

Navigating and Engaging Continued Violence and Migration, A Reflection on: “Violence and Migration on the Arizona-Sonora Border”

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In the decade since this article was written, a lot has changed, and much has stayed the same. While Trump’s border wall was in the political spotlight for most of the past four years, in and of itself, the wall represents a continuum from Bush to Obama to Trump, as each successive presidency has converted smaller barriers into larger, more restrictive ones that have served to enhance vulnerabilities (Deeds and Whiteford 2017). However, there has been a more subtle shift in structural and legal approaches to migration that has exacerbated the situation. Broadly, our original intent with this article represents the kernels of a concerted effort to understand how and why violence against migrants is seen as mundane but also attempts to gain more insight into this violence as something that people navigate and engage with, rather than something that simply happens to them. As this article was being written, the first, of multiple, high profile massacres of migrants occurred. The murder of seventy-two migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, Mexico, was a watershed moment that brought attention to the fact that people engaged in migration were being targeted and killed. However, this has done little to decelerate this trend, with the most recent mass murder of nineteen migrants in Camargo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, in January of 2021, weeks before we write this (Associated Press 2021). This is yet another instance where the boundaries between state and non-state violence blur as the blame has been directed at the Cartel del Noreste (a splinter of the infamous Zetas drug cartel) and a special unit of the state police with collaboration from Mexican immigration officials (Associated Press 2021). Despite the increase in Central American migration, typically in family units, and the preference of applying for asylum as opposed to evading detection at the border, the constant has been extreme forms of violence, such as extortion, kidnapping, assault, and even murder. Two goals from this article are worth revisiting: helping to humanize how people react to the extreme circumstances of migration (rather than presenting a flat portrait of victimhood) and urging scholars to take the presence of non-state criminal organizations seriously due to their impact on the migration experience.

One of the big questions we had entering into this article is how people navigate these threats, especially regarding decisions to participate in criminal activity. We were confronted

by a reality whereupon the very same people who guard safe houses where migrants were held hostage were often held hostage there only a short time prior. Those doing the torturing were often being tortured, and people originally paying to be smuggled across the border were being paid to take a load of drugs across. We dubbed this play between victim and victimizer as “post-structural violence” to denote how people move from one structurally disadvantaged position to another. At times now, it feels clunky to use this terminology, as the structural positions could be viewed as too rigid, with hard boundaries denoting a position (migrant, smuggler, kidnapper, etc.). The “migrant or” binary does not take into account the fluidity and overlap in these positions, as many people pass seamlessly from one to another and back again depending on the situation. However, this concept certainly helps to expand understandings of people engaged in migration as having complex reactions, interactions, and a wide range of goals that are not easily subsumed in many dominant narratives, especially through flat portrayals of romantic victimhood.

While scholars have come farther in their development of more nuanced portrayals of migrant decisions, goals, and actions, (Andrews 2018; García 2019; Gomberg-Muñoz 2017; Vogt 2018), there has been less progress in untangling the messy world of non-state and criminal violence. We should clarify that with all non-state violence, especially in Mexico, there is state participation and complicity; however, it is still a fundamentally different issue than anti-immigration policies and legal frameworks. Much of the academic literature on migration over the past decade has been almost exclusively state focused, with good reason, as the policies of the Obama and Trump administrations created new layers of barriers to migration (Slack, Martínez, and Whiteford 2018). Unfortunately, much of this literature has remained stuck in analysis of the “prevention to deterrence” measures that began in earnest in 1994, seventeen years before this article was originally published. Additionally, the concept of “deportability” (Genova 2002) has kept scholars squarely focused on deportation as a potential consequence. While there is no doubt that deportability is an important concept, its popularity has led scholars to focus their attention on how people live and manage the

risk of deportation in the United States (see Castañeda 2019; García 2019; Kline 2019), rather than study what happens after they are removed. Post-deportation consequences, such as kidnapping, extortion, and the various challenges people face reconstructing a life in their home country, continue to receive less attention than how the potential for removal affects people and how they modify their behavior to mitigate risk. While post-deportation research has certainly increased (see Coutin 2015), little of it has focused explicitly on violence connected to non-state actors. Understanding the logic behind why migrants and deportees are being targeted, either as cover for drug smuggling operations through the desert as evidenced here or as victims of extortion and kidnapping, provides much needed information that has become central to key legal questions during the Trump administration and beyond.

Scholarship on human smugglers, or coyotes, is a particularly fraught area that, while receiving additional attention, has failed to grapple with the realities on the ground. While originally this body of work sought to reject straw man portrayals of smugglers presented by law enforcement as evil opportunists (Spener 2009), it has swung in the opposite direction, risking an overly sanguine portrayal of smugglers despite the fact that there is documented evidence of mistreatment as well as support (see Vogt 2016 for a detailed discussion of these complex relationships). On one hand, part of what we wanted to do was explore the ways that human smugglers and migrants relate to one another—a relationship that can be mutually beneficial or potentially violent, both in terms of migrants as victims and victimizers, as coyotes have been killed by the people they are smuggling (Slack and Martínez 2018). On the other hand, much of the literature that has developed around smuggling simply ignores or fails to address the ways that drug cartels have influenced smuggling along the United States-Mexico border. This includes charging coyotes a *derecho de piso* or a right to pass, setting up tolls for migrants as they approach the border, as well as coordinating when groups may cross (Slack and Campbell 2016). The penalties for failing to abide by these rules can be severe, from the torture and murder of coyotes to the kidnapping of migrants who do not know the appropriate safe words given to approved coyotes. This is likely why the group of nineteen migrants was massacred in January 2021 (Mora and Green 2021).

All of this contributed to a rapid escalation of violence as the Trump administration enacted policies and practices to ensure that asylum seekers stay trapped on the Mexican side of the border. This included the so-called “Migrant Protection Program,” better known as Remain in Mexico, where people were returned to Mexico to await the conclusion of their asylum hearings (Human Rights First 2019) and the practice of metering that required people to take a number and wait in Mexican border cities in order to present themselves at ports of entry and apply for asylum (Arvey et al. 2018). The presence of Central Americans, South Americans, Cubans, Haitians, and African immigrants, among others, struggling to find housing or employment all along the United States-Mexico border presented new targets and amplified the violence

that we began studying a decade ago. Therefore, exposure to the violence we wrote about in 2010 has evolved from what could be considered an incidental, albeit important, product of immigration enforcement into a more explicit goal of anti-immigration policies (Slack and Martínez 2020). While there is still some unpacking to do of this recent period, we would encourage more scholars to embrace not only the lessons and methodology from our article but also keep an eye toward how to apply this knowledge outside of academia.

One of the interesting consequences of this research has been its relevance to asylum applications. The lack of information regarding specifically the harms people face after being removed to Mexico opened new venues for how this research can be applied to questions about potential threats certain individuals may face upon deportation (see Slack 2019 for a deeper exploration of these questions). With asylum applications largely taking the place of undocumented migration over the past decade (starting in 2014 but accelerating during the Trump administration), there is an increasing need for expertise and published materials about what happens if deportees are returned to their country of origin. Hopefully, the coming years will see scholars engaging in questions of what violence is awaiting people upon removal throughout Latin America and the world.

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