
The arterial border: negotiating economies of risk and violence in Mexico's security regime

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Abstract: This article examines the material and ideological dimensions of what I conceptualise as Mexico's 'arterial border'. Since the late 1980s, transit routes in Mexico's interior have increasingly become sites of a diffused migration enforcement strategy. Based on long-term ethnographic research along Central American transit routes, I examine how the arterial border has developed historically and is experienced by migrants in local contexts. I pay particular attention to the disjuncture between violent encounters with the state and discourses of security, human rights and humanitarianism that serve to legitimise bordering practices. Such an analysis moves beyond understandings of borders as spatially fixed entities to reimagine them as constantly shifting and dynamic sites of state violence, individual agency and contestation.

Keywords: bordering practices; transit routes; violence; security; Central American migrants; Mexico.

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1 Introduction

"Mexicans have it easy. They only have to cross the northern border. We Central Americans have to cross Mexico", I was told by Aurelio, a Honduran man I met while conducting ethnographic research at a humanitarian aid shelter for Central American migrants in State of Oaxaca in Southern Mexico. The US-Mexico border, one of the most

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heavily enforced borders in the world, was met with a shrug from this migrant who called it 'easy' in comparison to what he had to face crossing Mexico. From his perspective, several days walking through the brutal Sonoran Desert or wading across the waters of the Rio Grande in attempts to evade US Border Patrol agents paled in comparison to the typical journey faced by Central Americans. Already in transit for several weeks, he had witnessed and been subject to multiple forms of violence. Recently extorted by Mexican police in the Southern State of Chiapas, he was now waiting for a family member to wire him money at the shelter. Aurelio knew that, even when the money arrived, he would still face one of the most dangerous stretches of the journey through the State of Veracruz. Rumours had begun to swirl that the notoriously brutal Zetas cartel now controlled the train routes in Veracruz. They were demanding migrants pay a fee to ride the freight trains; those who did not pay risked kidnapping or being pushed off. He was at a crossroads – continue along on the train through the epicentre of mass kidnappings and violence, or try his luck taking the bus along Mexican highways studded with militarised checkpoints. The priest at the shelter was advising some migrants to take an alternate and more circuitous bus route to the next shelter in attempts to bypass official checkpoints. But this route posed its own dangers, as migrants reported profiling and extortion by both the bus driver and local police dressed in civilian clothing. Whichever route he chose, Aurelio risked more violence with no guarantee that he would avoid deportation, disappearance or death. As he made clear to me, just making it to Mexico's northern border with the USA would be a dream.

Historically, the majority of scholarship on migration routes to the USA has concentrated on the US-Mexico border region. Indeed, the US-Mexico border is one of the world's most visible displays of state power manifest through a sophisticated border enforcement infrastructure (Dunn, 1996; Nevins, 2002). Yet, for Aurelio and many others I met during fieldwork along Central American transit routes, the US-Mexico border represented just one phase within a longer trajectory of movement through militarised space. This article looks beyond the US-Mexico border region to understand some of the complexities around transit journeys and migration enforcement for people travelling within the Central America-Mexico-USA corridor. The concept of transit migration is one that has primarily been applied by scholars to contexts around the borders of Europe (for example, Collyer et al., 2014; Collyer et al., 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008; Schapendonk, 2012), yet a critical approach to transit provides a useful lens to understand shifting patterns of mobility, enforcement and violence in the Americas as well.

More specifically, in this paper I examine the material and ideological dimensions of what I conceptualise as Mexico's 'arterial border'. Since the late 1980s, transit routes in Mexico's interior have increasingly become sites of a 'diffused' (Bowling and Sheptycki, 2011) migration enforcement strategy via roadside checkpoints, surveillance technologies, vehicle patrols, raids and detention facilities. Activists in Mexico have used the phrase 'vertical border' to critique the proliferation of immigration enforcement in Mexico's interior, particularly in response to the rollout of Mexico's 2014 Southern Border Program. However, the metaphor of a vertical border still imagines and consolidates state power in a spatially linear, ahistorical and top-down framework. In contrast, the arterial border conceptualises power in terms of more fluid, multidirectional and contested 'regimes of mobility' (Schiller and Salazar, 2013) along transit routes. Moreover, as Walters (2015) has argued, by decentering political borders, we may turn our focus to other types of spatialities, particularly the geographical and infrastructural transit routes where the politics of migration are 'visualised, problematised, policed and

contested' (p.9). The arterial border becomes a space to examine how bordering practices are continuously *performed* (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Kaiser, 2012) by state agents, politicians, migrants and local actors through a dynamic mixture of material infrastructures, discourses and encounters.

Such an approach seeks to understand bordering practices as historically contingent and embedded within specific socio-political contexts. This paper places Central American transit flows and bordering practices into historical context by examining periods of intensified immigration enforcement from the 1980s to the present. For decades, Central Americans have sought to cross Mexico where they have been subject to surveillance, policing and enforcement strategies conceived of and carried out by a range of state and transnational actors. At different points in history, Mexico's southern border with Guatemala has been explicitly and implicitly treated as the new southern border of the USA.¹

Using data from ethnographic research carried out between 2006 and 2013, I then consider how the arterial border is embodied and experienced by people on the ground in Mexico. While migrants experience a continuum of state and non-state violence en route, this paper primarily focuses on encounters between migrants and agents of the state. Not only does the arterial border funnel people into more dangerous routes and illicit economies, but violence has also become routinised and central to bordering practices.

Beyond its material manifestations, the arterial border is also discursively constructed and legitimised through policy and 'security talk' (Goldstein, 2010). In the concluding sections of this paper I examine the ways bordering practices are legitimised through the language of security, human rights and humanitarianism. Drawing on recent examples from Mexico's 'Southern Border Program' and the USA's 'Dangers Awareness Campaign', I argue that migrants are simultaneously positioned as threats to national security and as victims in need of rescue and protection. The contradictions inherent in the ways such policies are constructed and practised work to legitimise new security strategies. In doing so, they further reproduce the violence and vulnerability experienced by unauthorised migrants along arterial routes. Ultimately, through an ethnographic analysis that pays attention to the spatial, temporal and discursive construction of the arterial border, we understand it not as a fixed entity, but as a constantly shifting and dynamic site of state legitimisation, individual agency and contestation.

2 From external borders to the arterial border

There is no doubt that national borders are crucial spaces to examine ongoing projects of state making and national sovereignty in a globalised world (Wilson and Donnan, 2012). Borders often operate as a political stage where the state visibly performs its commitment to progress through immigration and border enforcement, even if they are not particularly effective or efficient at deterring drugs and people [Andreas, (2000), p.9]. Yet they are not monolithic; they are dynamic sites of social interaction and agency that take place along what Mountz has called the 'fractured fault lines of daily practice' (2010, p. xxi). Moreover, these bordering practices are increasingly carried out in spaces far removed from external borders.

In recent years, scholars have moved beyond understandings of borders as fixed ‘lines in the sand’ (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012) to reimagine the political geographies where borders are ‘enacted, materialised and performed’ [Johnson et al., (2011), p.62]. The ‘delocalisation’ (Walters, 2006) of immigration controls from external borders moves toward more nuanced perspectives on the workings of governance, violence and state power. For example, in light of significant geopolitical changes after the 1985 Schengen Area Agreement, social scientists working in Europe re-examined “the spatial reconfiguration of immigration control beyond a neat inside/outside cartography” [Coleman, (2012), p.420]. Attention turned to the ways Europe’s borders moved into the spaces of everyday life where immigrant groups become subject to increasing surveillance, policing and ethno-racial profiling (Fassin, 2011; Mutsaers, 2014). Yet Europe’s border regime has also moved beyond European soil. The externalisation of Europe’s border control is embodied in ‘European Neighbourhood Policies’, which delegate immigration enforcement and surveillance to non-European ‘transit’ states (Fassin, 2011). For example, Ruben Andersson (2014) has examined the complex entanglements of Europe’s border policing industry within what he calls the emerging Euro-African borderlands.

While borders may be provisional and mobile, they are not random or simply everywhere (Johnson et al., 2011). Rather, they are often strategically located within and beyond sovereign territorial sites (Johnson et al., 2011). A focus on Mexico’s arterial border thus offers an important case study through which to examine the strategic ‘thickening’ (Rosas, 2006) of border controls in the Americas. Internal policing mechanisms seek to manage not only immigrant communities but also people in active transit.

The 714-miles that make up Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala and Belize, sometimes called *la otra frontera* (the other border), are notoriously porous and easy to cross. It is not until migrants reach highways and train routes further inland that their mobility begins to be subject to the significant build-up of state surveillance and policing. The politics of migration play out spatially along highways, railways and foot trails that cut through and across Mexico like arteries. They also play out in train yards, near migrant shelters and local communities where migrants stop, rest, eat, work and negotiate their movements. These spaces become “sites of exception, where regimes of police prevail over regimes of rights” [Fassin, (2011), p.9]. Yet the arterial border is uneven; it expands and contracts across space and over time depending on local, national and transnational socio-political contexts. Moreover, the power of the arterial border is not simply top-down. Within Mexico’s regimes of mobility, power is produced, embodied and contested by state and non-state actors – migrants, asylum seekers, police, shelter workers, priests, migration authorities, criminals, residents – in local spaces. As such, we must understand the dynamic relationship between migration strategies and bordering practices and the ways they ‘ricochet’ off each other [Andersson, (2016), p.4].

The arterial border also offers a lens into understanding the ways larger structural conditions and policies play out in local spaces. Mexico’s arterial border is not solely the product of Mexican state policies, but the result of transnational pressures and partnerships under the pretext of security and a hemispheric war against drug trafficking. As such, the arterial border offers an intriguing lens that contributes to scholarship on immigration enforcement beyond the territorial margins of the state. Such a perspective contributes to work on the transnationalisation of crime and insecurity and emerging ‘transnational-state systems’ of global policing [Bowling and Sheptycki, (2011), p.102;

Andreas and Nadelmann, 2006]. I do not suggest that Mexico's arterial border has become so diffuse that territorial sites of enforcement are no longer important. On the contrary, enforcement practices depend on localised infrastructural and territorial logics of transportation/movement as well as historical institutional, political and discursive assemblages of power.

3 Securing the south: refugees, national security and the war on drugs

To understand contemporary experiences of transit and enforcement in Mexico, it is important to place the arterial border into historical context. Over the last half-century, we have seen an increase in the policing of Central Americans through various efforts to 'secure the south'. State-sponsored crackdowns on Central Americans have historically intensified in relation to US political pressure during periods of heightened concern over immigration and national/hemispheric security. Yet immigration enforcement in Mexico has never been monolithic. Even along the Mexico-Guatemala border we see how bordering practices are historically uneven and contingent. Galemba (2013, pp.278–279) has analysed the selective invisibility of some 'illegal' border crossings which allows the state to uphold an image of a controlled and orderly border and still profit from illegal activities that support local economies. At the same time, the Mexican state occasionally makes such spaces hypervisible in order to justify new border-making practices, which increasingly take place in Mexico's interior [Galemba, (2013), p.279]. By rendering certain border crossings and enforcement practices visible and others invisible, the state is able to uphold its image, justify increased militarisation and assert its sovereignty.

The Mexico-Guatemala border region has a history of cross-border trade and labour, particularly for Guatemalans who have historically worked on coffee plantations in the Mexican state of Chiapas (Castillo, 2001). However, more restrictive immigration policies emerged in Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s as large numbers of Central Americans fled political and social unrest and civil war in their countries of origin (González-Murphy and Koslowski, 2011). In 1974, under *Ley General de la Población* (General Law of Population) the unauthorised entry of a non-citizen into Mexico was considered a criminal act. The criminalisation of unauthorised people included a possible prison sentence and monetary fine. In the 1980s, Mexico first began to militarise its southern border and regulate the flow of Central American refugees (Cruz-Burguete, 2013). Yet as the Central American civil wars continued to escalate, pressures for asylum increased and Mexico had to reconsider its position toward refugees. While Mexico's General Population Law did not recognise 'refugee' as an official category, it began offering protection and assistance to some Guatemalan refugees and established camps in the states of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo.² Yet at the same time, Mexico was under pressure by the USA to stem the flow of asylum seekers crossing Mexican territory. In a coordinated effort with Mexican and Central American Governments, in February 1989 the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) implemented Operation Hold-the-Line, a program intended to stop Central Americans from reaching US soil, thus precluding them from applying for US asylum (Zucker and Zucker, 1996; Frelick, 1991). Operation Hold-the-Line³ supported US training of Mexican authorities, predictive intelligence sharing, the establishment of transit checkpoints and the deportation of intercepted Central Americans. The operation was deemed a 'success'; in

Mexico, the number of Central Americans deported in 1989 marked a 500% increase from the number deported in 1988. In 1990, the numbers of Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans apprehended at the US-Mexico border dropped by 20% (Frelick, 1991; Zucker and Zucker, 1996).

It could be argued that the 'success' of Operation Hold-the-Line was measured less in the drop of Central Americans reaching US soil and more in terms of the precedent it set for Mexico's cooperation with a US immigration and security agenda. Indeed, in the 1990s and 2000s, Mexico expanded its enforcement infrastructure along interior transit routes through various apprehension, deportation and drug interdiction efforts (Ogren, 2007). The focus on 'securing the south' was formalised in 2001 with the announcement of Plan Sur, under the leadership of President Vicente Fox (Castillo, 2003; Ogren, 2007; Hagan, 2008). In addition to increased raids and checkpoints, Central Americans were no longer simply dropped off across the border in Guatemala, but were bussed back to their countries of origin (Flynn, 2002; Jaramillo, 2001). Between 2000 and 2008 Mexico more than doubled its number of detention facilities from 22 to 48 (Alba, 2013). The intensification of such practices coincided with the events of 9/11 in the USA, which largely contributed to the reframing of migration through a lens of security. Not unlike the US reorganisation of immigration agencies under the Department of Homeland Security, in May 2005, Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM) was formally designated as part of Mexico's National Security Council.

The linkages between immigration enforcement and national security would continue to tighten over the next decade and beyond, particularly in the context of Mexico's drug war. In 2006, President Felipe Calderón declared a war on drug cartels, inciting a new era of militarisation, violence and instability in Mexico. Felipe Calderón's declaration broke with the hands-off approach of leaders before him, who not only tolerated Mexican drug trafficking organisations but actively protected them under a 'blanket of impunity' [Astorga and Shirk, (2010), p.8]. Estimates of the number of people killed during Felipe Calderón's six years in office range from 60,000 to 120,000. Mexico's drug war has largely been funded by the USA through bi-national antinarcotics agreements. Under the Mérida Initiative signed in 2008, the USA has given US \$2.5 billion in equipment, training and intelligence to Mexico to combat drugs, trafficking and money-laundering. The USA has also allocated millions of dollars to similar security measures in Central America through the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Such policies firmly place Mexico within a US-led hemispheric security agenda.

The transnational forces that undergird state enforcement have significantly reshaped local contexts of mobility within Mexico's interior. Whereas migrants were once able to travel through Mexico on buses, the increase in official checkpoints has funnelled migrants to more clandestine train routes. By the early 2000s riding the freight trains became the primary means of transportation. The train became known as *La Bestia*/The Beast, for the ways it mutilated the bodies of migrants who fell off. Train routes also increasingly became incorporated into the activities of organised criminals who began to prey on vulnerable migrants in transit. Of particular concern to migrants and shelter workers was the rise of the criminal group known as *Los Zetas*, notorious for their brutality and for seizing control of territory across Mexico and Guatemala by military-style tactics. I first began to hear whispers of *Los Zetas* in 2008 as reports of violent kidnappings of migrants began to spread across the network of migrant shelters.⁴ Migrants and smugglers reported the changing conditions along the freight trains; no longer did they just need to pay off corrupt authorities, but organised criminals were now

demanding they pay a 'tax' or fee to cross their territory. Those who did not pay were reportedly pushed off the trains or kidnapped and held for ransom. Human rights groups estimate that tens of thousands of Central American migrants have been kidnapped on their journeys north.

The rise of organised crime along migrant routes served to justify more intensive security strategies by the state under a framework of national security. While organised crime has significantly changed the violence migrants experience in Mexico, I suggest it is only one segment of a larger industry in the migration-violence-security nexus that has developed along transit routes. This industry is intimately connected to both local and global flows of capital, labour and commodities (Vogt, 2013). A diverse range of police, military, drug cartels, gangs, smugglers, security operators, train conductors, local businesses and residents have all developed ways to profit from the movement of unauthorised migrants. As I have analysed the more wide-ranging dynamics of this industry elsewhere (Vogt, 2013), in the next section I focus on experiences of violence through direct encounters with state agents.

4 Violence and bordering practices

Scholars, particularly those who work on the US-Mexico border, have examined the linkages between immigration enforcement and the production of violence and death. They have analysed, for example, the ways US 'prevention through deterrence' policies in the 1990s created a 'funnel effect', which effectively redirected border-crossers to more dangerous and deadly stretches through the Arizona-Sonora Desert (de León, 2015; Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2006).⁵ In this scenario, the state strategically shifts culpability to the migrants themselves, who risk crossing dangerous environmental terrains, or to the unscrupulous smugglers who deceive and endanger them (de León, 2015). Yet there is less research on the ways state violence is produced not only through such policies, but also more directly through enforcement practices (Slack et al., 2016).

This section examines how violence against migrants is not aberrant or an unintended consequence of militarisation, but has become routinised within Mexico's security regime. During my fieldwork I documented the widespread occurrence of Mexican authorities conducting unlawful immigration checks, using excessive force and extorting migrants in transit. Under Mexican law, only certain immigration and federal agents are legally permitted to ask for documentation of citizenship. However, migrants reported a wide range of authorities that demanded to see their papers including local, state and federal police, military soldiers, marines, intelligence forces, as well as armed men they assumed were police or military dressed in civilian clothing. Those who could not produce proof of Mexican citizenship were threatened with deportation, extorted or physically abused. The infrastructural and spatial make-up of the arterial border meant that these encounters often took place in out-of-the-way locations. The decentralisation of bordering practices creates the conditions for violence to be perpetrated across the varied landscapes of mobility with little oversight or accountability.

In 2008, I interviewed Gloria, a single mother from El Salvador who was on her fourth attempt to reach the USA. She had been deported multiple times at different locations along the arterial border, from the boundary with Guatemala to the outskirts of Mexico City. Gloria's first attempt was in 2001, the year that Plan Sur was implemented.

She had heard that in order to ride the train she needed to pay off the authorities. Sure enough, before boarding the train near the border town of Tapachula, she was stopped by local police who demanded \$300 Mexican pesos, all the money she had with her. Gloria thought this would be the extent of her interaction with Mexican authorities, but after the initial leg of the train journey, she was caught in an improvised immigration raid near the train tracks:

Everyone was there. Immigration, the Army, the Federal Police were there. There were so many of them. And they checked me. I was the only woman who had come on the train...I was scared that they were going to rape me since there were only men checking to see if I had any weapons or tattoos...They didn't have to check me, and if they did a woman should have been the one to do it, not the one who did among so many soldiers and police. And immigration was there, the ones with blue uniforms and green also, we call them *zotacos* [derogatory for short man] or *garroteros* [guards] and immigration.

Gloria's testimony illuminates several important threads around the violence of militarised space along the arterial border: the generalised chaos and unpredictability of migration checkpoints and raids; the profiling of people with tattoos (often associated with gangs in Central America); and the multiple levels of state power that collude in unlawful immigration enforcement practices. Because Central American migrants are funnelled into particular routes along the train line or between migrant shelters, they are easily identifiable and thus more vulnerable to ethno-racial profiling and forms of abuse.

Yet beyond simple abuses of power, Gloria's experience also demonstrates the ways violence becomes central to localised economies that profit from human mobility. Far from being simple enforcers of the state, police strategically engage the arterial border as a site of profit and power. Systematic extortion of migrants has become normalised along migrant routes. This is further evidenced by an excerpt from an interview with a 25-year-old Guatemalan man who was travelling with his wife and was apprehended by Mexican police:

In the State of Chiapas we were deported across the border but we turned right back around. It is very dangerous there with the thieves. We were captured two times by the judicial police. They demanded money from us. The first time they just took our money and let us go. The second time, when we didn't have money so they deported us. The same ones who took our money before. They are just like thieves. They are nothing more than thieves with titles and uniforms.

The language that migrants use to talk about such encounters demonstrates the blurred line many perceive between state authority and criminality. Encounters with the state are fraught with uncertainty as official practices of apprehension and deportation are often secondary to unofficial practices of extortion, abuse or criminality. Migrants assume state authorities have ties to organised criminals or that criminal perpetrators are actually authorities dressed in civilian clothing. This was most immediately apparent through testimonies of migrants who had witnessed mass kidnappings along the train routes. During my fieldwork, I documented multiple incidents of trains being stopped in remote areas where convoys of heavily armed gunman would descend upon the tracks and kidnap migrants. While difficult to prove, it is widely assumed by migrants and shelter workers that such incidents were coordinated attacks between train conductors, local authorities and organised criminals.

In response to state violence perpetrated by authorities, migrants continuously develop new strategies of mobility. These may involve circumnavigating immigration checkpoints along footpaths and train routes, travelling with migrant brokers (Vogt, 2016), or attempting to 'pass' as Mexican nationals within militarised spaces (Brigden, 2016). Migrants also seek out alternate routes along Mexico's extensive bus and highway system. Yet, as migrants seek to avoid state enforcement, the arterial border splinters and follows them. New arteries are created along remote roads, near migrant shelters and other areas where migrants move. During intake interviews at the shelter where I worked, my colleagues and I began to hear nearly identical stories of police profiling, intimidation and extortion along a remote road in a mountainous region in the state of Oaxaca. Efrain, a migrant from Honduras described his experience:

We were on the bus for maybe 45 minutes when we were pulled over. Police dressed in civilian clothing boarded the bus. I imagine the bus driver must have already told them what we were wearing, and told them that we were traveling as a couple [so they could identify us]. They approached us and told us to give them our papers. We didn't have papers. They told us to get off the bus. 'Quickly, quickly!' they demanded. We were the only ones to get off and they took us behind the bus where no one could see us. We told them we were from Honduras. They took all of our money. But then they let us get back on.

In this remote area far from official migration checkpoints or the external border with Guatemala, systematic profiling and extortion had become incorporated into the everyday routines of both the bus driver and the police, who worked in collusion with one another. The fact that none of the other passengers on the bus protested, even though they were Mexican citizens, speaks to the normalisation of violence along the arterial border. Furthermore, because migrants were ultimately allowed to continue on their journeys, we see how bordering practices do not necessarily prevent migration flows. On the contrary, as migrants navigate increased enforcement, they are channelled into more dangerous routes where they often become entangled in economies that profit from their movements.

Through these lived experiences of mobility and encounters with the state we see how migration, bordering practices and violence are mutually constituted. As new security measures are implemented, migrants develop new strategies and routes, which in turn become incorporated into policing practices. Unlike traditional conceptualisations of borders as political and spatial boundaries, the arterial border reimagines the ways state power and practices of enforcement are carried out across local landscapes.

5 Discourses of security and humanitarianism: responses to the 2014 unaccompanied minor 'crisis'

In addition to the material and lived realities of the arterial border, I now examine the ways the arterial border is ideologically constructed. In contexts worldwide, scholars have examined how international migration is governed through a lens of security. Politicians, the media and security professionals, among others, perpetuate a 'truth' about the link between migration, crime, unemployment, terrorism and disease (Bigo, 2002). Migrants are often constructed as undeserving 'illegals' or criminals who need to be contained through more restrictive policies, harsher punishments or higher walls.⁶ They are also conflated with societal concerns around public safety, economics, education and

health. Nevertheless, in the context of more recent migrant and refugee crises in both the Americas and in Europe, we see a shift in state discourses around transit migration.

Discursive strategies draw less on fear and more on universal ideas of human rights and humanitarianism to justify new security and enforcement programs. On a conceptual level, security projects potentially impinge upon the rights of people (Goldstein, 2010) – both citizens and non-citizens – through policing, surveillance and inhumane treatment, and contribute to an increase in human rights violations through violence and exploitation. However, discourses of human rights and humanitarianism have become central to ‘security talk’. As scholars in Europe have analysed, humanitarianism is a powerful justification to patrol the open seas around Europe and ‘rescue’ migrant boats, which Andersson (2014, p.73) has called the ‘humanitarian-policing nexus’. Transit migrants are constructed both as threats to national and community security, as well as victims to be protected and rescued. In such configurations, migrant rights and claims of humanitarianism are used to justify the very security policies that increase their vulnerability as they attempt to flee violence in their home countries.

The conjoining of security and rights is apparent in recent policies and discourses in Mexico and the USA, particularly in the wake of the 2014 unaccompanied minor crisis. Up until 2010, the violence experienced by Central Americans in Mexico was largely invisible in state policies and discourses. Although the Mexican Government did formally decriminalise irregular migration in Mexico in 2008, most laws were still based on the outdated 1974 General Population Law. Yet, in the wake of the 2010 Tamaulipas massacre, where the bodies of 72 mostly Central American migrants were discovered on an abandoned ranch, the Mexican state was forced to publicly address its own immigration ‘problem’. In 2011 a new migration law came into effect after being passed unanimously in the Mexican Congress. The new law was thick with the language of migrant and human rights and outlined social services and protections for migrants in transit. While the implementation of the law has been uneven, on an ideological and discursive level it marks a significant shift to governance of immigration not only through a lens of security but also through a lens of human rights.

This approach was further solidified in the context of the 2014 influx of Central Americans crossing Mexico. In the summer of 2014, President Enrique Peña Nieto announced his new Southern Border Program, with the specific goals of: first, protecting and safeguarding the human rights of migrants who enter and transit through Mexico; and second, managing international border crossings to increase the development and security of the region. In announcing the program, President Peña Nieto promised to turn the challenge of migration into an opportunity for development while at the same time ensuring the dignified and humane treatment of migrants. Peña Nieto’s statements strategically bring together discourses of human rights with promises of development and security.

The Southern Border Program, which was largely funded through the Mérida Initiative, has continued to expand the web of enforcement and bordering practices in southern Mexico. Mobile kiosks have been set up at checkpoints to collect biometric and biographical data of people transiting through Mexico (Wilson and Valenzuela, 2014). The rates of deportation have skyrocketed,⁷ but perhaps most unprecedented has been the crackdown on migrants riding freight trains. Before 2014, the Mexican Government turned a blind eye to unauthorised migrants on the train and it was common to see trains with hundreds of migrants clinging to the tops and sides of steel railcars. In the months after the implementation of the Southern Border Program, the trains ran empty. The

government has brokered deals with train companies to increase their speed to deter migrants from riding. In March 2015, Ardelio Vargas, the commissioner of Mexico's National Migration Institute, announced that the INM carried out 158 raids on the freight train, forming part of a total of 758 migration inspections in 2014. Bars, restaurants and hotels frequented by Central Americans were also specifically targeted. Vargas' rationale for cracking down on the train was framed in humanitarian terms, in his reference to the irresponsibility of allowing migrants to continue risking their lives on a cargo train (La Prensa Grafica, 2015). Through such discourse, the Mexican state justifies its increase in raids through promises to protect migrant lives, but, on the ground, we see that such policies only funnel people into more dangerous routes. To avoid raids, migrants must traverse even more remote areas away from the network of humanitarian aid shelters, making them even more vulnerable to violence and exploitation (Boggs, 2015). For those with some financial resources, they must now pay higher prices to smugglers to help them navigate the journey (Soberanes, 2015). Some activists have equated the new program as one that has formalised the hunting of migrants by Mexican authorities.

In the USA, historically, justifications for the increased build-up of US-Mexico border enforcement have been framed in terms of security and protecting the US public under the guise of the wars on terror and drugs [Slack et al., (2016), p.11]. Yet, in the wake of the 2014 surge of unaccompanied minors, there has been an interesting shift in US political discourse. The objects of protection are not US citizens, but the minors themselves, who are cast as largely agentless victims. Illustrating this strategy was the US Customs and Border Patrol's 2014 Dangers Awareness Campaign, a transnational public service campaign that focused specifically on the dangers of transit in Mexico and the US-Mexico border. According to the Customs and Border Patrol website, the most immediate problem related to the surge of unaccompanied minors was caring for the 'children'. The intentional use of the word 'children' rather than 'minors' portrays them as helpless victims in need of protection.

While such campaigns have long been a strategy of US immigration authorities, the Dangers Awareness Campaign was unique in the way it specifically targeted Central Americans. It included radio and television commercials, songs, posters and billboards intended for populations in Central America and Mexico and US-Spanish media outlets. In 2014, a *migracorrído* called 'La Bestia' (the Beast) was played on radio stations across Central America.⁸ It tells the tale of the cruel and dangerous journey on the freight train. Sensational lyrics detail the perilous journey north and the train is presented as a force in itself, personified as a snake, beast and devil. Through its 'crushing mortar' and 'slicing machete' it leads them to the slaughterhouse and their death. Those who are not injured or killed by the train risk encounters with gangs and smugglers. By constructing the freight train as the source of danger, the discourses of La Bestia and, more broadly, the Dangers Awareness Campaign strategically obscure the role of the state in the production of violence against migrants. In contrast, it works to legitimise the state as a protector of migrants and authority on humanitarianism and human rights.

The three central messages of the campaign are: "the journey is too dangerous; children will not get legal papers if they make it; they are the future – let's protect them" (US Customs and Border Protection, 2015). One poster has an image of a child alone in a remote desert landscape, the site of many border deaths, with text written from the perspective of a parent who states, "I thought that it would be easy for my child to get

papers in the U.S. I was wrong". The message constructs the child as an innocent victim, and the criminal is the parent who foolishly sent their child into harm's way. The discourses around Central American minors and the Dangers Awareness Campaign fluctuates between strict and punitive enforcement and nurturing optimism; we will detain you and get rid of you as quickly as possible, yet we will protect you because you are the future – not just *the* future, but *our* future. Such discourses simultaneously exclude and include Central American minors, constructing them as both criminals and vulnerable subjects in need of protection. In doing so, they work to legitimise US state power as both the strong enforcer and compassionate humanitarian. Through these policies we see how Mexico's arterial border is constituted and legitimated not only through concrete enforcement efforts, but also through state discourses and propaganda.

6 Conclusions

This paper illuminates the disjunctures between the routinised abuse, extortion and violence experienced by Central American migrants along Mexico's arterial border and frameworks of security, humanitarianism and human rights. Through ethnographic detail, it links the testimonies and experiences of transit migrants to the policies and contexts that have historically shaped the possibilities of their movement. While border enforcement measures have intensified in recent years, the arterial border must be understood as part of a longer historical trajectory. Furthermore, an ethnographic perspective on the arterial border forces us to rethink traditional understandings of borders and the ways bordering practices may operate through strategically diffuse sites of enforcement and state propaganda. The arterial border is not just a space governed by state agents; it is also a complex social arena where migration flows are policed, exploited and contested. It is a rich site for future analysis of localised bordering practices, material infrastructures and sites of everyday resistance. Such analyses will move the dialogue beyond the smoke and mirrors of political discourses of rights and rescue to understand the material effects of enforcement policies on local landscapes and on people's bodies.

The arterial border has implications for understanding the complex and far-reaching political and economic webs of contemporary immigration enforcement regimes in wider contexts. Collyer et al. (2014, p.18) have suggested a hierarchy based on 'concentric circles' to understand the sphere of European influence beyond the external borders of the EU. And while the arterial border is certainly an example of the political and economic influence of the USA on its neighbours to the south, the inter-workings of power may not be so straightforward. Hess (2012, p.436) has suggested that in a European context, there has been a 'boomerang effect' of the externalisation of migration control policy wherein transit countries play the 'transit card' to obtain both funding and more influence in contemporary migration management. Indeed, as the example of Mexico's arterial border teaches us, the enforcement of transit is produced, executed and challenged by a range of stakeholders across multiple borders. Transit journeys have become spaces where state power is both materially and discursively reproduced and contested. By exploring the tensions and contradictions between policy, practice and experience, we may work toward more nuanced understandings of the intersections between violence, security and human rights in transit spaces worldwide.

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Notes

- 1 In 2012, Chief Diplomatic Officer for the US Department of Homeland Security, Alan Bersin, known as the 'border czar', stated that "the Guatemalan border with Chiapas is now our southern border" (Isacson et al., 2014).
- 2 Between 1981 and 1983, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans entered Mexico and 46,000 were officially registered with the UNHCR. Between 1993 and 1999 Mexico organised programs of both voluntary repatriation and settlement of Guatemalan refugees (Castillo, 2003).
- 3 This name was also later used for the operation that replaced Operation Blockade in the El Paso sector of the US-Mexico border.
- 4 By 2012, Los Zetas had begun to splinter and factionalise into smaller groups controlling more localised criminal operations.
- 5 A substantial literature has focused on the relationship between militarisation and violence along the US-Mexico border (Andreas, 2000; Nevins, 2002; Dunn, 1995). In the mid-1990s, the US implemented a new 'prevention through deterrence' border strategy. The first significant effort was Operation Blockade, which redeployed hundreds of US Border Patrol agents and technology to the banks of the Rio Grande near El Paso, Texas. The perceived success of Operation Blockade led to similar enforcement efforts along the border in California and Arizona with Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Safeguard, respectively.

- 6 According to Davidson (2010), 'undeserving' migrants are distinguished from more 'deserving' subjects, namely, victims of human trafficking through discourses of 'trafficking as modern day slavery'.
- 7 According to Mexico's Secretary of the Interior, the number of migrants deported in 2014 increased by 35%. In 2013, Mexico deported 80,079 migrants; and in 2014, Mexico deported 107,814 migrants. Most significant is that the number of children deported increased by 117%, from 8,350 in 2013 to 18,169 in 2014 (Boggs, 2015). The numbers in 2015 were even higher. In the first three months of 2015, Mexico deported nearly 40,000 Central American migrants, a 79% increase over the number of migrants deported in the same months of 2014 (The Guardian, 2015).
- 8 *Corridos* are traditionally narrative ballads that address themes of revolution, oppression and heroism, as well as more everyday themes of life, love and betrayal. More recently, *corridos* have become an important cultural medium to grapple with contemporary urban issues and social problems. *Narcocorridos*, about the seedy world of drug smuggling, and *migracorridos*, about the sacrifice and suffering of cross-border migrants, are popular themes.