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“Asylum is Not for Mexicans”: Unaccompanied Youth and Racio-Governance at the US Border

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ABSTRACT

In this article we engage and extend work on race and border politics via an analysis of unaccompanied Mexican migrant youth. Historically, until recently, Mexican youth have formed the largest group of unaccompanied minors attempting to move across the US-Mexico border. However, a set of structural political, socio-legal, and everyday institutional violences lead to their neglect, disregard and exclusion from rights to protections in both the US and Mexico. We use Yarimar Bonilla’s notion of “racio-colonial governance” (2020), in connection with antiracist and feminist US-Mexico border studies and feminist border geopolitics, to understand how these complex and interwoven systems are spatialised and racialised: shaped both by long histories of racism and colonialism, and entrenched by contemporary, geographically-specific racialised beliefs and practices. In particular, we show how place-specific processes of racialisation construct Mexican youth as dehumanised criminals, contaminants, and security threats in border crossing sites, shelters and detention centres, and in border cities. We draw upon research carried out along the Tamaulipas-Texas border by the co-authors between 2015–2020. In particular, we focus on 26 key informant interviews and 25 in-depth migration histories with repatriated Mexican youth. Many of these individuals were identified through a survey of 204 deported Mexican unaccompanied children conducted in three government shelters. We show how systemic racism across these linked border spaces and systems powerfully devalue Mexican youth migrants, normalising extensive institutional neglect, violence, and denying their internationally determined asylum rights and other forms of relief. Our youth-centred focus extends important existing work on migration and race by demonstrating how historically-produced racist stereotyping around criminality, worthiness, security, lost innocence, and childhoods-denied are shaped by place and institutionalised in the US-Mexico border-complex.

Introduction

In 2014, apprehensions of unaccompanied asylum-seeking youth along the US southwestern border reached a record high with over 67,000 children detained (US CBP 2021). Through cooperative security agreements such as *Plan Frontera Sur*, Mexico was also intercepting and repatriating unprecedented numbers of Central American minors (Hiemstra 2019), but many thousands were indeed successfully crossing the border and beginning the process of requesting legal protection in the US. In South Texas, makeshift emergency shelters worked with community advocates to prepare. During a volunteer training, author 1 (Rebecca Torres) realised that Mexican children had not been mentioned once. This despite the fact that Mexican children comprised almost a quarter of those apprehended on the border at the time. In 2014, she asked: “What about the Mexican children: – will we be seeing them come through?” The attorney shifted uncomfortably and, while pointing to the next raised hand, shook his head resignedly, mumbling “we will likely see no Mexicans”.

In this article, we make sense of this response. The absence of Mexican youth receiving legal aid in United States Office of Refugee Resettlement (US ORR) shelters and courts, both in 2014 and currently, is undeniable. Mexican youth at the border rarely make it past border patrol agents into US ORR custody or immigration courts, regardless of their circumstances. United States Customs and Border Protection (US CBP) officials blatantly and routinely disregard required screening for human trafficking, asylum, and other protections, instead sending minors and adults alike back to Mexico within hours (Amnesty International 2021; Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; Coulter et al. 2020; Terrio 2015; Thompson 2008; UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) 2014; US GAO (Government Accountability Office) 2016). We interrogate this erasure and make visible its violences. To do so, we bring together the insights of feminist geopolitical thinkers (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Massaro and Williams 2013), scholars of Mexican and US migrant racialisation, and Yarimar Bonilla’s (2020) concept of “racio-colonial governance”, or what we refer to henceforth as *racio-governance*. Connecting their work helps us to trace how, even in the face of stunning and sustained violence – including escalating cartel and gang brutality, homicide rates, disappearances, and forced internal displacement – Mexican children are functionally barred from seeking humanitarian protection at the US-Mexico border. Specifically, we argue that racialised xenophobic crisis narratives render Mexican youth as criminals, unworthy migrants, security threats, and contaminants or “rotten fruit” (shelter director, 06/22/2015). This has a devastating impact: The sustained violation of Mexican children’s bodies and rights. Via the accounts of Mexican migrant youth, their advocates,

shelter staff, and migration enforcers, we detail the ways that such officials routinely and extra-legally suspend and violate the rights and protections of Mexican unaccompanied migrants/refugees. In keeping with feminist imperatives to refuse a totalising and victimising account, we close by highlighting migrant moves to negotiate, push back, and make space for themselves in this oppressive migration complex. In doing so, we offer a modest counter-geopolitic of immigration (Secor 2001), one that repositions the “crisis” as the denial of youth humanity, their rights, and their security (Hyndman 2001; Torres 2018). We begin by integrating our foundational literatures and concepts: Bonilla’s *racio-governance*, critical race scholarship on Mexican racial formation, and feminist geopolitics work on migration.

Feminist Geopolitics and Racio-Governance: Migrant Crisis, Erasure, and Resistance

... to understand Puerto Rico, we must place it within this larger archipelago of racialized neglect, connected through deep currents of *racialized governance* ... These are not mistakes or even events. These are the logics of disposability at work ... an environment in which black and brown bodies are rendered disposable.

(Bonilla 2020, 4, emphasis added)

I’m tired of being locked up between four walls.

(Kevin, repatriated youth detained in Mexican government unaccompanied youth shelter, 08/12/2015)

In her searing analysis of Hurricane Maria’s fallout, Yarimar Bonilla roots its devastating impacts in US “racio-colonial governance”. Refusing a simplistic understanding of this disaster as natural, inevitable, or a “great leveler” (2020, 1), she instead provides a compelling interrogation of power in moments of crisis. Drawing on decolonial and Black feminist thinkers like Christina Sharpe (2016), she demonstrates how the devaluation and disposability of Black and Brown people is central to the dereliction of responsibility by the US state after the hurricane, one rooted in a (neo)colonial history of exploiting the island and its people. Understanding the response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in the broader context of racialised neglect in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans or the water crisis in Flint, Michigan reveals the structural violence of racio-colonial governance. Bonilla’s feminist and antiracist approach disrupts the naturalisation of “natural” disasters, and common sense assumptions about when crisis begins. Instead, she shows the groundings of crisis, even one emerging from a hurricane or earthquake event, as rooted in a long history of state neglect, disinvestment, and exploitation, resulting in slow, expanded, unending suffering, and trauma for Black and Brown communities. Her work insists we attend

to the ways such a crisis is deeply racialised and gendered – both in its drivers and impacts. We find Bonilla’s work vitally instructive for understanding the “unaccompanied child migration crisis”. Through this lens, we can trace a racialised project of Mexican child erasure and neglect, one formed at the confluence of multiple complex historical and contemporary violences.

To understand racial formation in Mexico, where race and racism is so often elided (Mora 2017), we draw on critical race scholars of Mexico and, specifically Mexican migration. We connect it here with the well-established body of work in feminist geopolitics on migration, asylum, forced displacement, mobilities, borders, citizenship, deportation, and detention (e.g. Carte 2014; Hiemstra 2012, 2019; Hyndman 2010; Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018; Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Feminist geopolitics is a key tethering point for our work because it disrupts disembodied, top-down masculinist perspectives by linking state policy and geopolitics to everyday, grounded, and embodied experiences. Central, too, is the effort to remediate conventional geopolitics’ erasure of those most disempowered, and subject to inequality and violence, by privileging the voices and embodied experience of the silenced and invisibilized (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001; Massaro and Williams 2013; Torres 2018). Some feminist geopolitical work on migration usefully draws insight from Giorgio Agamben’s “states of exception”, which conceptualises how certain categories of individuals are cast into bare life, legal abandonment, or removed from protections as an assertion of sovereign power. This concept is instructive for understanding state policies and practices towards migrants, asylum-seekers, and immigrant detainees (Coleman 2007; Gordon 2010; Mountz and Hiemstra 2014), with geographers paying careful attention to the spatialities of those processes that lead to legal abandonment (Belcher et al. 2008; Coleman 2007; Pratt 2005). Bonilla pushes this body of work, in line with recent moves in the sub-field (Armenta 2016; Chavez 2008; Ehrkamp 2019; García 2017; Herrera 2016; Menjívar 2021), for a deeper engagement with the ways that racialisation, racial power, and racism produce this legal abandonment. This approach is complexly historical in form, concerned with long histories of colonialism, racialised nationalism, enslavement, and genocide for example, and refusing presentist analysis of crisis that can constrain feminist geography and wider geographic thought (Van Sant et al. 2020). In turn, as Bonilla and this kind of antiracist work makes clear, racialisation is a spatial project. Feminist geographers Kobayashi and Peake (2000, 393) have long made this argument. As they state:

“‘Racialization’ is . . . the process by which racialized groups are identified, given stereotypical characteristics, and coerced into specific living conditions, often involving social/spatial segregation and always constituting racialized places.”

For antiracist feminist thinkers, these spatialised racial formations, racism, and racial power always interlock with those of gender and class. That is, they are attentive to the ways racial-gendered power is produced, enacted, and remade differently in distinct places (Isoke 2016; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Mollett 2016, 2021; Mora 2017). Where racial projects produce “human, not-quite human, and nonhuman” bodies (Wynter 2003 in Isoke 2016; Weheliye 2014), geographers have shown how these are shaped by specific geohistories and spatialised juridical-political systems. Omi and Winant (2014 [1986][1986]), Crenshaw (1990), and Gilmore (2002, 2007) provide classic examples of the spatialities of racial formation in the US; Mollett (2016) grounds racial-gender formation and offers a hemispheric and relational analysis of the Americas in later work (2021), while Mora (2017), Gall (2013), and Moreno Figueroa (2010) provide deeply instructive examinations of the violent work of racial formation in Mexico. We see clear ties to Gilmore’s foundational geographic definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007, 242). While the US and Latin America have markedly different geohistories and constructions of race and racialisation, we see many parallel examples of US and Latin American racism that deploy similar tropes of Black and Latinx children as criminals, as undeserving, and as adults, e.g., for Guatemalan youth in southern Mexico (Ybarra 2019a, 2019b); Honduran and Salvadoran youth in Mexico (Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres 2021); and Black and Latinx youth in the US (Falola 2016; Falola and Faria 2018).

The racism we see manifest against Mexican youth on the border is enacted via a process of racialisation. Examining the subjects and spaces of this racialisation on the US-Mexican border, and for Mexican migrant youth, forms the focus of this article. Isoke defines racialisation as “an ongoing process of marking, categorizing, and reproducing human difference through the uneven distribution of life chances *within specific geographic time-space continuums*” (2016, 741, emphasis added, see also Shabazz 2011). In border spaces, the specific geohistories of racialisation in the US and Mexico collide and connect in messy, violent, predictable, and sometimes unpredictable ways. For unaccompanied Mexican youth at the border, what we see most prominently emerging is their dehumanisation as criminals and contaminants and a refusal of their childhood, innocence, and vulnerability that renders them devalued and disposable. In particular, our project engages the work of feminist geographers like Ybarra (2019a and 2019b) and Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres (2021), who have shown how these racist assumptions of criminality and unworthiness operate too for Central American youth elsewhere, specifically in Mexico’s southern borderlands. We extend it here with a focus on a different geohistory of migrant racialisation with distinct subjects and

spaces, to demonstrate the malleability and spatiality of gender-racial violence on the US-Mexico border, and to clarify the always-interwoven work of *racialisation* and *citizenship* in US and Mexican efforts to secure state control and authority.

Linking these bodies of thought helps us to see the work of racial power and *racialised governance* in the four walls that incarcerate Kevin and many other Mexican minors who are caught in limbo. Kevin is fleeing violent cartel activity but, de facto barred from his right to seek protection in the US, he sits in detention. Following Bonilla, what keeps him there are practices of racio-governance: racialised stereotypes about youth violence and criminality, adultification of Mexican children, presumptions of his motives, and heightened US immigration enforcement that fuel the perception of Mexican migrants, and particularly male youth, as a threat to national security. This racialised neglect is rationalised by the refusal of US and Mexican border bureaucrats and institutions to acknowledge the realities of historically produced and deeply entrenched geoeconomic inequalities that leave youth open to exploitation and violence, and that force so many to seek protection and alternative livelihoods in the United States. Central to this practice is the notion of “crisis”—emerging out of nowhere and no-when – a crisis in need of containing and erasing. But, as we argue, this “crisis” masks enduring racisms in the migration system built on its long historical, structural, and racialised foundations (Menjívar 2021). In this article, we trace how these take the form of racio-governance for Mexican youth on the border.

Child-Centred Activist Methodologies

Our argument is grounded in extensive binational, child-centred ethnographic research on child migration (2015–2020) and draws primarily on data from interviews undertaken between 2015 and 2016 by authors Rebecca Maria Torres, Sarah Blue, Tamara Segura, and Kate Swanson. This project involved interviews, a survey, a participatory workshop, and ethnographic observation in three Mexican government youth migrant shelters on the Tamaulipas-Texas Border. The focus was on everyday state practices of migration control as experienced by children repatriated from the US (Mexicans) and/or detained in Mexico (Central Americans). In this article, in particular we draw on 25 in-depth migration history interviews with unaccompanied Mexican children in 2015 (a subset of the total 53 including Mexican and Central American youth) and 26 interviews with key informants such as Mexican migration officials and shelter staff, binational advocacy and service providers, and US immigration attorneys. To ensure anonymity we assigned pseudonyms to all study participants and in some cases avoided geographic specificity in identifying places. While our analysis concentrates on the rich material from our qualitative interviews, it is also informed by a survey we

conducted with 204 repatriated Mexican children in shelters. The survey included socio-demographics and experiences with authorities, including CBP agents. It also helped to identify those youth interested in participating in more extensive migrant history interviews. The research was conducted on the heels of the implementation of *Plan Frontera Sur*, the US-sponsored Mexican border plan used by the US government to externalise its border enforcement in response to the increase in unaccompanied minor arrivals in 2014. To the extent possible we purposefully sampled children to integrate a range of ages (12–17 years old), migration paths, and home communities. Given that the stories of girls are particularly unknown, yet they are the fastest growing group of unaccompanied minors seeking shelter and humanitarian assistance (REDODEM 2019), we made a concerted effort to recruit at least 50% girls. Lastly, our research and analysis was made possible by sustained activist scholarship (Blue et al. 2021; Swanson 2019; Swanson and Torres 2019; Torres 2019). This includes volunteering with legal advocacy groups to assist with in-take interviews, paperwork, legal service information, visiting or working in shelters and detention centres, interpreting, court watch, writing policy reports, and serving as expert witnesses, amongst others. As we have argued elsewhere (Torres 2019) this scholar activism is not only an ethical imperative, but it deepens and complicates our understanding of the issues.

Our activist feminist methodological framing is consistent with the study's child-centred epistemological approach rooted in children's geographies (Abebe 2009; Aitken 2001; Bartos 2012; Swanson and Torres 2016) in that our approach gives primacy to youth's perspectives and experiences, rather than studying them from the viewpoint of adults (Glockner Fagetti 2007, 2008). In doing so we address a lacuna in migration studies in which children's narratives are rarely placed front and centre (McKendrick 2001; Pavez-Soto 2018). Yet their stories are critical, because children and youth are over-represented among global migrant, refugee, and displaced populations: they increasingly migrate on their own volition in response to multiple forms of violence; and are often most affected when parents migrate and they remain in place or are "left behind". Intellectually, a child-centred methodology deepens existing work on border migration policy, including that work sensitive to racial power, by showing how racialisation and youth intersect to produce racist stereotypes. This is particularly useful in understanding how racism erases ideas of "childhood innocence", adultifies youth populations, simplifies criminality and victimisation, and marks distinct categories of deserving and undeserving youth. In turn, and following feminist geographers like Megan Ybarra (2019a and b), Caitlin Cahill (2010), and Peter Hopkins (2004), who have centred youth (im)migrants, our work explores how the intersections of racism and childhoods-denied take form differently *in place*.

From here we trace the racialisation of Mexican youth on the US-Mexico border and show how this works to discriminate against them in securing protections such as asylum. We first examine the racialised geohistories of migration in Mexico, demonstrating how historically produced racialised ideologies surface in border politics via the tropes of criminality, contamination, and disposability. We then turn to a focus on the ways racio-governance shapes legal practice in ways that foreclose entitlements and protections such as screening Mexican youth for human trafficking and asylum, among other forms of legal relief. To close, we examine how racialised beliefs shape the practices of low-middle level Mexican shelter system bureaucrats and US CBP agents. Our goal is to show how contemporary depictions of Indigenous, Black and Brown Mexican youth as criminals, “rotten” contaminants, unworthy, and adultified non-children is part of distinct racialised ideologies of *mestizaje*, colourism, anti-Black, Brown and Indigenous, and anti-immigrant that come together at the border and mark who is valued and devalued, worthy of protection and disposable. This, we argue, permits the dismissal of their vulnerability by the Mexican and US state, denying Mexican Youth’s internationally protected rights and disregarding the bodily and psychological risk they face if they return.

Devalued, Unworthy, and Corrupt: the Geohistories of “Rotten Fruit”

When they see you’re Mexican . . . they treat you worse than a dog.

(Lorenzo, 17-year-old deported Mexican asylum-seeker, 07/31/2015)

Decolonial and antiracist moves by scholars like Bonilla (2020, 2021), Mora (2017), and Moreno Figueroa (2010) prompt us to trace the long “historical-geographies” (Van Sant et al. 2020) of colonial, structural violence that surface in the contemporary system of border control. The geohistories of racialisation in the US and Mexico have important parallels, connections, and groundings in colonialism, genocide, settlement, and enslavement (Lowe 2015; Mollett 2021; Smith 2005; Spillers 1987); they also have geographically- and nationally-specific racial formations and distinctions (as well as complex distinctions *within* these fictional nation-states). In Mexico, late 19th century racist-nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* – Indigenous-Spanish miscegenation – associated whiteness and the whitening of Mexican citizenry with civility and superiority (Moreno Figueroa 2010; Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016). In concert, *mestizaje* devalued Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples. Today, the ideology of *mestizaje* continues to valorise whitened bodies (Valdivia Ramirez 2022) while powerfully erasing “race” and

hiding the everyday and state practices of racism in place of a nationalist culture and class-based identity. Yet, as scholars of race in Mexico make clear, the nationalist ideology of *mestizaje* is itself, and always was, an anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, colourist and racial project – one that deftly constructs worthy/unworthy, human/dehuman, valuable/killable bodies (Gall 2013; Mora 2017; Moreno Figueroa 2010; Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres 2021; Wright 2011).

Racism and neocolonial asymmetries also mark the geopolitical history of US-Mexico relations (e.g Morán González 2009), including decades, if not centuries, of uneven development, colonial and neoliberal labour exploitation, state corruption and organised crime, wide-scale smallholder land loss, and the aggressive territorial expansion of US homeland security state migration control into Mexico (Durin 2013; Gonzales 2013; Slack 2019). This history drives contemporary forced migration in Mexico, which has the third largest number of internally displaced people in Latin America (CMDPDH 2020; IDMC 2017). Today, the United States continues to play a key role in fuelling the violence in Mexico as the largest consumer of illicit drugs, the architect of the bloody Mexican “war on drugs” (Paley 2014), and the primary supplier of illegal arms – so much so that the Mexican government recently filed an unprecedented lawsuit against US gunmakers (Agren and Holpuch 2021). This confluence of factors is complexly interwoven with, and often secured through, deathly violence, as Mexico is now coming to terms with over 94,000 disappeared people (FJEDD 2021). In 2018 alone, the Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH) acknowledged 25 episodes of massive internal displacement affecting 11,491 people across five states (CMDPDH 2020). Mexican youth, in particular, have been leaving their homes for decades due to multiple intersecting violences that include escalating homicide rates, cartel violence and recruitment, gang threats, human trafficking, domestic violence with impunity, land dispossession, extractivist projects, family separation, poverty, failed neoliberal development policies, state corruption, ethnic discrimination, racism, and gender/sexuality-based persecution, among others (Durin 2012, 2013; Glockner Fagetti 2008; Pizzey, Fredrick, and WOLA 2015; Slack 2019; Swanson and Torres 2019; Terrio 2015; Torres 2018).

Part of the mechanism of racio-governance is an elision of neocolonial, racialised, geoeconomic power relations that produce these structural violences (Bonilla 2020) and, as such, resistance to the possibility that Mexicans may be legitimate or “worthy” refugees (Mountz 2016; Mountz et al. 2013; Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Instead, one of the most historically entrenched arguments is that Mexicans, and by extension, Mexican youth, are not fleeing the same kinds of violence and threat as Central American migrants or other asylum-seekers. Instead, they are overwhelmingly positioned as exclusively economic migrants, coming to the US for work, to join their working parents,

and to lean on the welfare state (Vera Sanchez 2018). Their “unworthiness” allows for another racialised migrant trope to dominate, that of Mexican criminality. The process of racialisation here links certain and entire immigrant groups (such as Mexican immigrants or “other than Mexican” immigrants) to an already-assumed “criminal” status (Armenta 2016; De Genova 2002; Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Soletto 2013; Menjívar 2021). Socially constructed narratives of threat and transgression form a racialised “illegal” identity that institutionalises exclusion. Historically situated and place-specific, racialisations are produced and reinforced by immigration laws, targeted enforcement practices, media discourses, and social attitudes, and perceptions (Menjívar 2021). Mexicans living, working, and moving across the border are racialised by their own state and Mexican and US commercial interests at once as the quintessential cheap, low skilled, flexible, and disposable worker (Wright 2006) – rendering them impossible refugee subjects, undeserving of asylum status. In turn, they are typically positioned as already-criminals: via their assumed work as cartel members, traffickers, smugglers or, once they are in the US, via assumptions of their undocumented status, so typically framed as “criminal” or “illegal” in US immigration discourse (Brown, Jones, and Becker 2018; De Genova 2002; Gómez Cervantes 2021; Jones 2021; Rosas 2012; Valerio-Jiménez 2016).

In US-Mexico border spaces, and in discourses around Mexican migrants, the association of Mexicans with criminality is particularly stark. Mexicans are regularly racialised as criminal, positioned as the instigators of drug violence and/or smuggling related crime – diminishing their vulnerabilities and exposure to crime (Gonzales 2013; Rosas 2012; Slack and Martinez 2021). These two sets of stereotypes work together and in contradiction. At once, the US government and wider nationalist popular discourse positions Mexico as a dangerous and economically unstable country, “teeming” with criminals and afflicted by high unemployment. As Lorenzo, a deported Mexican youth, attested above, his racialisation as Mexican immediately made him a target for “treatment like a dog” by US immigration officials. Indeed, the criminalisation of Mexican children is intertwined with state crisis narratives of border insecurity (for historical examples see Morán González 2009). This gives licence to ignore protections, or worse, to sanction violence against the youth suspected of involvement with cartels or gangs. While Ybarra documents this process for Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran youth in southern Mexico (2019b), we see this operating in similar ways for Mexican youth at the US-Mexican border.

In this space, the state makes sense of youth via the same racist lens that positions Mexican adult migrants as a threat, a source of labour competition, or as lazy burdens on the welfare system, but these are often intensified or refracted in particular ways. Those who engage in “unchild-like behavior” (Aitken 2001) such as living without parents, working full-time, having babies,

or exerting agency and decision-making, are stereotyped and discriminated against because they fall outside of the frame of the “innocent child”. So too, can sexual identity as LGBTQ, indigeneity, forced marriage, and past victimisation work to strip innocence and proffer deviance on young people (REDODEM 2019). In this discourse, Mexican migrants are also positioned as criminals, while the wider discourse of illegality via the assumption of undocumented status (a form of criminal activity) itself extends throughout these narratives (Menjívar 2021). Thus the criminalisation of Mexican migrants, particularly youth, happens before they even pass through the border, functionally preventing them from doing so.

Unaccompanied child migration, in contrast to its portrayal as a recent “surge” event, is not a new phenomenon (Heidbrink 2020), but is rather produced from decades of colonial, structural violences. The racialisation of Mexican migrant youth is a part of this geohistory. The result is a depiction of Mexican migrant youth as criminals, “rotten” contaminants, unworthy, and adultified non-children. This enables the Mexican and US governments to ignore their vulnerability in the face of extensive violence and dismiss the bodily and psychological risk they face upon repatriation.

Unwanted Bodies and Systemic Abandonment: legal Logics of Racio-Governance

There is an agreement that says that CBP at the border will screen them [Mexican youth] but they never do . . . to see if they qualify for asylum, but the process is as soon as they come in with a Mexican child, immediately within hours they're back in the hands of the Mexican consulate who turns them back . . . and DIF [Mexican Child Protective Services] turns them back to the people that persecute them.

(Juan Rosas, US Immigration Attorney, 02/19/2016)

Assumptions about the criminality of Mexican youth, along with wider sentiments about their disposability and devalued status, are pervasive in the US-Mexican border system (De León 2018; Sanchez 2018). In this section we examine the way racialisation shapes legal practice, leading to the differential treatment of Mexican children at the US-Mexico border. This racialisation is reproduced and hardened structurally and codified by bilateral laws and agreements between the United States and Mexico. Both are complicit in state actions that produce and reproduce invisibility and exceptionality of unaccompanied Mexican children along the border. Racialised as either “economic migrants” or “criminals” rather than refugees fleeing violence and persecution, the vast majority of unaccompanied Mexican child migrants are not properly screened for vulnerabilities or potential legal relief. Most often, they are compelled by US immigration

authorities to sign “voluntary return” papers in English upon apprehension and are then repatriated without adherence to prescribed safety protocols (Thompson 2008; 2019; Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; Torres 2018). Once in the hands of Mexican child protective services, absent adequate screening or follow-up, they are often returned to unsafe circumstances. In the worst-case scenario, children who work with cartels are actually returned to “employers”. These bi-national instances of racialised governance illustrate how historically-produced racialisation is constructed not only through individual racisms, but through broader racialised legal logics of neglect and disposability with systemic and structural underpinnings.

Because of their racialisation, and in contrast to other nationalities, the vast majority of unaccompanied Mexican migrant children are functionally barred from seeking immigration relief at the US-Mexico border (Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; Pizzey, Fredrick and WOLA 2015; Thompson 2008). Differential categories codified within immigration law produce distinct legal outcomes (Gorman 2017), making immigration laws and legal interpretations yet another instance of racialised violence against Mexican youth. A clear example of the erasure of rights for Mexican youth is found in the uneven application of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorisation Act (TVPPRA 2005, 2008, 2013) This US law requires the screening of all unaccompanied children for trafficking – as well as credible fear of persecution upon return (for asylum). However, due to bi-national repatriation agreements and TVPPRA stipulations, unlike children from non-contiguous countries, Mexican minors are most often screened by Border Patrol officials. Under TVPPRA, children from contiguous countries (Mexico and Canada) must be screened within 48 hours and repatriated if they do not meet criteria for protections. In contrast, those from non-contiguous nations must be turned over to ORR within 72 hours. In most cases, rather than being evaluated by an asylum officer trained to work with children, Mexican youth deal with CBP officials. Border patrol agents serve as *de facto* adjudicators (UNHCR 2014) – which, as a law enforcement entity charged with restricting immigration – is a conflict of interest.

The TVPPRA inadvertently created a system of legal protections, rights and resources available to non-Mexican youth that, because of the geographical distinction, are routinely and extralegally denied to Mexicans in practice. Growing evidence suggests screening protocols are rarely followed by CBP officials – especially with Mexican children (UNHCR 2014; Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; US GAO) 2016; Torres 2018; University of Chicago Law School – Global Human Rights Clinic 2019; Coulter et al. 2020). Due to their distinct categorisation under TVPPRA, Mexican minors are detained separately when apprehended and identified as ERS, or Expedited Removals, a term indicating that they will be immediately deported without the chance to

see an immigration judge. Unsurprisingly, most Mexican youth are returned to Mexico within hours, and nearly all (95.5%) are repatriated within two days of reaching the United States (UNHCR 2014; Amnesty International 2021). Since most are immediately returned at the border, Mexican youth comprise less than 3% of unaccompanied minors referred to ORR custody in contrast to children from Guatemala (40%), El Salvador (34%), and Honduras (21%) (2016 data, ORR 2016). This, despite that in 2016 (during shelter fieldwork period), they were 20% of the unaccompanied minors encountered at the border (US CBP 2021). If they do make it to the US, Mexican children seldomly have the opportunity to pursue asylum or other legal protections in immigration courts, despite the legitimacy of their claims. In 2016, they represented only 5% of unaccompanied juvenile initial immigration court filings. This compares with 33% Salvadorans, 37% Guatemalans, and 21% Hondurans that same year (TRAC 2021). When they do make it to court, many do not have lawyers – only 49% of Mexican children had a legal representative at their initial filing in 2016. In this regard, Central American children did not fare much better, with only 47% of Guatemalans, 50% of Hondurans, and 66% of Salvadorans with legal representation that same year. Only a negligible percentage of both Mexican and Central American children (1–3% in 2016) are officially “granted relief” in US immigration courts (TRAC 2021). Of these nationalities, in 2016 Mexican and Guatemalan children received the highest proportion of removal orders (36% for each), compared to those from El Salvador (19%) and Honduras (31%) (TRAC 2021). Overall, neither Mexican nor Central American children fare well in US immigration hearings, however, the former are far less likely to make it across the border into ORR custody and into a US immigration court.

This evolution of distinct migrant categories translates into disparate legal geographies that result in differential opportunities to protection by nationality (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Mexican youth are subject to everyday, extra-official forms of restriction–blurring the lines between legal distinction and racialised treatment. Racio-governance is revealed as a spatial tactic of exclusion (Gorman 2017) as US law related to contiguous nation-states is shaped by processes and practices of racialisation and binational political negotiations in the space of the US-Mexico border. Carmen’s case illustrates how racial governance functions in both the US and Mexican governments. Carmen was 15 years old when we interviewed her in a Mexican government shelter/detention centre for unaccompanied children after being deported from the United States. Before arriving in the shelter, she had been living with her mother and three younger brothers and attending school in McAllen, Texas for six months. Her family had left their home in the western state of Colima, Mexico because her mother, as a small business owner, was subjected to constant threats and extortion of regular “quotas” by organised crime. Carmen and her mother, the only ones without papers, were moving with

her brothers to join her stepfather in Houston. They were travelling in separate vehicles and Carmen was with her mother's friend when she was stopped and arrested at an immigration checkpoint in South Texas. During her interview, she described asking throughout her CBP custody for an opportunity to call her mother and being denied until she was repatriated to Mexico. She recounted her interactions with the border patrol agents:

Interviewer: Did they (CBP agents) ask you if there were any reasons you would not want to return to Mexico?

Carmen: Why I didn't want to go back? –No, they didn't ask ... I tried to tell them something, but they gave me something to sign if I didn't want to stay in the country (US). I asked them, "what if I want to stay in this country?", but they said, "sign it because if you don't you'll have to go before a judge, and (then) another judge, and another judge, and another judge ... and it is better that you sign" and so, yeah, I finally signed.

(Carmen, 15-year-old deported asylum-seeker, 07/13/2015)

The CBP agent did not explain that going before a judge was not necessarily a punishment, but an opportunity to plead a case for legal relief. For CBP to be able to legally remove an undocumented individual from the United States without giving them a chance to speak to an immigration judge, the individual must sign a form indicating that they are "departing" the country "voluntarily" – essentially, consenting to repatriation. Like most youth in our study (approximately two-thirds surveyed, though likely higher), Carmen admitted to not understanding the papers she signed. CBP presents children of all ages with the same legal forms, in English, that it presents to adult detainees. Many reported threats of prolonged detention or other types of coercion to pressure them into signing. Carmen was apprehended and deported, separated from her family, and denied her right to legal advocacy. Crossing the bridge to Mexico, Carmen remembered, "I was very nervous crying because I was sad not knowing how I was going to be with my mom". A Mexican official met her at the bridge and delivered Carmen to the shelter where she would wait for an extended family member to pick her up. Carmen's fear of returning to Mexico was ignored by officials on both sides of the border. Had she been Central American, instead of immediate removal she would have been transferred to ORR, screened by an asylum or child protection officer, and eventually released to her mother, while awaiting immigration proceedings. Carmen's case illustrates how "spaces of exception" exist for Mexican youth at the border, in which exceptionality is not only extra-juridical – that is outside of the law, or even simply a suspension of a law (Coleman 2007) – but rather a "point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence" (Agamben 1998, cited in Coleman 2007, 32).

This is not to suggest that US state bordering practices stop at the border. Scholars have traced the ways that US policy shapes migrant management throughout Mexico (Hiemstra 2019; Swanson et al.), including for Central American youth in southern Mexico (Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres 2021; Ybarra 2019a). But the racialisation of Mexican youth as criminals, their depiction as “unchildlike” youth without innocence, and their disposability in US-Mexican border spaces marks them as unworthy of asylum and other legal protections. This denies them the rights afforded to non-Mexicans in US-Mexico border space to enter ORR and immigration proceedings.

Mexican youth are excluded from rights regimes and entitlements due to the nature of the law itself, or the relationship between legal structures and everyday racio-governance. The lack of proper screening at the border, being denied access to legal support upon apprehension, and lack of protection in Mexican border cities upon repatriation are clear instances of seemingly neutral policies having racialised effects. As one of the few attorneys working primarily with Mexican asylum-seekers, Juan Rojas (02/19/2016), reflecting on the vagaries of both US and Mexican immigration laws and policies, concluded: “in Mexico, human rights are violated by breaking the law and in the United States human rights are violated by implementing the law”.

“Hierba Mala” in the System: the Denial of Due Process by Border Officials

... Yolanda, who was with her 4-year-old son, heard agents talking amongst themselves, saying “Mexicans are shit, asylum is not for Mexicans”. When an (US border control) agent told her “Sign this to be deported” she refused saying, “no, I am not going to sign anything, I want to tell them why I left and what I am fleeing”. She and her son were deported without her ever signing her removal paperwork.

(Asylum Seeker account, *Kino Border Initiative Press Release*, 10/04/2019)

Yolanda’s experience of the process of deportation is one shared by many Mexicans. It reflects the ways that practices of racio-governance filter into and are reproduced by everyday norms of border control officials. Turning to the operations of racialised exceptionality, we next look at how national racist criminalisation narratives filter down to permeate the everyday practices of low-to-mid level officials on the border. Using the narratives of Mexican youth’s interactions with multiple actors in both the US and Mexico and those of Mexican shelter staff, we examine the ways that practices of racialised governance are reproduced by everyday and quotidian norms of border control officials.

As we detail above, the assumption that most Mexican migrant children are from border towns and involved in smuggling or other organised crime is pervasive among officials in both the US and Mexico. As Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres (2021) illustrate, racialisation and criminalisation are closely interwoven in bureaucratic training, everyday discourse about migrants, and the practice of managing asylum claims. Bureaucrats embody state anxieties around national security, crime, and immigration, shaping their decision-making around asylum (ibid). In turn, along the US-Mexico border young Mexicans, particularly males, of certain geographic origins or socioeconomic class are systematically perceived as gang members or smugglers by shelter staff and border police in both nations. This, along with the historical racialisation of Mexicans as exclusively labour migrants, leads to a widespread belief, to cite one US border patrol agent that, “asylum is not for Mexicans”. This assumption is taken up by a wide range of migration-related bureaucrats and employees. For example, in interviews Mexican shelter staff often conflated Mexican origin with youth working with cartels smuggling migrants or as drug mules. Those most suspect are low-income youth from northern border communities. So ubiquitous are conceptions of Mexican children working as guides that one shelter director described them as “like *hierba mala* (weeds), they grow back the next day, and you pull out another and it grows back”. [06/22/2015] Another noted: “we isolate them [the Mexican youth migrants] from the *real migrants* . . . it’s like rotten fruit . . . if you put it together with spoiled fruit, they both rot”. (José, government youth shelter director, 06/22/2015). In reality, our research found that the majority of repatriated youth we surveyed in shelters (74.5%) were not from the border states. This closely approximates DIF’s geographic origin data for all Mexican youth that same year, indicating the three shelters where we worked were not anomalies (Lorenzen Martiny 2016). Youth from non-border states, at the time, were less likely to be involved in smuggling (Julian, government shelter coordinator, 06/11/2015), suggesting that fewer repatriated Mexican children work in organised crime than US and Mexican officials’ discourse would indicate.

This racialisation leads to the treatment of all Mexican youth with less compassion and greater suspicion, as illustrated through our interviews with Mexican shelter managers and staff. In their efforts to keep the “bad apples” of Mexican youth from Central Americans, shelter managers regularly isolate them and attempt to “move them through” as quickly as possible. The differential treatment of Mexican children, codified by laws and agreements is, in part, premised on the assertion that they will be handed over to the safety of Mexican child welfare authorities. Yet shelter staff, citing inadequate resources and police who are often corrupt and/or entangled with organised crime, feel they are unable to provide protection to their Mexican charges, as reflected in Mari’s resigned comments:

... yes, kids do arrive here (at the shelter) claiming they are “going to kill” me, but in the end they leave. I don’t believe they go back home, ... I imagine they go to some other place, but we don’t know ... we don’t know what’s to be done ...

(Mari, Mexican shelter worker, 07/06/2015)

This functional “dual-track” system once again demonstrates how legal structures both rely on and reinforce this exceptionalism, exclusion, and racialisation of Mexican youth. One shelter manager explained, “Many times the parent will authorize the *pollero* (smuggling employer) to pick them up”. He also pointed out the inability to involve law enforcement in such cases, “Many times the authorities are in it with them, so we avoid it (involving police) because ... what can we do? It is sad ...” (07/06/2021). Given the limited child welfare resources and the challenges operating in the shadow of the paralegal state, the processes available to this shelter manager suggest that there are no strong mechanisms in place to ensure repatriated youth are not returned to abusive homes, dangerous environments, or even criminal elements.

Sometimes it *is* the case that Mexican youth at the border are, or have been, involved in criminal activity. However, it is not surprising that we found little indication of screening suspected youth smugglers for welfare or protection. Indeed, we found that all three shelter directors admitted to turning kids over to cartel employers in order to protect the shelter staff and the Central American children – their priority in terms of care. We learned that when this is the case there is rarely any acknowledgement of the structural oppressions or limited life paths that led to working with cartels. The combined racialised framing of Mexican youth with existing legal structural problems and police corruption create incredibly challenging conditions for shelter staff. If it becomes hard to deal with Mexican youth, the shelter staff ultimately deny them their rights and abandon them.

No Redemption, No Rights: Mexican Child Smugglers and the CBP

We found the criminalisation of Mexican youth to be binational – not only prevalent among Mexican shelter staff, INM (Mexican immigration) agents and consulates but also US embassy officials, border patrol, and even NGOs. This racialisation of Mexican youth as criminals also elided any sensitivity to the fact they may also, or in particular, be victimised by crime. Indeed, and ironically, without state protection or support, some Mexican youth are more vulnerable to recruitment into criminal activity. Border youth in particular are at risk of recruitment into cartels – youth are cheaper to employ, are more easily exploitable, and are not subject to the same prison terms as adults. In turn, the racialised disposability of youth is also reflected in the cartel system. Organised crime networks use children to avoid apprehension and prosecution (Alcántara and Gómez 2014; Pérez Silva 2012; Sanchez 2018; Segura 2021;

UNHCR 2014). They become trapped in exploitative cycles of vicious violence serving as drug mules or migrant smugglers, often with no way out (Moreno Mena and Avedaño Millán 2015; Vera Sanchez 2018; Peña and García-Mendoza 2019; Hernández Hernández 2021).

Despite the vulnerability of Mexican youth to recruitment into cartels, their racialisation as disposable, unworthy, and criminal leaves no room to *also* understand them as victimised by crime (Segura Herrera 2021; Valdivia, Faria and Torres 2021). Rather, these young people often suffer the worst abuses and rights violations at the hands of CBP (re: child smugglers see Hernández-Hernández 2021; Segura Herrera 2021; Vera Sanchez 2018). In conversations with Ruben and Desi, two former guides, violence during apprehension and detention at the hands of CBP was common. Here the criminalisation of youth ignores the way that, even as they engage in illicit activity, they are also rendered vulnerable subjects of that activity. While handcuffing minors is illegal, 16-year-old Ruben demonstrated how officers tightened cuffs to the point of cutting off circulation: “They [CBP] hit me on the head with a flashlight and put me in handcuffs ... up to here handcuffs, they put them here ... look it’s bruised” (07/01/2015). Desi, 18 years old at the time of the interview, recalled when he was apprehended the agent was angry and screamed, “you made me run!” Then “they started to use the taser gun on us, kicking and bumping us on the head”. One officer recognised him, “Go figure, the migration (officer) said ‘man – this one we already know – hand him over to me’. And that’s when he started to beat me ... he hurt me with the taser. Hitting me where you couldn’t see (the bruises)” (07/28/2015). Engagement in criminal acts strips Mexican youth like Ruben and Desi of innocence, their own victimisation, redemption, and thus of their rights. Simplistic, zero-sum understandings of illegal acts, notably smuggling, is made possible by an already-devalued view of Mexican boys in particular.

While some of the youth we interviewed said that CBP asked whether they were afraid to return to Mexico, their responses often had no bearing on removal. This was the case for 17-year-old Lorenzo – originally from the state of Colima. He had lived with his mother in the United States for over eight years, returned to be with his father, and was now attempting to join his mother again in Iowa. Lorenzo described being deported to Mexico after months in US custody, detailing his fear of return after having collaborated with law enforcement while in the midst of his processes to secure legal relief. He was particularly worried because he had provided border patrol information against the smugglers when he was apprehended at the border. Prior to deportation, he told border patrol, “that they [guides/hitmen] threatened to kill my family if I return [to Mexico] and I had talked. I told them [CBP] places along the border where they broke the sensors ... I told them and they sent me

back here anyway” (07/31/2015). After being in US detention for four months because his smugglers carried drugs, collaborating with law enforcement, and receiving several death threats – Lorenzo was returned to a potentially life-threatening situation. Even though he was cleared of drug smuggling charges, given the circumstances of his arrest, his position as a suspected smuggler may have led officials to violate the premise of non-refoulement. This prohibition of forcibly returning an asylum-seeker to a country where they are likely to be subjected to persecution is at the heart of asylum law.

Racialised stereotypes deeply impact the prospects of Mexican youth for successful asylum claims or other forms of legal relief. Our study revealed that Mexican youth from all backgrounds experienced rights violations while in CBP custody. For example, nearly a fifth of repatriated Mexican minors we surveyed in 2015 (18%) were threatened with prolonged detention as a form of coercion; only a third (36%) understood the documents in English they were told or sometimes coerced to sign (likely “voluntary return” papers); only a fifth (21%) were offered an opportunity to speak to their consulate; and only 15% were allowed to call a family member while in custody. The majority of repatriated youth (62%) indicated they were not asked by CBP if they were afraid to return to Mexico, which is a key question when assessing potential qualifications for asylum (Torres 2018). This, despite 85% of surveyed youth indicating one or more legal vulnerabilities in their responses (Thompson 2019). While seemingly minor procedural violations, the consequences are profound. For example, we found cases of youth with significant potential legal grounds to remain in the United States, and with parents who secured attorneys, as was the case with Carmen above, only to be denied their right to a phone call, coerced, or deceived into signing voluntary return papers, and immediately repatriated to Mexico (Torres 2018). Our results are consistent with reports of CBP’s frequent failure to implement federally mandated screening protocols to detect Mexican children with vulnerabilities (Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; Coulter et al. 2020; UNHCR 2014; University of Chicago Law School – Global Human Rights Clinic 2019; GAO, 2016).

The instances detailed here shift our attention from discriminatory acts undertaken by border officials, to *racio-governance* as a structural racism present in ubiquitous stereotyping of Mexican youth as criminal, unworthy, contaminating, disposable, and thus undeserving of basic rights. The logics that racialise Mexican youth and systematically criminalise and deny them access to humanitarian protections at the US-Mexico border effectively exclude them from the (limited) rights provided to unaccompanied migrant children from other nations.

Conclusion: Negotiating Racialised Governance on the Border

In 2021 the growing number of unaccompanied migrant children at the US southern border captured media headlines again – a déjà vu of the 2014 “unaccompanied child migration crisis”. By the end of the year, CBP reported 146,925 border encounters with single minor children – a record number greater than the most recent peak of over 80,000 in 2019, and more than double that of 2014 (US CBP 2022b). Children continued to arrive despite the Trump administration’s implementation of the most draconian anti-immigrant policies in recent US history. The COVID-19 pandemic provided the latest exclusion and one of the most powerful tools in the US government’s arsenal, the implementation of Title 42 exemptions permitting immediate expulsion of migrants and asylum seekers under the guise of public health measures in March 2020, despite opposition of much of the medical community (Blue et al. 2021). Title 42 expulsions included unaccompanied children prior to their exemption under the Biden administration in February 2021. In an attempt to signal a more humane stance on immigration than his predecessor, while presenting as tough on border enforcement, President Biden remarked: “The only people we’re not going to let siting [sic] there on the other side of the Rio Grande by themselves with no help are children” (White House, 3/25/2021). Shortly after the exemption of unaccompanied minors from Title 42 expulsions, his administration admitted to a policy of repatriating nearly all Mexican unaccompanied children (Coulehan 2021), even reducing them to a footnote in the DHS/HHS Unaccompanied Children Daily Reports (Amnesty International 2021; DHS/HHS 2021) that read, “*This Number does not include Children from Mexico, most of whom will be repatriated and will not remain in CBP Custody”. Even migrant children who are alone, if Mexican, are largely invisibilized and deemed unworthy of protection. Turning a blind eye to Mexican children ignores the fact that they comprised nearly half of CBP reported “encounters” with unaccompanied minors along the southwest border in (US CBP 2022a). Despite Biden’s humanitarian rhetoric, in practice the administration continues to invisibilize and erase unaccompanied Mexican children from the protected legal category to which they belong.

Via these acts, the US state continues its longstanding historical policy stance of racialised neglect towards Mexican migrants/asylum seekers, turning a blind eye to the extraordinary violence many face at home and along the border (Torres et al. 2021). Indeed, the unjust differential treatment, and complete erasure of Mexican children, existed long before the pandemic. To truly understand the 2014 unaccompanied minor migration “crisis” and the racialisation and erasure of Mexican youth at the border, it is necessary to address a far longer history of structural violence within Mexico and between

Mexico and the United States. The focus on a reified moment of “crisis” in 2014 ignored the longer arc of Mexican youth migration and contributed to their exclusion and racialisation. The dramatic increase in youth migration is more productively seen as the result of a “disordered jumble of seismic events” (Bonilla 2021) that displace children and their families from their homes: long held and reproduced racisms, sexism, labour exploitation and land theft, cartel activity and corruption.

This article calls attention to the longstanding racialised erasure of Mexican migrant youth. It traces how repatriated Mexican children experience everyday migration restriction performed by embodied state actors, and how these legal and extra-judicial (in)actions construct the US-Mexico border as a space of exclusion for Mexican children, (re)producing precarity with often devastating results. Specifically, we examine racist-nationalist “crisis” narratives that persistently devalue, dehumanise, and legally abandon Mexican youth, powerfully rendering them “other than”–outside and threatening to–the US immigration system. Mexican youth are not simply ignored or overlooked. Rather there is a *de facto* negation of their *right* to claim asylum or other legal protections. These moves have deep material impacts. They carve a path for aggressive state strategies of deterrence and enforcement that heighten the vulnerability of unaccompanied children, to human and legal rights abuses, and dehumanisation, through both legally sanctioned and informal practices (Carte 2014).

As we show here, a key component of this racialisation is the naturalisation of Mexicanness with criminality. This racialisation is produced through wider, historical, colonial political-economic structures, what Van Sant et al. (2020) call “historical-geographies” that are enacted in legal systems, border policy, and everyday beliefs, decisions, and norms. Via Bonilla’s theorisation of racio-colonial governance, we cannot separate out discrimination along lines of citizenship and/or nationalist identity (as “Mexican”), the law and legal practice, and associations around age from the historically produced ideals of race, processes of racialisation and practices of US and Mexican strands of racism which converge at the US-Mexican border. This takes particular form and has particular impacts for Mexican youth in US-Mexico border spaces where racialised tropes of criminality, contamination, worthiness and threat mark them as unworthy of protection. We see parallels in the marking of Central American youth in southern Mexico (Valdivia Ramirez, Faria, and Torres 2021; Ybarra 2019b) and low-income Black and Brown youth in the US (Falola 2016; Falola and Faria 2018). Seeing how racialisation and racio-governance operates at the US-Mexican border extends existing literature on race by migration scholars by demonstrating its malleability and spatiality. In turn, it extends Bonilla’s project via a focus on Mexican youth, demonstrating how

historically-produced racist stereotyping around criminality, worthiness, security, lost innocence, and childhoods-denied are shaped by place and institutionalised in the US-Mexico border-complex.

We close with an opening: Navigating the narrow and violent constraints of racialisation, but with very limited options, its impact on Mexican youth can be devastating. But, as Jhoanna's words highlight, and our research shows, they find ways to resist, negotiate, and challenge these constraints:

When they [CBP] told me to sign the papers they wanted, I told them I didn't want to return to my country because of the violence and the threats we received . . . I told them I wasn't going to sign [the voluntary return papers] and they told me if I didn't sign they were going to take me to jail . . . but in any case, I'm not going to sign anything.

(16-year-old Jhoanna, repatriated asylum seeker, 7/16/2015)

After Jhoanna refused to sign and was eventually permitted to call her mother, CBP hung up the call as soon as they began discussing getting an attorney. In addition to refusing to sign papers and asserting their rights to phone calls and legal counsel, as in Jhoanna's case, others described withholding information or providing misinformation, calling out officials on rights violations, or accepting repatriation as a means to an end (Thompson 2019; Thompson et al. 2019). Throughout their narratives we witnessed the strength, ingenuity, persistence, agentic strategies, and acts of care and love embedded in children's mobilities. Yet, we resist celebrating the "resilience" of unaccompanied migrant children, joining Bonilla (2020) in her scepticism of state, academic, and non-governmental narratives of "resilience" that reproduce structural violences and the status quo. We see in moments such as Jhoanna's experience the tightly constrained spaces within which Mexican youth navigate, the ways entitlements are withheld, and potential freedoms stolen. Yet remarkably, in the face of persistent state violence and racialised neglect of two nations, Jhoanna, and many others with whom we spoke, plans to "try again", resisting bordering and exerting her rights to leave her country and seek protection in the United States.

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Data availability statement

The data related to this research is under embargo until completion of all publishable results.

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