childcare as women's sacred duty (ibid. p.83).

The history of the modern city has in this sense been the history of man and location has been pivotal for constructions regarding ideal womanhood and manhood, deviation from these expectations has resulted in a variety of societal sanctions ranging from verbal abuse to violence to incarceration. a consequence of these discourses deemed women's movement in public space as transgressive behavior where "women who did not conform or keep to their place where constructed as wicked or fallen, subjected to abuse or vulnerable to physical danger, forcing them to reconsider their decision to participate in the public sphere" (McDowell, 1999, p.140). The social organization where women's participation in public space is seen as a transgression, has been part of putting blame of (sexual) violence on woman themselves, accordingly further bestowing men with authority and power over certain spaces and leading to the particular policing of women's bodies. Women that experience sexual violence are in this manner blamed where mobility thus could be viewed as implying more rules and more sanctions for women.

Victimizing discourses portraying women as passive and inferior have further been important to controlling women's movement. The urban and public space was for example constructed as a potential threat and women as subordinates, fragile, dependent, in need of protection, and urban space therefore as masculine space (ibid. p.150). In the industrialized society women were prohibited from walking alone in the city, where the home was maintained as women's arena of security (ibid.). This frame of security has however always been conditioned as women thus assume a certain place and men instead gain authority of others,

presenting them with greater functions of control, and the right to decision-making and surveillance of women's bodies (ibid.). The victimhood discourse thus emerges as a mechanism that serves to uphold hierarchy. In the context of migration these assumptions have served in representations of women as trafficked, where portrayals of women as victims have resulted in the stronger monitoring of women, they have moreover justified anti-immigration policies (Schrover et. al. 2008, p.11).

Women's mobility and border journeys could in this manner be understood as tied to morale and sexuality in a way that men's journeys aren't where the narrative of victimhood further serves as a mechanism in restricting women's choices.

Through looking at the gendered norms in relation to mobility it is possible to discern how women's experiences are structured in a differentiated manner and how female migrants transgress in double the sense. In relation to the broader framework of border control policies, as well as its micro-politics the burden of risk and vulnerability shifts towards migrant women en route that therefore experience adjacent techniques in a differentiated manner.

3 Methodology

The methodological choices as well as reflections concerning those, became imperative for my research, contributing greatly to how my analysis unfolded. Accordingly, issues that I faced during the collection of empirical material have brought me to ask questions regarding gender, power and inequality, aspects that all have translated into a specific understanding of the migrant route and its gendered contours.

I will start this chapter with an introduction the methodological frameworks I chose, namely mobile ethnography. I then go on to discuss the main challenges I encountered, with the objective of adding to qualitative methodological conversations in with a focus on aspects of mobility, ethics and security.

3.1 Choosing Methodology

In order to get a better understanding of women's experiences I have aimed at exploring the migrant route and its gendered contours. This type of knowledge ultimately requires immersion and deep understanding of the field, which has been the main reason behind choosing ethnography for gathering empirical material.

A couple of characteristics to ethnography and fieldwork, as outlined by Howard S. Becker (No date) have been especially relevant to consider. Firstly, there is an emphasis towards the actor's point of view, where ethnography has provided me with a more accurate methodology, replacing mere speculation with actual observation. Secondly, the focus on everyday life practices provided me with nuances through the closeness that participation and fieldwork allowed for. My departing point for gathering material was that a good understanding of the

field of the migrant route, especially as it is both clandestine and little researched, called for this particular methodology from within.

The challenge in the initial stages lied in deciding on the specific ethnographic tools to use. How would I go about my fieldwork in the practical sense? I knew that I was interested in the specific process of travelling and that I wanted to get to know the spatiality that makes out the migrant route. But where would I conduct the interviews and what would I observe?

Staying for some time at one of the shelters along the migrant route was an alternative I considered, but as most of the shelters had a rule of migrants staying a maximum of three days, I sensed that building rapport and developing trust would be a challenge. Doing fieldwork at one shelter would moreover not give me a broader understanding of the spatiality and various localities of the migrant route and what travelling towards the United States entails, which ultimately was my aim. My focus brought me to notice the limits of traditional ethnography and its static perspective in relation to space and place. Accordingly earlier research on migrants and migrant women in this context have mainly been done at specific localities, such as at shelters (Frank-Vitale, 2011), or detention centers (Diaz and Kuchner 2007), without taking into consideration the many localities of the migrant route, the importance of mobility and journeys to understanding present day expressions of border control and moreover its gendered consequences. Globalization has accordingly been said to pose new challenges for ethnographic research that is looking into how related phenomenon could be studied ethnographically (see e.g. Ong and Collier, 2004 .p. 3). One such answer has for migration studies been transnational and multi sites ethnography that has looked at transnational migration, where global ethnography has used case studies in order to look at how global processes shape everyday life (see e.g. Buroway et al., 2000). However, for this research, with a focus on the subjective experience as well as the technologies behind border control, I found mobile research to be a better fit for my project, in order to make intelligible the nuances of mobility control in a clandestine and under researched subject I had to follow the women and their experiences along Mexico's migrant route.

Mobile research states that societal relationships are mediated through movement (see e.g. Buscher et al., 2010, Kusenbach, 2003). The objective is therefore to look at how informants situate themselves in the social landscape, which offers insight into the texture of spatial practices and makes visible the web of connections between people and hierarchies (ibid.) which is especially interesting in terms of the gender-specific nuances to border journeys.

The main argument for applying mobile methodology is that life on the move is different from life when still. In this manner the consideration of space, place and localities, and moreover questions regarding how people relate to these in the practice and act of moving becomes the main focus.

The methodological tools consist of “being there” and “hanging out” with people in space and place, trying to gain access to nuances, to the momentary; allowing for practices to unfold in the immediacy of a context (Buscher et al. 2010, p.169). The mobile researcher encourages informants to comment on details, people and localities they pass, as well as feelings and other relevant information. In this manner the method is interactional which allows for the gap between the researcher and those whom she investigates to be as less of concern in comparison with the traditional setting of face-to-face interviews for example, which is especially important when researching clandestine fields. Another advantage is that mobile methodology gives a phenomenological understanding to experiences, in this manner creating awareness about the three-dimensionality of the life world that normally remains hidden to observers (Kusenbach, 2003).

Sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach in her studies about urban neighborhoods (2003) suggests that mobile research is unfit for social settings that are silent. Looking back, I disagree with this view, as silence can be an important part of certain experiences that through moving along get uncovered. In the context of the migrant route I noticed silence being an imperative part of experiencing fear when travelling aboard “*La Bestia*” for example. Kusenbach additionally states that one should not study criminal or hazardous activities. However I find mobile research especially fit for understanding the context and spatiality in settings that are not normally known, and that moreover are considered subversive and dangerous. In

the clandestine context mobile research creates the opportunity to conduct “unobserved” observations in these social settings that normally are difficult to access for unaccompanied outsiders.

3.2 Mobile Research and the Migrant Route

With the aim of grasping the context of illegal traveling I decided to explore the migrant route by visiting its localities, and moreover to partake in the practices inherent to it. Due to practical limits I decided to focus on the border zone between Guatemala and Mexico. Accordingly, I spent three months in various localities along the migrant route. During this time I did three longer journeys that lasted between five to fourteen days, following groups of migrants in the localities through which they were passing. I also had longer stays, about 10 days each, in two shelters along the route and shorter stays in two other shelters. After much consideration I also decided to travel along on boats and trains, spending time at the tracks and other waiting places, all accordingly with the context and practices of the migrant route.

Through these follow alongs, and by the means of hanging out and doing observations I got to know several facets of the migrant route I otherwise would not have had access to. During the fieldwork I had open-ended conversations with migrants I met, but I also got the opportunity to conduct longer interviews with three women - although due to ethical reasons I decided to stop with these (see more on this subject below). My initial stance was to let the field guide my research, but as the research progressed I tried to guide the conversation I had with both migrant women and men into talking about the experiential aspect of the journey. The material collected was mainly in the form of field notes that I wrote when I was staying at the shelters, during the follow alongs, and at times after coming home to Mexico City, where I was residing in the meantime. Some of my field notes are extensive and detailed, others have been written in the form of keywords. This aspect I suggest is a challenge to using mobile methodology as well as ethnography in challenging fields; at times I was tired and/or hungry which made the researcher role quite difficult to uphold and affected the way in

which I was writing field notes for example. Strategies and tools regarding the collection of material should therefore be worked out well before embarking on challenging fieldwork. Ulf Hannerz (in Burawoy, 2003, p.673) gives a critique towards going along, stating that, bouncing from site to site, anthropologists easily substitute anecdotes and vignettes for serious field work. In a similar manner, Gille and Riain (2002) state that the “methodological imperative /.../is replaced by that of chasing things around, things that are identified more by the ethnographer’s interests prior to entering the field than by the field itself. My answer to this critique is that in order to get to know a certain spatiality, especially if there is little information beforehand, the “bouncing around” and even the collection of “anecdotes and vignettes” is of grand value. The insights and knowledge I got by meeting with various actors and visiting several localities is unsurpassed to merely conducting interviews or getting intertwined with the dynamics of a particular shelter. Moreover, this methodology provides a lot more authority to the field itself, rather than to the researcher and her ideas, mostly due to the depth of knowledge that is offered.

Concluding, several facets to the experience got uncovered by the means of moving along and being present at several places. For my work this was especially the case in relation to understanding gendered violence, as well as the various expressions of illegality in feelings of fear, lethargy and adrenaline - all important nuances of understanding the migrant route and how border control works in its most subjective sense. My standpoint is therefore that these issues have been possible to observe and address precisely because of the methodology employed.

3.3 Gaining Access

The strongest concern I had before embarking on the fieldwork was the subject of gaining access. What possibilities were there to get access into a clandestine field? Due to this concern I was prepared on clarifying the research along the way, having several alternatives in mind. I have spoken Spanish fluently for the last decade and never experienced problems related to language in a greater sense.

The difference in my Spanish was rarely more than between different Spanish speaking countries, regions or even social classes.

My initial plan when I arrived to Guatemala during the late spring of 2012 was to follow a group of migrants together with civil society that I knew had arranged events of follow-alongs earlier. I decided to spend some time in Mexico in order to wait for such an event to happen as they often were organized from there, meanwhile trying to establish relevant contacts. Just before Easter I decided to network through Facebook, which came to be a useful tool to accessing information about the rather informal networks of migrant activism. Within just a days' work I had found the event that was following a group of migrants from Guatemala into a shelter in Mexico, accompanying them during seven days. I wrote the organizer a short message, asking about the possibilities to participate. They wrote me back with directions about coming to the shelter, stating that I had to arrive the day after. It was during this event that I first came to meet the people that became my companions during the fieldwork. Here I met "Ale", an active human rights defender in both Mexico and United States who became my gatekeeper. I did not plan for him to take on that role, but we had good personal chemistry and both aimed at working closely with the migrants, something that even among activists was not always the case, in this manner the relationship developed naturally. Various strained situations however occurred when I felt that "Ale" was putting me in hazardous and risky situations, for example by staying until late at night in controlled areas. One time at these late night outings at the train tracks in an area known to be especially dangerous for migrants, Ale got into a discussion with a man that was intimidating a group of women, and that people had suggested was in liaison with organized crime. Whilst "Ale" was discussing with the man, the women walked away into the dark alley crying quietly. But the man who moreover was holding a machete quickly turned to me, trying to intimidate me. When returning to our cheap hotel room that was close to the railroads I stayed awake the rest of the night, and couldn't help to think about this man and his collaborators and the risk of retaliation. Ale insisted that I was visible, European and therefore safe, whereas the migrants were not, and that ultimately he was there to protect them. These instances brought me to learn that the people present along the migrant route and I at times had conflicting ideas and

objectives with being there. Some of the activists were very passionate about their cause, to the extent of being able to risk their life for it. And there were others, journalists, activists and photographers, mainly concerned with getting a good picture, or organizing a good event, many times without taking into consideration the integrity of migrants and the hardships of the journey they were on. Either way, getting involved with this group of people, as well as travelling along proved to be the most fruitful way of getting close, although deeper immersion into the migrant route and organized crime would require a different or more well-thought out set of strategies as human rights defenders are growingly becoming targets for both corrupt authorities and criminal groups.

The instances of moving along and being exposed to similar challenges as the migrants facilitated creating rapport. The “bare life” experiences of sitting together in an overcrowded boat, having the water run out, or sharing the concern of boarding the train or conversations regarding people that could be dangerous, created a unique relationship that eroded the distance between “the researcher” and “the researched”, additionally presenting me with a perspective from within.

Due to sharing experiences people I travelled with and followed from locality to locality quickly started viewing me as an insider, often referring to me as carnalita [little sister] and it was this role I decided would be the most fruitful in terms of getting close, security and in order to create valuable relationships. Being a woman in a masculine context where a majority of actors were younger men, made for instances of flirtation and of being visible and objectified sexually as “a girl” and “woman”, a role that I often found to be problematic and did not approve of. But by upholding the role of carnalita, of a little sister, of someone “young”, a bit rebellious, but also “afraid”, this challenge became less of a concern and gave me a natural role amongst the migrants, close to my own comfort zone and personality. This role I moreover sensed made me less of importance for those actors that were on the lookout for people that they found to be compromising and threatening to their “business” with migrants. My role as carnalita moreover gave me access to conversations about polleros, coyotes, dangers, and realities that migrants did not have with other people that worked with them.

The specific role and access women have in these dynamic, masculine and often time's dangerous contexts are particularly interesting for qualitative research, other women have used other gender-based roles more suitable in relation to their particular personality and departing point. A fellow female researcher Amelia Frank-Vitale for example mentions using her femininity and sexuality to her advantage when gaining access and creating trust (2011:14), whereas conversations with a fellow anthropological photographer revealed that she preferred to use the role of a caring mother or older sister in order to gain status as an insider and create trust. In essence gaining a role and insider status in this context not only as a woman, but also an outsider relates to finding a role that balances authority, respect and familiarity.

Although following along provided many shared experiences there was one defining and great difference between the migrants and me that adds to understanding inequality and the particular reality of illegality. Whenever I choose to do so, I could hop on the bus and travel back to Mexico City, my Swedish passport and documents provided me with a sorts of safety, moreover we didn't share the fear of authorities that many migrants told me was their biggest concern. I always travelled with an activist or journalist close by, but kept closer to the migrants in order to develop report. Many were curious about who I was and where I was from. At times people asked me if I was migrating to the United States from Sweden (why would I be there otherwise?), at other times they thought I was part of an organization from the United States. I did however choose to disclose my purpose in a broader sense, saying that I was researching the migrant route as a sociology student from Sweden. Various migrants wanted to practice English with me, in a way making me a symbol for their dream and goal. Many migrants I met had moreover lived for many years in the United States and were therefore eager and happy about speaking English with me. By following my gatekeeper and learning from him, the people I met were accessible and open for conversation. Ale worked close with the migrants outside of the conventional dynamics of "us" "helping" "them" and had friends amongst various actors present as well as several years of experience from various locations throughout the migrant route. Through him and his experiences I therefore got access to more clandestine places, such as specific parts of the train tracks in the

cities that make part of the migrant route. In these parts often in the outskirts of cities and villages, the train slows down and or there is less presence of guards and *garroteros*, so this is where migrants gather to hop aboard the train. Due to heavy presence of migrants these locations are often are controlled by criminal organizations and could therefore be rather dangerous places for the unknowing outsider. At times people approached “Ale” and me at the tracks, inquiring about our objectives. They did so in a manner that clearly suggested they were *orejas* (ears) asking questions with the objective of gathering information for the groups controlling the area. I usually answered that I was a student from Sweden wanting to learn more about migration or a volunteer, and that was always enough.

Through “Ale”, I also gained access to the shelters, all led by priest and parishes. As I had assumed earlier, creating report with migrants was a bit more complicated at the shelters. This was due to rather established hierarchies and a well-defined organization of shelter activity where creating relationships with migrants that weren’t volunteering or staying for a longer period of time was more of a challenge. I recall on one occasion when I was eating lunch at one shelter; the director came up to me, took away my plate and said that this food was for the migrants and that “we” had other food. He then gave my plate to a migrant girl making her wash it. This obviously created a distance between this girl and I that I moreover had planned to talk to. I furthermore slept in a different “volunteers” area and naturally had extensive contact with volunteers and people working at the shelter, which entirely changed my role and relationship to migrants in this clandestine field. I tried to balance this out by talking for long hours with the migrants in spaces where the volunteers normally did not move (out on the yard, at the entrance where the migrants that were not allowed in were sitting), but the conversations and accessibility was different nevertheless. These dynamics obviously differed between the various shelters I visited and that worked in different ways. But there was always a power dynamics between volunteers, migrants and people working at the shelters, and the migrants that were just passing by, often just wanting to keep a low profile. Being at the shelters however provided me with a deeper understanding of the migrant route by allowing me to get an insight into challenges regarding protection and security of migrants, as well as being good places to get firsthand accounts of news, changes

and developments of the migrant route. Being at the shelter is also a good way to get insider status, and information about other parts of the migrant route, as the shelters have an informal network of activists that move around and possess a lot of information. Gaining access by meeting with an appropriate gatekeeper and following along within a suitable framework was in conclusion a rather fruitful strategy in order to get an understanding of the various localities, as well as dynamics within those. Gaining access to the women and their stories proved to be much more challenging. I discuss this in the next segment.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Several ethical challenges arose during the study. There are numerous publications regarding the code of ethics and conducts for researchers in social sciences. Organizations such as the Swedish Research Council (2011) in their handbook *Good Research Practice*, the International Sociological Association in their *Code of Ethics* (1999), as well as UNESCO in their *Code of Conduct for Social Sciences* (no date) all stress the responsibility researchers have when doing fieldwork and researching people.

Choices pose consequences for people involved and this is especially true when working with vulnerable groups such as with women in violent contexts and illegalized migrants. Anthropologist Nicolas De Genova states that for the case of undocumented migrants, the ethnographic documentation and exhibition of ethnographic practices can have quite practical consequences and entail certain ethical quandaries, as well as strategic risks at the levels of research practice (De Genova 2002, p.422). Issues such as consent, clearly stating my purpose, as well as guaranteeing anonymity by changing names and details were imperative for the interviews. The issue was a bit more complicated during the observations when the sheer number of migrants practically impeded these types of agreements, details have however been changed, such as nationality, age and name as well as elements of their stories. Working with journalists and photographers further complicated these matters, as their point of departure in terms of ethics was different than mine as a researcher, a facet that I nonetheless value within

ethically sound ethnographic practice. Many migrants, albeit not all, appreciated the intentions of visibilizing the situation for migrants en route. Their own view as well as discourse often departed from collective experiences and stand points, which colored my sense of this being an ethically sound exploration, further supported by a reflexive and shared practice accounted for in this segment.

Feminist researchers moreover discuss the issue of positionality, or rather the power implicated in making part of the academia and therefore having the power to produce knowledge on groups, people and their experiences. My fieldwork with migrants was at many levels extremely paradoxical. I talked to people that had travelled for weeks, months trying to getting to the United States. I was meeting people willing to risk their lives and limbs in order to get there, whereas I with my “correct papers” travelled as I pleased. This paradox surely shaped the relations I developed in the field as well as pointed to larger societal structures of inequality and my position within these. Patricia Zavella (1993) suggests that researchers self-consciously reflect upon their status at the field site and how they are situated within larger relations of power and inequality. Accordingly, it has been important for me to reflect upon the relationship between the informants and me, both during the fieldwork and in the process of writing up; when for example making decisions about what is important, having certain assumptions and ideas of a particular “reality”, and claiming to (re)present voices, groups and experiences. One evident situation of this complex relation was when I during the initial phases had difficulties understanding why people where facing the risk of migrating to the United States. Although people’s choices differ and are complex, there is one particular conversation that put my initial notions and quite simplistic questions about the decision of “illegal” travelling and risk on their head. In the early phases of my fieldwork I was sitting by the side of the train tracks on the dusty, brown ground, chatting with “Jorge” who was waiting for the next cargo train to arrive. “Jorge” was a sympathetic from El Salvador. He smiled when I presented myself, reached out to his pocket and took out several shattered pictures of his family, he then pointed towards a young smiling girl, “this is my daughter, her name is also Sara”, he said and looked at me with a proud expression on his face. He then asked about me, and we went on talking about my parents and their choice to migrate to Sweden in the 1980’s. I then asked him about his choice to

migrate in face of the risks involved. “Jorge” smiled again and said, “...you know what, that is exactly what I want for my Sara, your parent’ choice...I want her to have the same possibilities as you in the future, of travelling and making choices. And that is why I am doing this”. In effect, his standpoint of looking towards the future, of the possibilities of providing a better life for his family and daughter differed greatly from my own focus on risk and danger and the initial fraught question of “why in the world are people doing this”. Through these informal exchanges of ideas and stories, with “Jorge” as well as others migrants, the complexity of our relationship, our different realities and understandings, became quite clear and have colored this research process.

Another challenge during the fieldwork has been the matter of studying women within a context tainted by sexual violence and vulnerability. I was not prepared for such a stark reality when entering the field, thus planning on doing many interviews with the women I met. But very early on I noticed that I was not prepared for interviewing people going through trauma. Essentially I did not have knowledge to conduct interviews with subjects in extreme vulnerability, consequently when the women started telling me about the trauma they had gone through or witnessed (rape, extreme violence etc.), I did not always know how to respond, how to continue in a responsible manner or even how stop the interviews when I felt that continuing would be unethical. Fundamentally, I felt unprepared on many levels and therefore quickly decided that I would rather focus on observations and participation in the follow ups. Another issue was the fact that many women were controlled by guides, *polleros* or *novios* they travelled with. The men knew about the interviews and conversations we had, whether it be at a shelter or at other places and I sensed that I was making these women more visible, which was the opposite of what they needed to be in this particular context. Conducting interviews in this setting, I therefore concluded, posed a threat for them.

Organizations and researchers concerned with the theme of sexual violence do accordingly state that it is a sensitive and a difficult topic. In effect undertaking research on sexual violence poses unique methodological and ethical challenges where researcher skill and training is of utmost importance.

On their website Dart Center, a project of Columbia Journalism School that advises journalists and researchers about the subject of trauma, state:

Rape is known to be one of the most deeply traumatic experiences any human being can undergo. Talking about such an event is usually associated with very high levels of distress /.../during re-telling survivors may even re-experience some of the same emotions they felt at the time of being attacked

They add that:

/.../reporting on sexual violence [therefore] demands special care and increased ethical sensitivity. It requires specialized interviewing skills, understanding of the law, and basic awareness about the psychological impact of trauma.

Accordingly, one of the challenges for further research I would suggest is elaborating safer methodologies and tools to grasp and understand these particular experiences of violence by the means of safe conversations and interviews in situ, with the advantages mobile research nevertheless offers.

3.5 Danger and the Female Researcher

Before embarking on the actual fieldwork many people were questioning my intentions and research due to matter of safety. And as I kept on doing preliminary research and talking to people, I was constantly working with a feeling of responsibility to defend and explain my choices and interests. Reflecting on these feelings I came to understand how they often were entangled with expectations and limits related to me being a woman. In that sense gender came to be a relevant factor in the research process, especially in relation to understandings about danger and what women can and/or should study, furthermore translated into reflections about gendered spaces in general. This feeling was further nurtured in the field. For example I made a short presentation at a conference in Mexico and had male researchers question and discard my choices, while women instead stated female presence and knowledge was especially important in a dangerous

and conflict ridden contexts, something that came to be an imperative departing point for my methodological choices and the risks I decided to take. During my second journey, already half way through the fieldwork, a male journalist whom I made out to be a cohort asked a couple of questions. He then chose to include my answers in an article where I was represented as a young and petite researcher from Europe with little prior knowledge about transit migration (nor Spanish). In essence I was made out to be vulnerable and in a way inept of being in such a field. In regards to mobility and sexuality, female researchers have for long been succumbed to discussions on safety as if there was a special, hidden rule book for female anthropologists with guidelines that men don't have to hear nor follow (Williams *et al.*, 2009, p. 156). This experience of defending your choices, of representations of vulnerability and demands to police your body (*ibid.*) could easily be translated to the experience of female migrants and other actors in a dangerous context such as photographers and volunteers, in that sense my own field experience came to color my view on what constitutes masculine space. Nevertheless I was also myself thinking strongly about security issues mostly because I really had little idea about the risks I would face. My strategy was in essence to be flexible, letting the field guide my choices and modifying my project accordingly. As has been proposed by earlier researchers there are a series of strategies in order to more safely conduct ethnography in dangerous settings. Central for me has been seeking others, in my case especially migrants and my gatekeeper for protector roles, as well as making my intentions and myself transparent and visible through being consistent and forthcoming with all informants and actors there regarding the nature of my presence. A couple of strategies not mentioned in earlier research has been to work with having tremendous flexibility regarding choices. At times I had decided to travel with the cargo train with the migrants, but made a different decision just before "departure", even if it was just because I had a "bad feeling".

The main characteristic to doing dangerous field research was nevertheless becoming "street wise" (Peritore, 1990, p. 369) - an aspect which is dependent on experience in the field. Several questions were difficult to answer beforehand, especially when moving along and finding yourself in various localities; how does one spot a guide, a gang member, who can you trust, who should you avoid all

together, why are certain people asking certain questions, what places are particularly dangerous, how can you spot a “controlled” area? Answers to these questions essentially rely on experience and of actually being in situ in this particular context.

During a stay at one of the shelters I befriended a young man “Richy” that spoke English really well, we “hung out” for a couple of days and I was possibly part of making others trust him. One night, we were walking towards the migrant shelter where we were staying, when suddenly migrants in the hundreds started running towards the incoming train and the tracks further away. Chaos arose as this was the first train passing after a several day long wait. Before I had the chance to step away from the running crowd, I got hit lightly on my shoulder. In an instant “Richy” changed his behavior and started pushing people, mostly young boys and men towards the ground. He then started shouting loudly ”*trucha*, “*trucha*”, as to state that he was part of the infamous gang MS13. The men he had pushed down got up slowly as he was pointing towards his jeans lining, illustrating that he was carrying a weapon. He left on the train that night, but I could not avoid thinking about how I never realized or suspected that he was affiliated with a gang. The issue at hand was safety, not only for me but also for others that due to our relationship possibly increased their trust in him. It could be that he was travelling with the same intentions as everyone else, but he was part of controlling the route, which in the southern parts of Mexico often is done by members of that particular gang. Consequently ones persona as a researcher, and moreover choices in the field are important to consider. As well as the understanding that experience and knowledge of the field takes time to acquire and that these aspects are especially important to contemplate when doing research in conflict settings.

Looking back, there are thus several strategies that I ought to have used for this type of fieldwork, of which I learned after acquiring experience. Firstly, I was acquainted with the context, but never did research on the specific localities along the migrant route. When moving along and moreover working in a dynamic field, this type of thorough research is essential, more so in dangerous contexts. Several times I ended up in areas without prior knowledge about how dangerous and

controlled they were. The problem with such an approach is however closely linked to this particular context, where media has become prone to censorship of the reality of organized crime for example. Nonetheless there are places where this type of information is available, especially through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or blogs. In the context of the United States and Mexico border region an excellent examples is *Valor por Tamaulipas* that on Facebook and in a direct and anonymous manner explores the context of violence and control.

Secondly, this type of knowledge is important in relation to the various actors present along the route. I was somewhat knowledgeable about organized crime and transnational gangs, as well as migrants and coyotes, but I knew little about for example the migrant movement (as well as the military and *la migra*) and their specific ways of working, which was a real concern in regards to personal safety. At my first trip with activists, we met a convoy of militaries that approached us in order to ask questions, my strategy in such situations has always been to answer back politely, but my companions (with another objective in mind) reacted differently and instead provoked the officials. I was rather surprised and decided to be vigilant and ask around beforehand about the different standpoints. Based on these challenges I would therefore advise future mobile research in these dangerous contexts to do a thorough mapping of both localities and actors (their enemies and counterparts) in the spatiality one aims to study. One related strategy would be to talk to, and follow local journalists that work on this particular matter, as they often hold recent information about current developments in these contexts.

4 The Process of Analysis

4.1 Writing Ethnography

During the fieldwork and inspired by mobile methodologies I wanted to know more about the migrant route and its gendered contours. The spatiality of the migrant route is therefore essential for my understanding of women's experiences. One great issue that was carved out during the first instances of being in the field was that of inequality in traveling, both for men and women, my perception was then that migrants through mechanisms of (im)mobility were disciplined for being poor. This challenged my feminist endeavor, as women's experiences amidst a general zone of injustice became difficult to distinguish, the struggles were so pertinent that choices and writing up proved to be particularly difficult. The strong focus on border control policies and how they affect both the creation of a migrant route and adjacent experiences have however developed out of those challenges.

In the analysis I try to give a sense of what's its like to be a woman while travel along the migrant route. However, being at different places at different times, the sheer chaos, the changes, these aspects that are difficult to frame in a package such as the academic endeavor often requires. Instead my aim is here to give an insight, give glimpses of people, stories, places, discourses, for in that manner show how the micro politics play out for women. Interviews, conversations, comments and pictures are similarly used to support and highlight my thesis.

4.2 Limitations

I have had the privilege of gathering important ethnographic material about the migrant route and adjacent experiences. Nonetheless, the context of clandestinity, led to certain information being difficult to acquire. Initial accounts from migrants

where for example ostensible, and challenges with getting access further made the fieldwork process difficult. As I maintain throughout this thesis the migrant journey is largely controlled by criminal organizations and corrupt authorities. Certain information is therefore considered both secret and dangerous to disclose. The context as well as practical limits therefore makes generalized statements and conclusions about the true reality difficult enterprise. On the contrary, certain topics need further analysis in order to stand complete. As I further maintain, the reality of the migrant route exists in constant adaptation and alteration to current border policies towards the Global North, and will therefore demand such further analysis.

4.3 Outline

In the analytical part of the paper I will explore the intersection between state governance and women's experiences as the micro-politics of border control and accordingly reflecting on how women's journeys come to be shaped. My analysis will center around the context of the migrant route and its gendered contours, at times with a greater focus on women's experiences, at times on the context itself. Similarly, neither dimension can be excluded for a full understanding of the micro-political effects of modern day border policies on Central American women's journeys towards the United States.

5 Engendering Border Journeys

5.1 In transit

With the objective of preventing arrival of Central American migration, United States has extended its regulatory networks beyond the physical border onto Mexican policy and territory. Mexico maintains that the human rights of Central American migrants are recognized and they have classified irregular migration as an administrative infraction, rather than as a crime (see Frank-Vitale 2013). Nonetheless as I will indicate throughout this segment the crude reality of migrant livelihoods en route through Mexico demonstrates how migrant women's journeys towards the United States have been de facto criminalized with an increasing presence of migratory checkpoints and officials in Mexican territory.

Estimations suggest that measures for keeping migrants Central American migrants from transiting through Mexico have in reality not had any effects; instead the numbers are continuously increasing. 30.000 Central American migrants were for example detained between January and April 2012 in Mexican territory, which is a 42 percent rise from 2011. More recent numbers from the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* [National Institute for Migration] equally suggest that Central American migration has tripled between 2011-2013.

Journeys along the migrant route in Mexico start out in the jungles of northern Guatemala. The entire crossing follows four main routes and is 35000 km long (see fig.2). Ultimately it leads to the United States-Mexico border from where women and men continue on through the desert. Migrants with better resources travel in *combis* [smaller buses] or in the back of truckloads. The most common method of travelling is however aboard rickety freight trains loaded with cement and iron, along railways that since decades have been suspended for passenger



Figure 2 Map of Mexico's Migrant Route

service. Migrants and guides modify the exact route in accordance with up-to-date information regarding new checkpoints and migratory raids.

During the time of my fieldwork wooden boats towards Mexican territory departed from *casas de seguridad* [safe houses] that had been established and were being run by criminal organizations. Migrants gathered and planned the details of entering into Mexico while sojourning in a one-street town described in media as in a state of “chronic lawlessness”, in this manner women and men were starting out their border journeys toward United States in the middle of a narco-trafficking path.

Migrants sat crammed together, 40-60 people, in silence aboard rickety boats taking them to the first Mexican town. Boats departed every day. If a boat would break as happened when I was visiting the area, the journey in the glaring sun would be prolonged by several hours. Due to the overcrowding boats do break regularly and there have been several reports in local media about accidents. From a clandestine and mobile port (the port changes locations continuously) several four wheels were taking the incoming groups to the first city in Mexico from where trains departed - bribes to authorities were allegedly included in the price migrants paid. The price was also four times the price that regular travelers with

“correct” papers paid, for them the journey was not only cheaper, but quicker and safer.

Migrant livelihoods for both women and men is defined by hiding, by moving through dark terrain - allowing them to remain unseen and continuing on with their journeys towards United States. Women I talked to stated that traveling through Mexico aboard buses was impossible due to their different dialect, mannerism and color of their skin. The risk of being detained was too great.

Traveling through Mexico therefore meant being on guard, always looking around, always keeping eyes and ears open, staying alert, ducking and hiding and sleeping as little as possible in order to stay safe and avoid authorities. The development of measures and strategies in order to circumvent authorities and criminals and continue on with the journey is done differently depending on gender, but both women and men were planning escape routes and preparing for jumping off the trains in case migratory authorities would show up. Everyday life was similarly maintained in shelters along the route, in safe houses or by the railroads where migrants were sitting on the ground, outside of the public view, washing their clothes in river, rain or bottled water, gathering strength, while waiting for the next train on to the next city.

Policies and adjacent techniques of control have served to funnel women into clandestine territories, created by their fear of being caught and deported. The current migrant route in Mexico - the largest migrant corridor between the Global South and North, has effectively become more concealed giving way for organized crime and increased insecurity for migrants at large. Border control policies should in this context be understood as an invisible actor, pushing women towards dark and clandestine routes with no other options for migrating.

Women I talked to equally expressed shock and disbelief about the reality of the dangers inherent to migrating but equally maintained that they would intend to migrate at any cost: *“cuando miramos lo difícil que es no nos queda más que seguir adelante”*, [when we notice how difficult it is, there’s nothing more we can do but to continue] said “Evelin”.

Although the insecurity women faced generally was framed as unfortunate consequences, state power as seen in the defining experience of hiding from and avoiding authorities, is clearly complicit in having directed them towards this dangerous environment rather than stopping them.

5.2 Keeping up

With an increase in checkpoints throughout Mexican territory, and with migrant mobilities being pushed towards clandestine and treacherous territories women's experiences have been affected in a different way as compared to their male counterparts. Essentially the journey to the United States has been made more difficult and is currently a great physical endeavor. Research from the physical border between Mexico and United States (Pickering 2013, O'Leary 2008, Falcon 2001) has suggested that women's greater responsibilities is behind women's higher death tolls were they are more prone to dying in the desert due to exhaustion and fatigue (O'Leary 2008). Here I would argue that the aspect of physicality is a materialized form for differentiation that in this context adds a crucial dimension towards the border policing of women's journeys.

One night, a group of migrant men came to the shelter where I was staying, stating that a woman that was accompanying them from the Guatemala-Mexico border had lagged behind. People at the shelter went looking for her and came back a couple of hours later with "María". She was in her late teens, from Honduras, wearing dirty jeans and carrying a pink children's backpack she said she had borrowed from her daughter, above all she was very content with having been found.

"María" tells me that she had decided to run away from her home in Honduras just a couple of days ago, where she was living with her parents' and her four year old daughter. In our interview she stressed the sense responsibility she felt of having to take care of her family as the reason behind her decision to migrate; *tengo que mantener a mi hija /.../ con 1700 lempiras no me ajustaba para*

mantenerlos a los viejitos [I have to provide for my daughter, and 80 dollars wasn't enough to care for them].

She continued with the story of the ordeal:

Ya de noche, ya no aguantaba, yo les quise decir a los compañeros /.../nada más habíamos quedado con dos compañeros, y veníamos ocho por todos, todos se vinieron adelante /.../algunos aguantaban, y nosotros ya no aguantábamos /.../adelante se vinieron y nosotros nos quedamos atrás, caminando despacio, así fue donde pude llegar hasta allí, y a noche yo me regrese por un potrero, como te cuento, a buscar posada /.../porque ya no aguantaba, me fui me fui me fui para buscar posada, casa por casa, nadie me dio posada, me fui a meter en un potrero, allí estaba yo gran rechimpilero, entonces lo que hice fue, venirme por donde estaba la policía, cuando iba el señor de acá, y me hablo, “María” te andamos buscando me dijo”, “qué?” dije yo, “bendito caso que lo conozco?” /.../ entonces dije gracias a Dios, “que me lleve”.

[/.../at night I couldn't take it anymore, I wanted to tell my buddies, two of us were lagging behind, all in all we were eight, everyone was walking in front, some of them could keep up, but we didn't, they were walking in the front and we were walking behind, walking slowly, in the way I knew would get me here, and at night I went back through a land plot, as I'm saying, to look for shelter, because I couldn't take it, and I walked, I walked, I walked asking for shelter, from one house to another, but no one helped me, so I went to rest on a plot of land, and there I was with no strength left, so then I decided to go towards where the police was, when I suddenly saw that man from here, and he told me, “María”, we are looking for you”, “what?” I asked, “am I so lucky to know this man?” /.../ I then thanked God, “let him take me from here”]

Solidarity is an important part of the journey; en route fellow travelers shared food and water, they helped each other up on the train, and gave each other advice. Men were helping out with carrying backpacks or lifting women when they boarded the train, while women helped the men with washing the few clothes they were carrying, and above giving emotional support.

But there's also the crude reality where keeping up is key, "if you can't do this, if you can't keep up then you shouldn't continue", a group at the shelter said about "María". Due to their physicality women are accordingly viewed as a burden. "There's a risk to bringing women on the journey", men said, "they are slower and they need help", "I would never travel with a woman here". Men are equally expected to be strong, daring and skilled – and in this context these expectations come to color women's subjective experience of crossing borders. Effectively some guides charge women more for taking them across Mexican territory; I also received reports and comments about female *polleras*, that were taking on groups solely consisting of women, albeit for a higher price.

5.3 ...the price women pay

"María", the young woman that had been left behind, quickly created a close relationship with a marero, a gang member who was travelling to the United States. After just a couple of days he was carrying her pink back pack and they were now travelling as a couple.

"Norma" discussed the price women en route like "Maria" will have to pay for this sense of security:

Muy difícil que le ayuden sin pedirle nada a cambio, ella sabe que tiene que dar el cuerpo, sabe que tiene que acostarse con el, quien regala algo sin recibir nada?, es rara la persona /.../se sienten protegidas y se enamoran.

[getting help without being asked for something in return is tough, she knows she has to offer him her body, she knows she has to sleep with him, who offers anything without getting anything back?, no one does/.../they feel safe and they fall in love.]

“Maria” travelled without friends, she had nowhere to turn to and I saw her being harassed and intimidated early on in her journey. Gang members control the migrant route in several places along the route, they have a good network and basically move at ease along the route, something that could serve ‘Maria’, but it could in many ways act against her in a very cruel manner as many girls in this context are lured in to trafficking networks by newfound “boyfriends”. But it was a chance “María” had to take.

A majority of the women I talked to were similarly travelling with their *esposos* [husbands]. After some time in the field I quickly noted that esposo was a designate either for guides, or men women had met and travelled with for protection. Migrants know well about this reality of coupling up and transactional sex, “you see a woman travelling alone, and it doesn’t even take days before she’s hooking up with someone”.

Life strategies people develop largely depend on the social context in which situations and crisis occur. Strategies are in this manner dependent on the support, the resources or possibilities one has and involves an inherent sociological dimension (Dominguez 2012). Considering the sociological character of negotiations in regards to safety, these say a lot about the social context at hand. In the context of the migrant route finding an *esposos* points to the lack of other options for safety, the objectification and reification of women’s bodies en route, but also how women use their sexualized body a strategy for safety and survival.

Skeggs (1997) outlines how women’s safekeeping is linked to ideas about the respectable, en route these women are no longer in safe-place, issues regarding safety and responsibility are in this manner put in their hands. Women en route seek strategies accordingly and sex for safety could then be viewed as another payment made by women, for “lacking physicality” and for being vulnerable in the particular context where they have been funneled by border policies.

5.4 *La Bestia*

The main means for traveling across Mexican territory is aboard the freight trains that have been deemed the Beast, *La Bestia*. Traveling by train is not only the most common way, but it has also become the most symbolic part of Central American journeys through Mexico. At the same time it is one of its most dreaded characteristics, “*abajo está manchado de sangre*” [underneath it is stained with blood], “Lidia” from Honduras tells me while waiting for the train to pass, and refers to the many lives and limbs that have been pulled in beneath it.

But at the same time few options exist for crossing Mexico, as here aboard the trains migrants are subjected to far fewer immigration checkpoints, as compared to buses or vehicles traveling on roads. It’s also generally cheaper because aboard the trains they don’t have to pay the large amount of bribes that bus drivers and local officials normally expect.

In essence the whole journey is planned and enacted with the intentions of avoiding being deported back to Central-America. The farther one comes, the greater is the fear of having to do it all over again. Women have borrowed money from family and friends, they have made promises to other people, they have left their homes and children, promising themselves to not come back or contact their families again until they have sufficient means for survival and support. Neither men nor women talk much about the details of what they have left behind, albeit the contour of a violent life emerges. “Yessica” says she was convinced by her cousin, but tells me later that a gang in their neighborhood killed the love of her life and father of her daughter. The boyfriend and father to “Paulina’s” 2-year-old was also killed. But in this context defined by danger and mobility, women travel rather with opportunities, hopes and future in mind. Thinking and talking about what they will buy their children, the house they will buy for their family, the future that awaits them, the job they will finally have.

From the southern parts of Mexico migrants travel on *La Bestia* on one or two principal routes. Somewhere around the Mexican capital the migrant route is again separated into three-four main directions. The journey aboard the 8-10 train series takes approximately 10 days for the most experienced, but up to 3-4 weeks for the majority. Just the first 160 km from Arriaga, Chiapas to Ixtepec, Oaxaca

takes three hours by car, but lasts fourteen hours for migrants traveling with the freight train (Frank-Vitale 2014). This is also an interesting illustration of the differentiated mode of traveling poor Central American migrant de facto have available, as compared to those with a acceptable migratory condition.

Waiting for the train is an essential part of the journey through Mexico. Most commonly migrants stay close by the train tracks, eating, washing clothes, and talking to fellow travelers - all the time listening closely to the sound of the horn that signals the arrival of the train. Women generally keep rather quiet and invisible, trying not to be seen or heard, and not joking too much, this is especially the case when fewer women are around. When the horn finally sounds, women and men appear from the surrounding areas, houses and run in masses of a dozen and up to several hundreds of people rapidly trying to board the unoccupied wagons.

In some parts of the route the train slows down or stops. Often it does not, some drivers even pass by the incoming crowd quicker in order to deter the groups of waiting migrants from jumping aboard. During my fieldwork I talked with young “Josue”. He told me that he was thinking that part of traveling a top of *La Bestia* was to jump at whatever cost. One night, still in the southern parts of Mexico he was standing on the tracks while looking at the train approaching quickly. He says that he had a feeling that cartel members were after him, he further hadn’t slept during several days and was unsettled by the whole situation. Without overthinking it he then decided to jump and got pulled in under, loosing his right leg.

Men and women make calculations beforehand, “where should I jump aboard?” “how?”, “on top?” etc. The plans are however often circumcised by the sheer chaos of attempting to board in a hurry or not having enough knowledge.

Boarding the train is moment filled with fear and excitement where men and women clutching small backpacks and large soda bottles filled with water emerge, “*córrele*” [run] scream in encouragement, “*agárrate aquí*” [hold on here]. They hurry up the ladders of the moving cars, up on to the roof, or cling to the narrow

platforms between the wagons. On some trains migrants have to be wary to avoid *garroteros* [train guards] that demand bribes, or pull migrants off the trains, often violently. At all times the journey requires strength, premeditation and courage.

The hot sun is reflects from the top of the metal cars and the journey is experienced in tandem with the midday heat with only cartoons and caps to cover the face, then there's wind, there's rain, in the central Mexican plateau the nights get extremely cold.

The trains moreover pass tunnels where the hot engine smoke rises and fills the shafts. People I talked to say that smoke in the tunnels burns their lungs and that they therefore prepare to breath as little as possible during the 30 minutes it takes to pass through the tunnels.

The risk of riding for hours on end is physical exhaustion and tiredness. Women and men risk falling off the wagons due to exhaustion. For that purpose they use a handkerchief, or some type of cloth, with which they tie themselves to the train. They use the cloths to avoid burning their hands on the hot metal cars, or to cover their faces to protect themselves from the wind or hot engine smoke when passing through the tunnels.



Picture 1 Handkerchief used for protection

One shelter that especially works with empowering migrants has accordingly published the following advice on their Facebook page (my translation):

- To endure the cold or the rain and if you don't have a sweater, find or acquire a piece of plastic and put it over your clothes as it will conserve your heat.
- When getting off a moving train car, don't stand still, but continue running so other people don't fall on top of you when they get off.
- Don't try to board the train if it travels at high speed. The speed creates a magnetic field that attracts bodies beneath it.
- Be careful when boarding if it rains. The surface gets very slippery.
- When passing through Orizaba's tunnels, try to travel in the lower part of the train by the anchors, there's more air to breath there.
- When passing the tunnels or during cold days and nights, protect your hands with mittens or any piece of cloth as steel train parts freeze.

Aboard the trains women stay alert in order to avoid potential dangers and negotiate the possibility of risks. "You never know what type of people will climb aboard and if they're good or bad", people comment. Sometimes the train stops and everyone aboard goes silent, scanning the environment around them. Stories about the how the drivers cooperate with organized crime abound, "what if the train is stopping to pick up criminals?" Some of the men stand up to get a better view, other men that carry machetes prepare to protect themselves, and those that had fallen asleep wake up. The women are sitting down, trying to hide in the best manner possible – often in the arms of a man. The train jerks of again and everyone sits back down again, "we were lucky *this* time", they say. The people aboard sit down, look around, look down, breath, and the ordeal continues.

Looking at the context of train travels the migrant route emerge as a masculine spatiality where the younger men often live the journey as an adventure and a competition, jumping on and off the rapidly moving train in order to show off their abilities. The particular masculine traits of being daring and adventurous are the traits that are needed during the journey and therefore the traits mostly valued.



Picture 2 Aboard the freight train

“Ideal” femininity and its lack of physicality instead impedes women’s journey where they negotiate the instance of jumping aboard the moving train and fearing for organized crime accordingly, often resorting to the support of a man - which as discussed above often comes with certain demands. Some women nonetheless comment that they feel stronger after each instance of boarding, as if the train journey is a rite of passage where they come out resilient and strong, as the perfect migrants, in effect strengthening their hopes of arriving in the North.

The Mexican Human Rights Commission (2011) suggest that as much as half of Central American migrants that cross the border from Guatemala into Mexico are women, whereas testimonies from Mexico’s northern parts of Mexico state that only one in ten of the migrants arriving are women. These estimations as well as “Marías” story suggest that the border control technique of funneling migrants into treacherous territories has had detrimental effects on women’s mobility, possibly contributing to their lesser chance of following through with their journey. In effect various questions arise about the outcomes on women’s journeys. Perhaps women travel numerous times before actually making it to the border? Maybe their journeys at large therefore are more costly? Perhaps they therefore have fewer option but to travel in the hands of criminal networks?

In whatever case the strategy of deterrence has served to thwart and shape female migration in particular manner. It moreover illustrates a particular technique of border control that becomes a central filter through which Central American women's mobility is regulated. Carpenter (2006, 103 in Weber and Pickering, 2011) accordingly outline the gendered selection inherent to border enforcement: "to survive unauthorized border crossings in the present border regime, physical strength is required, so it's more likely that young, healthy strong people will risk such a journey. Borders thus make a selection, the new border regimes favors young fit men and discourages women, children and old people" .

5.5 (The American Dream)... The Mexican Nightmare

In much of Mexican literature, reports, media discussions in the region, organized crime has been pivotal for understanding and explaining migrant vulnerability (see e.g Amnesty, 2010, CNDH, 2011). Looking at the larger geo-political framework, such discourses could however be viewed as another technique for denying and continuing on with violent policy measures where United States and Mexico have distanced themselves from their responsibility. Accidents have in a similar fashion been attributed to natural forces beyond human control, with responsibility instead displaced onto smugglers and corrupt guards (Weber and Pickering, 2011).

By criminalizing migration in Mexico migrant women and men have been driven into the hands of organized crime that has come to control the migrant route. In this manner border policies have been pivotal for upholding insecurity. Weber and Pickering (2011, p.28) has equally stated that the increase in risks in illegalized migration from the Global South has created an environment favoring the most organized and well-resourced facilitators. The funneling of migrants, their clandestine condition, and the increase in risks has in this manner served to strengthen criminal control over the migrant route in Mexico. Illegalized migration has moreover served to strengthen them economically where more than

70 percent of those who have crossed the US–Mexico border in recent years have used the services of guides and *polleros* (Cabrera, [2010] in Weber and Pickering, 2011).

Some migrants already arrive in Mexico with a *coyote* [smuggler], while others have arrangements to meet up with them at the Mexico and Guatemala border - from where the *coyotes* accompany and guide them through Mexico. Due to the increased difficulty and danger of the border journey, both the price and use of guides has risen. Migrants state that the cost for hiring *polleros* that guide them the entire journey is around 5000 dollars. 2000-3000 dollars is the cost for crossing the desert into United States. During the time of my fieldwork a *cuota* [fee] of 100 dollars was being introduced for boarding the train.

The drug cartel *Los Zetas* allegedly controls the route collaboration with *clicas* [cells] of *maras* [members of MS13] that have established themselves in the south. It is estimated that kidnappings have generated 25 million dollars in a period of six months during 2008-2009, and those earnings have undoubtedly increased (CNDH, 2011). The *Sinaloa Cartel* and the *Cartel del Golfo* are also involved, as well as other criminals and corrupt officials that collect bribes under the threat of turning the migrants to authorities. In effect there is a growing industry around border journeys and illegalized migration.

Mexico's Public Security Secretariat (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (in Dressel 2012) has similarly identified 25 *zonas calientes* [dangerous zones] along the four railway routes, where migrants regularly are assaulted, kidnapped and threatened, over 70.000 Central American migrants have consequently gone missing in Mexican territory (CNDH 2011) and there are several informal cemeteries where unknown victims of violence that many assume are Central American, have been buried. The danger is particularly high at Mexico's southern and northern borders as well as along the freight train routes, which ultimately makes out the migrant route.

Hand in hand with heightened border control it has therefore 1998-2009 become 17 times more dangerous to travel through Mexican territory (Castro Soto et al., 2010:12).

Shelters have little option but to cooperate with these groups and volunteers and personnel receive constant death threats. In some instances, especially in the northern parts of Mexico where organized crime holds a stronger control, shelter personnel have similarly seen themselves forced to open up lines of communication with the cartels. Many personnel live with threat, and there are therefore international mandates calling for state protection for two shelters and additionally for three priests and their teams (Frank-Vitale 2014, p.7).

Women and their bodies have in this context become valuable for profit making and are therefore constantly negotiation the risk of being kidnapped or getting in to trafficking networks. According to testimonies the cartels selectively kidnap women as their families more frequently pay ransom for them. In effect many women intended to hide their femininity at the shelters, at the railway tracks, aboard the train - by their choice of clothes for example, to the extent that they many times where difficult to distinguish, especially when travelling with a group of other men. As facilitators want to avoid detection or problems as they view it, women are made invisible by force as well, and I noticed many women being monitored and controlled during my fieldwork that presented a challenge in terms of getting access to women. Migrants are accordingly incriminating evidence for organized crime and the business is therefore at constant risk of being disposed of, (Carling, 2007 in Weber and Pickering, 2011, p.27) people equally told me that women are less trustworthy and more emotional and therefore more of a liability, and effectively monitored and threatened to a greater extent.

Women's vulnerability in relation to organized crime, as trafficked victims, has served as an important argument for heightened control at the borders; nonetheless without considering the role of policies as concealed actors in funneling and driving migrant women into these environments.

5.6 (In)visible

Throughout Mexican territory and mainly near the train-routes there are around fifty migrant shelters and *comedores* [soup kitchens] (Frank-Vitale 2014) that are essentially the only safe-places available for migrant women and men. Run by priests and parishes the standard as well as approach varies widely but the shelters are nonetheless places for rest, whether in dormitories or on the grounds on the premises. Here they have a plate of food; they organize themselves in safe groups and obtain information about dangerous routes. Some of the shelters work extensively on the issue of human rights. Generally women and men are due to matters of safety offered a maximum stay of three days and can only enter with documents, this was often however circumscribed for women that had better means of using traditional gender roles or “their need to be protected” as a safety strategy.



Picture 3 Food serving at a shelter

This strategy is fruitful in a milieu defined by catholic faith and effectively traditional catholic gender roles in the more general sense – where women not only are defined as vulnerable but also add value in terms of their roles as

respectable mothers and wives letting them take on important roles in the kitchen for example (see e.g. *marianismo*).

Both women and men have their picture and data taken before being admitted. After entering it is often forbidden to go out, and they are further prohibited from reentering during the following three months – the shelter personnel told me this was done in order to keep *coyotes* out. Some shelters didn't allow migrants to enter with belongings; others had banned soda and cigarettes (which for many was their only means of lessening the ongoing fear and unsettlement). Migratory authorities were during the time of my fieldwork not allowed to detain people at the shelters by state provision, but there was always a strong presence of police and authorities around.

Migrant existence in relation to the safe-places that continue throughout the migrant route illustrate what Agamben (2005) has argued - how migrants in the most paradoxical sense are both within and outside of law. There are still rules to follow, still authorities present and documents need to be shown.

This was also interesting to reflect upon in relation to the visibility of migrants in general on the trains for example, that at many times were passing through towns and villages, with children waving happily (at times throwing stones). People in the villages were moreover throwing up food and water, knowing that the freight trains come packed each time they pass. A huge commerce has similarly been created around the border journey, in some places where the train stops women and men get off and can borrow toilets and buy food from the vendors that stand waiting.

This further raises questions and illustrates the manner in which the journey could be perceived as a filtering mechanism rather than as an effort to close the border - where especially women if not using available strategies are filtered out.



Picture 4 [food for sale] commerce around the railways

5.7 *Con la ayuda de Dios* [With the help of God]

Apart from the short stays at the shelter migrant women have little alternatives for security and sheltering. Aboard the trains, in dark woods and lonely streets, they have nowhere to turn, and they can't do much but wait and see how their luck will unfold. When asking about women's means of staying safe, many answered: "Con la ayuda de Dios", [with the help of God], indicating that hope is really all they have in terms of security.

In effect migrant women through their condition as liminal subjects are located at the migrant route, exposed to high insecurity, on a journey defined by being in limbo, between life and death (Khosravi 2011, p.90). The consequence of illegality is a clandestine, dangerous and conflict-ridden journey with little hope of accountability and support.



Picture 5 Constantly ready to jump off of the train

During my first days in the field my observations led me to perceive the lives and spatiality of the migrant route as being in a constant state of war. Women and men with their back-packs, sitting on dirt grounds, they hadn't showered for days, they were hungry, organized crime were monitoring them, women knew or felt that they can be taken away at any time. A couple of houses away life was so different but here at the shelters, at the tracks, on the train, life was being lived in an ongoing risk of mutilation, accidents, extortion, and murder.

Women and men thus prepared for the journey by only bringing the smallest and lightest backpack. Always prepared to run, always ready to jump aboard the trains, with their water bottles secured tightly to their bodies in order to move as freely as possible.

The subjective experience is in the same manner defined by always being on the look out, always being prepared for violence, always hiding, as a woman you need to monitor your behavior, not speak too loud, wear "appropriate" clothes. Women learn this quickly. They have to behave differently and gender is in this sense done in a different way en route. The experience of moving through places and localities that are unknown add to that sense of perpetual conflict and fear.

Sometimes it takes a couple of hours with the train to arrive to the next stop, and sometimes the same journey lasts much longer, no one really knows beforehand. Khosravi (2011:69) accordingly states that life en route is unsettled, unpredictable and erratic and that the condition of illegality adds abrupt and dramatic interruptions to one's life, being kidnapped, or simply a sudden opportunity to move. Fellow travelers disappear without a trace and groups of friends lose track of each other when boarding the train in a hurry.

Every very act of movement is accordingly shaped by various modes of somatic attention, of being under constant surveillance (Willen 2007).

[/.../te pueden llevar hasta cierto punto, uno nunca sabe, y de allí secuestrarte o venderte, en todos lados hay carteles, en todos lados uno no puede andar solo. ("Norma")

[/.../they can take you until a certain point, you never know, and there they can kidnap you or sell you, there are cartels everywhere, and nowhere can you walk alone.]

Women's subjective experience of border policies is enacted, through the embodied Women police their bodies, they feel fear they make themselves invisible, by putting on a hoodie, by laying low, they can't sleep unless they're protected by men, and at the same time they spend their everyday lives watching out for authorities.

Many don't know the route well and decisions change because "someone heard that there's a migratory check-point somewhere". "Today we couldn't board the train, it passed too quickly", "no, it wasn't that train, we had to jump off". In the chaos of jumping on the train people lose each other and the place where you got a spot is now amongst a group of people you don't know.

"Norma" from El Salvador says:

/.../ en el país de uno, es de uno, pero aquí no, andamos escondiendonos de los ladrones, de los mareros, de la migración, de la policía, de todo el mundo, porque la policía, esta la ley que no pueden tocar a uno, pero no les importa /.../el pobre nunca tiene voz ni voto, no les importa.

[/.../in your own country, it's yours, but not here, we hide from robbers, from gang members, from migration officials, from the police, from everyone, because the police, there's a law that they can't touch you, but they don't care/.../the poor don't have a voice or saying, they don't care.]

Many border crossers do not make it to the next "stopover". Some give up, contacting authorities on their own, or traveling home by taking the same route from which they came. Some of the migrants returning tell me they had been robbed, lost their possessions and/or had been beaten by *maleantes* [criminals], and therefore end up with no means of paying their guides or continue on further. Others said they were returning because they had witnessed murders and/or accidents, "*no vale la pena el riesgo*" [the risk is not worth it], "Ame" said.

Life en route is incomprehensible and out of control. Overwhelmed by the incomprehensibility the border journey is further unsettling. There is in this manner an immediate experience entailed with travelling, most likened to that of being caught up in a war zone.

This main feature of border politics en route is in effect exposing migrants to insecurity. In this context of impunity of having nowhere to turn, of being in a sort of war space, women and their bodies are policed in a differentiated manner which is a situation that is neither random nor unforeseen (Khosravi, 2010, p.27).

5.8 *La Ruta de Las Violaciones* [The Rape Route]

"Yessica" was hesitant and thought about it well before embarking on the journey. Nonetheless, she says, her cousin convinced her, and she therefore

decided to leave her daughter with her stepfather and mother in order to try for a better and safer future in the United States. She had been in Mexico at various shelters during a few months when I talk to her – becoming one of those migrant women that stay behind in limbo. She was helping out at a shelter, working part time in the city.

She told me how she hates Mexico, and that she hates the look men give her:

“Yessica”: Cada vez que veo o me acerco a un mexicano me da disgusto y quiero salir de allí, lejos

Yo: /.../ Como o porqué?

Yessica: No se, lo veo en los ojos, nunca olvidare los ojos de ese hombre

[Yessica: “Everytime I see a Mexican man I get like.. /.../ I get nauseous, I want to get away, faraway”

Me: /.../ How or why?

Yessica: “I don’t know, I see it in the eyes /.../ I will never forget his eyes”].

“Yessica” told me the story about how a ranch owner raped her, with gruesome detail she kept on returning to how he was wearing a mask, and how she couldn’t forget or erase his evil eyes. She was still in trauma when I talked to her but nevertheless said that it helped her to talk about it. Somewhere in the southern parts of Mexico she and her cousin had walked into a store close by the highway asking about directions. The woman in the store had pointed towards a ranch where she suggested the owner would let them through. “Yessica” and her cousin didn’t know what else to do, and trusted the woman, so they decided to go towards the ranch. When they got there, they couldn’t find the owner. Instead they decided to walk back. But suddenly three men with guns appeared, all of them masked. They forced “Yessica” and her cousin to take their clothes off, taking all their money. Next, one of the men dragged “Yessica” into a shed while her cousin was kept guarded outside. Held at gunpoint “Yessica” was raped and sexually violated.

“Yessica” continues her story, telling me how the phone rang, during which the man walked out from the shed. While lying on the dirty ground, in panic, fearing for her life, she had decided to give it all and run. Her cousin ran too, and they finally reached the highway, stopping a bus that would take them to the closest city.

“Yessica” says her cousin was unpleasant afterwards, telling her not to talk about it, to get over it, to just continue with the journey “it’s part of it”, he said. She says she thinks he was mad at her for being a liability, for being sad, and that he saw her as weak.

The volunteer that took her information at the shelter noticed that something was “off” with “Yessica”. She finally decided to tell her story, and against her cousins will the volunteer advised her to press charges, which she later did.

Although in this case the men were charged and convicted, the impunity of sexual violators and their lack of accountability to authorities reveal the patriarchal mode of operation of the borders. The man who raped “Yessica” knew about her status, he probably knew she wouldn’t dare to go forward with charges, and he had raped other women before her. He raped “Yessica” because he could.

En route rape could be understood as possible to carry out due to the impunity that is created on the basis of the condition of illegality. Hadn’t the volunteer had experience and knowledge about the migrant route “Yessica” would never dare, or even know how or where to press charges, she tells me. Her cousin had told her that this was part of the journey, and for a moment she says she believed him. The impunity inherent to the migrant route has had terrible consequences for Central American female migrants that decide to travel to the United States.

Rapes and their cynical relation to the broader framework of border control can be viewed as a particularly violent mechanism for regulating poor women’s mobility, impeding their border crossings. The United States Border Patrol has similarly in their discourses used rape as a scare tactic for arguing that Central American women shouldn’t migrate, as if rape would be a consequence behind

their own choice. As if it wasn't connected to how women are funneled to these environments.

“Clady” outlines the clandestine and invisible - where rapes can be carried out without accountability:

/.../allí mismo en el tren las violan, la llevan a un lado oscuro, y la gente pasa pero voltea la cara para otro lado, si se meten los matan.

[/.../there on the train they rape them, they take her where it's dark, and people pass but they turn their heads, if they meddle they will be killed.]

The estimations and number of women being raped are continuously repeated without looking further into the structures or dynamics behind the high incidence. Such discourses not only impede actual change and normalizes the violence, although systematic violence can never be random nor isolated. Perpetrators further become invisible in such analysis, like rape en route just happens.

“Norma” says that she didn't want to consider the possibility of being raped when embarking on her journey:

Nos tiramos a lo que pase, a que Dios nos cuide, y si nos sale algo pues ni modo, a colaborar, da miedo, pero por la necesidad lo obliga a uno.

[We throw ourselves in whatever comes along, into the hands of God, and if something happens well "whatever", we collaborate, it does bring fear but our needs forces us.]

Other women instead come prepared themselves “Clady” says:

Yo conocí una muchacha que traía una caja de condones, y me dijo, "si me violan les doy condones" /.../ muchas vienen inyectadas, hay algunas que dicen, "esperate, esperate, hazme lo que quieras pero cuidate, protegete"

[I knew a girl that brought a box of condoms with her, and she told me “if they rape me I will give them condoms”/.../many girls arrive injected, some of them say, “wait, wait, do whatever you want, but take care of yourself, protect yourself”]

When asking a woman about what happens after sexual assault and raped. Her answer was “te sacudes y sigues” [you shake it off and continue].

Similarly to what “Yessicas” cousin had told her, many migrant women do believe that sexual violence is part of the journey and that this is a consequence inherent to migration. In a similar fashion various shelters along the Guatemala-Mexico border offer contraceptive injections for preventing pregnancy in case of rape it is told. Violence against women along the migrant route has in effect been rendered commonplace and has been normalized

5.9 *Este camino te hace hombre* [This journey makes you a man]

Militarism and securitization has during the last decades become inherent to the United States – Mexico border zone (Falcón 2001). The nature of the border is in that sense that of a war zone. Experiences of traveling along the migrant route clearly show how that war zone has been extended to Mexican territory, albeit in a different shape due to the adjacent industry and its actors. Organized crime that in Mexico often resorts to using violence for creating fear have similarly used rapes for showing authority and dehumanizing female migrants.

Earlier research on gender, war and conflict has showed that these contexts significantly shift power relations in favor of gendered violence (Sjoberg and Via, 2010). Manliness is prized, whereas femininity instead undesirable. I heard several comments between the men about how this journey makes you a man. In effect war and conflict is a hyper masculine context, where men are under

constant pressure to prove and perform their manhood, and they do so by being aggressive and tough (ibid.). In these masculine spaces sexual violence becomes a means for gaining power and authority. Rape is similarly a mechanism for performing manliness as well as keeping women in their place. (Pickering, 2010; see also Khosravi, 2010).

When war breaks out, women's bodies accordingly undergo a sort of metamorphosis where they become sites for male protection and authority (ibid.). "Lorena" from Guatemala said that her friends that she had known for years transformed during the journey, deciding to leave her behind at the tracks when she didn't agree to sexual relations: "*la gente se cambia en el camino*" [people change en route], she said, showing how certain norms and expectations are unique for the migrant route as such and how they materialize accordingly.

The freedom inherent in moving from place to place, of being safe against sexual assaults, to have a choice in matters of sexuality is equally erased:

No se puede confiar en nadie, hasta los paisanos nos andan hacienda cosas "alli, alli esta una mujer, que esta buena, que vamos a estar tantos y tantos dias, que agarramosla", y la agarran. ("Clady")

[You can't trust anyone, even our own people do things to us here "there, there's a woman, she's fine, we're going to be here so and so many days, let's take her", and then they take her.]

Women are therefore forced police their bodies en route in a differentiated manner and they are often monitored with guides constantly watching them. Migrant women are in one sense invisible by being outside of public view, but paradoxically in this context they become highly visible.

"*Pasan los hombres arriba del tren, en que momento se dan cuenta que uno es mujer?*" [they walk on top of the train, in what moment will they notice that I'm a woman?] "Ame" says.

Migrant women dress in a masculine way to hide their femininity, a big shirt, loose jeans, a cap, no make up - trying to make themselves less visible.

This particular aspect of being visible reflects how women in the migrant route are perceived to be out of place where invisibility thus could be framed as a privilege, as a matter of power and authority colored by norms and discourses regarding ideal femininity and masculinity (Skeggs 2010:220).

Gender en route is a matter of becoming, and the negotiation between visibility and invisibility is particularly relevant for women. As female migrants penetrate the norms of the social body, as well as gendered norms in relation to masculine space; they are transgressors, they are stigmatized, and they consequently face a set of sanctions.

In a context where the masculine is prized, women are viewed as polluted and dirty and their presence is sanctioned by not getting respect or recognition and ultimately by being subjected to violence. To rape a woman along the migrant route is thus different than the rape of a “decent woman” - a woman that follows social norms and expectations, she shouldn't be there in the first place ultimately a rape culture has been materialized.

5.10 “*La Mujer Migrante*” [the Migrant Woman]

Men and women, migrants and their advocates present en route were saying that women shouldn't be there: “*nunca dejaría mi hermana estar aquí*”, [I would never let my sister be here]. Several men joked around saying “*son locas*” [they are crazy]. Many people working along the migrant route accordingly kept on telling me that “*la mujer*” women shouldn't travel, furthermore trying to separate them from men. A majority of shelters accordingly made the separation between women and men “for women's safety” obligatory without taking into account that not all men are perpetrators and that some women similarly traveled with family members and spouses. Similarly these shelters did they reflect upon the fact that

not all women victims but at times perpetrators. In some instances personnel moreover argued that women should be separated from the men in order not to have sexual relations. In a subtle manner the ideas regarding female powerlessness, as well as victim blaming permeated discourses and ideologies inherent to the migrant route.

In research and social debates regarding female migrants portrayals of women have similarly been dominated by a similar discourse of frailty, victimhood and exploitation (Magliano, 2009). The inclusion of women in political discourse as vulnerable is primarily associated with the phenomenon of trafficking, a subject that the International Organization for Migration has promoted, and through which migrant women have gained high visibility in public discussions. The narrative of victimhood and the assumption that women migrate under force has however lead to protective policy measures that at times help women, but at other times have served to restrict their choices (Pickering, 2011:8).

In a disciplinary and governing manner discourses permeating the migrant route these could be viewed as further regulating women's mobility and reproducing the discursive basis inherent to victim blaming in sexual violence for example. They are moreover instances of further mechanisms of control towards women's independence and sexuality. This infantilization or demonization of women has throughout history significantly contributed to the criminalization of women's mobility (Pickering 2011:9).

Migrant women themselves often use discourses of female powerlessness and sexual vulnerability, in this manner being part of reproducing mechanisms of exclusion but also circumventing risks by using various forms of strategies based on these traditional gender ideologies. Women for example washed clothes and got paid for doing it. They offered to help out in the kitchen at the shelters and in this manner obtained more and better food. They furthermore used their status as "weak" women to gain higher status within their group, for example by sharing the privileges they got as women with men. At the majority of shelters women were served first during meal time and they always had priority in the long lines that formed for medicine, for calls, for food, blankets and clothes.

Gender is not only a moralizing system, but also serves to generate sites of resistance and subversion. Women travelling along the migrant route said they had been made aware of the risks, but they decided to go against these hurdles anyway. Through exercising their right to move they have in a sense altered both policy measures, as well as common notions about women's place and all that this symbolically implies.

“Norma” equally said. “Somos chingonas las que estamos aquí, dicen que tenemos huevos” - [we're badass us women that are here, they say we have balls].

“Clady” :

Se necesita valor para salir, lo bonito es que cada vez que uno camina adelante uno se acerca más para allá, lo bonito es el sueño americano, la felicidad que uno siente, es como cuando uno estudia y siente que casi se gradúa

[You need courage to leave, the nice thing is that every-time you move forward you're getting closer, the nice thing is the American dream, the happiness one feels, it's like when you study and graduate.]

“Clady” continues:

Dicen que las mujeres somos las debiles y los hombres los valientes, pero somos iguales, también se necesita valor para subirse en el tren y viajar, uno sabe que te pueden matar, pero uno igual se arriesga.

[They say that us women are the weak ones, and men the brave, but we're the same, you also need courage to board the train, and to travel, you know that it can kill you, but you risk it anyway.]

Organized crime has increasingly used women as *enganchadoras*, a term describes the women that seduce and persuade possible victims for kidnappings, robberies and trafficking.

“Pati” was for example deceived by a female enganchadora, subsequently leading her to suffer through a group rape:

Las mujeres/.../siempre uno esta caracterizado como un vaso frágil, sea para bien o para mal/.../soy muy desconfiada, siempre lo he sido, porque honestamente, yo me he puesto a pensar, si hubiera sido un hombre que me hubiera tratado de engancharme yo no hubiera caido, pero como es así que entre mujeres se siente mas confianza, te estoy diciendo que la que me engancho fue una mujer, por eso usan mujeres.

[Women/.../we are always characterized as frail glasses, for better or for worse/.../I’m very distrustful, I’ve always been, because honestly, I’ve been thinking, if it would have been a man that tried to hook (persuade) me I wouldn’t have fallen for it, but as it is, like, between women we feel confidence and trust, I’m trying to tell you that the one that hooked me was a woman, that’s why they use women.]

“Pati” said that female traits of weakness provoked her trust, but that they had been used against her, consequently leading her into the hands of criminals.

The victimizing of female migrants could in this manner also be viewed as leading to a more vulnerable situation for those that do fall victims for organized crime for example. I talked about this fact with a migrant man that pointed out several young and funny girls in fact were collaborating with the MS13 and Zetas cartel. The females that collaborate with organized crime and use gender expectations to their advantage could be understood as in a sense subverting an unequal system, albeit at the cost of other women.

6 Sum-up and conclusion

For this thesis I have aimed at understanding the structure behind Central American women's journeys along the migrant route in Mexico, by looking closer at their subjective experiences of traveling.

Throughout I have presented important insights into the various gendered dynamics and patterns inherent to the migrant route, moreover outlining various key concerns for prospective research that due the extent of vulnerability migrant women and men live, obliges further attention.

Ethnographic material has supported and evidenced the migrant route as a political space with highly gendered contours. I have shown how female migrants are funneled and pushed into the hands of organized crime. The cargo trains, the treacherous territories, a constant risk of being kidnapped, these are all technologies for sorting out the able-bodied, strong and fit and therefore women. Due to the insecurity and difficulty, women's price for traveling includes sex and emotional support in return for security. Impunity and ongoing unsettlement has moreover provided a setting conducive for sexual assaults. In this militarized and war-like context state power has obfuscated its role and women's journeys have been stigmatized, with women deemed as "out of place". Such discourses have moreover served in normalizing gendered violence on putting the blame on women themselves. Women are accordingly highly visible, and controlled to a greater extent. Consequently they have another facet of "hiding" added to their experience. They are not only avoiding being detected by authorities or organized crime but also the hyper-masculine gaze.

By traveling women are nevertheless in ongoing process of subversion of norms and expectations in regards to "who moves and where" - in this manner their journeys should also be understood as acts of resistance.

Concluding, I have argued that border policy extend far beyond the physical border, in this manner increasing the risk and vulnerability for women in transit. In intersection with norms regarding women's mobility these mechanisms have shaped a particularly treacherous journey. Looking into women's experiences en route has in this manner provided a lived account of transnational border policy showing how it reproduces and institutionalizes vulnerability in a gendered way.

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