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NAVIGATING RISKS ACROSS BORDERS: THE LIVED  
EXPERIENCES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN MIGRANTS

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Balsillie School of International Affairs  
Faculty of Arts  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy in Global Governance  
Wilfrid Laurier University

2017

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## **Abstract**

The journey for ‘unauthorized’ migrant women from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) through Mexico dangerous and violent. In hopes of achieving safe passage to the United States (U.S.), women migrants will have to navigate borders. In this dissertation, I use the concept of borders to reveal the gendered experiences of (im)mobility. I argue that navigating borders throughout the migratory journey is not simply about experiencing the risks and vulnerabilities associated with restrictive border enforcement policies and practices implemented by the nation-state. (Im)mobility for women migrants is equally about the boundaries and/or barriers that are created by oppressive systems of subordination, such as patriarchy. These borders determine their embodied experiences, which not only affect their journey through Mexico, but their access to migration as well as their migratory options and resources.

In Article #1, I begin by exploring how disembodied border policy affects people, specifically migrant women. I show how territorial nation-state borders are governed in Mexico and how this governance can be associated with the long history of immigration control in the U.S. The border governance implemented in Mexico categorizes migrants as ‘unauthorized’. For women migrants, this subordinate category exists throughout their migration journey producing vulnerability and violence as soon as the Mexico-Guatemala boundary is crossed. This embodied illegality creates forced invisibility, further marginalizing women with respect to finding work, experiences of sexual violence and abuses by migration actors.

In Article #2, I shift my focus and explore other types of borders and/or barriers. I argue that nation-state border policies and the categories associated with these policies, such as ‘unauthorized’, ‘irregular’, ‘undocumented’, are but only one type of oppression that migrant women face in their migration. I connect the violent effects of territorial border practices with other structures of oppression, such as gender discrimination, class, race, which constitute the woman migrant subject and affect women’s embodied experiences. I frame my analysis using intersectionality and corporeal feminism to examine how gender inequality is embedded in the context of migration; how it is a motivating factor, but can also impact migratory options and resources.

Lastly in Article #3, I explore how migrant women navigate these borders and attempt to survive in this migration context. I examine how they act within limitations, constraints, exploitation and violence. Informed by feminist scholarship, I examine the concept of the ‘mobile commons’ and how it fits in this particular context. I explore how situated and relational knowledge affects the survival tactics and strategies applied by women migrants while on the journey to the U.S. I contribute to the scholarship on the mobile commons concept by showing how diverse experiences and vulnerabilities affect knowledge and, thus strategies, while on the run and how migration is not a gender-neutral experience.

Together, these three articles illustrate how gender is embedded in migration and borders and how women migrants in the NTCA and Mexico must confront these lived realities and navigate their journeys within these constraints and limitations.

## **Acknowledgments**

My doctoral work has been an enlightening and enriching journey. It has taught me patience, perseverance. Through the stories of my participants and my fieldwork, I was shown not only another part of the world, but also the strength and courage of many outstanding people.

This dissertation could not have been possible without considerable support from the following people. First, I would like to extend my thanks to my doctoral committee. My advisor, Kim Rygiel, has been a great and knowledgeable support throughout this process. She has helped and guided my research immensely. She made my work stronger by providing constant feedback and encouraging me to look at new ways to conceptualize my work. Thank you for always being there to chat and meet whenever I needed it. I am grateful to Jenna Hennebry, who has been a constant mentor and a friend. Not only has she provided intellectual guidance throughout this whole process, but she helped me connect to networks for my fieldwork, including UN Women, which financially assisted by research abroad through consultant work. Her encouragement and moral support at the end of this journey has been indispensable. Thank you. I owe many thanks to Alison Mountz, who is an insightful and forward-thinking scholar and who took the time to provide constructive feedback of my work and helpful comments during meetings to become a better researcher and scholar.

The research for my dissertation would not have been possible without the generous support of the following organizations, the Balsillie School of International Affairs,

Wilfrid Laurier University, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, UN Women, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council through the Borders in Globalization research program, and the International Migration Research Centre. Through the Borders in Globalization program, I was grateful to meet Helga Hallgrimsdottir, who has also provided intellectual support through her feedback for one of the chapters in this dissertation. Thank you, Ben Muller for introducing me to the Borders in Globalization team and encouraging me to pursue this research opportunity.

I am also grateful to have done my doctoral studies within the Balsillie School community, where I have met great friends and colleagues. At times, this journey can be a solitary one, so coming into the office every day and seeing familiar faces to share challenges and seek support was truly appreciated. For this, I thank Antulio Rosales, Charis Enns, Tracey Wagner-Rizvi, Masaya Llavaneras-Blanco, and Maissaa Almustafa.

To the people in Mexico, I want to share my deepest gratitude, for without you, this research could not have been achieved. Thank you for bringing me into your lives and sharing your life experiences with me. I learned so much from you. The challenges you have overcome are truly remarkable. Thank you, Mario Pérez Monterosas, for guiding me and facilitating my fieldwork when I first arrived in Mexico City with my partner and my 2-year-old baby. I felt like a fish out of water, but you anchored me and helped me get started. Although, I cannot mention names, I am indebted to those administrators and volunteers in the migrant shelters in Veracruz and Oaxaca, who welcomed me and shared their experiences. Keep on fighting the good fight!

Finally, I am most thankful for the constant and enduring support of my family throughout this journey. I could not have finished this adventure without you. To my babies, Mateo and Luna, whom I welcomed into the world during my time in this Ph.D. program, they inspired me as a mother to do this research and continue to be an inspiration to achieve social justice. To my parents, Cecilia and Carlos, who consistently helped me first with one child and then with two under the age of five. A special thank you to my mom, Cecilia, who came to Mexico during my fieldwork to help us taking care of our son, so my partner and I could go to migrant shelters along the transit corridor together. After my fieldwork, she has been there constantly to support me by helping to take care of my children while I write and revise this dissertation. To Vicki, my mother-in-law, who was also a great help during those trying months when my Luna was born. To my partner in everything, Matthew, who has seen me laugh, cry, fail, and get back up during this journey and beyond. I thank you for your unwavering love and support, your endless encouragement and understanding, and your patience. Continue to keep my life balanced by letting me see the lighter side of things.

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## Introduction

### **Navigating Risks across Borders: The Lived Experiences of Central American Women Migrants\***

The journey for many ‘clandestine’ migrants in Mexico follows various pathways beginning in countries in Central America and extending throughout Mexico all the way to the United States (U.S). It is fraught with violence. Primarily, migrants attempting this journey are coming from the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), which includes Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. This migration has become increasingly referred to as an ‘invisible refugee crisis’ (Lakhani 2016) due to the lack of attention it has received versus other higher profile ‘crises’, such as those found in the European context and the U.S.-Mexico border. However, my dissertation is interested in a fluid aspect of this migration; that of borders and the complexity and constitutive nature of borders. It is motivated by asking: what are borders?; where are borders?; who creates and benefits from borders?; what are the effects of borders on migrants?; and how do migrants grapple with these borders? In this dissertation, I also capture *how* a specific group of irregular migrants, women migrants, are affected by these borders. By sharing women’s personal experiences, the gendered nature of migration is exposed and we begin to see how many categories applied to women are constructed in subordinate ways, and how gendered migration is not adequately addressed in certain migration scholarship.

The situation for ‘unauthorized’<sup>1</sup> migrants transiting through Mexico involves assault, robbery, kidnapping, and extortion. It involves walking for days through the most

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\* Unless otherwise noted, all names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms to protect the identities of those interviewed.

secluded fields and developing blisters the size of rocks on the bottom of one's feet. It involves trying to board a deadly freight train as a mode of transportation, which can amputate or kill people. It involves palpable fear and distrust of anyone and everyone along the journey, including the authorities that are supposed to 'protect', but instead, abuse. Women migrants are 'the most vulnerable of the vulnerable' (Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano 2016), in so far as while they may experience all the above, they also face heightened risks of kidnapping specifically for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and/or forced prostitution in bars or brothels; they may be raped upon entering Mexico, upon a moving train and/or when police authorities detain them (Ibid.).

Three stories illustrate the difficulties women face as 'unauthorized' migrants transiting through Mexico and highlight the importance of undertaking this research. The first story is about Daniela, who was walking with a group of other migrants in an area that looked like a jungle, when suddenly they were attacked by five armed men. The assailants told them all to get undressed, but told Daniela to stand up and follow them. She asked, 'What are you going to do to me?' to which one of the men responded, 'what we do to all of you'. Daniela continues, 'Three of them raped me, "you can go," they told me. I ran away, I felt so much fear and sadness, I cried with rage'. Daniela was trying to return to the U.S., after being recently deported, to reunite with her husband and her one-year-old daughter (Ibid.).

The second story concerns July, who was travelling with her three children, aged 3, 6 and 12. Her journey was on hold at a migrant shelter in Oaxaca as she had been

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my dissertation, I use the terms 'unauthorized', 'irregular', 'undocumented', etc. to define a group of people who choose to 'enter a nation-state without [its] authorization' (Squire 2011, 4). I use these terms interchangeably, rather than framing migrants as 'illegal' as this term associates migrants with criminality, and thus contributes to their criminalization.

waiting for a Humanitarian Visa for two months (Nazario 2015). Her journey to this point had taken her 20 days. Together with her children, she had to get out of taxis and buses and walk around various checkpoints to avoid apprehension. After walking for 12 hours to get around a mountain, they all waited for seven days for the freight train, only for the train to be attacked by a group of men. July was trying to reach Florida, where her mom and grandmother live. She used to have 4 children, but her eldest son, who was 14 years-old, was killed by a criminal gang in Honduras for refusing to work as their ‘lookout’ (Ibid.).

Lastly, there is Sonia’s story. A Honduran migrant who experienced being kidnapped in a ‘safe house’, riding on the freight train and witnessing women raped in front of her. She did not know she would be sleeping on the floor, and as she explains: ‘That I was going to withstand the cold, that my pillow was going to be a rock, but that it felt so good because of the exhaustion’. She was migrating to provide opportunities for her daughter, who was waiting back home. So, when the journey looked the most difficult: ‘I remembered my family and the hope of helping them and even though the journey was hard, I kept walking. Even though my body told me I couldn’t keep going, my heart told me to keep going’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

While reflecting on these stories earlier on in my analysis, several issues stood out for me. The first involves the targeted violence that women endure while on the migrant trail because of their sex and the trauma that results from these experiences. The second concerns the emotional toll that women endure as mothers. That emotional toll involves having to leave their children behind in order to acquire better opportunities for them; embarking on a dangerous journey in order to reunite with their children; and/or having

to migrate with their children due to the persecution and fear of staying behind. Lastly, there is the reality that many women are trying to flee the escalating violence in their countries of origin and may be particularly vulnerable to this violence if they have children who can be forcefully co-opted into criminal gangs. It is from this starting point of analysis, that my dissertation aims to further explore the experiences of women migrants who grapple with personal insecurity throughout their journey but are equally caught up in violence before they depart.

In this dissertation, I use the concept of borders to analyze how ‘unauthorized’ women from the NTCA experience (im)mobility and the migration journey specifically through Mexico, with the hope of arriving in the U.S. However, rather than conceptualizing borders as strictly those nation-state practices associated with territory and the techniques of control used to maintain them (whether physical or virtual), I contribute to the literature on borders and migration by including and examining other types of borders, barriers and/or boundaries associated with gender, race, class and nationality. As a feminist scholar, I am interested in not only studying territorial borders, such as those that separate two nation-states by means of a line on a map, but also those borders/barriers/boundaries that are constructed by social differences; the boundaries produced by race, class and gender. Therefore, drawing on Kron (2011, 108), I define borders as the ‘symbolic and discursive borders of social constructions which form power relations, legitimize social inequality, and mould subjective experiences and personal and collective identities’. Studying borders should include the types of borders that have been constructed in several hierarchical and unequal power structures that serve to oppress marginalized groups, in this case, migrant women from the NTCA. Ultimately, I



aim to show that the practices associated with the territorial border are but one type of barrier that affect women migrants on the move. Women in transit are equally affected by other barriers of oppression like gender, race, class and nationality, which together have an impact on their migratory options and their migratory journeys through Mexico. The three articles that follow examine how border practices of categorization, such as government border enforcement policies assigning the label of ‘unauthorized’ or ‘undocumented’, intersect with other systems of oppression and other sources of subordination (other boundaries), which help to maintain dominant unequal power hierarchies.

To conduct this research, I spent three months in Mexico during 2014, studying the situation of Central American women along known migration routes. My fieldwork was multi-sited and took me to two prominent locations along the well-known transit routes through Mexico, in the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca. I also spent the latter part of my fieldwork in Mexico’s capital (Mexico D.F.) through which many migrant women travel to get to the U.S. or sometimes decide to stay and work in the informal economy. I relied on multiple methods during my fieldwork. These included a) qualitative semi-structured interviews among key informants involved with migrant rights, including shelter administrators and volunteers, civil society representatives, government officials, and Central American migrants; and b) extensive field notes acquired during my participant observation while staying at migrant shelters. Prior and upon my return from fieldwork, I engaged in policy analysis of key government border enforcement and migration documents (see Appendix B). My approach to conducting this research is provided in more detail in the *Research Design and Methods* section below. My

dissertation consists of an introduction, followed by three articles and a conclusion. In the remainder of this introduction, I first discuss the rationale for my research study. I then focus on explaining borders, the key concept that frames my research. Within this section, I problematize borders from a feminist perspective by including other forms of boundaries/barriers that are intertwined with territorial borders. In the section following, I review my research methods and positionality within my study. Lastly, I briefly outline the three articles that comprise the dissertation and the conclusion.

### **Rationale for Study**

I chose to conduct this research for several reasons. First, while there is vast research on U.S.-Mexican borders and its effects, there is less focus on the Mexican government's border policies and the effects of its border enforcement practices *within* Mexico, which is important for migrants transiting to the U.S. Empirically, there has also been more scholarly focus on Mexican migrants coming to the U.S. Yet, given the current socio-political climate in the NTCA, particularly with respect to targeted violence, corruption, and impunity (Human Rights Watch 2016; Amnesty International 2016), the trends are changing where we are increasingly observing a growing number of migrants from the NTCA seeking to move to the U.S., with a notable feminization of this migration (UNHCR 2015). Despite these growing numbers of migrants, and the concerns flagged by UN agencies and NGOs about their protection along this route (e.g. ITAM 2014; IMUMI 2014), this migration remains understudied. Lastly, in both policy and scholarly circles (both within and outside of Mexico), there is insufficient knowledge and research pertaining to the ways women migrants, specifically, seek to migrate; their experiences with (im)mobility, their struggles and their knowledge. In this case, migrant

women often experience violence, which is embedded in their migratory options. They experience structural inequality resulting from patriarchy, gender discrimination and pervasive sexism (Manjoo 2011, 2014). These oppressions become the motivation for migration, but can also present structural barriers to mobility (Piper 2008).

Theoretically, this dissertation aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on borders, through a critical feminist perspective that includes an embodied view of knowledge, which centres around the security and protection of the individual body. My objective is to situate knowledge according to the embodied experiences of women migrants. As such, an embodied view aims to '(re)situate knowledge production as a partial view from somewhere' (Hyndman 2004b; see also Haraway 1988). This knowledge directly speaks, and is in contrast, to the disembodied and abstract knowledge at the macro-level of the nation-state, which assumes the referent object of security to be the nation-state and borders to be a fixed instrument used by nation-states to separate people into 'us' and 'them'. Situated knowledge, in turn, has the potential to challenge these dominant political narratives. Below, I will now further explain each rationale in more detail.

### *Mexico and its Borders*

While U.S. border policies typically tend to be the focal point of research (Nevins 2001; Andreas 2009; Doty 2007), more scholarly focus should equally be allocated to border practices in Mexico because the Mexican state is assisting the U.S. in border enforcement and represents an added barrier for migrants trying to move north. In their journey, Central American migrants must cross all of Mexico to reach the U.S. This

includes the Guatemala-Mexico border, but also all the states in between where *migra*<sup>2</sup> officials (among other Mexican authorities) can apprehend, detain and deport migrants. Border policies in Mexico are extremely restrictive and violent. Since the latest iteration of border security policy, *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS), which was launched in the summer of 2014, Mexican authorities are detaining and deporting migrants in record numbers. The launch and implementation of this policy coincided with intense U.S. political pressure due to the increase of unaccompanied minors from Central America reaching the U.S. border. As of 2015, Mexico apprehended more Central American migrants when compared to its U.S. counterpart: 174,529 apprehended in Mexico (SEGOB-INM 2015) versus 145,316 apprehended by the U.S. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP] 2016). Furthermore, while attention is paid to the U.S. border, less attention is paid to how the U.S. can use Mexican border enforcement as an extension of its own border enforcement. Mexico appears to have a unique role and acts as an effective bottle-neck for migrants and, equally, as an extra border enforcer for the U.S. as evidenced by the intensified policing in transit and borderland areas (WOLA 2015; Andreas 2003).

Mexico, however, even without U.S. political pressure, has always had a complicated history with respect to migration. During the 1970s and 1980s, Mexico became known internationally for being a host country for refugees coming from Latin America, namely Chile and Argentina, but also from Central America during the civil wars that ended in the mid-1990s. Yet, the *General Law of the Population*, which was implemented in 1976, was considerably unfavourable to migrants, especially to those deemed ‘undocumented’, who would attempt to enter Mexico in a clandestine fashion. In

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<sup>2</sup> Colloquial term used by migrants and Mexicans to refer to migration officials/authorities.

fact, this law criminalized undocumented migration, making it a felony to enter Mexico without legal documentation or to be found with an expired visa, examples of crimes that were punishable for up to ten years (Gonzalez-Murphy and Koslowski 2011).

As a result, from 1976 onwards, ‘undocumented’ migrants became associated with criminality and a pattern of xenophobia emerged within Mexico. At the same time, however, Mexico pressured U.S. government officials for immigration reform with respect to its own nationals given the strong history of emigration to the U.S. (Fitzgerald 2005). This hypocritical stance prompted calls from within civil society in Mexico to change their restrictive migration laws that criminalized migrant populations. In addition, regionally, the context began to change with the *North American Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA) implemented in 1994, which created a free trade bloc and accelerated economic mobilization, but left human mobility outside of the scope of the agreement. The lack of attention to human mobility in the agreement continued to aid civil society and the government alike to pressure the U.S. for immigration reform.

It was not until the Vicente Fox (2000-2006) administration, however, that bilateral dialogue began with the G.W. Bush administration in regards to immigration reform. President Fox persuaded President G.W. Bush during a bilateral visit in 2001. If passed by the U.S. Congress, the immigration reforms were to include a guest-worker program to allow more Mexicans to work in the U.S., and establish a path to legal residency (Gutiérrez 2007). But these efforts evaporated when the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) occurred, which stalled all negotiations from going forward. Although irregular migration in Mexico was already viewed in xenophobic terms, the events of 9/11 further solidified a restrictive and hard security discourse with respect to

‘unauthorized’ migrants among policymakers. Nearly ten years later, a new *Migration Law* (2011) [Ley de Migración] was established after countless border control policies implemented by the Mexican government, with economic aid from the U.S., which had connected ‘irregular’ migrants to illegal contraband and/or organized crime and effectively embedded ‘irregular’ migration into a national security discourse.

### *Central American Migrants*

Similar to the focus on the U.S.-Mexico border, scholars have devoted greater attention to the experiences of Mexican migrants because of the regional and cultural history between Mexico and the U.S. Yet, it is important to understand the changing dynamics of migration within the region, which places Central American migrants, especially from the NTCA, as principal actors within this context. For the last several years, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has documented an increase in Central American migrants’ arrests at the border. For instance, according to the 2016 *Border Security Report*: ‘In FY 2014, Central Americans apprehended on the southern border outnumbered Mexicans for the first time; in FY16, the same was true’ (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2016). As previously noted, the statistics show that migrants are coming primarily from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

Poverty and inequality have always been prominent reasons for moving North. Like the rest of Latin America, neoliberal policies of structural adjustment, enacted during the 1990s, crippled local economies; poverty increased and socio-economic conditions worsened (Alarcón-González 1999; Pessar 2005). According to World Bank data, for instance, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras suffer from sizeable poverty rates where, in all three countries, nearly half or more of the population lives below the

international standard poverty line of \$US4 per day (World Bank 2014). In addition, the UNDP Human Development Report (2016) cites the high percentages found in the NTCA with respect to those found with vulnerable employment within the total labour force: Guatemala (49.9%); El Salvador (37.6%); and Honduras (53.3%) (2016, 255–56). This increase in poverty has also prompted many women in these countries to enter the labour force (typically in the informal sectors) in order to achieve sustainable livelihoods.

Even more poignant, however, is the continued increase of violence, combined with the lack of government response, corruption and impunity. Fear of violence is quickly becoming the principal reason for migrants, especially women and children, to flee the NTCA. The figures are staggering. According to the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) (2016), in 2016, there was a total of 39,343 ‘unauthorized’ migrant women from the NTCA detained by Mexican authorities, which is approximately 26 percent of the total ‘unauthorized’ migrant population of 150,035. The region of the NTCA has been referred to as ‘the world’s most dangerous region outside an official war zone’ (Lakhani 2016), where the ‘number of people fleeing violence... [has] increased to levels not seen since the 1980s’ (UNHCR 2017, 40). In other words, levels not seen since the civil wars that plagued the region during the 1980s/1990s, which were embedded in Cold War politics and had the U.S. funnel millions of dollars in military aid to combat the leftist ‘communist threat’.

Therefore, migrants from the NTCA are no longer solely leaving for economic reasons but are increasingly leaving to seek asylum, whether in the U.S. or in Mexico. In 2015, for instance, the UNHCR reported that the number of refugees and asylum seekers with pending cases was 109,800, a considerable increase from only 2012, when the figure

was 20,900 (2016, 7). In 2016, the U.S., the second largest recipient of new asylum applications worldwide, received 25,700 applications from Guatemala, 33,600 from El Salvador, and 19,500 from Honduras (UNHCR 2017, 40). These numbers indicate that the increase of violence and the fear of being targeted by violent actors is a growing humanitarian reality.

#### *Women Migrants from the NTCA*

Despite the growing number of migrant women, their experiences remain understudied (IMUMI 2014). Migrant women from the NTCA are disproportionately represented even though particular groups of women (i.e. police officers, women with children, and transgender women) face higher levels of persecution in their countries of origin and face unique obstacles and dangers while on the migrant journey (UNHCR 2015). Focusing on the migration of women is important as, globally, their levels of migration are virtually equal to that of men (Donato 2006). Additionally, in 2013, women represented 51.6 percent of the migrant population in Latin America (INCIDE Social 2013). Furthermore, although it may be difficult to estimate, the total number of ‘unauthorized’ women migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border due to their clandestine nature, there is agreement among academics, civil society and government sources that this number is on the rise (ITAM 2014; Ley Cervantes and Pena Munoz 2016). Similarly, there has also been an increase in the number of ‘unauthorized’ women migrants who transit through Mexico, where the numbers range between 20-25 percent of the overall migrant population (IMUMI 2014; Dresel 2012).

Researching the mobility of ‘unauthorized’ Central American women helps uncover the gender blindness that occurs in the scholarship and the policies surrounding



security and migration. In the same vein, drawing attention to gender when speaking about the migration process deconstructs the existing power relations, which place women in more vulnerable, dangerous and violent situations while migrating because of their sex when compared to male migrants. It also shows women's active role and decision-making power throughout this journey. Thus, while it may be the case that women travel through Mexico to reunite with a spouse in the U.S., many others, as will be seen throughout this dissertation for example, are single mothers who leave behind children and risk their lives to reach the U.S. with the hope of bringing their children in the future. Researching the experiences of women migrants shows how women are victimized in specific ways because of their sex, among other traits. So, not only are they 'unauthorized' migrants, which carries a xenophobic criminal stigma in Mexico, but they are also women, which increases the risk of targeted sexual violence while en-route to the U.S. It is reported that approximately 80 percent of women and girls transiting Mexico will be sexually assaulted while trying to reach the U.S. (Bonello and Siegal McIntyre 2014). There is no shortage of participants within Mexico who assault these women (members of *pandillas* [criminal gangs], coyotes/pollereros, Mexican authorities, train operators, and male migrants, among others). It is these gender inequalities that intersect with other systems of oppression like class, race and nationality, which together form a woman's relational and situated experience. Examining these intersectional dimensions works to address and understand social inequalities and raise political awareness and social justice for the rights of this marginalized group (Collins 2012).

## **Why Borders Matter**

The following sections explore the literatures with which I engage as well as aim to highlight some of the contributions offered from my research. While my scholarly training stems primarily from political science and international relations (IR), my dissertation engages with theories found in feminist studies, critical human geography and political sociology. I consider these literatures to provide a more holistic approach to my research because they enable me to carry out a more integrated analysis of the lived experiences of women migrants transiting through Mexico. Specifically, my dissertation engages with theories found in the critical border studies literature and specifically with the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) perspective, which is one strand of theorizing within critical migration and border studies. As the name suggests, the AoM perspective advocates migration as autonomous and preceding sovereign control. Migration is about the movement of people, who struggle for and practice the freedom of mobility, as active and creative agents, despite dangerous border controls. Above all, I chose this approach because the framework privileges migrants' perspectives rather than a state-centric view and, therefore, focuses on the lives and experiences of migrants and their struggles around issues of mobility. Similarly, the approach highlights the importance of migrant agency. Indeed, unlike other perspectives, which view migrants primarily as victims in need of protection (Agamben 1998; Hanafi and Long 2010; Diken 2004), the AoM counters these approaches by emphasizing the human agency of migrants who have a creative capacity to enact the freedom of movement. Lastly I chose this approach because it emphasizes the border as a site of social and political struggles between and among

various actors, movements and discourses (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 69). Therefore, advocates of the approach do not view the border as a fixed, stable form of migration control – a perspective that is particularly relevant to migrants in transit.

Through the feminist approach I adopted for this research, the reflexive analysis of interviews and observations throughout my fieldwork led me to identify some gaps and shortcomings within the AoM literature. These became the basis for my contributions. Two main shortcomings involve how advocates of the AoM 1) conceptualize agency and 2) account for different subjectivities. As illustrated in my dissertation, I argue that proponents of the AoM stray too far in privileging agency at the expense of appreciating the structures of power that cause harm and violence. Too much emphasis on agency and autonomy dismisses the complexity of ‘relational’ autonomy, as articulated by feminist theorists (Benson 1990, 1991; Nussbaum 2001) who are mindful of how agency is exercised within structures of power, such as patriarchy among others. ‘Relational’ theories of autonomy illustrate how oppressive social conditions weaken or erase agents’ autonomy. Further, while AoM proponents are interested in the process of subject-making that comes when people move (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Trimikliniotis et al. 2016), they do not go far enough to account for the differences of migrants, including the gendered experiences of mobility – neglecting the longstanding contributions and contentions of feminist scholarship that has demonstrated the way in which all aspects of migration are gendered (Pessar and Mahler 2003; Pessar 2005; Donato et al. 2006; Silvey 2006; Piper 2006; Hyndman 2004b; Ruiz-Aho 2011). For example, women migrants are more likely to travel with children (Women’s Refugee Commission 2013), they are more likely to be concentrated in gendered sections of work

characterized by informality and insecurity (Hennebry et al. 2016), and are more likely to face sexual abuse on the move (Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano 2016). Yet, the value of prioritizing migrant agency, rather than state-centric approaches that further methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2003), underscores the continued relevance of the AoM approach to understand migrant experiences of the border.

Therefore, in order to begin to bridge this scholarship, and engage the AoM through a feminist epistemology, I draw on critical feminist scholarship particularly within critical geography and political sociology, and more specifically, with corporeal and poststructural forms of feminisms, as well as feminist concepts of embodied mobility and intersectionality. I employ a poststructural feminist approach that focuses on how bodies are socially constructed by interconnected power structures (Grosz 1994, 1987; Bordo 1993, 1996). In addition, I apply an intersectional analysis to illustrate how bodies are socially positioned in a hierarchy where multiple forms of oppression intersect with each other and shape women's situational experiences (Collins 2012; Crenshaw 1991). As I further explain below, bridging feminist theory with critical border studies and AoM literatures not only involves embedding a feminist perspective but also considering several forms of oppression and exclusion which marginalize vulnerable groups and sustain unequal power relations. Indeed, as concluded by Mouffe (1992, 382), 'Feminism... should not be understood as a struggle for realizing the equality of a definable empirical group with a common essence and identity, women, but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category "woman" is constructed in subordination'. What remains critical to feminist analysis is evaluating these social differences and the prevailing power relations and practices that position particular

groups of people in ‘hierarchical relations to others based on such difference[s]’ (Hyndman 2004b, 309). In the following sections, I will further examine critical border and AoM literature in order to illustrate the merits and shortcomings of these literatures, and make the case for integrating a feminist perspective into this approach in order to carry out a holistic analysis of how migrant women from the NTCA experience borders and migration while in Mexico.

Historically, traditional IR theory conceptualized the border as a fixed, physical territorial line that divided one sovereign state from another and was to be defended militarily, if necessary (Walters 2006). Scholars engaged in critical borders studies, however, began to see a shift in the governance of borders with greater migration, specifically ‘unauthorized’ migration (Huysmans 2000; Huysmans and Squire, 2009; Squire 2011). Policy makers began to frame ‘unauthorized’ migration as a ‘threat’ to national security and internal stability, calling for its regulation by fortifying national borders, fearing nation-states would otherwise face an international security crisis (Weiner 1993). In the European context, asylum was framed pejoratively and migrants, who were typically coming from the ‘developing’ world and seeking refuge, were characterized as a danger to cultural homogeneity and/or the social welfare system (Huysmans 2000).

Critical scholars now contend that border enforcement policies enacted by government authorities are no longer only at the territorial edges of the nation-state. Instead of fixed lines or parameters around national territories, borders are processes and practices put in place to regulate unwanted migration; the idea of ‘bordering’ as oppose to the ‘border’ (Rumford 2011). Furthermore, scholarship on borders focused new attention

on the changing spatiality of border practices. Whereas traditionally the state's borders were perceived by scholars and government alike as located at the territorial edge of the nation-state at official ports of entry (POEs), now border governance is being implemented and enforced inside the state, whether by border officers at internal checkpoints within 100 miles of a POE (Mountz 2011) or in a city or town by local police officials (Coleman 2012). In addition, state borders are increasingly enforced beyond or outside the nation-state, with programs of pre-entry security checks, for example, established by airline companies (Salter 2008). The 'spatial stretching' of the border, therefore, operates well beyond territorial state borders (both inside or outside) (Amoore 2006). Therefore, as Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2012, 730) argue, borders 'increasingly form a continuum stretching from within states, through to the conventional "flashpoint" at airports, ports...and beyond to "pre-frontier" zones at the point of departure'. Critical border scholars thus challenge the fixity of borders arguing that bordering practices can occur anywhere (Balibar 2002).

Scholars have also increasingly drawn attention to the connection between bordering practices and the personal body (Salter 2006; Provine and Doty 2011; Khosravi 2011). Since bordering practices can occur anywhere, it is the embodied individual who is perceived as a risk or threat, which speaks directly to the politics of mobility in that the bordering practices depend, to a great extent, on the individual 'undesirable' body in question (Khosravi 2011). Some people will be afforded more mobility while others will be constrained and restricted, to what Hyndman (2001) refers to as the 'geopolitics of mobility'. This dissertation recognizes these insights by critical feminist and border scholarship regarding the spatial dynamics of border practices enforced by the nation-

state and their connection to the personal body. It does so by focusing attention on how women migrants live with this ‘invisible border’ throughout their journey in Mexico and the consequences of this border. For example, in Article #1<sup>3</sup>, I analyze the bordering effects of categorizing migrants as ‘unauthorized’ by the Mexican government when they cross the southern international border with Guatemala. Despite the government’s claims of working to protect migrant women from nefarious non-state actors through policies such as *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) (Presidencia de la Republica 2014), on-the-ground, such categorizations further force women into vulnerable, insecure situations in order to survive.

Taken together, the three articles presented in my dissertation contribute to critical border studies by applying a feminist perspective and nuancing border practices and the connection to the personal body to account for women’s specific experiences. It pushes the analysis of the ways in which embodied migrants experience the border by examining the multiple subjectivities that can affect mobility, with a focus on gender. Through the analysis of my research with migrant women, I discovered that the AoM approach, which at the beginning seemed to encapsulate migrant experiences, suffered from limitations around migrant agency and migrant subjectivities. Specifically, the perspective does not highlight how agency is exercised within structures of power. Furthermore, it privileges agency to a point of neglecting the tangible violence experienced by migrant women. In addition, the perspective does not adequately account for different subjectivities, specifically gendered subjectivities that affect the autonomy of migration. Studying the politics of mobility means evaluating how mobility is relational, situated and based on a

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<sup>3</sup> As this article was written for an edited volume for the ‘Borders in Globalization’ research project, with an international relations (IR) audience, the discussion of the border stems from a political science perspective and then applies a feminist critique.

migrant's individual positionality. Jennifer Hyndman, for instance, has done extensive work on the 'geopolitics of mobility' (2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2012) and argues that the controls put in place allow certain bodies the freedom of movement at the expense of others, who are constrained and contained. This not only refers to those controls associated with border enforcement, but also to how mobility is affected by and varies according to gender, race, class and nationality (Hyndman 2001). For example, while in Article #1 the focus is on how border enforcement logics employed by the Mexican nation-state produce an everyday clandestine space where women migrants experience increased vulnerability and danger, Article #2, notes that border enforcement policies that label women migrants as 'unauthorized' are but only one of the borders or boundaries that women migrants from the NTCA experience during their journeys. Not only are they 'unauthorized', but they are also *women*, and/or *racialized*, and/or *poor*, and/or from *Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras* – all of which change the dynamics of their mobility.

Understanding border enforcement policies and practices, and how they intersect with other oppressive barriers that affect migrant women's movements, illuminates how the 'intimate and the global intertwine' (Pratt and Rosner 2012). Similar to Mountz and Hyndman (2006, 450–51), I aim to show how the intimate decisions surrounding migrant movements are not separate from enforcement practices, but rather, they constitute one another. Therefore, I consider both the bordering effects of nation-state policies on individual bodies and how unequal structural power relations act as added boundaries/barriers that intertwine to form intimate decisions. As such, one set of questions running through this dissertation are: What are the bordering practices that



restrict and/or impact the movement of women migrants in this context? How do they have an impact on a) women migrants' trajectory/journey and b) personal security? And, how do women migrants navigate, negotiate, respond and contend with these practices and impacts?

### **Borders as Experience**

The bordering practices of authorities and governments have important implications for how borders are experienced and negotiated by women in order to survive the migrant journey. By problematizing borders, the three articles in my dissertation tell a story of women's migration across Mexico rooted in their embodied experiences. The narratives found in this story show how border governance places women in subordinate positions and engulfs them in danger and vulnerability. My analysis through the three articles demonstrates how borders are used to build a binary of 'us' versus 'them' that is then used by governments and border officials to justify repressive policies that further divide and separate. Additionally, the articles represent a perspective that emphasizes individual bodies, which allows me not only to examine the consequences of imposed border enforcement practices, but how the effects of state borders interact with other boundaries/barriers that are created by unequal socio-political power hierarchies, which together shape migrant women's intimate experiences. Lastly, given the multiple borders, which together create a situated, relational, embodied experience and knowledge base for women, the articles also importantly explore how women respond to borders and survive the journey using different strategies to endure those borders. With this in mind, a second set of questions throughout my dissertation include: What is the relationship between agency and oppression within (im)mobility?

How do women migrants experience violence in their (im)mobility? What strategies do women use to survive the journey?

Overall, the emphasis throughout my dissertation is that borders are not fixed in place (Muller 2009) but are carried on the body (Khosravi 2011; Squire 2011) and therefore continue along this particular migrant journey. Borders are not abstract concepts but materialize through individuals' differential embodied experiences of moving across borders; and the social categories that result, which are often based on social differences, interact and shape subjective experiences and determine migrants' access, resources and options (Kron 2011). In order for a border to materialize, it needs people; whether to pass policy demarcating territorial spaces, or to cross it, otherwise the border is just an abstract discursive construct. According to Bertha Jottar, during Biemann's (2002) video essay:

You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border; it's a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing there is no border, right? It's just an imaginary line, a river or it's just a wall.

So far, I have discussed critical borders studies and how examining the migrant body as a site where borders can be manifest contributes detailed insight into how we define borders beyond the physical territorial divides between nation states; and explicates how women migrants engage with and are affected by a range of borders. Through this critical analysis, my dissertation also contributes to the AoM perspective by addressing migrant subjectivities and questioning binary assumptions. The AoM

perspective, within migration border studies, enriches the scholarship by transferring our attention to the migrant rather than the nation-state. By changing the unit of analysis, AoM scholars emphasize the practices of migrants, how they respond to restrictive border practices, and how they subvert and resist borders (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Mezzadra 2004, 2011b; N. Trimikliniotis et al. 2016). My analysis applies this perspective to Central American women on the move through Mexico. Through this case study, in conversation with a detailed critical review of the AoM approach, and its principal tenet of the autonomous nature of mobility, my dissertation calls into question the contention of many AoM scholars that mobility is autonomous to and precedes border controls. In other words, though migrants are creative and active agents, their movement is relational to multiple structures of power, which affect their mobility options and resources.

Furthermore, the concepts of escape and invisibility feature prominently in the AoM literature. According to its proponents, escape is the ultimate form of subversion by migrants who choose to refuse the modes of rights and representation enacted by the nation-state (Papadopoulos et al. 2008). Migrants are viewed as active agents, not victims, and become ‘imperceptible’ or ‘invisible’ to sovereignty and control because they create their own new communities with their own forms of knowledge, which are outside of the ‘existing system of political representation’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 188). Thus, becoming ‘invisible’ and creating new communities of knowledge not only makes escape a real possibility, it also renders borders porous because it is the nation-state that is scrambling to react to these migrant strategies. When examined

through this perspective, borders are not impassable walls and/or fences (Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010).

My dissertation, however, illustrates that women's choices with respect to (im)mobility are more complex than the AoM perspective may suggest, especially with respect to different forms of violence and systems of oppression. Similar to other scholars who have critiqued the AoM perspective (McNevin 2013; Nyers 2015), I argue that many scholars within the AoM scholarship fall prey to following several either/or dichotomies, such as those classifying the migrant as an agent versus a victim, or promoting the focus of human mobility over that of control. In addition, I agree with Sharma (2009) and Scheel (2013b, 2013a) who claim that AoM scholars generalize the migrant population into simply 'people on the move' who acquire and share a common knowledge. For example, in Article #2, I show how mobility is not necessarily a given because of women's relationality and social position. I argue, for instance, that *access* to 'escape' may not be an achievable goal in that women from the NTCA face embedded gendered power structures, such as the gender expectations which require women to care for children and the household. They may also be forcibly detained by violent spouses or have little resources to migrate because of the gendered barriers to employment, property ownership and financial inclusion (Hennebry, Elias, and Holliday 2017). Therefore, escape should not be a taken-for-granted assumption, when access to migration may not even be a possibility. In Article #3, I examine the concept of the mobile commons and show how 'common' knowledge can be quite diverse due to the differentiated and gendered migrant population, and thus may produce different knowledges and relationships. I demonstrate, for instance, that women from the NTCA in particular, must

acquire birth control because of the likelihood of being raped in Mexico. In this instance, women have agency to practice autonomous movement, but it comes at a cost of serious physical and emotional harm. All three articles grapple with the embodied experiences that make up migrant women's everyday struggles through all stages of the migration journey, which includes pre-migration, and the 'visceral conceptions of violence, security and mobility' (Hyndman 2004b, 308).

Feminist scholars problematize false dichotomies because they can simplify the knowledge that is produced. As Sprague (2016, 17) notes, 'most of the dualisms we use to describe everyday life are not logical dichotomies, but...points on some form of a continuum'. Migrant women in Mexico, for instance, are not active agents nor passive victims. The situations in Mexico and, prior, in the NTCA, are messy. Women may exhibit agency (deciding to leave their country of origin) and experience moments when their agency is taken away (kidnapped in a safe house). But either/or binaries obscure embodied realities experienced by migrants, which are particularly relevant to women migrants. By employing a feminist perspective, I suggest that the AoM approach overemphasizes migrant agency at the expense of analyzing the ways in which migrants are forced into positions of serious personal violence and insecurity. I illustrate how the gender-blindness may be, in part, due to the neglect of situational, embodied realities and of the multiple power structures that enable these realities (i.e. patriarchy). By generally concentrating on escape and strategies like the mobile commons, they do not appreciate the moments of (im)mobility, the constraints on women's mobility (such as care responsibilities), or the lack of access to 'escape' (e.g. due to lack of resources or gender-based violence [GBV]). Also, they fail to address the different kinds of violence, both

intimate and systemic, throughout the migration journey, which are revealed when paying direct attention to gendered bodies (Fluri and Piedalue 2017). Therefore, I commit myself to using situated forms of knowledge in this dissertation, knowing that it will be a partial perspective based on an embodied view of the world (Haraway 1988), because I believe that there is not just one type of knowledge, such as the knowledge of ‘the migrant’.

Overall, this dissertation addresses how marginalized bodies, such as those of women migrants from the NTCA, experience borders across their migration journey within Mexico. As such, I focus on how bodies are socially constructed by interconnected power structures and use the concept of the ‘embodied body’ to describe women migrants. Employing the work of scholars such as Grosz (1987; 1994) and Bordo (1993; 1996), I define an embodied body as a body that is not only biological in nature, but also socially constructed through historical and socio-cultural factors. The body, therefore, is not fixed but rather is a ‘writing surface’ where it is produced by its social inscriptions from the outside. In other words, social inscriptions and biological elements constitute a body (Grosz 1994, 141). This is significant within my research because it allows me to appreciate the positionality of the body, how it is produced through hierarchies of power (such as gender, race, class), and how, in this case, it is constructed through subordination. Through this process, the body becomes a ‘lived body’ or the body as experienced (Bordo 1993, 142). Women, therefore embody different subjectivities and their (im)mobility is affected by their ‘social location’ in life (Pessar and Mahler 2003), not just their spatial relation to a given territory or border location.

Positionality and social location are also significant in another feminist concept that I employ throughout this analysis: intersectionality. Intersectionality, which is

utilized by poststructural analysis from earlier African-American feminist scholarship (e.g. Crenshaw 1991), is equally important for my research because it focuses on how social locations are inherently embedded in systems of power and oppression. Originally catalyzed by the black feminist social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, intersectionality as a ‘knowledge project’ or an analysis was not visible in the academic context until the 1980s (Collins 2012). Intersectional analysis involves understanding how multiple forms of oppression (such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) are all interconnected and shape women’s lived experiences. Crenshaw (1991) was a pioneer scholar with respect to intersectional analysis in her critique of the legal system only ‘examining gender oppression in isolation’ (Hurtado and Sinha 2016). However, Chicana and Latina feminists, like Fregoso (2003) and Anzaldúa (1987) have also analyzed how different systems of oppression are formed and sustained to exert power over ‘women of color’. Anzaldúa (1987, 78), for example, argues that women living in the borderlands of the U.S. live a multilayered reality because of their ‘mestiza consciousness’ where they cross multiple social and cultural boundaries and identities, and undergo a ‘struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war’.

Another prominent scholar whose work has focused on drawing attention to the importance of intersectional analysis is Collins (2000, 2012) who has focused on societal structures that create and sustain subordination and oppression. I conclude that what is most prevalent for understanding women migrants from the NTCA in the context of border studies and the AoM perspective can be captured by incorporating the themes Collins notes comprise intersectionality. First, Collins (2012, 452) explains how intersecting power relations affect social location. So, as I argue in Article #2 and Article

#3, women migrants who are able to migrate are not solely affected by the imposed category of ‘unauthorized’. They are also women, maybe poor, and coloured, among other categories, which add to the vulnerabilities that they encounter. Connected to the above point, the second theme notes that social locations have ‘important epistemological implications’ and ‘knowledge cannot be separated from power relations in which it participates’ (Ibid., 453) This directly applies to my study, especially in Article #3 where I explicitly argue that migrant knowledge is distinct and situated, which in turn means applying different strategies of survival based on that knowledge. Lastly, there is the theme of relationality and directing attention to how systems of oppression are constituted and maintained through relational processes and ‘social locations... acquire meaning and power (or lack thereof) in relationship to other social positions’ (Ibid., 454). By examining bordering practices in Article #1, I evaluate how border enforcement policies differentiate between ‘trusted’ travellers and ‘undesirable’ and/or ‘unauthorized’ migrants. I illustrate how the politics of mobility depend on allowing some bodies the freedom of movement at the expense of constraining others. Overall, by analyzing my research using these prominent themes, I can problematize borders and problematize mobility in order to provide a more comprehensive and situational analysis of the conditions that women migrants face in their everyday lives.

### **Research Design and Methods**

Before I outline the structure of my dissertation, I would like to offer more detail about my research methods, data and positionality as a researcher. As previously mentioned in this introduction, I employ a feminist perspective, which in turn informs my epistemological understanding and commitments. As a researcher who is committed to



understanding the lives of people who are typically marginalized from hegemonic security narratives, I have employed research methods that provide a view of the world that prioritizes the voices of migrant women. I adopt a view of ‘knowledge’ which enables the questioning of dominant power structures, how they ‘fit into the rest of social life’ (Sprague 2016), and thus, exposes the social inequalities among women whose experiences and subjectivities are constructed in subordination. To this end, I have employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation at field sites, unstructured/semi-structured interviews with migrant women, and semi-structured key informant interviews with those with whom migrant women are in frequent contact to be able to interpret data and provide narratives of personal experiences. In addition, I carried out policy analysis and other forms of document research to gather data pertaining to governance and policy frameworks relevant to Mexico’s bordering practices.

My dissertation is principally based on empirical fieldwork that I conducted in Mexico from September to December 2014. I chose Mexico for the reasons outlined above in the *Rationale for Study* section but also because it represents a geographical barrier for Central American women migrants trying to achieve passage into the U.S. Thus, in my study, migrants are attempting to transit through Mexico, although there are increasingly instances where migrants are choosing to stay in Mexico due to the traumatizing effects encountered on their journeys throughout the country, or due to barriers (ranging from physical to financial) in realizing their intentions to cross into the U.S. Qualitative fieldwork specifically was important for my research because it allowed me to spend time in places where women migrants travel and, often, live for long periods of time. This approach enabled me to learn about and validly describe some aspects of

their lives with accuracy guided by the voices of migrant women and their advocates and communities: in particular, this approach strengthened my representation of their practices of (im)mobility and survival, their fears, their emotional traumas, and their hopes (Emerson 2001). Indeed, it was particularly important for me to talk with and observe research participants in their own social contexts and to listen to their stories because I was able to ‘recognize them as subjects’ rather than ‘abstract individuals’ (Sprague 2016, 146), and it was my sincere aim to give voice to the people I was studying.

Though I have aimed to represent the voices of these women throughout my study, I recognize that my own positionality affects all stages of my research – from the initial formulation of research questions to the data gathered and analysed. Although, I could build rapport through various similarities with many of my participants (that we are women, Latin American, migrants, and mothers, as I discuss below), I am also aware of our different positioning and entitlements. Nowhere was this more telling than when I was speaking with one woman migrant, whom I interviewed. We were discussing the insecurity and fear she felt, when she suddenly told me, ‘yes, but you get to leave.’ In that moment, I recognized that my position as an educated researcher from Canada afforded me the privilege of mobility and safety. In this interaction, I realized that the ‘snap-shots of people’s lives from which we construct knowledge are located in a narrative flow with which we may have little or no ongoing, direct connection’ (Dyck 2002, 244). It was such moments, where our differential positionalities and subjectivities were highlighted, that led to my reflexive analysis of the theoretical frameworks employed to understand mobility.

Adopting a feminist methodology not only contributes to my understanding about situated knowledge but it also makes me attentive to the limitations of my research, and to recognize the personal and contextual factors (specifically, that I am a woman researcher with two small children and that some of the areas where my fieldwork was carried out are some of the most violent in Mexico) that may influence interviews, data gathering and interpretation, which requires constant reflexivity. As I elaborate in the *Challenges and Limitations* section below, I understand that there are power relations that may shape my interviews, especially with vulnerable populations, such as ‘unauthorized’ women migrants (Clark-Kazak 2017). So, while there are relations with participants and the researcher that may place participants at ease, there are other power dynamics, which make participants uncomfortable. Therefore, while conducting interviews, I engaged in constant ‘reflexive awareness’ knowing that ‘research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power, but rather are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference’ (De Vault and Gross 2012). As a result, I made a conscious effort to be aware of and note ‘bodily comportment [such as] tears and/or hushed tones’, and I was aware that my position is also read by those I was interviewing (Dyck 2002, 242–43). In order to mitigate feelings of difference, which may impede communication, I sought to increase openness by engaging in semi-structured interviews, which could also become open-ended ones if the participant chose to speak at length to respond to any one question. I understood the vulnerability and ethical considerations involved with interviewing ‘unauthorized’ migrants and thus assured them anonymity and gave them the choice of being recorded or not. During the interview, I would also share my story of being a child of refugee parents to ‘disrupt the

traditional hierarchy which places the researcher “above” her participant’ (Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002, 108). My goal was to engage in interactive communication or conversations in which ‘the nature of the interaction itself produces new information or insight about a topic’ (Ibid., 106).

### *Site Selection*

Prior to embarking on my fieldwork, I analyzed relevant documents, including policy papers, academic research and news stories in order to contextualize the migration situation in Mexico, trace its genealogy and find those experts who were working in the field of migrant rights. Through this desk-based research I discovered a network of scholars who became my key contacts and organizational base in the field. I then applied a snowballing sampling method whereby each key informant would connect me to others who might be interested in speaking with me. This research also informed my site choices. I chose three different locations for my qualitative data collection, which included the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, as well as the capital Mexico D.F. These were selected on the basis that they are all major points along the transit route for migrants. These transit routes are also prominent and well-known to migrants due to the trajectory of the cargo freight train, infamously known as ‘*La Bestia*’ [The Beast] among migrants and Mexicans alike. As can be seen from Figure 1, the train routes travel from south to north on separate lines - one crosses through Oaxaca and the other through Veracruz and both pass through the capital.



*Figure 1: Rutas a Estados Unidos [Routes to the United States] Source: Jesuit Migrant Services Foundation*

In each site location and through these key contacts, I arranged interviews at migrant shelters, non-governmental organizations, university research centres, faith-based organizations, and government institutions. As such, a total of twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were carried out with several stakeholder groups, migration research experts (6), representative of *Comision Estatal de Derechos Humanos* (1), NGO and faith-based organization personnel (5), migrant shelter staff and volunteers (7) and migrants (8). A complete list of interviewees can be found in Appendix A. However, as previously noted, participants were guaranteed anonymity due to their vulnerable positions, if they wished and, thus, all three articles include the use of pseudonyms to protect various participants' identities.

### *Interviews and Participant Observation*

I employed interviews to understand the experiences of women migrants from the NTCA while in Mexico en route to the U.S. As interviews are a form of social interaction, I conducted interviews to fill in any gaps of knowledge found during my initial phase of desk-based research and to gain access to various perspectives and experiences. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, with a set of core questions to guide the process (if necessary). Therefore, every question did not need to be asked of every participant as some people felt open to tell their stories without any probing questions. Each participant was given the choice of having the interview recorded. If they consented, I used a recording device. Otherwise, I took detailed handwritten notes. Of all the participants interviewed, it was mainly those in more precarious situations, for instance, migrants or shelter staff and volunteers, who chose not to be recorded.

As a researcher, the most revealing experiences for me were my visits to two migrant shelters, as these visits not only allowed me to conduct interviews in a safe and trusted environment but also to take part in participant observation. The sheer number of migrants travelling through Mexico and the rise in human rights violations along migrant routes means that many shelters have been cropping up in the interior of the country (Coutin 2005). According to the *Dimensión Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana* [Pastoral Dimension of Human Mobility] (2013, 29), as of 2013, there were a total of 63 faith-based shelters and dining halls along the Mexican transit corridor, which together have formed a humanitarian network to assist migrants. My first visit was at beginning of

October 2014, to the shelter *Decanal Guadalupano* in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz. During my visit, I was able to gain insight into how dangerous the state of Veracruz is for migrants, through my interviews with the director of the shelter, its volunteers and one migrant who had just been processed by the shelter. After my interviews, I was taken on a tour of the facilities and learned about the connections of Veracruz and organized criminal organizations, the use of ‘safe houses’ right outside the shelter and the security controls put in place by the shelter, often hampering the liberties of the migrants hosted there. I discuss these pertinent issues throughout my dissertation.

The second shelter I visited was in the state of Oaxaca at the end of October 2014. The shelter, *Hermanos en el Camino* in Ixtepec, Oaxaca offered me a volunteer position during my stay. For reasons I will discuss in further detail below, I was only able to stay at this shelter for approximately one week. In that time, however, I was able to speak to migrants, volunteers and staff during the daily operations of the shelter. Thus, in addition to scheduled interviews with participants, I was also able to observe women migrants and learn about their lived experiences while in the shelter. I was able to take part in informal interviews while cutting vegetables for dinner in the dining hall or while lining up for lunch. Overall, I was able to learn about the activities of migrants while participating in such activities (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). During my stay, I wrote extensive detailed field notes to accompany my interview data. Throughout my fieldwork, I also kept a detailed research journal of my own reactions, interpretations and feelings to deepen my understanding of the data and also to recognize my own role and position of power vis-à-vis my participants (Emerson et al. 1995; Johnson 2012).

### *Document Analysis*

To address gaps in my data collection and also provide more context upon my return from the field, I also analyzed several documents and media reports. First, by analyzing government documents I was able to examine the prominent national discourses found in Mexico with respect to migration. This exercise not only provided me with the context of migration according to the ‘official’ government discourse, but I was also able to see how the national discourse tries to be embedded in both national security and human rights. In Article #1, I show how these narratives are ingrained in migration-security discourses but the protection of human rights appears to be more for optics as there is a lack of ensuring human rights on the ground. My objective with evaluating these documents was to analyze if and how these government discourses diverge from my observations and interviews while on the ground. I examined three primary texts, the *1974 General Law of Population* [Ley General de Población], the *2011 Law of Migration* [Ley de Migración], and the *Southern Border Plan* [Programa Frontera Sur] launched in 2014. Once I returned from the field, I also scanned online media sources, such as *Proceso* and *La Jornada*, in order to obtain further information about the effects of *Programa Frontera Sur*’s enforcement policies, particularly those regarding human rights violations. As I was only able to stay for three months, this data expanded my understanding of the political situation that was unfolding in Mexico.

### *Challenges and Limitations*

Researching vulnerable populations comes with its challenges. Among them is first, accessing the population and second, establishing trust and rapport so people will feel comfortable discussing their personal experiences with the researcher. Thus, I knew I would experience these challenges prior to undertaking this study. However, this did not



deter me from pursuing this research because I also have a personal connection with issues around immigrant rights. As a child of refugee parents from Latin America, I have always had a close affinity with issues around migration and human rights. My father came to Canada as a refugee, who had suffered persecution while in his country. My mother and I migrated shortly after. In this sense, my positionality as a person who came to Canada as child refugee gives me an understanding of some, but by no means all, of the hardships that shape migrant experiences. Furthermore, now as an adult woman with my own children, I wanted to study not only migrant experiences with ‘unauthorized’ movements, but also women’s experiences, as I do truly admire their courage and resilience throughout their journeys.

Access was perhaps the greatest challenge during my research for a couple of reasons. First, since ‘unauthorized’ women migrants do not have a regular, legal status, many choose to remain hidden so as to avoid apprehension, detention and deportation. In my particular fieldwork, timing also played a role in determining access to women migrants. During the summer of 2014, U.S. CBP experienced a large increase in the number of unaccompanied minors crossing the border from the NTCA. The U.S. government expressed its discontent to Mexico and encouraged the Mexican government to help ‘stem the flow’ of this developing migrant ‘crisis’. Article #1 provides further context into this particular event. In response to the political pressure, however, the Mexican government implemented *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) in July 2014, which had detrimental effects on the migrants undertaking the journey through Mexico (Isacson et al. 2015; AICHR 2015). In particular, raids, roadblocks and checkpoints were set up along the train routes and highways. This pushed migrants into further secluded areas,

away from the network of migrant shelters, which are purposely established along these train routes. Once I arrived in Mexico in the fall of 2014, PFS was in full force and the migrant shelters I visited had not received their regular anticipated number of migrants. To compensate for the lack of access to women migrants specifically, I spoke with shelter administrators, volunteers, NGO activists and experts who engaged with women migrants directly and therefore knew of their experiences.

The second challenge is directly connected to that of access and time. Establishing trust and rapport with vulnerable people takes time. Perhaps if my research field trip would have been longer than three months, I would have been able to continue to cultivate my relationships and meet more women migrants after the initial effects of the PFS had subsided. Nevertheless, my positionality in the field was both as a researcher and a mother. My first child at that time was 2 years old and so I travelled with my family (spouse and son) to Mexico. So, whereas fieldwork (especially with ethnographic methods) often requires exploration and immersion for longer periods of time, with children ‘fieldwork has meant mixing “care-work” with fieldwork and for the most part, this mix sullied expectations of wholly unimpeded tracts of time’ (Drozdewski 2015, 372). Additionally, I had to consider my own personal security while conducting fieldwork with my family, as Oaxaca and Veracruz are known as violent areas for migrants and their advocates (Martínez 2014; Isacson et al. 2015). So, on the one hand, I was unable to volunteer for longer periods of time or do as many interviews as I wished. Yet, on the other hand, being a mother allowed me to build a rapport more quickly with the women that I could engage with during my time in the field. Also, my positionality (i.e. a Latin American woman with children, who was a child of refugee parents) allowed

me to have more empathetic understanding in this context; empathizing more closely with women migrants in this region. Thus, while being a woman and a mother provided an advantage with respect to facilitating rapport in some cases, these characteristics also ironically restrained my mobility while in Mexico and limited the spatial and temporal parameters of my study.

### **Outline of Dissertation**

The remainder of my dissertation is comprised of three articles and a conclusion. Each article contains an abstract. With all three articles, my aim is to tell a story about borders and how women experience borders. The story begins with how borders, specifically those associated with territory and the nation-state, are governed. I then problematize borders and explore the different ways in which borders are violent. Given the borders encountered by women, I then investigate how women migrants struggle with these borders and the strategies they may employ while trying to survive the violence of the migrant journey.

In Article #1, I show how territorial nation-state borders are governed in Mexico and how the rationale for this governance can be associated with the long history of immigration control vis-à-vis the U.S. To support this analysis, I trace the history of border control in the U.S. and explore how similar logics have been implemented by the Mexican government, especially with the latest iteration of the border policy, *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS). Using critical border studies and feminist analysis, I question what borders are, who implements border practices and to what end, where borders are located on-the-ground and what are the consequences of these border practices on women migrants.

In Article #2, I shift my focus and explore other types of borders or barriers. I argue that territorial border practices and the categories associated with these practices, such as ‘unauthorized’, ‘irregular’, ‘undocumented’, etc., are but only one type of oppression that women migrants face in their migration journeys. I connect the violent effects of territorial border practices with other types of barriers and systems of oppression, which add to women’s overall intimate experiences. I frame my analysis using intersectionality and corporeal feminism to illustrate how the woman migrant subject is constituted by boundary-making narratives, which are constructed in subordination and create and sustain power hierarchies based on social differences.

Lastly, in Article #3, I explore how women migrants survive in light of the borders they face. Using the mobile commons as an analytical concept, I employ a feminist analysis to examine how situated knowledge affects the survival tactics and strategies used by women migrants while on the journey to the U.S. I contribute to the scholarship on the mobile commons by showing how diverse experiences and vulnerabilities affect knowledge and thus strategies while on the run and how migration is not a gender-neutral experience.

Following these three articles, there is a short conclusion. In the conclusion, I rearticulate the main contributions of my dissertation to the existing literature, returning to the themes of borders and oppression. I then explore the practical implications of my research, which centres upon political awareness and social justice for women migrants. I consider these practical implications so that women do not have to live a life of structural violence and can exercise their right to mobility with human dignity. Lastly, I include a discussion on future research, which focuses on two sets of experiences, women who

decide to stay in Mexico and women who are able to arrive in the U.S. In both instances, they may continue to live as ‘unauthorized’ migrants and also continue to experience feelings of insecurity in different embodied ways. Overall, women should not be missing from the literature and policy of migration. Their bodies, as women and mothers must not be neglected in favour of disembodied, gender-blind theorizing and/or strategies and policies governing migration because, in the context of the growing feminization of migration, we risk not only understanding their experiences but, equally, risk at best ignoring or at worse violating their human rights. Disregarding these embodied realities allow nation-states, through their policies, to at best continue to contribute to migrant women’s hardship through negligence, and at worst, actively harm them through such governance.

## **Article 1**

### **The Categorized and Invisible: The Effects of the ‘Border’ on Women**

#### **Migrants in Mexico**

**Carla Angulo-Pasel**

#### **Abstract**

This article focuses on ‘unauthorized’ migrant women from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras), who are trying to achieve safe passage to the United States (U.S.) via Mexico. By drawing on corporeal feminism and using the idea of embodiment, I show how the Mexican border becomes attached to the individual body. The category of ‘unauthorized’ or ‘undocumented’ follows migrant women, putting them in positions of increased risk and vulnerability, and forcing them to remain invisible. I argue that despite being framed in a language that promotes protection, Mexican border enforcement policies and practices actually obscure the violence on the ground. Border policies are constructed using dichotomous ways of thinking that privilege macro-level and disembodied forms of knowledge, and neglect attention to the ways in which migration is relational. This article is based on policy analysis and empirical fieldwork where I first discuss the intertwined border logics between the U.S. and Mexico. Following this section, I discuss the effects of bordering practices on women migrants with respect to vulnerability and precarity. Finally, I outline the effects of invisibility for women while on the migrant journey through Mexico, which

includes experiences of physical and sexual violence and experiences of exploitation and marginalization in the labour market.

## **Introduction**

Since the 1960s, border controls in the United States have undergone a transformation and become more restrictive towards ‘unauthorized’ migrants (Nevins 2001). Whereas in the past, border controls were typically focused on external, geographical and territorial demarcations (Walters 2006), border enforcement is increasingly practiced both at territorial borders and internally within nation-states (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012). The nation-state, through border security policy, has also created categories of migrants. Despite employing a rhetoric of protection, such categories place certain people in more precarious situations during their migration. This paper takes as its starting point the categories nation-states use to refer to irregular migrants (including ‘unauthorized’, ‘illegal’, ‘irregular’, ‘alien’, ‘foreigner’) and examines how these categories make migrants more vulnerable when crossing international borders. These state-produced categories place migrants in more dangerous and risky situations and affect their mobility and human rights. The danger facing migrants may be more pronounced during the journey from the country of origin to the country of destination. This is because the journey, or being in-transit, represents a state of limbo for migrants in which they can no longer rely on accessing the legal rights associated with their citizenship. Thus, given their ‘unauthorized’ status, they may be more prone to human rights abuses and insecurity while in transit.

Through its border controls, the nation-state contributes to the securitization of migration<sup>4</sup>, and produces ‘unauthorized’ migrants by virtue of assigning that category to an individual person. When a person is classified as being ‘illegal’ or ‘unauthorized’ this label follows him or her throughout the migration journey. Therefore, when a body is classified in clandestine terms, a migrant embodies this illegality and must travel with it. This is evident in Mexico, especially in the case of women migrants generally, and women migrant workers (WMWs) specifically. Over the past several years, the number of Central American migrants entering Mexico in the hopes of reaching the United States (U.S.) has steadily increased. For example, the year 2014 saw a total of 127, 149 ‘irregular’ migrants enter Mexico (SEGOB-INM 2014). This number jumped to a total of 198, 141 ‘irregular’ migrants in 2015 (SEGOB-INM 2015). Between 90 to 94 percent of this population originates from Central America – principally from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador – and they mainly enter Mexico through the border zone in Chiapas (Diaz Prieto and Kuhner 2014: 16). In 2014, the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (INM) detained a total of 119,714 migrants from Central America of which approximately 40 percent were from Guatemala, another 40 percent were from Honduras and 20 percent were from El Salvador (SEGOB-INM 2014). Again, the number of Central American migrants detained by the INM increased to 179, 618 in 2015 (SEGOB-INM 2015). Likewise, it is important to note that these official statistics do not demonstrate the number of migrants who have avoided detention and, thus, it is difficult to statistically

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I refer to the securitization of migration, to indicate how migration has been socially constructed as a security issue, framing it as a threat to public society, cultural homogeneity and/or labour market stability (Huysmans 2000). Socially and politically, therefore, there is a sustained public perception that ‘irregular’ migrants need to be contained or excluded by using restrictive border enforcement practices. The creation and maintenance of this securitization involves multiple actors, norms and practices, similar to what has been referred to as a ‘security assemblage’ (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009).



measure the whole ‘unauthorized’ or ‘irregular’ population of migrants. It is equally difficult to estimate the number of women migrants that transit through Mexico in order to reach the U.S. Nevertheless, reports place this estimate between 20 to 25 percent of the total ‘unauthorized’ transit population (Diaz-Prieto and Kuhner 2014; Dresel 2012). This rise in migrants from Central America has implications not only for the U.S., but also increasingly for the Mexican government, as it attempts to address the needs of this population. From a security perspective, border control logics implemented by the U.S. are progressively extending into Mexico, where it appears the U.S. border with Mexico is stretching outward, through Mexico, to the Mexican southern border with Guatemala. The humanitarian consequences of this border control on ‘unauthorized’ women migrants from Central America transiting through Mexico have been alarming to human rights activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike (WOLA 2015; Isacson et al 2015; AICHR 2015).

This chapter examines how state border controls further marginalize Central American women migrants transiting through Mexico, making them more insecure while travelling and searching for employment en route. I argue that border controls construct categories of illegality and force women to become invisible, both of which enhance women migrants’ danger and vulnerability while in transit (Anderson 2012; De Genova 2004; Mountz 2015). Building on research carried out in 2014, this chapter draws on data from participant observation and semi-structured interviews, gathered during three months of fieldwork in Mexico, as well as policy analysis of Mexico’s *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) and the regional visitor visa [*Tarjeta de Visitante Regional*]. The research took place in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, which serve as two prominent

states along the migrant route to the U.S.-Mexico border. The first section provides a background of the concept of borders and the shift from physical borders to what may be referred to as 'bordering' (Rumford 2011). It delves into some of the current flaws surrounding border logics implemented by the U.S. and how the Mexican government is adopting these logics, especially with the implementation of the PFS policy. The purpose of this section is to consider border security governance in the U.S. and to show how this governance is being extended into Mexico. This section is relevant as it reveals how border security logics sustain the perception of migrants as 'threats', framing migrants in security narratives, which in turn affects women migrants' insecurity by forcing them to remain hidden. The second section examines how subordinate border enforcement categories imposed by the nation-state interact with other categories that are socially-constructed through lived experiences of oppression, which encourage the stigmatization of women migrants, not only as they attempt to negotiate safe passage while they travel through Mexico, but equally as they attempt to find work. Section three delves into the problem of invisibility where, given the 'unauthorized' nature of their status, women migrants find themselves living in a constant state of fear and unable to seek various forms of protection (health, employment, assistance from police etc.). Due to feeling the need to remain invisible and hidden because of fear of detainment and/or deportation, they are unable to access human or labour rights, which may place them in more vulnerable situations. By forcing migrants to live clandestinely, the nation-state, in effect, contributes to the creation of a shadow or illicit labour market within an informal economy, as these women are often unable to acquire 'legitimate' or 'regular' forms of work.

## **What is the ‘Border’?**

International security discourse plays an important role in securitizing global migration by framing it as a ‘threat’, and the concept of ‘borders’ is significant in this narrative<sup>5</sup>. Scholarly work conceptualizing the ‘border’ has flourished to address the border well beyond simply viewing it as a physical, territorial line where one nation-state meets another (Balibar 2002; Biemann 2002; Huysmans 2000, 2006; Walters 2006; Rumford 2006, 2011; Johnson et al. 2011; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009, 2012). Johnson and Jones (2011), for example, discuss how the ‘border’ has changed in terms of place, perspective and performance. Historically, with regards to ‘place’, the border was understood in strictly physical, geographical terms of fixed territorial lines demarcating one sovereign state from another. This fixed line at the geographical edge of a nation-state, defining a territory with official ports of entry (POEs), (whether on land, water or in airports), was to be militarily defended from enemy armies (Walters 2006). In terms of ‘perspective’, therefore, the principal actor involved with questions of ‘who borders’ or who sustains the border, was the nation-state. This state-centric focus, typical of dominant International Relations (IR) theory, positioned border policy within a national security narrative.

Beginning in the 1990s, with what Kaldor (2007) refers to as ‘new wars’, the border’s ‘place’ as strictly a territorial line was challenged by the new global security ‘threat’ of ‘unauthorized’ migration. As Huysmans (2000) notes in the European context,

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter was written for an edited volume with an international relations (IR) audience. As such, this discussion of the border stems from a political science perspective and then applies a feminist critique. For other works on the issue of borders, see political geography (Mountz 2010; Hiemstra 2012), Chicana studies (Anzaldúa 1987), Postcolonial studies (Mohanty 2003a).

asylum took on a negative connotation as most of the asylum-seekers were migrating from the ‘developing’ world. In the IR literature, this migration ‘threat’ was framed as one of ‘high international politics’ that required state-centric responses due to the internal instability that this international security crisis would generate (Weiner 1993). Indeed, migration was framed as a danger to domestic society, whether to cultural homogeneity, or to the social welfare system. Consequently, state actors viewed the regulation of this migration, through border controls, as necessary in order to protect internal security (Huysmans 2000). The state had to be pre-emptive and ensure that this migratory ‘threat’ did not reach official territorial lines and thus the border started to shift – expanding externally and internally – promoting a ‘delocalization’ of the border (Walters 2006, 193). In the North American context, Lahav and Guiraudon discuss this delocalization as the state’s ‘remote control’ (see Zolberg 1999); enlisting the help of private actors, like ranchers in Arizona for instance, to ‘forestall migration at the source’ (2000, 55). Furthermore, if these ‘unauthorized’ migrants were able to surpass the official border, government authorities needed to apprehend and, subsequently, deport ‘unauthorized’ migrants. Essentially, Bigo (2002, 76) argues, that similar to the notion of a Möbius ribbon, where one surface appears to have two distinct sides, the migration ‘threat’ blurs the lines between internal and external border security, where different security agencies all participate and cooperate in their struggle against migration.

As a result of this changing perception of migration and border governance, there is a theoretical shift among critical scholars from ‘borders’ to the idea of ‘bordering’. This is significant because borders are no longer conceptualized as fixed lines but rather processes and practices occupying both internal and external spaces (Rumford 2011;

Bigo 2002; M. B. Salter 2004; Amoore 2006). Focusing on practices is critical as it helps to identify how borders are constituted and sustained, by whom, and also reveals the consequences of these practices on people's everyday lives (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 729). In addition, the combination of practices and its effects on people illustrates the spatial and temporal dimensions of borders. As Balibar (2002, 71) has noted, borders are 'profoundly changing...to preserve the functions of the sovereignty of the state' by being 'dispersed a little everywhere'. Spatially, therefore, borders may follow an 'unauthorized' migrant into towns and cities. Borders may appear essentially wherever an 'unauthorized' or 'undocumented' migrant is asked to identify him or herself. Temporally, the border practices that categorize the migrant as 'illegal' can last a lifetime, as evidenced by the 'unauthorized' youth who were brought to the U.S. as children and are protesting for regular status.

Border governance also increasingly reflects practices of treating borders not just as physical boundaries but also as virtual and non-physical forms of borders. For example, governments along with private actors, such as airline companies, now employ technologies of pre-entry, entry and exit (Salter 2008). Amoore (2011) refers to this border expansion as 'spatial stretching' whereby biometric technologies and risk profiling operate well beyond nation-state borders. Entry, therefore, extends all the way to pre-departure at the country of origin and bordering practices are equally exercised internally. In the U.S. context, for example, borders are constantly moving internally due to the movement of border enforcement officials to internal checkpoints which can be within 100 miles of a POE (Mountz 2011), to local cities in the U.S. with 287 (g) agreements<sup>6</sup> or

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<sup>6</sup> Part of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, 287(g) agreements are partnerships formed between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

programs like *Secure Communities*, which are local-federal immigration partnerships allowing local police officials to conduct immigration enforcement (Coleman 2012). Traveler status management is yet another example where those travelers who have entered a state may be tracked while inside to ensure they do not overstay, similar to the functions of the Office of Biometric Identity Management (OBIM), which replaced the US-VISIT program in 2013, and stores and monitors travellers' entry and exit data (DHS 2016).

Along with internal and external border governance processes, there has also been a 'corporeal turn' with respect to bordering practices (Salter, 2006; Amoore, 2006; Doty and Provine, 2011). Given the complexities of the border and the enforcement mechanisms practiced in the name of border control, this 'spatial stretching' really coincides with bordering practices that are associated with the personal body and to a great extent depend on the individual body in question. Accordingly, it is the individual who is perceived as a risk and a threat, which is why the state has increased its use of biometric technologies and biopolitical control (Muller 2011). Hyndman (2004) refers to this phenomenon as the 'geopolitics of mobility' by which mechanisms are put in place in order to seek to control certain individual bodies at the expense of others; mobility therefore may be constrained and directly relates to 'corporeal access'. This reveals that there is an interconnection between state bordering practices and the politics of mobility. Mobility becomes relational and politicized in that it is connected to the mobility and/or containment of others (Hyndman 2001) and the border becomes a relationship between the nation-state government and a particular body in question. This shift to bodies

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and state and local authorities that allow local law enforcement officers to perform federal immigration law enforcement.

demonstrates how the border is enacted on bodies on the move. In other words, by seeking to cross a territorial border without the nation-state's permission, the individual body who is 'unauthorized' to cross is automatically categorized as an 'illegal' migrant. Through this category, the border accompanies migrants in their everyday lives and often forces people to put their bodies and lives at risk in order to survive (Holmes 2013). It is, as Khosravi argues, an 'invisible border' where 'undesirable people...are forced to *be* the border' (2011, 99). As borders become virtual and/or 'invisible', they are carried on bodies, are gendered, classed and racialized, may be materialized in several ways, and are used to govern and control migration (Amoore 2006; Squire 2011).

The bodies of migrant women add a level of complexity to this bordering dynamic. Nation-state border practices, by virtue of assigning legal categories to certain individual bodies, enforce the immobility of 'unauthorized' migrants. Critical feminist and feminist border theory illustrate that marginalized bodies are not only subordinated by categories such as 'unauthorized' or 'illegal'. Race, class, gender and nationality all equally affect (im)mobility (Hyndman 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Ruiz-Aho 2011; Cruz Salazar 2011; Pessar and Mahler 2003). Women migrants experience multiple barriers of marginalization or what Ruiz-Aho (2011) refers to as 'intersectional oppressions'. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) noted in her pioneering analysis of intersectionality and African American women, feminist theorizing must examine gender oppression also within the context of other sources of oppression and subordination that women of colour experience. The idea of how the multiple oppressions of gender, race, class and/or nationality all intersect to constitute a 'social body' is a core concept found in corporeal feminism (Grosz 1987, 1994; Bordo 1993, 1996). Feminist theories of the body challenge

biological essentialism, which draws on a mind/body dichotomy that typically reaffirms the male/female binary by associating the mind with reason and rationality [i.e. the masculine] and the body with its (lesser) opposite of passion and emotion [i.e. the feminine] (Grosz 1987, 4). The body, however, is not fixed and not only a 'physical' or 'natural genetic body' but rather also socially constructed (Bordo 1993, 142). Grosz (1987, 10) uses the metaphor of the body as an 'inscriptive/writing surface' to argue that the 'body's interiority is produced through its exterior inscription; its external environment'. Similar to the permanence of a 'social tattoo', the body is therefore 'marked, [and] constituted' by the 'inscriptions of cultural and personal values, norms, and commitments' (Grosz 1994, 142). A theory of the body should, therefore, account for both the biological body, as well as determine how the body can become socially constructed. Historical and socio-cultural factors make the 'lived body' or the body as experienced possible (Bordo 1993, 142). As Pratt illustrates (2005, 1056), these historical, socio-cultural factors are gendered, racialized, and classed, and are used to create false binaries, which render women to the private sphere.

Both corporeal feminism and intersectionality can be applied when discussing the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by Central American women migrants because, while it is true that they experience the border produced by the nation-state on their bodies, most are also coming from poverty and a patriarchal society where structural gender violence is often the norm (ACNUR 2015). Furthermore, during their transit, they are placed in a more vulnerable position because, as women, they face greater likelihood of experiencing sexual and gender-based violence (GBV).



*The U.S.-Mexico Border, Enforcement Logics and Flaws*

This section examines border governance in the U.S. to show how border policies often frame migrants as security ‘threats’ and, therefore, assist in maintaining restrictive border practices. As will be shown in the next section, similar practices are also extending into Mexico. Women migrants, who are framed as security threats, often fear detention and deportation and therefore attempt to remain hidden. Control and enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border have undergone radical changes since the 1960s, where migrants entering from Mexico have become increasingly securitized. For instance, in his book *Operation Gatekeeper*, Nevins (2010) provides a useful historical trajectory of the securitization of ‘unauthorized’ migrants, which began to take hold in the 1960s. He notes that during the 1950s and early 1960s, border security and immigration were liberal in nature, failing to demand much political attention by governments and national security institutions alike. In the late 1960s, however, a shift occurred where the perception of crisis began to emerge among government officials and the public claiming the U.S.-Mexico border as dangerous and out of control. Mountz and Hiemstra (2014, 383), when discussing border crossings, illustrate that fear and insecurity are driving forces of securitization, where the discourse of ‘crisis’ is repeatedly used by nation-states especially when ‘migrants attempt to cross between regions of great economic disparity’. Indeed, there were several factors both contextual and agent-driven that engendered these perceptions of ‘crisis’ in the U.S.-Mexico border case. First, the success of the Chicano civil rights movement in the late 1960s, especially along the borderlands, led many to fear a possible U.S. Southwest secession. Second, in the 1970s there was an economic downturn and energy shortage, which led to a fear of

unemployment and the perception that immigrants would take U.S. jobs. Lastly, the conservative Nixon administration, which had declared a war on drugs and crime, often perpetuated a link between migrants and the drug trade thus further criminalizing ‘foreigners’ (Nevins 2010, 78).

Similarly, Andreas (2003; 2009) and Duvell (2011) have noted how the security framing of migrants as ‘threats’ continues to evolve, distinguishing between border security controls pre and post September 11, 2001 (9/11). In the 1990s, national security interests focused on the external physical border, creating and fortifying border fences. Unauthorized migration was primarily treated as a law enforcement matter on the U.S. side of the border and included an escalation of border policing (Andreas 2009). After 9/11, however, the expectation of success was significantly higher and, unrealistically, deterrence was required to be 100 percent (Andreas 2003). Subsequently, there was a prominent transformation in terms of border control and enforcement, which encouraged the blurring of the lines between the external and internal realms of the nation-state for the sake of national security. Border governance was not only to be implemented at border crossings but also internally, whether through work raids, local-federal immigration enforcement partnerships and/or increased deportations (Nevins 2001; Doty 2010; Inda 2011; Coleman 2012). De Genova (2002) argues that the very real possibility of being deported places migrants in a constant state of ‘deportability’. By instituting internal control within everyday life, the migrant is forced into a ‘state of nonexistence,’ constantly fearing deportation. This form of productive power conditions migrants to live in a state of invisibility.

The U.S. government continues to advance restrictive security mechanisms along the southern border to control mobility, which further contributes to the securitization of migrants and raises humanitarian concerns (Holmes 2013). Increasingly, the logic behind border security appears to revolve around three prominent trends, all of which exhibit various flaws. As will be shown following this sub-section, the Mexican government is also using these logics within its border security policies. The first trend speaks to the intersection between immigration enforcement and crime control (such as drug enforcement) agencies, departments and/or information, which contributes to the criminalization of migrants. Similarly, the trend is not only the intersection of multiple departments and agencies but also the cooperation between different levels of governance, from federal to state to local police. The U.S. security elite believe that the intersection between departments and between different levels of government will lead to greater efficiency and cooperation by focusing on the accumulation of data and/or intelligence (Fischer 2012). Therefore, there appears to be an obsession with acquiring more data, more surveillance, and more intelligence, all of which will inevitably, in the minds of the ‘managers of unease’ (Bigo 2002), lead to more security. This is an absolute security or what has been referred to as a vision of ‘zero risk’ (De Goede 2008; Muller 2008).

One example of this model of cooperation and intelligence gathering among multiple agencies and multiple levels of government is the creation of the Border Enforcement Security Task Force in 2012. The Border Enforcement Security Task Force, or BEST, is one of the newest creations of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the arsenal of border security. One of the main reasons why BEST

has been touted as such a success is because these teams incorporate ‘personnel from ICE, United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATFE), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the United States Coast Guard (USCG), and the U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO), along with other key Federal, State and local law enforcement agencies’ (U.S. Government Printing Office 2012). These teams also include Mexican and Canadian counterparts.

The second trend in the border security logic is the reliance on scientific and technical knowledge, which promotes increasing technological advancement along the border. This technological infrastructure relies on multi-million dollar contracts being awarded to private security companies. In 2011, for instance, ICE awarded more than 1.3 billion dollars to approximately 1, 300 companies (FedSpending.org 2011). The last prominent trend appears to be the constant overemphasis on risk governance, which focuses on trying to virtually create a vision of ‘zero risk’. It concentrates on trying to quantify risk using assessments that attempt to predict all possible future scenarios in order maintain security at the border (De Goede 2008). This type of mentality causes policy makers and authorities to fixate on security technologies, such as biometrics, and the outsourcing of surveillance infrastructure (Muller 2008).

In all, these border governance logics are flawed for several reasons. First, it may appear that the information sharing and data gathering by multiple agencies would in fact yield new forms of ‘official knowledge’ and amass impressive amounts of data. The assumption would be that the more data gathered the more effective the security for the homeland. Yet, although in theory the collaboration of multiple levels of government

may seem more productive, in practice, the actual implementation of this new knowledge depends on the site in question. For example, Mathew Coleman (2012) has extensively researched border security with respect to federal-local partnerships in the U.S. focusing on how programs like *Secure Communities*<sup>7</sup> are unevenly implemented at each locality regardless of the same federal policy objectives. So, the amount of data gathered does not mean more efficient security if the cooperation in implementation among agencies differs from community to community.

The second flaw speaks to the problem of realistically being capable of managing and/or controlling uncertainty with risk assessment schemes. Managing through risk profiles while trying to achieve a utopian vision of ‘zero-risk’ is essentially impossible because knowing *all* of the ‘unknowns’ and predicting *all* possible future scenarios is inconceivable. Furthermore, these risk profiles are constructed with ‘multiple encoded borders’, which are highly racialized, classed and gendered (Amoore 2006, 337). All told, these risk profiles produce a subordinate migrant-subject. Yet this governing logic builds upon the authority of the risk consultants that rely and promote a representation of a world without risk and uncertainty; controlling for all contingencies (Amoore 2006). This type of unattainable ‘zero-risk’ approach promotes a culture of fear within society where pre-emptive security is seen as necessary and the politics of exception become normalized. Within this context, there is also the concern of subjective knowledges where these forms of knowledge are based on a particular subset of actors who have the authority and power to categorize populations based on a determined degree of ‘riskiness’

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<sup>7</sup> Secure Communities was an immigration enforcement program from 2008 to 2014. Its objective was to “identify and remove criminal aliens and others who pose a potential threat to public safety” (ICE, 2014). Secure Communities was replaced by the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP) in July 2015.

that they believe particular groups and/or individuals pose (Rygiel 2013). Managing border governance by relying on ‘scientific’ knowledge by ‘professional’ risk consultants encourages and sustains dichotomous ways of thinking. This form of ‘expert’ knowledge is justified and preferred because it is perceived to be disembodied and therefore ‘rational’ as oppose to embodied knowledge. Yet, it neglects to appreciate complex migrant subjectivities. As Grosz (1994, 3) argues, ‘Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart.’

Overall, the concept of nation-state borders and all the diverse actors, institutions, technologies and knowledges involved in their creation and maintenance reveals not only the popular anxieties about an increasingly borderless world with the onset of globalization but also the contradictions involved with state sovereignty. Brown (2010), for instance, discusses the escalation of wall building in a world that is increasingly globalizing. She explains several paradoxes of a globalized world where there is the simultaneous opening (as with trade and goods) and blocking (as with the movement of people). A globalized world promotes universalization while at the same time pushing for exclusion and stratification. The most notable contradiction is the relationship between sovereignty and borders where it is the weakening of sovereignty that generates ‘much of the frenzy of nation-state wall building today’ but rather than being an expression of a sovereign nation-state, ‘the new walls are icons of its [sovereignty’s] erosion...they [walls] reveal a tremulousness, vulnerability...at the core of what they aim to express’ (Brown 2010, 24). Thus, despite the astronomical costs and its limited effectiveness in terms of deterring migrants, borders continue to be legitimized by the political elite as an

efficient form of governance because politicians fear losing their sovereignty or ‘their symbolic control over the territorial boundaries’ which justifies the nation-state as a ‘body or a container for the polity’ (Bigo 2002, 65). Furthermore, these border logics are framed as gender-neutral whereby they neglect paying attention to the role that gender plays in how risk profiles are produced and how credible knowledge is created.

*Beyond the Frontier: Border Logics Applied at the Mexico-Guatemala Border*

What is equally critical for global border security governance is how similar border logics are being applied worldwide. Huysmans (2000) examines this ‘fortress mentality’ specifically in the European context where the European Union (EU) focuses on clamping down on the free movement of people at the expense of developing an appropriate response to the global issue of increased mobility of people. This fortress analogy has also been applied in the North American context and is clear when observing the border enforcement logics applied at the Mexico-Guatemala border. In the summer of 2014, the Mexican government implemented its latest iteration of border enforcement policy aimed at the securitization of migrants. It came at a time when the Mexican government was receiving intense pressure from the U.S. administration with respect to border security, due to the media attention surrounding the humanitarian crisis of unaccompanied Central American children crossing into the southern U.S. Indeed, a significant number of unaccompanied children from Central America arrived in the U.S., overwhelming Border Patrol (BP) personnel and causing a media frenzy and public outrage in many southern states (Meyer and Boggs, 2014).

As a result of the humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, the Mexican government faced increased pressure from the Obama administration to try and combat

the ‘problem’ of the arrival of irregular migrants. To do so, the Mexican government has tried to secure the border with Guatemala, helping to stop more migrants from travelling onward to the U.S. by increasing the detention, and subsequent deportation, of Central American migrants in Mexico. In July 2014, the Peña Nieto administration implemented *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS). Along with his Guatemalan counterpart, Otto Perez Molina, Peña Nieto agreed to implement this policy, whose primary objective was to ‘protect and safeguard the human rights of migrants entering and transiting through Mexico and to regulate international crossings so as to increase the development and security of the region’ (Presidencia de la Republica, Mexico, 2014). This objective promotes two prominent, albeit seemingly contradictory, narratives; one associated with the protection and human rights of migrants and the other connected to the reinforcement of security by enhancing regulation and creating ‘orderly’ migratory movements.

Upon closer investigation, however, it appears that the PFS is more concerned with facilitating restrictive forms of border controls as well as applying comparable border enforcement logics witnessed in the U.S. context. When the PFS was launched, it came with five distinct line action items. Four of the five action items relate to border security and controlling migratory movements, all of course in the name of the migrant’s security and protection. The largest claim to migrant protection is the use of a temporary visa scheme, the *Tarjeta de Visitante Regional* (regional visitor visa), which is meant to give migrants a temporary regular status to be able to move freely while on Mexican territory and thus be less prone to being victimized at the hands of organized criminal groups. This visa is a prime example of a policy that is gendered through a binary logic



where migrants are framed as victims at risk, who need protection and control rather than as agents with rights.

In theory, this temporary visa appears to offer some form of protection to transit migrants. Nonetheless, in practical terms, it has several shortcomings with respect to migrant protection. First, this visa option is only applicable to Guatemalans and Belizeans, which leaves a large proportion of the migrant population outside the scope of eligibility. According to official statistics presented by the INM, out of the total Central American migrants it detained in 2014 (119,714) only 47,794 were from Guatemala and 42 from Belize. The remaining numbers represent migrants from El Salvador (23,131) and Honduras (47,521), and smaller numbers coming from Costa Rica (31), Nicaragua (1,180) and Panama (15) (SEGOB-INM 2014). Of course given the nature of official statistics, these figures do not include individuals who were able to evade authorities. Yet, by examining these statistics, we may conclude that the temporary visa declared by the PFS leaves a substantial portion of this transiting population without protection while in Mexico. As noted in more detail in the section below, women from El Salvador and Honduras experience escalating and targeted violence, fear persecution, and are often the first to flee (UNHCR 2015) but they are not covered by this visa.

The temporality and the geographical applicability of the visa are also quite flawed. For instance, of the small percentage of migrants that are able to acquire this visa, the protection afforded to them with this ‘regular’ migratory status is only three days long or a seventy-two-hour window. After this timeframe, migrants from Guatemala and Belize are once again ‘irregular’ if they do not return to their country of origin. Furthermore, the spatial mobility sanctioned with this visa is fairly restrictive as it only

covers the southern states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Tabasco (Presidencia de la Republica, Mexico 2014). Given these constraints, the primary objective of the policy does not appear to make sense. Protecting migrants while transiting through Mexico clearly implies that they are, in fact, in transit to another location (in most cases to the U.S.). Why restrict access then solely to southern states? Likewise, the journey to the U.S. is at least 2000 kilometres long and thus a seventy-two-hour window equally places them in a precarious situation, as most migrants are unable to reach the U.S. in three days, which is already a moot point as they are denied access to the northern states. Consequently, since the regional visitor visa is touted as a successful mechanism for the protection of migrants for the PFS, its primary objective instead should read as follows: ‘to protect and safeguard the human rights of [*some*] migrants entering and transiting through [*southern*] Mexico [*for a period of only three days*]’.

Unfortunately, when looking at these contradictory and inconsistent policy mechanisms, the PFS does little to protect the rights of migrants who are transiting through Mexico. It does, however, promote and advance border security logics by enhancing nation-state control over this ‘irregular’ migrant population. By intensifying border security and increasing enforcement so as to bring ‘order’ to migration flows in Mexico, this program reinforces the securitization of migrants and benefits the nation-state by allowing it to have more access to knowledge of this population. It securitizes this population by viewing ‘unauthorized’ migration through a state security lens rather than through a human rights or humanitarian lens. Given the level of violence experienced in these Central American countries, particularly in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, many migrants are forced to flee their homes and these people should be

viewed as seeking a place of refuge and protection from persecution (Human Rights Watch 2013; UNODC 2013).

Furthermore, by effectively promoting inter-institutional collaboration between different forms of authority including federal, state, and municipal security forces (a principal border security logic also practiced in the U.S.) the government criminalizes ‘unauthorized’ migrants, connecting them to policing and penal practices rather than asylum practices. Again, applying a binary logic, the migrants are either victims or criminals. For instance, one of the outcomes of the PFS has been the creation of a Gendarmerie of 5,000 Federal Police with military training in Tapachula, Chiapas (IACHR 2015). The increase in enforcement personnel in Mexico has resulted in a rise of internal border controls, especially the surge of checkpoints and raids. Rather than ensuring the safety of transit migrants, many migrant organizations have condemned the actions of the PFS indicating that these enforcement operations are responsible for the increase of violence towards migrants by security agents and a rise of detentions and deportations without due process (Boggs 2015; Tourliere 2015; IACHR 2015). Finally, the program endorses the acquisition and access to data and more sophisticated data-sharing among multiple government agencies. First, to obtain the regional visitor visa, the individual must be willing to register his/her biometric data with the Mexican government. In addition, there are guidelines set within the PFS for reinforcing intelligence networks in prominent transit zones in collaboration with other state authorities, increasing knowledge exchange between local, state and federal counterparts and developing a technological platform for effective real-time biometric data sharing of migration registries (Presidencia de la Republica, Mexico 2014).

## **Categories, Vulnerabilities and Precarity**

Women migrants confront this precarious migratory system. Central American women migrants travelling through Mexico already face structural vulnerabilities even before they decide to venture North. Notable discrimination and unequal power hierarchies with respect to gender are prevalent in Central America and permeate most daily economic and social interactions. For example, due to socio-economic structures, women typically only have access to gendered occupations, which are predominantly deemed inferior when compared to men's labour (Raghuram 2004; Pratt 2004; Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). This type of labour is usually found within the informal economy and includes domestic work or working in small-scale market stands (Anderson 2000; Hennebry et al. 2016). In addition, GBV in Central America is prevalent and impunity is the rule rather than the exception (UNHCR 2015; Human Rights Watch 2016; OHCHR 2016; Amnesty International 2016). Dr. Manjoo, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, during her visit to Honduras in 2014, noted that violence against women is not only systemic but also that incidents of violence are increasing. Using contested statistics from the Public Prosecutor's Office, she noted that in 2012, there were 'approximately 16,000 reported allegations of numerous manifestations of violence against women...with 74.6% related to domestic and intra-family violence, and 20% related to sexual offences (Manjoo 2014). El Salvador exhibits a similar situation, where high levels of domestic violence persist and 'Research shows that domestic violence and sexual abuse of women and girls in the private sphere remain largely invisible [because of] family and community pressure not to reveal domestic problems; economic dependency; fear of retaliatory violence by partners; poor awareness of rights

among victims; lack of sufficient support services; and low confidence in the justice system' (Manjoo 2011, 7). For many women, it is precisely these structural vulnerabilities that become primary reasons for leaving their country of origin. Therefore, GBV is embedded in the migration process, as it is often a motivating factor for migrating. It then continues during women's transit, and again may continue upon reaching their destination. Women leave to obtain better opportunities; not solely economic opportunities but also better social and educational opportunities, and a life free from violence.

Thus, being 'unauthorized' already places women migrants in a more vulnerable position vis-à-vis migrant men. It is equally important to note that women migrants may also be travelling with multiple oppressions that are socially-constructed through power structures based on social differences, which in turn leads to multiple vulnerabilities. For example, they are not only women but may also be poor, and/or indigenous, and/or from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras. These multiple oppressions differentiate based on gender, class, race and nationality and are all constructed in a subordinate manner (Hyndman 2001). The state-imposed category of 'unauthorized' is added to this dynamic through border enforcement policies. Whether the category is 'unauthorized', 'illegal', 'alien', 'irregular', or 'undocumented', border security enforcement policies like the PFS, despite their claims of protection, force women migrants to put their bodies, health and lives at risk in order to survive. As such, borders are ideological because 'they are productive and generative of placing people in new types of power relations with others' (Anderson et al. 2012, 76). Risk profiles, for example, classify and categorize between the legitimate and illegitimate or between the 'trusted traveler' and the 'illegal migrant'.

The experiences of bordering can be quite different depending on which category is assigned as some bodies are afforded more mobility than others. Thus, one is either deemed a 'safe-citizen' that needs to perform according to those bordering expectations (Salter 2004, 2008), or an 'unauthorized' migrant that needs to hide and run in order to avoid apprehension and deportation.

An 'irregular' migratory category situates migrant women in a more marginalized and insecure position because, as soon as they cross into Mexico, they enter an illegal space, that is into the Mexican nation-state which has prohibited their entry. They, in turn, occupy a clandestine or illicit presence (Coutin 2005) within the Mexican territory and must navigate their journey with this illegality in their everyday lives. This group of people live with this boundary-producing border all the time as they occupy a space of 'non-existence' (De Genova 2002). As such, they experience the border in their everyday world because 'the borderline is not just at physical entry points at ports, airports, and land crossings' it is a process that has the potential to be materialized anywhere (Nyers 2008, 166–67). The border follows and surrounds women migrants as they travel with 'illegality' or without state authority (Khosravi 2011). Living life as an 'unauthorized' migrant is connected to an emotional state of constant fear where women migrants are persistently afraid; afraid of being caught by migration agents, afraid of being deported, afraid of experiencing violence, and in the case of employment, afraid of being fired as well as deported, all due to a state-imposed border category.

#### *Transit Migration and Shadow Labour*

Being in transit represents a liminal state for women migrants due to the dynamic nature of migration. Defining transit migration is difficult because 'transit' may, and

often does, change due to time and space. Temporally, for instance, migration is not a straightforward process of departure from the country of origin to arrival at the country of destination. Rather, it evolves in stages where expectations surrounding the journey prior to leaving home may differ significantly from the reality. This is especially true for women categorized as ‘irregular’ or ‘undocumented’ as they face added challenges due to their migratory status. For instance, women may be robbed, raped, and/or kidnapped (Isacson et al. 2014; Diaz Prieto and Kuhner 2014; CNDH 2009, 2011). They may also simply run out of economic resources to continue their journey. These interruptions usually change the length of the overall journey as well as the spatial trajectory of the trip, and their plans must adjust to accommodate these new realities on the ground as well as moments of immobility (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016). Consequently, women migrants, who may not have initially set out to work during their transit, face challenges that may make them change course out of necessity and they must adapt to succeed in the rest of their journey.

The climate of fear experienced due to the categorization discussed above is intertwined with this complex journey. It is directly connected to their everyday activities, including finding work while in-transit. Unlike temporary foreign workers, women migrants in transit do not have the documentation and/or the legal status to work while in Mexico. They are in a liminal position where they are simultaneously outside (in transition or not yet arrived), but also inside (travelling through) a national space (Chavez 1992). In this sense, they may be physically present but also economically and socially absent and most are without the nation-state’s protection (Coutin 2005). It is unsurprising, therefore, that these women acquire work illegally in the shadow market.

Since they are afraid of being caught and deported while in transit, they engage in shadow labour<sup>8</sup>. This heightened fear leads to precarious conditions and various forms of exploitation.

With respect to labour, women who are categorized as ‘irregular’ face discrimination in employment as their migratory status is directly connected to their employment status and the labour market to which they have access. For women transiting through Mexico, the consequences of an ‘irregular’ status affect 1) their ability to actually secure employment and 2) labour market access and labour precarity. First, women migrants may find it difficult to find employment even within the informal labour market. According to a government representative I interviewed, Mexican nationals, for example, may discriminate against ‘unauthorized’ migrants because there is a stigma associated with foreigners, especially from Central America (Interview, 18 Sept. 2014, Mexico). Typically, ‘unauthorized’ migrants are perceived in a negative light, especially given the pervasive national discourse, which frames migration as a security concern. I interviewed one migrant woman who describes her situation, which resulted in being refused work, as follows: ‘People discriminated against me as soon as I mentioned I was from El Salvador. One lady said that the woman working for her before stole from her so now she doesn’t trust them [migrants]’ (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). If women are able to obtain this type of employment, it is governed and controlled by the employer in the home and, in most cases, ‘employers have the right to dismiss a worker even if there is no “good” reason’ (Hennebry et al. 2016, 52).

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<sup>8</sup> Shadow labour represents those economic activities and types of work that are not part of the formal economy and thus avoid government regulation and taxation. These forms of work may also be referred to as informal labour.



On the other hand, if women can procure employment within the informal sector, it is commonly in highly gendered job markets – either as a domestic worker, as a waitress and/or as a bartender. Likewise, they suffer from labour precarity. These types of occupations deprive women migrants of a variety of legal protections. Employers know that they do not have work permits and often use their fears of deportation against them. Thus, women may be exploited by their employers either by working long hours, not being paid what was verbally agreed to, which can involve being paid less or simply not being paid at all, and/or being fired without just cause (Hennebry et al. 2016). A migration expert who works with a labour rights organization describes the situation where women may not have ‘formal contracts, [and] their pay is arbitrary, so they don’t have a stable income or job security; it’s very easy to fire them’ (Interview, 25 Nov. 2014, Mexico).

In addition, women who work during their transit may face a lack of knowledge about the laws governing labour in Mexico and, if they do have the adequate knowledge, often fear accessing judicial mechanisms and coming forward to make a claim against the employer. The same may be said for access to health care. Most Central American women migrants who work during their transit are frequently employed in the informal domestic work sector, which is said to be ‘one of the most vulnerable labour flows’ (IMUMI and ONU Mujeres 2014). There are several factors that contribute to this vulnerability. First, many women may be live-in workers, which at first may seem advantageous because they would not incur living expenses. But this type of live-in condition, in reality, promotes more labour rights violations – especially being exploited by working longer than agreed upon while being paid the same. Moreover, these

positions are traditionally paid very low wages, have no employment contract, receive no vacation or vacation pay, no over-time pay, and/or sick leave (IMUMI and ONU Mujeres 2014, 15).

Lastly, there is the potential danger involved with occupations within the service sectors, such as working as a waitress or bartender. In the Mexican context, the lines between a waitress or bartender and a sex worker may become blurred, especially in the southern Mexico border zones, where bars in Chiapas are often also known for prostitution (Ruiz 2009) . It is difficult to know the exact number of women who are working in the sex industry due to the negative stigma attached to this form of work and its hidden nature. Numbers are not accurately captured by official statistics and thus it is equally difficult to know which women enter the work voluntarily or are forced into it, which may also be a blurry distinction. Those that are forced into prostitution, again usually work in bars and/or brothels along the border in Chiapas (IMUMI and ONU Mujeres 2014, 15). This occupation places women in an extremely precarious position in that they are subject to physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. Nevertheless, since sex work is not considered a ‘legal form’ of work or a legitimate occupation, labour rights are unattainable, even in theory.

### **Invisible Women Migrants**

Travelling without the state’s authority also implies that women transiting through Mexico need to become invisible to avoid detention and deportation. Since nation-state border security controls impose immobility and further contribute to marginalization, they make women insecure and vulnerable, forcing them to become invisible in order to

survive while in transit. The state of invisibility poses several problems<sup>9</sup>. Being invisible during the journey, and not being able to freely access public spaces, exposes women migrants to increased danger and risk by virtue of not being seen. The consequences involved with being invisible may include severe exploitation, heightened violence, disappearance and even death. The transit routes that are accessed to avoid apprehension may prove more violent due to their secluded nature.

In Mexico, ‘unauthorized’ women migrants often remain hidden as their objective is to reach the U.S. and being detained and/or deported does not serve their goal. The consequences of this invisibility may be broken up into three issues: the mode of transportation used while in transit, the migration agents used to facilitate the journey, and the sex and gender-based human rights violations encountered while en route. First, the very nature of invisibility positions women migrants outside conventional means of travel. Women choose the mode of transportation, which will afford them the greatest invisibility. Traditionally, migrants, especially those that did not have sufficient economic resources for alternate transportation, have boarded the freight train known as ‘*La Bestia*’ [the Beast]. The freight train ‘*La Bestia*’ is a commercial cargo train with multiple northbound routes. It stretches from the Mexico-Guatemala border all the way to the U.S.-Mexico border. This mode of transportation was used in order to access a hidden transit route. The irony, of course, is that as more migrants continued to use this transportation route, it also became more known as an established transit corridor (Coutin 2005). Both criminal organizations and nation-state authorities became familiar with these routes and transit migration became an economic market to be exploited. Criminals,

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<sup>9</sup> While the purpose of this article is to illustrate how invisibility poses problems for ‘unauthorized’ migrant women in transit, I recognize that there are instances where invisibility may be advantageous for women – such as dressing like a man, in order to avoid sexual attention.

for instance, prey on the migrants that board the train. Criminal groups often board the trains and demand that migrants give them \$100 US to continue their journey. If they do not comply, they are often beaten, thrown off the train and left for dead (Isacson 2014; Interview, 7 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

According to the Mexican government, one of the primary reasons for implementing the PFS was to stop these human rights abuses along the train route. Once the PFS was realized, however, there was an enormous increase in the number of raids occurring along the train routes by INM officials and other state authorities. The result has not been positive for women migrants. The intensity of raids along the prominent train routes means that migrants now have to find alternate and more secluded routes, often in deeply wooded rural areas of the interior, far from any type of protection, and often travel on foot for days. Currently, migrants are even less visible and more vulnerable than they were prior to the PFS (Boggs 2015). Transit migrants continue to experience severe abuses that are perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. By being pushed into ever more secluded areas, migrants become easier prey for criminal groups who capitalize on this invisibility, target migrants who venture into rural areas, and either rob, kidnap or extort them. Since 2014, not only has there been a surge in the amount of robberies experienced by migrants (Boggs 2015; Meyer and Boggs 2014), but there has been public outcry from human rights organizations like Amnesty International (AI) which claim that Mexico has become a ‘mortal trap for migrants’ and urges the ‘Mexican authorities to investigate the atrocious increase of violent attacks against undocumented migrants by criminal groups’ (AI 2015; BBC 2015). According to the AI press release, more than 200 migrants were targets of a brutal attack, and several were

killed by armed groups in two separate attacks [in a couple of months] (AI 2015; Avila Perez 2015).

Women migrants also become victims to abuses by Mexican state actors. In 2009 and 2011, the *Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos* (CNDH) [National Commission of Human Rights] in Mexico published reports indicating that federal, state and municipal authorities were responsible for human rights violations including robbery, kidnapping and extortion. Similarly, in 2013, a prominent Mexican non-governmental organization (NGO), *Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes* documented in their report testimony by migrants in transit who had been assaulted by Mexican authorities. While interviewing a woman migrant, she expressed that she was assaulted by municipal police forces in Tuxtla, Chiapas while trying to transit north. She stressed that she was taken in their patrol car to a wooded area where she was physically assaulted, robbed of all her money and her documentation (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). After the implementation of the PFS, there have been numerous reports from NGOs and migrant shelters that abuses by authorities continue unabated during these raids and enforcement operations, where soldiers not only increasingly take part in operations, but frequently use violence to detain migrants (AI 2015; La Prensa 2015; IACHR 2015). International organizations have equally expressed their concerns over the human rights violations occurring in Mexico. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in a press release, explicitly urged the Mexican government to ‘implement international standards regarding the use of force in immigration control operations; investigate, on its own initiative, acts such as those described above; punish

agents responsible for human rights violations; and provide reparation to the victims of these violations' (IACHR 2015).

*Coyotes: The Good and the Ugly*

Forced invisibility means that migrants need to use such forms of transportation as *La Bestia* but also to travel with the help of migration agents, who facilitate the process of migration. Specifically, migrants have to hide their presence even prior to departing from their country of origin by hiring a *coyote* or a *pollero* who assists them in navigating their migratory journey. Coyotes/polleros are migration facilitators who charge a fee in order to help smuggle migrants through Mexico and into the U.S. As soon as the decision is made to hire a smuggler, migrants enter into this clandestine space, as these migration agents do not operate in public spaces. Their 'unauthorized' category and the arduous, hidden journey through Mexico make it almost impossible to survive and arrive in the U.S. without the assistance of coyotes/polleros.

Hiring a coyote/pollero may have several advantages and disadvantages for women migrants. One advantage is that many women migrants attempting to transit are unfamiliar with the territory and unaware of the best transit routes to reach their destination. This is especially the case since the implementation of the PFS in 2014, which has pushed migrants into different remote spaces. Since for many women migration to the U.S. is a survival strategy, most would be unable to move without the aid of a smuggler. Coyotes are knowledgeable and provide a service for these women; it is their business. One of the main problems with this business for women migrants, however, is how this type of work has evolved into one that is connected with organized criminal groups. This reality increases the insecurity and potential for human rights

abuses for women migrants who essentially are taking a gamble and hoping they can trust these migration agents in their migration journeys.

Unfortunately for migrants, the business of coyotes/polleros has undergone a change in Mexico over the last ten to fifteen years (Interview, 30 Sept. 2014, Mexico). Traditionally these migration facilitators were from the same community and were therefore known and trusted among those individuals who resided in these neighbourhoods. People knew that the coyote had completed the journey north in the past and had helped many migrants on their road to the U.S. Currently, however, many traditional coyotes have been co-opted (either by threat or force) into a more sophisticated system of coyotes, which has direct links to criminal groups (Interview, 30 Sept. 2014, Mexico). They operate as a network with several coyotes involved in the transit journey. As a result, migrants will meet and encounter many individual coyotes throughout their trajectory. Each coyote will be responsible for a specific region and can navigate it well. Since the group of migrants are passed off from one coyote to another, there is a lack of established trust in this relationship. It is strictly a monetary transaction. In addition, it is important to note that escalating border controls have increased both the need for coyotes but also the price of acquiring their services. As the pathways through Mexico become more dangerous and violent, the services of a coyote become more expensive to account for the risk involved. The average price for these services now ranges from \$5,000 US to \$10,000 US (Interview, 7 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Consequently, it has become an increasingly common practice for migrants to take out loans in order to pay these fees (Coutin 2005).

The lack of trust experienced by women migrants with regards to the coyote relationship may translate into abuses involving abandonment, kidnapping and extortion. First, due to their ‘intersectional oppressions’, women may be perceived by their coyotes as physically weaker compared to men and thus more disposable when compared to the rest of the migrant group. Generally speaking, some women may be at a physical disadvantage, for example, when having to outrun state authorities. Coyotes make it very clear at the beginning of the arrangement that if anyone is unable to keep up with the rest of the group, they risk being left behind. Women travelling with children may be especially insecure since they are more likely unable to keep up with the rest of the group (Women’s Refugee Commission 2013). Second, many women migrants face kidnapping combined with extortion. Coyotes may try to take advantage of these women by extorting more money from their families than was originally agreed upon during the business arrangement. In this scenario, women are kidnapped and taken to ‘safe houses’ where they are kept until a ransom of money is paid for their release (Meyer 2010; Interview, 11 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

### *Sexual Violence*

Perhaps the most salient danger which women migrants are exposed to during their journey through Mexico is sexual violence. Due to their sex, these individuals are victimized in gender specific ways. Furthermore, given their state-imposed invisibility, if physically assaulted or raped, migrant women feel unable to seek social justice despite the fact that their human rights have been gravely violated. Sexual violence is increasingly common along transit routes and the main culprits are not only criminal gang members or coyotes, but also migrant men, migration officers, police officers and/or security agents



on the freight train. Sadly, this reality is becoming so common that being sexually assaulted has become the norm when discussing women migrants in Mexico and was pointed out by several interviewees (Interviews with NGO representatives, migrant shelter administrators, migrants in-transit). This ‘new normal’ becomes an important mental and physical preparation for women migrants prior to departure in that many women take some form of contraception prior to starting their journey (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

Equally disturbing are two links that have been associated with the increase in sexual violence. One is the connection to forced disappearances and human trafficking. Women en-route are disappearing and being forced into prostitution, especially in Tapachula, Chiapas - the southern border zones. They work in bars, and traffickers often exploit their economic vulnerabilities promising more lucrative employment (Interview, 13 Nov. 2014, Mexico; Prieto Diaz and Kuhner 2014; Rodriguez and Davies 2012). Moreover, a ‘significant number of them [women] are minors and they often suffer from extortion by various authorities’ (ONU Mujeres 2015, 15). The *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) highlighted this problem as a principal area of concern in Mexico and called for a harmonization of criminalization initiatives between federal and state level mechanisms as well as measures be put in place for prevention and prosecution (The United Nations 1988). The other connection relates to sexual violence and kidnapping. Kidnapping and extortion have been identified as consequences of invisibility. Nonetheless, women migrants who are kidnapped are also often subjected to sexual abuse by their captor(s). According to the CNDH (2009, 6), the ‘sexual abuse and the frequent cases of rape are persistently associated with events of

kidnapping of women migrants.’ Overall, for women, being categorized as ‘unauthorized’ migrants starts a cycle. First, the category places women in a clandestine space, where the fear of detention and deportation forces them to try to remain hidden while travelling through Mexico. Second, remaining invisible often translates into women having to access remote areas, which become primary targets of criminal groups. In these secluded areas women cannot only be exposed to sexual violence, but kidnapping and subsequently trafficking (Martínez 2014). Lastly, if they do survive, they may again fear coming forward as this can result in their detention and deportation.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Mexico presents a critical case for examining border controls and transit migration, especially with regards to women migrants. The close geographical proximity to the U.S. border increases the pressure for the Mexican government to secure its borders, whether external or internal. Adopting similar border logics to that of the U.S., however, has allowed the Mexican nation-state to produce and control the ‘unauthorized’ or ‘irregular’ migrant population in the name of human rights and ‘orderly’ migratory movements. This type of ‘protection from harm’ national discourse (Anderson 2012) attempts to change the optics internationally where the Mexican government appears to be implementing these policies to protect migrants. Using this narrative, in turn, characterizes the nation-state as a ‘protector’, absolving it from criticism, whereas, in reality, it is implicated in creating this vulnerability and human rights violations by producing ‘irregular’ migrants.

By incorporating a corporeal feminist perspective and including a focus on the embodied border, I show how once women migrants cross the Guatemala-Mexico

boundary, the border follows them, internally, as they travel throughout Mexico. On-the-ground, not only have the border enforcement controls, implemented by the PFS, caused greater violence and insecurity for women migrants with respect to their transit, but these controls also support their further marginalization, vulnerability and precarity in a gendered informal labour market. For women migrants, the category of being ‘unauthorized,’ forces them to remain hidden or else to face detention and subsequent deportation, and also exposes them to greater danger and risk. Furthermore, by addressing intersectional oppressions, my article advances the understanding of migrant women by appreciating that a body is constituted by lived experiences based on historical, socio-political, and economic factors. This kind of analysis, in turn, shapes our understanding so we do not neglect the gendered, racialized, and classed boundaries that intersect with the nation-state’s border and which, taken together, constitute the subordinate migrant-subject.

This paper has argued that despite claiming to protect women migrants from human rights violations, these border controls construct and promote negative categories as well as forced invisibility, which enhance risk and danger for the women migrants who are transiting through Mexico and trying to reach the U.S. for better life opportunities. Border security policies framed as ‘protection from harm’ allow nation-states to sidestep their responsibilities and circumvent human rights, which are encapsulated in national and international legal commitments. By including a feminist critique, I challenge current border policy in order to show how narratives of protection often replace the discourse of rights. By analyzing binaries, the framing behind these policies often becomes clearer. Narratives of protection frame migrants as victims (typically women), whereas as

narratives of security and/or control frame migrants as threats, often due to their presumed association with crime (narratives often connected to migrant men). What is missing from these narratives is the concept of rights, which frames migrants (both men and women) as agents. By changing the narratives, we can advance the understanding of border policy to include the importance of access to fundamental rights. Migrants are agents who are entitled to rights. They are rights holders and state actors are duty bearers who have the responsibility to respect and promote human rights. Ultimately, border studies and policy circles can draw on feminist scholarship not only to critically analyze the embodied realities of borders, but also transform hegemonic security narratives. My research can contribute to transforming hegemonic security narratives by questioning how boundary-making narratives are produced and show that borders are sustained by promoting differences among individuals. These differences promote a self/other dichotomy, which is used to justify restrictive practices on-the-ground and obscure the violence and lack of personal security people experience.

## **Article 2**

# **The Eternal Nightmare: Women Migrants' Escape, Violence and Oppression**

**Carla Angulo-Pasel**

### **Abstract**

Migrant women from Central America experience exclusion, displacement and marginalization, not only while traversing Mexico en route to the U.S., but also prior to leaving their countries of origin. In critical border and migration studies, the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) literature has been used to better account for migrant agency, rather than portraying migrants as victims of the nation-state's control. However, by drawing on empirical fieldwork, this article identifies and addresses gaps in the AoM approach. By bringing AoM scholarship into dialogue with feminist scholarship, I argue that an expanded understanding of subjectivities should be incorporated within the AoM approach, in order to adequately account for the gendered experiences of migration. By focusing on the gendered bodies of women migrants from the North Triangle of Central America (NTCA) (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras), I show how escaping systems of oppression and migrant agency are more complicated than portrayals of the AoM literature might initially suggest. Specifically, escape and agency always exist in relation to structures of violence and control. By analyzing women's experiences of violence and intersectional oppressions, I reveal how systems of oppression based on power imbalances intersect to construct women's 'lived' experiences. These subjective experiences, in turn, shape women's migratory motivations, options and resources. The

article begins with an explanation of the AoM approach, followed by a feminist critique, which problematizes the AoM perspective's principal concepts of 'escape' and 'imperceptibility'.

## **Introduction**

Every year, the journey for 'unauthorized' migrants from Central America trying to transit through Mexico in the hopes of stepping foot in the United States (U.S.) is a violent one. Multiple reports cite the human rights abuses encountered by migrants while in transit in Mexico, documenting abuses by state and non-state actors, and while in detention awaiting deportation (CNDH 2009, 2011; Boggs 2015; Diaz Prieto and Kuhner 2014). For Central American women migrants, however, this journey is even more violent, both physically and emotionally, because they are women. They will be victimized in gender-specific ways because of the power structures surrounding gender, which construct their bodies in subordination; most of them know it before they depart on their journey.

At a migrant shelter in Oaxaca, Alma recounts her story as she cuts vegetables in the kitchen: 'I thought I was going to die, they were going to rape me' (Interview, 24 Oct. 2014, Mexico). She and her husband were travelling on foot from Honduras towards the U.S. when five men started chasing them. She was not fast enough and they caught up to her while her husband was able to get away. She explains: 'They took me to the bush nearby, surrounded me in a circle and told me to take my clothes off. I started to, but pleaded with them to please let me go because I was pregnant. All of a sudden, they told me to go. God saved me because they let me go. I was so disoriented that I didn't even

know where to run; they had to tell me where to go.’ Alma found her husband and together they fled to the migrant shelter, where they had been for a month. At that time, she was two months pregnant and they were waiting for their Humanitarian Visas<sup>10</sup>. She is now traumatized and has trouble sleeping, thinking ‘they are going to come and get me’. If and when they obtain their Humanitarian Visas, they no longer wish to continue to the U.S. Given her experience and her pregnancy, she is not interested in further risk and would like to stay in Mexico, specifically in Mexico City (D.F.). Alma’s story illustrates how women’s experiences of migrating to the U.S. are fraught with multiple forms of violence. Not only did Alma experience physical violence, but also gender-based and emotional violence. The borders encountered by ‘unauthorized’ migrants are violent ones. For instance, by legally imposing subordinate migratory categories such as ‘undocumented’ and/or ‘unauthorized’ through border enforcement law, border practices essentially create legal forms of violence: they produce harm and legitimize violence due to this clandestine categorization at, and beyond, official borders (Angulo-Pasel, forthcoming). Yet, most women have already grappled with violence in one way or another in their countries of origin.

Citizenship and border studies have advanced our knowledge about border controls and violence at the border. One strand of theorizing, the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) perspective, has also tried to make sure we pay attention to migrants’ agency, not just their victimization, in this migratory process. This article will look in more detail at the AoM perspective. While building on this scholarship, I argue that while agency is

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<sup>10</sup> Officially known as the *Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias* (TVRH), this is a temporary visa that may be issued by the Mexican government if a migrant becomes a victim of a crime while on Mexican territory. It provides migrants with a ‘regular’ status for up to one year, but may be renewed if their case is still under investigation.

important, women's agency on the move is often more relational than AoM portrayals of autonomy might suggest given the interrelationship of violence and agency. Drawing upon critical feminist scholarship found in geopolitics and sociology, this article explores how women migrants from Central America experience agency and how they experience violence. It argues that migrants are not abstract, subjectless and homogenous (Sharma 2009), but rather embodied through various subjectivities, making their (im)mobility relational and situational. Through the narratives of women from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), namely Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, I show how being legally categorized as 'unauthorized' is one of the borders and/or barriers that women experience while they journey through Mexico. However, there are already multiple social barriers, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class, which are 'inscribed' on their bodies and form the base of the prejudices that they endure daily.

This analysis is based upon research conducted during fieldwork in Mexico, which took place in the Fall of 2014, as well as a review of key policy documents. It draws on in-depth interviews, including stories of women migrants' narratives and extensive field notes based on participant observation through site visits to shelters found on the migrant trail. The article is organized as follows. The first section reviews the AoM perspective, which is then followed by an examination of agency and oppression from a critical feminist perspective. The next section delves deeper into how women experience multiple forms of violence prior to migrating. Finally, I discuss women's journeys through Mexico in the last section and provide detailed accounts of women's experiences with violence and agency.



## **Borders, Control and the Autonomy of Migration**

One prevalent strand within citizenship and border scholarship is the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) perspective. It traces its theoretical roots from Italian autonomous Marxism (for example, Tronti 1964) and thus has a strong emphasis on the relations of labour and capital with respect to mobility (Mitropoulos 2007; Mezzadra 2011b). This approach has advanced our knowledge of border security and migrants by not only problematizing the ‘impermeability’ of borders, but also by analyzing how migrants experience these borders while they are moving through diverse spaces. A main contribution of the AoM approach has been a theoretical shift that views migrants as creative and active participants whose movement precedes state control. AoM scholars (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Mezzadra 2011b, 2004) argue that state control and border security policy is secondary and reacts to the movement of migrants, movements that then force the state to respond with various forms of control. Scholars applying the AoM approach place emphasis on different ideas within the approach, for instance, the power of ‘escape’ as a form of subversion (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Mezzadra 2004), migrants as creating their own social realities in order to become ‘imperceptible’ to control (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Trimikliniotis et al. 2015; Trimikliniotis et al. 2016), or critiquing the border as an ‘impenetrable’ wall (Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010). They all, however, commonly focus on how mobility is autonomous to forms of control and how, through the power of agency of people on the move, migration is a constituent force that is capable of social transformation. These main points will be briefly discussed below.

According to Mezzadra (2011a), one of the first definitions of the AoM approach is found in the book *Escape Routes* by Papadopoulos et al. (2008), which draws upon the concept of 'escape'. As previously mentioned, the concept of autonomy and movement as a form of escape stems from theories of labour relations and worker struggles under capitalism, where the insubordination of workers through their 'exodus' or 'escape' determined the response of capitalist forms of power (Mitropoulos 2007). Papadopoulos et al. (2008, 203) situate the AoM perspective within the history of capitalism and labour mobility, as a 'contemporary form of escape' that challenges 'postliberal power'. By looking at migration as autonomous, rather than as a dependent variable to economic factors, a 'different gaze' is possible where the migrant's subjectivities, 'practices' and 'desires' become the focus of inquiry (Mezzadra 2011b). Mobility is, therefore, a social fact and a strategy that is taken against 'the cramped spaces of the global political economies of work' rather than a passive outcome (Mitropoulos 2007, 129).

Migrants, through their 'escape' are active agents capable of social transformation. As Papadopoulos et al. (2008, 43) argue, escape is a form of subversion or refusal of the '*double-R axiom*' whereby migrants choose to escape the modes of rights and representation enacted by the nation-state, which are not inclusive of all people. Mobility, therefore, precedes control because it is 'sovereignty' that attempts to respond to the 'new situation which escaping people create'. In other words, as they argue, 'control is a cultural-political device which comes afterwards to tame and eventually to appropriate people's escape. Social struggles come first' (Ibid.). The concept of the 'right to escape' is made possible by becoming 'imperceptible' to sovereignty and control. Focusing again on migrants as agents who enact creativity to subvert control while on the

move, escaping control means to become ‘everyone/everything’, ‘indiscernible’, ‘invisible’ by using everyday, mundane strategies outside the ‘regime of mobility’. This escape, however, does not intend to instigate political change, unlike organized civil rights movements, for instance (Papadopoulos et al. 2008, 76). Regime, in this sense, refers to the various institutions, actors, practices and discourses that attempt to control and sustain power in a specific area. It is in this regard, that the notion of escape provides an opportunity to both ‘evacuate’ a system or a ‘regime’ that one refuses and to create a new social reality that is ‘beyond’ the state.

Since migrants are viewed as active participants, who exercise agency as a creative force, their everyday practices and struggles enable their continued movement, such as by using false documents to travel for instance, something which is an everyday act that, by refusing to follow the rules stipulating the need for legal documentation, subverts and resists border control in an attempt to maintain access to free movement. Thus, as Trimikliniotis et al. (2016, 1041) argue, ‘migrants organize their mobility around ... everyday politics in ways that transcend and therefore transform control’. The strategies, tactics and practices are ‘beyond’ the state because they are ‘imperceptible’ to the mechanisms used by the regime of control; they are an assertion of autonomy. This is why the autonomy of migration is understood literally as a social movement – because the regimes of control of the nation-state are unable to control a substantial mass of individual everyday acts (Mezzadra 2004, 2011a). AoM is thus seen as a social movement ‘that possesses knowledge, follows its own rules, and collectively organizes its own praxis’ (Boutang 2002, 1; cited in Tsianos and Karakayali 2010). The conceptualization of living ‘beyond’ the state is often informed by an anarchist view and

is exemplified by scholars who engage with the concept of the *'mobile commons'* (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Trimikliniotis et al. 2015; Trimikliniotis et al. 2016). According to these AoM scholars, migrants who use 'escape' as a strategy create their own communities with their own forms of knowledge, tactics and practices that are outside of the 'existing system of political representation' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 188). According to Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013), these strategies allow for the development of a common language and knowledge that may be shared by all migrants while on the move. They refer to this world of knowledge and information as the 'mobile commons', explaining that it refers to 'a sociability that can be shared, used and where people contribute to sustain and expand it' (Ibid, 190). For this reason, migrants are successful in remaining invisible or 'imperceptible' – because the mobile commons is essentially another world.

Overall, the concept of escape as subversion is possible because one becomes 'imperceptible'. Becoming imperceptible, in turn, also renders borders porous, so that borders are in fact not impassable walls, such as the metaphor of 'Fortress Europe' would suggest (Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010). Borders are perceived as one of the nation-state's primary tools for controlling and restricting the mobility of certain migrants, not only by exerting power at a territorial line, but equally through the legal categories that are imposed on those seeking to move, for example, those migrants categorized as 'unauthorized', 'undocumented', 'illegal' and so forth (Angulo-Pasel, forthcoming). AoM scholars, however, refute any theory that views borders as impenetrable, and state policies to that effect, because it ignores the various tips and tricks that migrants utilize to make borders porous. Bringing the agency of

migrants into the discussions of borders, captures how border enforcement practices are shaped by the dynamic struggles migrants face (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010). So, while state-centric approaches may attempt to show the border as a stable and governable tool for migration management, in effect, borders are instead sites of constant flux because they are shaped by multiple actors and change with different movements and discourses (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 69; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). In addition, according to Andrijasevic (2009) and De Genova (2004, 2013), borders are not necessarily about exclusion. Instead, the complex relationships that emerge between borders and migrants due to migrants' acts of movement, result in 'diverse kinds of migrant subjectivities' with borders operating 'to produce differentiated forms of access and "rights"' (Casas-Cortes 2015, 57). Their main purpose is, therefore, not to exclude, but to 'govern the porosity of borders' (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010, 374).

The AoM approach champions the concept of the 'right to escape' and it features prominently among the literature as a positive practice because it generates creativity and new social realities among migrants. It is in this vein that Papadopoulos et al. (2008, xix-xx) speak of the 'joy of escape' and therefore, focusing on escape 'allows us to imagine, see and interrogate those ordinary moments when people's actions put processes in motion, processes which are effective in confronting the social order'. In other words, while migrant struggles are real, the power to escape and to freely move are generally regarded as positive elements because it empowers migrants as a creative force capable of transformative change. So too, 'imperceptibility' or invisibility are often treated within AoM scholarship as a strategic weapon, which migrants use to subvert control when

migrating. In this sense, as Papadopolous et al. (2008) claim, migration is viewed as ‘escape routes’.

### **Agency and Oppression from a Feminist Perspective**

While the above scholarship has been fruitful in understanding migration, a critical look through a gender lens, which is offered by critical feminist perspectives within geopolitics and sociology, would enrich this analysis. Feminist perspectives about relational autonomy (Benson 1990, 1991; Nussbaum 2001) and embodiment (Hyndman 2001, 2004a, 2004a; Pratt 2004; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Grosz 1987, 1994; Bordo 1993, 1996, Silvey 2005, 2006) help to problematize and nuance the way agency is often portrayed in the AoM scholarship, particularly in relation to issues of violence. Feminist scholarship also draws attention to the need to be critical of producing binaries, and the ways in which the concepts of escape and invisibility can become problematic if not understood in a more nuanced fashion. There is a growing body of critical scholarship surrounding the AoM approach which has shown how the AoM has a ‘reductive reading of power’ (McNevin 2013; Nyers 2015); does not sufficiently consider the experiences of migrants that are based on subjective positions and diverse conditions, thereby ‘romanticizing’ migration and framing it to be more akin to an adventure (Sharma 2009; Scheel 2013a, 2013b); and minimizes the securitization of borders by treating migration/mobility as a labour issue (Scheel 2013b).

These critiques are valuable because they point to a prevalent flaw within the AoM approach, which is the use of binaries in many of its arguments. For instance, as McNevin (2013, 185) aptly illustrates, migrants are neither wholly victims nor ‘heroic agents who subvert, refuse and resist sovereign order’. By using the human rights regime

as an example, she distinguishes how migrants can use these norms and mechanisms to achieve political claims, even though they may also be reproducing an imperfect system. Similarly, some scholars who employ an AoM perspective may risk creating the perception of a false binary between either ‘sovereign control’ or ‘human mobility,’ thereby relying on an either/or way of knowing and thus assuming that power ‘[arises] from one or another primary source...[which] misses out on the ways in which control and resistance are co-constitutive’ (Nyers 2015, 33). Conceptualizing migration, perhaps inadvertently, in either/or dichotomies leads to a lack of complexity and fails to address the ‘messiness’ of migration or the ‘visceral conceptions of violence, security, and mobility’ (Hyndman 2004b, 308). This is why Scheel (2013a, 2013b) and Sharma (2009) have both critiqued the AoM approach for being overly ‘romanticized’ in its portrayal of human mobility and for not adequately accounting for the migrant’s subjectivities but rather relying on the ‘figure’ of ‘migrants’ as the ‘symbols of escape’ (Sharma 2009, 472-74). By portraying migration in a ‘romanticized’ fashion, some AoM scholars also appear to minimize the effects of restrictive border enforcement practices, such as ‘biometric rebordering’ (Scheel 2013b), on migrants. Borders are becoming more impenetrable in some instances and thus may not always be so porous as AoM scholarship sometimes suggests. In the remainder of the paper, I will build on these critiques by drawing on original fieldwork and by employing a feminist approach which will give voice to the situation of Central American women migrating through Mexico. In doing so, I show how notions of escape and agency are more complex from the perspective of women migrants and always exist in relation to forms of violence and control. This insight

contributes to the general framing of the AoM approach by questioning the access to mobility or ‘escape’, as well as the desire to become ‘imperceptible’.

Essentially, feminist scholars problematize false dichotomies because they simplify complex embodied, gendered struggles and lend themselves to (re)producing masculinist practices and forms of knowledge (Hyndman 2007). False binaries hide the complexities of migrant experiences by suggesting either/or ways of knowing. As will be further elaborated upon below, the reality is that migrants both have agency and are controlled by many structural factors within the politics of mobility; they can and do have a will of their own but can also still be victims. As such, there are moments of agency, albeit constrained, but also moments where that agency is taken away, such as when women are detained at the *estación migratoria* [detention centre], or when women are kidnapped like Sonia, a Honduran migrant I interviewed who was held for ransom in a ‘safe house’ by criminals for ten days in Reynosa (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Furthermore, human rights abuses against migrants are increasing in alarming rates in Mexico by criminal gangs, drug traffickers, coyotes (or human smugglers), migration authorities, train operators and municipal/state/federal police forces (Isacson et al. 2015). All these actors produce forms of control, which in many instances may not be overcome by migrants who become ‘imperceptible’. The context of this vulnerable reality must be recognized as well as the migrant’s capacity to act, because there is a difference between a capacity to act and a dominant power relationship where migrants lose control and power.

Due to the AoM’s shift in focus to the migrant rather than forms of control, the portrayal of migrants as agents is often overemphasized at the expense of also paying



critical attention to the ways in which migrants are forced into positions of victimhood, often by state authorities, who claim to be protecting them from the harm of non-state actors (Anderson 2012). Critical engagement with the inherent conditions of violence that repeatedly victimize migrants, generally, and women migrants, specifically, need to be analyzed, which does not imply framing migrants as powerless victims like Papadopoulos et al. (2008, 203) claim is the case in humanitarian discourses. Concentrating on migrant agency as opposed to sovereignty and control creates a pendulum effect that has swung too far to emphasizing the desires and exercise of agency at the risk of not fully articulating the structures of violence, which in this particular empirical context still matter tremendously.

A gender analysis can enhance critiques of the AoM by injecting an analysis that addresses the asymmetrical and often violent relationships among people based on power hierarchies. For instance, Scheel (2013b) highlights the minimal attention given to repressive, violent border regimes on migrants by AoM scholars. I would go further and suggest that not only do they inadequately address the violence of borders, but they fail to fully address the other forms of violence that women experience vis-à-vis their male counterparts, both while migrating within Mexico and before they depart. A gender focus expands the analytical scope of mobility by problematizing how violence affects people differently, which in turn affects their agency. Critical feminist scholars have important insights into agency and the violence caused by border controls. They do not focus on abstract figures, but on embodied, relational and situated bodies (Hyndman 2001; Silvey 2006). As such, violence and agency are intrinsically linked. The agency, or capacity to act, experienced by Central American women who choose and are able to migrate, is

affected by direct and indirect forms of violence – not only on the journey through Mexico, but in their country of origin before they depart. For example, recalling Alma’s story from the beginning of the article, she and her husband chose to migrate to the U.S. She exercised her agency to migrate. But at the same time, her choices, as a woman, were limited, in that her husband was a former member of the *maras*<sup>11</sup> and, as a result, both were targeted by the criminal gang (Interview, 24 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Feminist scholars challenge the AoM approach by addressing how marginalized bodies, such as those of women migrants, experience violence through their embodied and gendered social differences (Hyndman 2001). Agency thus becomes relational. It may or may not be constrained, and as such, a woman exercises agency in various forms, but migration is ‘not simply an expression of individual agency or choice’ (Hyndman 2004, 169). Being the wife of a former *maras* member, as Alma was, places her in heightened danger, as the punishment for leaving the gang is death. She did not want to leave, but she had to (Interview, 24 Oct. 2014, Mexico). By applying a feminist analysis, the figure of the migrant becomes ‘embodied’: a body which has been socially constructed by interconnected power hierarchies and one’s (im)mobility depends on where the person is with respect to their ‘social location’ in life. According to Pessar and Mahler (2003, 816), people are born into a ‘social location continuum’ that is created through historical, socio-political factors, which ‘shape, discipline, and position people and the ways they think and act...irrespective of their own efforts.’ The relationships to structural factors that together shape the individual migrant’s unique experiences are lost when too much emphasis is placed on agency. Contextualizing and framing the analysis as relational and

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<sup>11</sup> The *maras* are prominent gangs found throughout Central America. The two rival *mara* gangs are MS13 and Calle 18.

dynamic may complicate the binary oppositions found in the AoM approach, but provides an understanding ‘within a larger context of gendered interactions and expectations between individuals and within families and institutions’ (Donato et al. 2006, 12). Unlike traditional state-centric approaches to migration, a feminist approach decentres the state to account for the security of the body, but does not dismiss the state entirely from consideration (Hyndman 2004b, 309). Although a relational reading of autonomy has been proposed by Scheel (2013b) within the context of the ‘technologisation of border controls’, it would also be valuable to nuance the reading of autonomy to instances where migration may not be a possibility or particular moments of (im)mobility on the journey within this empirical context.

Another way that a feminist perspective can nuance these critiques is to show how intersectionality affects the mobility of women migrants from the NTCA. Drawing on feminist scholarship, Scheel (2013a) has proposed using the concept of ‘embodied encounters’ to account for the differences between how migrants experience the border based on their subjective positions. However, he does not explicitly use intersectionality and has not applied the concept of ‘embodied encounters’ to a specific empirical case. For example, discussing abstract ‘migrants’ disembodies women migrants by neglecting the ‘intersectional oppressions’ (Crenshaw 1991; Anzaldúa 1987; Ruiz-Aho 2011) that shape their socio-political realities. Originally defined by Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to ‘how experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism’ (1991, 1243). Ruiz-Aho (2011), in her work on feminist border thought, uses this concept to discuss how women’s mobility is affected not only by being characterized as ‘illegal’ but also by other layers of marginalization such as

race, class and gender. As will be shown in detail below, the government's border practices subordinate women migrants by legally categorizing them as 'irregular' or 'unauthorized'. Yet, women not only experience violence and are subordinated by these legal categories, their (im)mobility is also affected by the boundaries of gender, race, class, and nationality, and often the associated stereotypes. A woman from Honduras while on the journey, for instance, is not only categorized as 'unauthorized' but, as Cruz Salazar (2011) suggests, is also, because of her perceived attractive looks, more likely a '*roba marido*'<sup>12</sup> who is prone to work as a waitress, or worse, forced into prostitution. Accordingly, by not focusing on binaries, a feminist analysis adds to the understanding that the categories enacted by the border are only one among other boundaries that impact a woman's migration experience. As Victoria, a social anthropologist who specializes in migration and works directly with women migrants through a Mexican faith-based organization, notes: 'We are talking about women migrants with a high degree of vulnerability from many variables. ... We observe that these vulnerabilities multiply, so if you are already an undocumented migrant and are also a woman, the other issues are added to these elements – you are poor, you are fleeing violence, etc. These are other elements of vulnerability ... so you are already carrying all this baggage with you when transiting through this state' (Interview, 23 Sept. 2014, Mexico).

Lastly, women migrants may perceive escape and invisibility differently than men. The AoM perspective emphasizes the importance of the freedom of movement and the 'right to escape'. It appears to portray the concept of escape as a positive practice – as a 'joy' – almost akin to an adventure. But not everyone has the power to move and/or the

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<sup>12</sup> In Mexico, a typical stereotype assigned to women from Honduras literally meaning 'husband stealer'

access to escape. The freedom of movement may be restricted due to structural violence and/or intersectional oppressions. A principal consideration for women migrants, therefore, is whether they even have access to 'escape'. For many women, the freedom of mobility is restricted because various gender expectations and oppressions block their access. For example, women with dependent children, who are expected to be the primary providers and who may not have caregivers available for their children, as well as women who suffer from gender-based violence (GBV), and are unable to flee due to fear, are two cases where mobility may be limited for gendered reasons. In addition, the romanticized notion of clandestine migration uses invisibility as a significant strategy, the notion of being 'imperceptible'. There are times when being invisible may be a viable strategy for women to avoid apprehension, but there are also other times when attempts to remain hidden in an environment that often preys on women only further exacerbates their risky position. Remembering Alma, she was attempting to pass by using very secluded routes, but she was almost raped as a result. Migration, in these instances, is not a romantic notion of escape. Women are not escaping violence because it continues to materialize along the way.

Overall, a more constructive way to describe the life of Central American women may be to use Frye's (2000) conceptual framework of oppression. In her analysis, Frye (2000, 11) examines how oppression, coming from the root word 'press', is used to immobilize. She explains that when something is pressed it is 'caught between and among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion'. Using the metaphor of a cage, she illustrates how the bars of a cage may be viewed systematically as multiple barriers restricting a bird's

access to the outside world. Similarly, those that are oppressed live a life that is akin to being caged in, where one's life is 'confined and shaped ... and surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers [that] restrict or penalize motion in any direction' (Ibid., 12). In the following sections, this article will examine this 'cage' of oppression in more detail by illustrating women's experiences, and will show that scholars who adopt the AoM approach appear to make several taken-for-granted assumptions. These assumptions mainly revolve around the concept of 'escape'. They assume 1) that everyone has the freedom to escape the regime of rights and representation; 2) that they have the 'desire' to leave these modes of representation and rights and trust in a 'new social reality'; and 3) that becoming 'imperceptible' by strategies of 'dis-identification' is favourable when compared to remaining within the regimes of control. By using the analyses of embodiment and intersectionality, I illustrate that women migrants' experiences are embedded in structures of violence. Thus, women migrants exercise their relational autonomous movements within these constraints.

### **The Conditions of Gendered Mobility: Is Access to 'Escape' Always Possible?**

It is important to recall the argument that some AoM scholars make, that is, that escape is a form of subversion, or 'a desire to depart from the plenitude which organized control in a certain field' (Papadopoulos et al. 2008, 80), because this argument appears to take as a given that escape from the rights and representation enacted by the nation-state is possible. Migrants are, after all, active and creative agents of their realities. However, *access* to mobility should not always be assumed in every situation. Applying a relational and situational analysis demonstrates the constitution and the location of the

subject, who may or may not be able to realize ‘escape’. This section problematizes the concept of escape by examining the idea of access to escape.

Women in the NTCA seek to migrate for various reasons. However, most of the reasons are distinctly connected to trying to flee direct or indirect forms of violence. Women experience structural violence<sup>13</sup> due to the intersectional oppressions that they face in their socio-political landscapes as well as forms of physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological violence. These forms of violence cannot be discussed in isolation because they are all interconnected, they are a direct reflection of intersectional oppressions, and they are all socially constructed. Furthermore, this violence affects the access to mobility, whether in a woman’s country of origin or through migration. So even if women want to escape, they may not be able to as their power of movement is restricted by social structures that organize power and perpetuate clear social differences, such as ‘demarcating between male and female domains in activities, tasks, spaces’ (Pessar and Mahler 2003, 813). Gender discrimination becomes a unique layer of oppression and violence as it often influences other social hierarchies of power, such as class, directly and helps shape exclusion and displacement, which may determine a woman’s access to mobility (Silvey, 2006; Hyndman, 2004a). Hyndman (2004a, 2004b), through her analysis of the ‘geopolitics of mobility’, refers to this as ‘corporeal access’ where mobility is directly tied to the subjective body and her level of access. This limited access is associated with the socially constructed body and may lead to constrained

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<sup>13</sup> Structural violence involves indirect forms of violence through historical social, economic and political structures, in the form of gender inequality, racism, poverty, discrimination and structural stereotypes, which together perpetuate and encourage everyday exclusion, exploitation and marginalization. According to Farmer (2004: 307), structural violence “is violence exerted systematically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order...[and] informs the study of the social machinery of oppression.”

mobility, thus shaping migratory options. If possible, the decision to migrate, therefore, may be sought in order to obtain better social and economic opportunities and a life free from violence because other forms of mobility, such as socio-economic mobility in their country, are restricted. Migration, or lack thereof, is directly tied to the socially constructed body, an ‘embodied subjectivity’ or a ‘lived body’ which has been produced and/or constructed by its ‘social inscriptions from the outside’ (Grosz 1994, 141). Therefore, social relations are critically important in this context because they are ‘embodied’ in that relations are ‘not just experienced by subjects, but are, in order to be experienced, integrally *recorded* or corporally *inscribed*’ (Grosz 1987, 7). Social relations, which include power structures like gender, race and class, constitute the individual body and impact one’s social location with respect to mobility.

Gender inequality and gender discrimination are strong structural barriers that manifest in Latin America in general, and Central America in particular, due to a pervasive patriarchal society. In Mexico, for instance, both the *Virgin of Guadalupe* and the *Malinche* become archetypes for women within society, with women being viewed as either ‘venerated virgin-mother [and/] or reviled whore-mother’ (Hardin 2002, 2). The archetypes represent a false dichotomy of good/evil where the Virgin the Guadalupe (also known as the Virgin Mary) is the symbol of innocence and purity whereas the Malinche, who was a native slave and mistress to Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes, symbolizes temptation and treachery. Similarly, men in Latin America have been historically associated with the hypermasculinity of *machismo*<sup>14</sup>, a constructed gender identity that produces unequal gender relationships, which were originally the products of the Spanish

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<sup>14</sup> According to Hardin (2002, 3), machismo is ‘the stereotypical Latin American masculinity that is characterized by an overt, active heterosexuality; courage that blends into aggression; and a male bonding that includes physicality without generally questioning the male’s heterosexuality.’



Conquest and subsequent colonization but which still exist today (Hardin 2002). This social structure, founded in a strong colonial legacy, is not easily eradicated and often exemplifies the unequal relationships of power by promoting the man's right to dominate, and be the stronger and more masculine one when compared to his feminine counterpart. Within this patriarchal social construct, women are automatically viewed as weaker than men and various gender expectations within society start to take hold (Cruz Salazar 2011; Ruiz 2009). These gendered expectations are taught through family, schools and communities; they endure through the processes of socialization and through the politics of the everyday (Pearce 2010).

Within this Central American context, women may often suffer from gender inequality, which directly influences class as well as racial forms of oppression. For instance, the gender expectations with relation to 'outside' work is critical when examining the endurance of gender inequality and its relation to the feminization of poverty. To be clear, Central America has witnessed neoliberal restructuring economic policies, which like the rest of Latin America, have produced critical situations in terms of poverty levels and equitable employment opportunities. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report* (2016, 255–56), the percentage of those in vulnerable employment within the total labour force is relatively high in the NTCA, with Guatemala at 49.9%, El Salvador at 37.6% and Honduras at 53.3%. When observing the data disaggregated by sex, women face disproportionate levels of income inequality. In 2015, levels of gross national income per capita were considerably lower for women than men: Guatemala \$5,132 (women) versus

\$9,081 (men); Honduras \$2,680 (women) compared to \$6,254 (men); and El Salvador \$5,385 (women) and \$10,385 (men) (UNDP 2016, 211–12).

Being a woman in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, however, means that poverty and class oppression are exacerbated by historically learned gender stereotypes. Women are further excluded and marginalized by primarily only having access to gendered occupations, specifically ‘care work’ or what Anderson (2000) describes as the ‘three C’s’ of cleaning, cooking and caring. They are automatically placed in what is deemed as inferior work in that this type of feminized work is given a lower value in society (Pratt 2004) and there is an assumption that women are better able to perform such duties. At a migrant shelter when interviewing Isabela, a migrant from El Salvador, she expressed that she had worked as a ‘*domestica*’ during her stay at the shelter and was trying to get to Texas where her cousins had work for her to ‘clean houses’ (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

In essence, these ‘caring’ skills are relatively undervalued when compared to more ‘masculine’ forms of labour (Raghuram 2004). By being undervalued, these occupations suffer from inadequate remuneration, vulnerability and precarity (Armstrong and Armstrong 1990; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Poverty becomes gendered. Indeed, the feminization of poverty and the increase of women working outside of the home are significant because they are situations that speak directly to the prominent false binary of the public versus the private sphere. Care work<sup>15</sup> is often perceived as an extension of the private realm. The economic situation in Central America, however, has made it difficult

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<sup>15</sup> Care work includes child, elderly and disabled care. The globalization of care has been analyzed through extensive work on the global care chains, which refers to the way in which care gaps filled by migrant women, in turn lead to care gaps in origin countries, with care work being further devalued along the chain (Yeates 2004; Perez Orozco 2010; Benería 2008).

for women not to enter this labour force. Since the structural adjustment policies and the roll-back of the welfare state, poverty and unemployment have increased, leading to more women working outside the home for survival (Pessar 2005). But these women still maintain the all the care responsibilities of their own homes.

In these scenarios, ‘escape’ may not be a realistic possibility as these women are expected to be responsible for the chores of the house as well as the care of children, and/or elderly parents in their countries of origin. In addition, they have typically been assigned not only the physical work of the household, such as cooking or cleaning, but also the emotional and nurturing work – the reproductive labour – that includes the wellbeing of the family, such as the education and/or healthcare of the children (Boris and Parreñas 2010). Padre Solalinde, who runs a migrant shelter, expressed to me the importance of children for women in this context: ‘They care a lot for their children, for their family. Their biggest worry is usually their children.... They fight for their children.... In the end, they will earn money to send to their family, to their children. They dream of bringing their children out of the danger found in Central America.’ (Interview, 30 Oct. 2014, Mexico). That is why there has been much work done on forms of social remittances, which are primarily fulfilled by women migrants (Levitt 1998; Haas 2009; Orozco 2009). For those women who can migrate, like Isabella who worked as a *domestica* while in Mexico and then would potentially work cleaning houses in Texas, these expectations are often mirrored while transiting through Mexico and in sites of destination, where women continue to be marginalized by mainly having access to gendered jobs such as domestic or live-in domestic work, or service work, which may include sex work (Yeates 2004; Benería 2008; Kofman 2004; Perez Orozco 2010).

Lastly, forms of discrimination based on racial and ethnic boundaries may also intersect with gender discrimination, which together contribute to form the ‘cage’ of multiple oppressions that inhibit socio-economic mobility, contribute to structural violence and may restrict access to migration. Indigenous peoples, who also typically reside in rural areas, are among the poorest in the Central American region. With some of the lowest income levels in Central America, not only are they particularly vulnerable to poverty, but they also lack adequate access to education, health care and basic community infrastructure. In Guatemala, for instance, indigenous peoples account for approximately 40 percent of the population and three out of four of them are poor (IFAD 2009). Indigenous rural women, therefore, have become one of the poorest population groups, ‘having little or no schooling, few or no productive assets, limited knowledge about production, few work skills and lack of access to basic services’ (IFAD 2002, 4). In these instances, the reality is that evacuating existing forms of representation in order to access mobility is not easily obtained due to the lack of resources.

Yet another challenge that may restrict the access to mobility or ‘escape’ for women is gender-based violence (GBV), which may affect a woman’s decision to move for fear of retaliation from her partner. Sonia, a woman migrant from Honduras, makes clear that ‘you don’t have to come to another place [i.e. Mexico] to get abused, if in your own country there is a lot of abuse. If you go out on the street, a man finds you and he abuses you’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Yet, it is important to note the multiple forms of violence that may be experienced (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, structural) in order to fully understand the interconnected facets within a prevailing socio-political landscape. The social-political context is relevant because it highlights how

women from Central America who suffer from GBV may also experience social exclusion and marginalization within their societies. For example, since gender inequality is often perpetuated in everyday life, women who are abused by their intimate partners may also be socially and legally excluded because of the enduring perception that what occurs between a husband and wife is a ‘private’ matter. Whether it is a relative asking the woman what she did to upset her husband or the police not taking her claims seriously, this inequality leads to permissible forms of violence within society, which in most instances remains invisible. In other words, as Ruiz (2009, 42) summarizes, in Central America, society ‘has built a culture of gender around the appropriation of women’s bodies and sexualities by the men closest to them... [and] local hospitals attend daily to women who arrive unconscious after suffering “fainting spells”’ often due to disagreements with their partners. Essentially, the law may condemn violence against women but in practice violence appears to be condoned as part of a normal ‘private’ relationship between a man and a woman. Violence is embedded in the social structures and continues even if ‘escape’ is possible.

This often occurs because women, in many instances, may be perceived to be inferior to men, where men are understood to be the head of the family household (Rodriguez Sickert 2014). Women are, therefore, often viewed as property, especially men’s property, and the relationship between men and women is usually one of mistrust. As an example, whereas men may be able to be promiscuous and enjoy an open marriage without commitment, women are seen within the larger society to be generally untrustworthy, which leads to added hostility towards them (Ruiz, 2009). Finally, one of the most explicit forms of GBV is femicide, which is a ‘crime involving the violent and

deliberate killing of a woman' (UN Women 2013). Within all this violence, femicide is the culmination of other 'lesser' forms of violence. In Central America, the rates of femicide are among the highest in the world: El Salvador ranked first; Honduras ranked second; and Guatemala ranked fourth (Declaración de Ginebra 2015, 94). Furthermore, women appear to be so devalued in society that impunity is often the result of those femicides that are reported; ninety percent of femicides go unpunished in Latin America (Rodriguez Sickert 2014). The problem with statistical data, however, is that official numbers are simply inaccurate. Given the lack of effective investigations and convictions with other forms of violence, many crimes, frankly, are unreported. There is a sense of indifference among the families of the victims who know that, historically, perpetrators are not punished for their crimes. Thus, when observing 2011 data that reports that there were 647 femicides in El Salvador, 705 in Guatemala and 410 in Honduras (Rodriguez and Davies 2012), the actual numbers, in all likelihood, are much higher.

Overall, the images of women as property and as belonging to the private sphere prevent their access to social justice in many instances. The GBV in all three countries of the NTCA is high. For instance, the 'violent deaths of women in Honduras increased by 263 percent between 2005 and 2013' (Human Rights Watch 2016, 24). In El Salvador, the Special Rapporteur for Violence against Women, noted that according to the *Institute for the Advancement of Women*, an 'increase in domestic violence cases against women and girls from 3,698 in 2004 to 6,073 in 2008' (Manjoo 2011, 7). Furthermore, sexual violence against women and girls by gang members in El Salvador is being increasingly reported by the media and civil society (Amnesty International 2016, 14). If they are able to migrate, women migrants then continue to experience violence while transiting

through Mexico, as encountering sexual violence is likely inevitable (OHCHR 2016). A recent UNHCR (2015, 25) report outlined that one of the main reasons why women are trying to flee the NTCA is due to unrelenting domestic abuse, which includes physical, sexual and psychological forms of violence. The report further explains how the abuses were varied and ‘often life-threatening’ and how authorities provided no ‘meaningful help’.

In sum, these social hierarchies, whether associated with race, class and/or gender differences, create situations in which women are alienated and violence is reproduced. This pervasive violence forms women’s everyday landscape. Mobility, therefore, is relational and becomes a constitutive part of this landscape. Some women may be able to escape while others are unable to experience the freedom of movement. In this context, understanding the embodied, intersectional oppressions experienced and lived by women nuances the AoM approach by revealing how the constitution and the positionality of the subject (in this case women) may facilitate or constrain migration and, equally important, access to migration. For those women who are able to flee, migration becomes forced, an outcome of various forms of violence as well as the intersections between these various forms, which displaces, excludes and marginalizes them. Consequently, for those women who can flee, this intersectional oppression continues to live with them. It follows them throughout their migrant journey, leading to further violence throughout Mexico and beyond. Similar to the migrant category of ‘unauthorized’ or ‘irregular’, women’s bodies are gendered, classed and racialized.

### **How Women Understand Agency and Violence on the Journey: Is ‘Imperceptibility’ Always Desirable?**

Thus far, I have discussed how access to escape may not be a possibility due to

contextual, situational and relational factors. In this section, I will examine how women experience the journey, whether they have the ‘desire’ to leave the nation-state’s system of representation and rights and whether becoming ‘imperceptible’ is favourable when compared to remaining within state regimes. As previously mentioned, it is important to understand the complexity of violence in illustrating how it excludes and displaces women. The recently published *Women on the Run* report, for instance, details the many structural factors that influence a woman’s decision to migrate to the U.S.:

The women from the NTCA reported multiple reasons for flight. Many women spoke of severe instances of violence due to *maras* or other criminal armed groups, including assaults, extortion, and disappearances or murder of family members. Likewise, many women described brutal domestic violence. Many emphasized that being women compounded the difficulties they faced (UNHCR, 2015: 15).

Understanding the diverse structural conditions women migrants face allows us to nuance our understanding of the agency and choices women have. However, by often discussing escape in a positive light, as ‘a form of energy’ (Papadopoulos et al. 2008, 52) or ‘a road to freedom’ (Mezzadra 2004, 267), several AoM scholars appear to connect this concept with the idea of desire, and the idea that migrants should want to ‘leave behind the long shadows of societies’ (Ibid., 270). However, if they had access to leave, can it really be a desire for women to leave their homes, often without their children, so as to create a ‘new social reality’? As explained by Victoria: ‘They [migrants] do not go in search of a dream. To me, the idea of the “American dream” is disrespectful and false. They do not



go in search of a dream; they want to be able to go out on the streets and not receive a bullet, to live a normal life' (Interview, 23 Sept. 2014, Mexico). For Victoria, migrants want an opportunity to live and she disagrees with those individuals who claim that migration is in people's DNA, because migration occurs out of necessity, *not* want. As Victoria further explains: 'As people we do not like to move, we like to have a place where we can anchor ourselves, where we have stable social relationships; when we leave, it's because it's no longer possible to stay.' The above quote illustrates how the concept of social relations is evident and critical among migrants and how migration is often a constrained choice.

Within their particular context, women often express that they have no choice but to migrate. Paola, a migrant shelter volunteer who worked closely with women migrants, explains the structural conditions facing women from NTCA:

The main motive is to give their children a better life and to give them opportunities which their country cannot give them. For instance, they always express the same thing – “my son or daughter's birthday arrives and I cannot buy a cake or a gift because I have no money”. And for them, it is super important that at least all the basic needs of their children are covered...Others migrate because they are victims of domestic violence and want to leave their country because they have no protection from the government (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

These observations are confirmed by the UNHCR (2015) which notes that when interviewing women for their report, all of the women interviewed who reported GBV to

the police expressed that they received ineffective protection or no protection at all from the police or other government officials.

Furthermore, as a woman, being a mother responsible for the wellbeing of children becomes a strong motivator for both trying and having to leave but also not wanting to leave at all. The emotional toll and strength women possess illustrate the complexity of social relations and provides an understanding of agency amid violence. A revealing example can be found when listening to Isabela's story, a woman migrant from El Salvador. She explains that she left for her fifteen-year old son, not only to provide for him but also because she wants to get him away from her neighbourhood: 'It is dangerous for him there because of the *pandillas* [gangs]' (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). She continued her story by sharing that she did not want to leave, but had to, feeling she had no choice, and the hardest thing she had to do was 'having that conversation with my son about leaving, while he pleaded with me to please not go, and then leaving him crying as I left.' Isabela's story underscores how women can be forced into a situation and also exhibit decision-making power and resilience. Constrained agency is perhaps a better way to conceptualize agency for women who are confronted by direct and indirect violence in the NTCA. Constrained agency speaks to the realities women face in their everyday lives and the decisions they make based on these structural realities. As many women in the NTCA, Isabela did not want to leave her home and her son, but she will continue on her journey for her son, so in this regard, as Sudbury (2004, 180) argues, 'women certainly have the agency to make choices ... [but] their choices are made under conditions not of their making'. Contrary to the AoM's adventurous and desired idea of escape, women feel like they have no other viable choices but to leave if they can.

Also, the desire to escape is associated with becoming imperceptible. But both escape and imperceptibility require the migrant to leave behind the ‘double-R axiom’. Leaving behind rights and representation found in nation-state regimes may present several problems for women migrants. For instance, Isabela needs this system of rights and representation for better life opportunities for her and her son. As discussed in the previous section, being ‘imperceptible’ or outside the system, does not benefit women who are surrounded by gender expectations that stipulate her responsibilities with regards to reproductive labour. These women are not solely thinking as independent individuals, but rather view their journey as a family strategy. If they are successful in their journey and reach their destination, they want access to rights, such as health care and education for their families. It is also important to note that they are entitled to these rights under the *Migration Law* in Mexico. But if the logic proposed by the AoM is applied to women’s migration plans, they would not be able to or, perhaps want to, access these rights because they are escaping these rights and it is a strategic benefit to remain invisible and thus ‘imperceptible’ to control. By doing this, they create a new social world without restrictions imposed by the nation-state.

In addition, examining the experiences of women migrants nuances the idea of (in)visibility as an inherent good in and of itself by showing that, on the one hand, there are instances where invisibility may be favourable, but on the other, there are also instances invisibility compounds danger and violence. The same may be said about instances of visibility. Women who are labeled ‘unauthorized’ in Mexico are invisible by being placed outside the law and excluded from social protections despite the nation-state’s claims to the contrary, which is not necessarily advantageous. For instance,

women experience hazardous conditions during their journeys, such as dehydration, hypothermia, injuries from riding La Bestia, and physical and mental trauma from violence. This is despite the fact that all migrants, regardless of status, are entitled to their right to health under the *International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* among other laws and conventions because the climate of fear surrounding detention makes accessing health care impossible in reality (OHCHR 2016, 13). For women migrants, in particular, the access to sexual and reproductive health is more challenging as consultations with gynecologists and/or specialized care for survivors of sexual violence is unavailable (OHCHR 2016, 14–15). As a result, the issue of access to rights and resources becomes problematic, whether it is access to modes of transportation, human rights, or safe routes. Although legislative instruments like the *Migration Law*<sup>16</sup> claim that migrants are protected, their everyday life in transit depends upon clandestine activities, which, in reality, makes it difficult for them to receive state protection. Therefore, women are systematically excluded from accessing basic human rights. For example, according to the *Migration Law*, Article 66, ‘The immigration status of a migrant shall not impede the exercise of the rights and freedoms recognized in the Constitution, [or] in the international treaties and conventions of which Mexico is part, as well as in the present Law’ (Congreso de la Unión 2011). The *Migration Law* guarantees access to basic human rights such as health care, education, justice mechanisms and a life free from violence. However, although in principle women migrants should not experience an infringement of their rights, in reality their invisibility prevents them from properly accessing the rights to which they are entitled.

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<sup>16</sup> The Migration Law (Ley de Migración) was enacted in 2011 by the Mexican government to guarantee migrant rights. For instance, it grants all migrants the right to healthcare and the right to non-violence.

In addition, imperceptibility is also unfavourable because it results in greater vulnerability for women with respect to travelling options. For example, many women who have already been displaced and forced to migrate due to the structural violence in their country of origin, may be forced to seek modes of precarious transportation like '*La Bestia*' during their journey. The cargo train '*La Bestia*' is infamously known to be a mode of transportation for poor Central American migrants seeking to travel north. In fact, many migrant shelters, set up by faith-based organizations, purposely built their shelters along these prominent migrant routes. Nevertheless, using this migration route becomes a problem because the more it is known to migrants, the more it also becomes known to various actors in the migration realm, such as state authorities and criminal groups, making what was once known as a relatively 'safe' route for migrants increasingly dangerous. '*La Bestia*' has now become a more dangerous mode of transportation, not only because of the severity of physical harm associated with falling off the train and either dying or suffering from an amputation, but also because these particular routes are now deliberately targeted by authorities and criminals alike.

Claudia, a Honduran woman staying at a migrant shelter, was travelling to the U.S. using '*La Bestia*' (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Her journey abruptly stopped because she had been pushed off the train. As she was 'unauthorized' and did not acquire the services of a *coyote*, she knew that the train was one of the few options she had for travelling north. While she was on the train, she was approached by a group of men. As she explains: 'They were from a *pandilla* and asked me to pay them money to stay on the train. I told them I wasn't going to give them any money.... They cut me and threw me off the train'. She had deep visible scars on both her face and arms. She was later found

by members of the *Grupo Beta* who took her to a migrant shelter. Still at the migrant shelter, she was filing a case to obtain a Humanitarian Visa due to the crime that was committed against her. This situation illustrates that autonomy and invisibility often also involve a great deal of violence.

There are also instances, however, when women benefit from being visible rather than imperceptible. Patricia, a migrant shelter administrator, explains how shelters increasingly provide the necessary legal knowledge that both men and women need to transit through Mexico: ‘Since *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS), there have been many more victims in Mexico and they, too, have a right to obtain a regular status’ (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). She reveals that at that point the shelter was hosting approximately forty-five individuals that were filing claims to obtain a Humanitarian Visa, which is a temporary status that is acquired if the migrant has been a victim of a crime while on Mexican territory. For Patricia, it is important for the shelter to not only provide this knowledge but also to help migrants by assisting with the paperwork and even economically. However, she notes how this is also a heavy strain on the shelter:

So what happens is that you have a piece of paper that says you are here for three days, but then they need to wait at least three months here for the case to be started – but what can we do? There are people that have family or friends in the U.S., but others do not. So what happens with these people? Going to the INM office is costly; it’s two hours away by bus, they have to go and they don’t have the money to pay for it. You have to support these people too by paying their bus fare. Right now,

there is a group that we are supporting because they say they don't have money.

The above example highlights how visibility is required to obtain a Humanitarian Visa in Mexico. Migrants, often with the help of shelters, need to file an official claim with the state, detailing the crimes that were committed against them. This visa, although temporary, affords women some protection and security while in Mexico and does not force them into invisibility. If the AoM logic of 'imperceptibility' were applied to women's strategies with regards to this visa, they would not be obtaining it because the visa is within the 'regime of mobility' from which they are escaping by becoming 'imperceptible'. Yet, in order to obtain this visa, which affords women some protection while travelling through Mexico, they choose to become visible and work within the regimes of the nation-state.

Lastly, although AoM scholars define regimes of control as 'the conjuncture of different institutions and actors which operate in an attempt to control power in a specific field' (Papadopoulos et al. 2008, 77), they appear to principally engage with becoming imperceptible to the control of the 'nation-state' which in turn makes escaping to a new social reality possible. But, what about non-state actors and their control? This lack of analytical attention is perhaps due again to the binary logic of 'human mobility' as opposed to 'sovereign control.' Yet in this empirical case, women experience human rights violations from several non-state actors that exercise their control. These actors include members of criminal gangs, coyotes, members of criminal organizations associated with drug trafficking, train operators and truck drivers, among others. This also relates to the (in)visibility conundrum. Women migrants may be imperceptible to the

state's control, which is supposedly beneficial as state authorities may not be able to apprehend them. But this invisibility leads them to more secluded areas, areas often targeted by the non-state actors mentioned above. So, even though women are perhaps invisible to the state's control in these secluded areas, they become visible to these other set of actors.

*Pandillas* [gangs], in Chiapas, for instance, whose members 'were once [Mexican] day laborers and ranch hands', who kept seeing Central American migrants trying to hide from state authorities, now know that given the migrants' fear, 'if there were to be an assault, a rape, say, or a robbery, nobody would report it' (Martínez 2014, 30). So, they now take advantage of a vulnerable situation; they take advantage of migrants' invisibility. This example points to non-state actors exerting their control over migrants. These assaults happen between Tapachula and Arriaga, a 160-mile long stretch of land made up of a network of approximately 28 ranches ending in an abandoned rice cellar, which is how this pathway received its name of '*La Arrocería*' [The Rice Cellar] (Ibid., 28). Migrants who want to board *La Bestia*, must first reach Arriaga. Likewise, coyotes can also take advantage of migrants, and exert their control as women migrants arrange an agreement that places them in an unequal power relationship vis-à-vis coyotes. There are instances where women may be used as drug mules or kidnapped by coyotes, kept in 'safe houses' until their families pay a ransom, even though they have already paid the coyote for their journey (Interview, 7 Oct. 2014, Mexico; Field notes, 11 Oct. 2014, Mexico). These examples show how autonomy often involves tangible violence and comes at considerable costs to personal security, and how a woman's agency may be taken away because, in this type of power relationship, these actors hold the power and



control.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are also another visceral reality for migrant women in Mexico. The number of women migrants who are raped during their travel through Mexico ranges from 60 percent (Amnesty International 2010, 15) to 80 percent (Bonello and Siegal McIntyre 2014). These statistics, however, are never entirely accurate as they fail to account for the number of women who do not come forward to report this crime and the number of women who may not survive the attack. Furthermore, this type of violence is often a continuation of the GBV experienced in women's countries of origin. The violence becomes normalized. As mentioned above, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala ranked among the highest countries in the world for femicide. This GBV is embedded in women's migratory context, in the motivation for migrating and continuing throughout the journey. Therefore, GBV is something that women migrants must confront despite choosing to escape it. If it can be called that, Alma is 'lucky' in that she was not raped in the end. However, the emotional trauma she endures daily is violent and long-lasting. Encountering sexual violence is common and can happen by either state or non-state actors. In Alma's particular story, it was a *pandilla* [gang] that the couple encountered along the way. Juan, a migrant from Nicaragua, reveals how being a woman automatically exposes her to more risk: 'On this journey, both men and women are at risk – but women are more vulnerable. When they evade migration authorities, they often find themselves in heavily wooded and secluded areas ... spaces that criminals take advantage of to catch their prey. Some [women] get away; many are killed after being raped. Apart from the criminals, they are affected by the state abuse of the federal government and the military that extort you' (Interview, 29 Oct.

2014, Mexico). Corruption within state authorities and collusion with criminal actors is commonly experienced by migrants while in transit (OHCHR 2016; CIDH 2013). Several reports (CNDH 2009, 2011; CIDH 2013) cite human rights violations committed by state authorities in Mexico including physical abuse by migration officials and police, kidnapping followed by subsequent robbery of personal belongings, verbal abuse, and sexual violence.

Furthermore, when these violent crimes happen, women feel ashamed and are shamed. As explained by Sonia, a Honduran woman migrant in her early twenties: ‘Many Central American women come predisposed to being raped... On the train, I saw women being raped in front of me. It’s a hard reality for most women to know that “because we are women, we will be sexually abused”. But I think the hardest is when three or four men abuse you. Most women are raped somewhere, somewhere in Mexico... There are those that are raped ... [but] there is also a lot of trafficking’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). For Sonia, however, what is even worse is the lack of reporting due to the fear and the shame associated with these violent acts. It angers her that people in Mexico contribute to this mentality because everyone is entitled to their dignity and to accomplish their goals by migrating in order to provide for their children and families. Sonia explains, ‘Women are afraid to say they have been abused because they [authorities] ask you too many questions and because they feel ashamed, and because Mexican people discriminate against migrants telling them “it was your fault they raped you, because you know you are exposed to this the moment you leave your country”’.

Thus, being invisible for women is quite relative and is not always a beneficial strategy. Women may benefit by being invisible in that they avoid being caught by state

authorities, but it also comes at the cost of living life like criminals, without documentation, and without the rights afforded to them by state laws and international conventions. In the end, women suffer violence because of the intersectional oppressions that are socially constructed by power structures based on social differences. These racialized, classed and gendered structures marginalize women and influence their journeys as well as their exposure to specific risks and violence. Escaping by becoming 'imperceptible' does not necessarily work for women migrants in all instances. Furthermore, being outside or 'beyond ... existing political structures of power' by being invisible (Papadopoulos et al. 2008, 43) may not favour their overall family strategy.

## **Conclusion**

This article, by examining the migratory experiences of migrant women from the NTCA, brings together the analysis of embodiment and intersectionality in order to critically examine how women experience agency and how they experience violence, which is embedded in the context of their lives in their countries of origin and continues in their migratory journey. The AoM perspective places importance on the freedom of movement and the 'right to escape' as if 'unauthorized' migration is a 'joy' and a 'form of energy' because it will end in a 'road to freedom' and new social reality. Furthermore, becoming 'imperceptible' or invisible is often portrayed as a beneficial strategy for achieving autonomous movement. Yet, as I have argued, in making these arguments the AoM does not sufficiently take into account the experiences of migrant women, especially their experiences of violence. Autonomy for women in this context involves tangible forms of violence and personal insecurity. Violence is often the motivation for migration.

This article has illustrated that women are not ‘escaping’ violence (even if this is a driving reason behind deciding to undertake journeys to the U.S. Rather, the reality is that women are continuously confronting and enduring violence throughout their journeys. Women in the NTCA experience both direct forms of violence, such as physical gang violence and domestic violence, and indirect forms of violence such as gender inequality, poverty and structural stereotypes that, together, perpetuate and encourage everyday exclusion, exploitation and marginalization. By employing a feminist analysis of intersectionality, I am able to demonstrate how escaping the nation-state’s system of rights and representation should not be assumed as there are multiple sources of oppression that often play a pivotal role in determining migratory access, options and resources and may therefore impede escape. In addition, becoming ‘imperceptible’ or invisible is not necessarily a positive experience for women as doing so means women become excluded from social protections and have less access to claiming human rights, such as reproductive health, education, and a life free from violence. Furthermore, since women travelling through Mexico often view their migration as a family strategy, they need to consider how this invisibility affects their reproductive labour responsibilities as well as their own personal security, and the security of their children.

By bringing a feminist analysis into dialogue with an AoM approach I have sought to show the different forms of violence that women experience in order to reveal that some of the AoM assumptions around escape and imperceptibility may put women at greater risk of violence and coming at considerable costs to personal security. A feminist analysis further contributes to the AoM perspective by exposing the importance of avoiding binaries, such as victim/agent and control/movement, and by challenging these

simplistic dichotomies that hierarchize and polarize, making one category more privileged and the other subordinate. In the everyday lives of migrant women from the NTCA, such dichotomies (i.e. victim/agent) do not exist. I have suggested that AoM scholars also need to deconstruct notions of ‘violence’ in order to investigate the systemic barriers of oppression and marginalization that shape women’s experiences of exclusion and (im)mobility. Intersectionality provides a useful perspective to illustrate the interconnectedness of various forms of violence that often work to restrict mobility. These insights suggest that a more productive way of discussing autonomy would be to do so through the concept of constrained agency, whereby women migrants do have decision-making power but not necessarily under a context or situation of their own choosing. Thus, the AoM’s notions of escape and agency need to be bridged more strongly to relations of violence and control.

Beyond expanding AoM scholarship, this article is useful for understanding the complexity involved with how migrant subjects are produced, which means, for instance, appreciating moments of immobility within the migrant journey, where women have made the decision to migrate, but must then contemplate who will care for family members. In this scenario, the journey includes pre-migration processes, not strictly practices that occur while en route. Studies on migration need to pay better attention to how systemic barriers are connected to movement. Women from the NTCA do not necessarily want to migrate, but have few options due to unequal power relations and structural inequalities (i.e. in the labour market), which are rooted in patriarchy. By focusing on women’s experiences, scholars and policy makers can further understand the roots of ‘unauthorized’ migration movements and find improved migration pathways for

migrant women. A shift to understanding migration from the perspective of living bodies, in this case women's bodies, allows for the gender and violence embedded in migration to be recognized and highlights the nexus between violence, personal security and mobility.

By applying a critical feminist lens, I have shown how autonomy needs to be understood relationally, by observing women's social landscapes and how women embody their intersectional oppressions which shape their mobilities; they shape the contexts and everyday realities in which migration occurs. In the end, women migrants exercise their autonomous movement relationally and within particular geographical, political and social contexts – most importantly in the context of patriarchy. In the case of migrant women from the NTCA, this means navigating movement within structural limitations, constraints, exploitation and violence. More broadly, however, these insights are important on a regional level. First, it is important to further study and understand the intersections between structural violence and political economy and how patriarchal structures are tied to feminized labour. Second, addressing GBV in countries of origin requires political solutions that not only address the lack of government protection, but equally, the continued impunity with respect to the crimes associated with GBV. Lastly, governments in the NTCA and Mexico need to provide safe and legal pathways for women who choose to migrate so that they can exercise their autonomy without fear and with human dignity.

### Article 3

## The Journey of Central American Women Migrants: *Engendering the Mobile Commons*

Carla Angulo-Pasel

#### Abstract

This article delves into the concept of the '*mobile commons*' which is articulated within the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) approach. The AoM literature focuses on migrant agency by advocating that migrants practice 'escape' and 'invisibility'. In this relationship of escape and invisibility, the '*mobile commons*' plays a pivotal role, as it is through the creation and maintenance of such mobile commons that migrants can escape an oppressive system and remain invisible by creating a different social reality based on their own communities of knowledge. However, drawing on the stories of women migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central American (NTCA) (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) travelling through Mexico, this article aims to *engender* and thereby trouble the concept of the mobile commons by questioning several taken-for-granted assumptions that are based on gender-neutral knowledge and dichotomous ways of thinking. Using women's experiences to question the assumptions made with respect to 'migrant knowledge', I show that the knowledge among women migrants from the NTCA is influenced by gendered power imbalances that place women in subordinate positions. As a result of these social inequalities, women conceive of and reflect on the migration process differently from their social locations (which are different than those of male counterparts); such distinctions must therefore be reflected in the conceptualization

of the mobile commons and how it may be used to explain experiences on the ground. The analysis will first focus on explaining the mobile commons as a theoretical concept. Following this, I discuss how conceptualizing the mobile commons through a feminist perspective challenges the ideas of invisible knowledge and trust often integral to the ways in which the concept of the mobile commons is used. Finally, I outline the survival strategies that migrant women may use given their own knowledge of the migration context in Mexico, and reflect on what this means for the scholarly understanding of the ‘mobile commons’.

## **Introduction**

The journey for women migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), namely Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, through Mexico to the United States (U.S.) is risky and precarious. According to the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (INM) [National Institute of Migration] in Mexico approximately 151,429 *indocumentados* [undocumented] from Central America were detained in 2016 (SEGOB-INM 2016). This number, however, does not consider the thousands of migrants who are not apprehended. Furthermore, although it is equally difficult to estimate the number of women migrants transiting through Mexico for the same reason, reports place this estimate between 20 to 25 percent of the total population of ‘unauthorized’ migrants (Dresel 2012; Diaz-Prieto and Kuhner 2014). According to the INM, 39,593 women migrants were detained in 2016 (SEGOB-INM 2016). For migrant women, the journey often begins with the decision to leave a system of oppressive gender barriers and embark on a clandestine journey; with this decision, they are placed in an illicit, invisible space, due to their ‘unauthorized’ category and must negotiate their safe passage. However,



women's journeys are also different from that of men because of their sex. Their 'communities of knowledge' are affected precisely because they are women and are viewed as highly sexualized objects and commodities (Vogt 2013). During my field research, I met Lucia, a Honduran migrant who had been at a migrant shelter for one month. She had two children, aged 9 and 11. While at the shelter, she had a male partner, Javier, who I later learned was 'protecting' her from sexual advances and/or violence in exchange for sexual relations. Javier, however, was leaving the shelter within a week, whereas Lucia was still waiting for more money, so she would be staying behind alone (Field notes, 28 Oct. 2014, Mexico). By sharing migrant women's experiences while transiting through Mexico, I highlight here the precarious nature of the migration journey and the survival strategies women migrants employ while on the run. Building on insights from an Autonomy of Migration (AoM) approach, developed within critical citizenship and border studies (Mezzadra 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Mitropoulos 2007; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013), this article engages with the concept of the 'mobile commons' which is employed within AoM approaches. According to AoM scholars (Trimikliniotis et al. 2015, 19) the 'mobile commons' refers to an 'ontology of moving people' that includes the 'shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support and care between migrants' while on the move. As discussed in further detail in the following section, applying the idea of mobile commons means conceptualizing the world in a different manner, which stems from the practices, tactics and knowledge migrants have and use during their mobility in order to achieve their freedom of movement.

My aim, however, is to complicate and *engender* the idea of the mobile commons by illustrating how gender is enmeshed in migratory journeys. By incorporating a critical feminist analysis, I argue that the mobile commons concept appears to be gender-blind by neglecting gender-specific considerations, knowledge, inequalities, risks and violence that occur to women on-the-ground. Thus, while the concept is useful because it frames migrants as active and empowered agents in the migration process rather than as passive victims, or as negatively categorized by state policies such as ‘undocumented’ ‘irregular’, or ‘unauthorized’, it falls short in analyzing how gender is embedded in migration and, therefore, influences how the mobile commons concept may be understood and experienced by women migrants..

The AoM literature is interested in how the mobile commons are ‘generated, used, and extended...between people on the move’ (Trimikliniotis et al. 2016, 1041) but the migrant population is a diverse and gendered population of *individuals* who, therefore, (re)produce distinctly different forms of knowledge. Migrants are all different; they have different identities, political subjectivities, backgrounds, economic means and access (Sharma 2009). Knowledge shared by migrants, therefore, is diverse because migrants are embodied, relational and situated based upon specific everyday contexts (Hyndman 2001). Thus, while valuable as a tool for scholars to understand the strategies used by migrants, the concept appears to emphasize a common image of ‘the migrant’ at the expense of differences, articulating a common global narrative of resistance and subversion shared by all migrants. This is problematic since, similar to earlier mobility studies (Urry 2000; Sheller and Urry 2006), it obfuscates the diversity of experiences and challenges that migrants face and tends to portray clandestine migration as ‘free and

necessarily positive rather than unequal and mediated by power relations' (Hackl et al. 2016, 24). As will be illustrated in further detail below, the idea of the mobile commons, therefore, comes across as a homogenous narrative with questions of gender unaddressed. As such, this article intends to 'engender' the mobile commons by inserting a critical feminist analysis into this framework in order to question several assumptions informing the concept of the mobile commons, such as the 'invisible knowledge' and the 'politics of care,' which, upon deeper examination, are not gender-neutral.

*Engendering* the mobile commons concept involves listening to the narratives of migrant women who may have experienced mobility differently; whose knowledge about these routes, for instance, includes the very high likelihood that they will be sexually assaulted during their journey. It may also involve women who must think and worry about the lack of care available with respect to their child(ren) or other family members when they leave their homes and country. This knowledge also involves distinct survival strategies. Thus, this article is interested in examining how gender relations impact (facilitate or constrain) the migration journey for women and what the idea of the mobile commons would look like through the lens of migrant women's experiences. Although I am basing my analysis on the individual experiences and strategies that women from the NTCA travelling through Mexico to the U.S. shared with me, I believe that these can also be understood as a collective experience of a community of women. Specifically, these individual experiences are not happening in a vacuum and are therefore linked relationally to various factors, like family, violence, migration, etc. These intimate experiences are taking place within a larger relational context, which in turn also influence intimate interactions. Similar to the notion of the 'global intimate' (Mountz and

Hyndman 2006; Pratt and Rosner 2012), individual experiences speak to larger global, local, national processes and vice versa.

Using narratives about women migrants from the NTCA, the goal is to include different types of knowledge and awareness informed by different subjectivities in order to contribute to discussions about how the idea of the mobile commons may be applicable to women migrants' experiences. In doing so, I intend to contribute to scholarship on the mobile commons in two ways: first, by generally providing a feminist analysis to AoM approaches found within critical citizenship and border scholarship and second, by providing a different regional focus to the more common European focal point that exists in much of the AoM scholarship, which is important because the NTCA region has been referred to as 'the world's most dangerous region outside an official war zone' (Lakhani 2016).

Data for this article are based on field research that was carried out in the fall of 2014. During the field research trip, a total of twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were administered with migrant women and men, as well as representatives of the Mexican government, non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel, migration experts, migrant shelter staff and volunteers, and members of religious organizations. The interviews followed a snowballing sampling method, whereby I first arranged one interview with a migration expert in Mexico City (D.F.) prior to embarking on my field trip. He became my gatekeeper and key informant by connecting me to others in the field, who then put me in touch with additional contacts. Data are also based on participant observation through visits to migrant shelters, specifically in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz and Ixtepec, Oaxaca and the review of key policy documents, namely the Mexico's *Migration*

*Law* (2011) and the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) (2014). The article is structured as follows: The first section provides a review of the concept of the mobile commons and a discussion of gender-specific inequalities and dangers that appear underrepresented in the AoM approach. Based on empirical data, the following section then delves into various narratives sharing migrant women's experiences in order to capture and analyze how women migrants in Mexico experience their journeys to the U.S. and how the concept of the mobile commons may be applied differently for women on the run, including noting where aspects of the concept may not be relevant to the experiences of migrant women. Lastly, the final section discusses the survival strategies that women from the NTCA use while in Mexico so as to cope with the realities they face on the ground.

### **Understanding the Mobile Commons**

This section begins with a review of the mobile commons as a theoretical concept. I am interested here in not only explaining the concept's strengths, but also pointing out some similarities with other theories that preceded it to bridge the knowledge between them, as well as point to some of the concept's gaps. The AoM approach examines migration as an autonomous movement that precedes control and focuses on migrants as active agents who use creative tactics to subvert sovereign control (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Mezzadra 2010; Bojadzijeve and Karakayali 2010). As Mezzadra (2010, 121) suggests, the AoM perspective requires looking at migratory movements through a 'different *gaze*...in terms that prioritize the subjective practices, the desires, the expectations and the behaviours of migrants themselves.' A primary reason why migrants on the move are able to *escape* or 'leave behind the long shadows' of the system (Mezzadra 2004, 270), and survive liminal spaces while evading

techniques of control is by creating and using what AoM scholars refer to as the mobile commons. The concept of the mobile commons was developed by Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) in order to explore a world of the everyday lives of the ‘others’; the ‘irregulars’, the ‘undocumented’, the ‘unauthorized’, the ‘illegals’. Together they define the mobile commons as consisting of everyday mundane and unnoticeable acts which organize the mobility of migrants. According to Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, 191), the idea is a new ‘organizational ontology’, which has ‘the ability to cultivate, generate and regenerate the contents, practices and affects that facilitate the [free] movements of mobile people’. Trimikliniotis et al. (2016, 1039) emphasize the sharing of the mobile commons as paramount to its existence since ‘the mobile commons as such exist only to the extent that they are commonly produced by all the people in motion who are the only ones who can expand its content and meanings.’ According to Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, 191-192), the mobile commons concept may be characterized as consisting of five main elements: ‘the invisible knowledge of mobility’ that is spread among migrants on the move and aids their movements (knowledge about transit routes, shelters, border crossings strategies and so on); an ‘infrastructure of connectivity’ that plays a key role in disseminating this knowledge (media platforms, word of mouth, social networks); ‘a multiplicity of informal economies’ due to the lack of accessibility with formal channels (how to find services found outside the public or private sector, how to secure short-term work, how to engage with smugglers); ‘diverse forms of transnational communities of justice’ (solidarity groups, shelters, NGOs that may facilitate movement); and ‘the politics of care’ (caring for others, affective support, trust, care for people’s relatives, etc.).

Although not without its challenges, the strength of the concept of the mobile commons lies in the fact that it draws our attention to migrants' experiences in three ways. First, as elaborated upon below, conceptualizing the experiences of migrants through the idea of the mobile commons shifts attention to the 'unauthorized' migrants' understanding of mobility as opposed to that of the nation-state. It thus provides a way to think differently about border enforcement regimes, whose primary objective is to control the very movement of this category of migrants. Second, it focuses on migrant knowledge that empowers migrants through the use of everyday ordinary practices; this knowledge becomes their source of power. Finally, the concept draws attention to migrant solidarity and reciprocity, which promotes the freedom of movement by coming together and sharing knowledge in order to survive.

Applying the mobile commons concept changes the perspective of the politics of mobility in that migration precedes the sovereign control of territory exercised by states. There is an emphasis on the practices and knowledge of 'unauthorized' migrants. The concept of the mobile commons shares similarities with Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of 'subaltern counter public' where excluded and marginalized groups form their own 'discursive arenas' to share their own needs and concerns. Fraser developed the concept in response to the universal, elite, male bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1999), which was not inclusive of common concerns. Similarly, the AoM, through the idea of the mobile commons, focuses on the experiences of clandestine migrants.

According to proponents of the mobile commons concept (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Trimikliniotis et al. 2016), the migrant's knowledge is also outside of current political structures because migrants are 'imperceptible' or invisible; they are not

operating and organizing within regimes of state control, like the border or citizenship regimes. The idea is that the mobile commons is outside of the state because migrants are operating outside of the politics of migration with their own logics, knowledges and practices (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). In this regard, migrants create their own social world and space, through their practices. Accordingly, there is the idea of a new 'gaze' and a new movement of the subaltern; their behaviours and articulations that together make up the mobile commons (Trimiklinotis et al., 2015). However, without over-prioritizing the nation-state, my research shows how the nation-state cannot be overlooked in favour of an anarchic new social world because women migrants are operating within border regimes even if they are attempting to circumvent or escape official border politics. With the implementation of the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS) policy in 2014, for instance, women migrants have been forced to travel via more secluded areas and longer journeys due to increased checkpoints. Plus, even if migrants ignore or resist border politics, these policies impact how and to what extent that women migrants can claim rights and make claims. The *Migration Law* in Mexico, for example, is a tool that women migrants can use to claim various social protections, like health care. Overall, the nation-state is not the most important entity at all times, but it is present and influential in the lives of migrant women. Even though their strategies and networks often exist outside of the reach of government, as when they obtain the services of a coyote (or human smuggler), for example, women are still navigating and subject to the border regimes of the state. Also, it is the restrictive border policies of the nation-state, which makes coyotes necessary in the first place (Sanchez 2015).



Furthermore, mobility studies theorists (Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Glick-Shiller and Salazar 2013) have also extensively researched on the social inequalities and global hierarchies within (im)mobility as well as questioning their assumed dichotomy. The idea of the mobile commons and the emphasis on the subaltern speaks to what critical mobility studies has been demonstrating, which is how by focusing on those who are marginalized, (im)mobilities ‘underline stark differences in privilege and, by extension, identities, class and citizenship if these markers of difference become the factors that determine how one is allowed to be mobile’ (Hackl et al. 2016, 23). Bridging the AoM scholarship with the study of mobilities would advance the concept of the mobile commons by examining not only moments of immobility, but also expanding the theory to include *mobilities*, which involves the ‘fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations and practices’ (Cresswell 2010, 18). The mobilities concept complicates movement by appreciating how mobility becomes political and how it is a resource that is differentially accessed because it is infused with power relations. For instance, whether one chooses to be mobile or has been forced to move will affect one’s experiences of mobility. The AoM perspective appears to be stuck in earlier approaches of mobility (Cresswell 2001), which not only assumed that human movement was a given, but that mobility was a liberating force. Connected to the study of mobilities is the concept of ‘motility’ (Kaufmann et al. 2004; Sheller 2011), which addresses how mobility depends on the capacities and potential for movement. Therefore, the emphasis is on the relations and tensions between mobilities and immobilities and how some individuals will have the possibility of movement. This concept again can advance the AoM literature by analyzing the mobile commons to include how power imbalances and

privilege can affect subaltern mobilities. Overall, mobilities studies can further research of movement without running the risk of reproducing binaries, such as immobility or mobility.

This idea of the mobile commons being outside of state regimes has been controversial, especially as it appears to be in tension with those who view migrant struggles as ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008) and argue that migrants do not necessarily have to have the ‘authorized’ legal status of citizenship in order to make claims through their acts. Essentially, these acts of citizenship ‘transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle’ (Isin 2008, 39). The AoM approach, however, with the mobile commons concept, challenges this conceptualization because it views the institution of citizenship as an exclusionary, statist category and a form of sovereign control and rather calls for a ‘transformation of citizenship’ (Mezzadra 2011), something altogether different or what Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) refer to as ‘after citizenship’. This is again a conceptualization that views migration, through the idea of the mobile commons created by migrants on the move, as based on building a form of community as a way of being in the world outside of state control. So, as Trimikliniotis et al. (2015) articulate:

In simplified terms, we can view these processes as something that goes beyond citizenship, as processes that define socialities of mobile commons generating alternative modes of livelihoods that emerge in the days of austerity-and-crisis. In the days of destruction where the very

notion of citizenship is undergoing violent and contradictory transformations rendering the old Marshallian citizenship in a state of flux (Isin and Nielsen, 2008), new nodes are being born.

The theorizing surrounding community building among migrants based on multiple relations has also been advanced by earlier studies on transnationalism (Castles 2003). However, the theory of transnationalism primarily focuses on the relationships that are maintained between migrants' home and host societies, whereas the idea of the mobile commons mainly concerns those clandestine migrants who are in transit or on the move.

When applying the concept of the mobile commons to migrants' experiences, technology and virtual space is paramount. Similar to mobility scholars (Sheller 2004; Castells 1996), AoM scholars (Trimikliniotis et al. 2015; 2016) claim that the use of virtual spaces, such as chat rooms, Facebook and the use of email are critical to migrants on the move because the knowledge that is produced may be accessed anywhere and anytime through these venues, which helps migrants stay mobile and continue to learn survival tactics. However, this 'infrastructure of connectivity', as AoM scholars call it, is not to be read as a utopian vision of networks and social media. As Trimikliniotis et al. argue, it is not a 'techno-utopian vision' of a 'brave new world of happy endings' that is changing the world but, rather, digital devices must be understood as being created and recreated under conditions of uncertainty and instability (2015, 12).

Additionally, according to proponents of the mobile commons, the concept promotes the evolving knowledge via the experiences of precarious migrants. The forms of knowledge that are generated include codes, practices, and logics, which are formed through ordinary life processes while migrants are on the move. Changing the focus of

study from sovereign control to the ordinary lives of migrants allows for the investigation of how these individuals cope and survive the often-times violent border and citizenship regimes that they must encounter. As Trimikliniotis et al. (2015, 15) contends the concept of ordinary lives is significant because these lives are creating socialities while in motion and they allow migrants not only to become more than the ‘other’ but also to have a voice and be heard; ‘to realize something more than the actual act of *escaping*.’ In this sense, the concept of the mobile commons changes the narrative of victimhood, which often disregards the agency, albeit constrained, of the migrant and instead focuses attention on the decision-making power of those on the move. Since these codes, practices and logics are developed, shared and maintained among migrants, they fall outside the purview of state control. One main aspect to keep in mind, however, is that this knowledge is constantly changing due to the clandestine nature of precarious journeys as well as the evolving practices of border control. This is why social networks and the ‘infrastructure of connectivity’ are crucial, since survival strategies and tactics of existence are constantly and continuously updated.

Lastly, the mobile commons as a concept emphasizes both solidarity and reciprocity among migrants. The knowledge of migrants may only be regenerated if it is shared among individuals on the move. As such, the concept of the mobile commons draws attention to a kinship that exists among migrants, which enables them to endure the journey. Thus, rather than highlighting how migrants are victimized by border and citizenship regimes, this concept, while maintaining that these regimes are uncertain and dangerous, centres on how people may come together in order help each other survive. Alongside their knowledges and socialities, migrants deploy their learned strategies on

the move and ‘organize their mobility...in ways that transcend and therefore transform control’ (Trimikliniotis et al. 2016, 1041). The ‘politics of care’, element, which revolves around solidarity as well as shared knowledge is imperative for the sustainability of mobile commons.

### **Reflecting on the Mobile Commons from a Feminist Perspective**

While the concept of the mobile commons may provide a different gaze by which to observe migration, I would argue that critical feminist scholarship can contribute a more robust understanding of the concept by incorporating women’s reality on-the-ground. This is a reality where embodied, intersectional oppressions experienced and lived by women (Collins 2012; Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1991), influence their relational autonomous movement. It is within this constrained context that the idea of the mobile commons may be applied. By ignoring women’s experiences of the mobile commons, the AoM approach does not go far enough in appreciating how migration and the migratory journey are not gender-neutral processes (Piper 2006; Kofman 2004). Women from the NTCA experience a gendered journey while trying to migrate to the U.S. because ‘sex enters into everything’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). The scholars using the concept of the mobile commons suggest that applying the term helps explain the experiences of migration and identify a common language and knowledge-base among migrants, and yet, not all migrants are positioned in the same way. The ‘figure of the migrant’ needs to be embodied and situated within power hierarchies. As Sharma notes, there is a lack of importance paid to the actual human beings and their subjectivities, and instead ‘we have ‘figures’... Yet, figures are not people. Figures do not act, but *people* do’ (2009, 472). Political subjectivities exist within a socially constructed

system, legitimized by oppressive and subversive discourse. Such is the case that women are always ‘Othered’ when compared to the male subject by their sex (Butler 2006).

Thus, a feminist analysis is important because, in their countries of origin, women embody different political subjectivities; they are mothers, daughters, and sisters, for instance, but they are also perceived as sexual objects. Women’s bodies are not only biologically sexed, but also socially constructed through power hierarchies based on social differences, such as gender, class, and race (Grosz 1994; Bordo 1993). Political subjectivities are significant because they impact (im)mobility; they make (im)mobility relational and situational (Hyndman 2001; Silvey 2006). This is why Vogt (2013, 770) argues that while en-route through Mexico ‘women are associated with prostitution and sexual immorality and are regarded as bad mothers who leave their children behind.’ These subjectivities and perceptions, in turn, change the journey and survival strategies for women; therefore, their experiences which make up the idea of the mobile commons looks distinctly different from that of men due to relational positionality, which is socially-constructed by intersecting power structures, placing women in subordinate position vis-à-vis men (Pessar and Mahler 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). For instance, since women are viewed as sexualized objects, their ‘knowledge of mobility’ if applied through the mobile commons concept often involves coping with the reality of potential sexual assault, or sexual trafficking, or prostitution. Scholars applying the mobile commons concept also suggest that invisibility from the state benefits migrants because they can remain hidden from state authorities. Yet, for women facing the potential of rape on-the-ground, invisibility translates into greater seclusion and the further risk of being

assaulted, in addition to, the lack of access to protection from the police when raped, due to their fear of deportation.

Furthermore, AoM scholars conceptualize the mobile commons as beginning with the act of migrating, when migrants ‘are on the road’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 179). But, there is a taken-for-granted assumption that all migrants have the same *access* to migration. A gendered approach questions this access because gender expectations, among other barriers resulting from unequal patriarchal structures, may in fact hinder access to migration (Piper 2006, 2008; Basok, Piper, and Simmons 2013). Similar to my interview with Isabela, a mother from El Salvador who had to leave her son at home with other relatives (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico), if a woman is a mother who chooses to flee, she must first figure out how her children will be cared for. If she is unable to find care, her migration journey is denied; she does not have access ‘*to escape*’. If she chooses to travel with her child(ren), this may present its own challenges of access to the elements of the mobile commons. Gender inequality influences the decision or desire to leave due to the gender expectations experienced at the country of origin, so that women may view migration as a part of an overall family strategy (Kofman and Meeto 2008). Due to the prevalent public/private dichotomy, women continue to be associated with the domestic sphere and family (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999) whereas men ‘inhibit the economic and workplace...untainted by everyday domestic concerns (Kofman 2004a, 644).

If women migrate for work, they enter into a feminized labour market both within and outside the home (Benería 2008; Piper 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Pratt 2004). If they are forced to migrate and seek asylum or refugee status, these legal mechanisms are feminized so that they are viewed as powerless victims (Hyndman 2010). In the NTCA

context, specifically, women describe violence, persecution and lack of government protection as principal motivators that have forced them to flee, where women with children and transgender women experience disproportionate levels of persecution (UNHCR 2015). Therefore, if migration is itself a gendered phenomenon, aspects of migration – such as the journey, and thus the idea of the mobile commons – may be reconceptualised through a feminist analysis. Because given all the gender politics that play out within migration, the knowledge, informal economies, and networks are not gender-neutral; the journey is different, the coping mechanisms are different and the survival strategies are different.

### **The Journey Begins at Home: The (Im)mobility of the Mobile Commons**

Through the mobile commons concept, the AoM perspective focuses on the strategies of migrants on the move. Nevertheless, the communities created while on the move privilege those bodies who *can* move at the expense of those who cannot. For Central American women, the journey begins when they decide to migrate North. For women, who are mothers for instance, the material and emotional preparations are significant and originate at home. The gender expectations, which have historically prevailed in their countries of origin, may determine that the childcare responsibilities lie principally with the mother (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Therefore, their journey begins even as they are immobile, waiting to leave and seeing whether or not they can access migration as an option. The concept of the journey, therefore, is difficult to define precisely because it is not a straightforward departure from the country of origin to the arrival at the country of destination. Furthermore, there are instances of both mobility and immobility for migrants on the journey (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016).



Hyndman (2004a; 2004b) has done extensive work on the ‘geopolitics of mobility’ and how it directly relates to the concept of ‘access’. She uses the example of Somalian, Ethiopian and Sudanese refugees in remote Kenyan refugee camps, where access not only depends on class, but also on gender. In order to achieve refugee resettlement in a third country, like Australia or Canada, a visa application must be submitted in Nairobi, approximately a six-hour bus ride from the refugee camps. This access is especially constrained for women in the camps, as most are ‘solely responsible for child care, food preparation, water, food, and firewood collection, and other labour-intensive household tasks. They cannot simply leave these responsibilities for days at a time’ (Ibid. 2004b, 316).

In Central America, the context is similar. Isabela, a woman migrant with whom I spoke at a shelter, had left her home in El Salvador three months ago fearing the violence and the impact it was having on her fifteen-year-old son (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Although the first leg of her journey only took three days via bus, she was currently immobile at a shelter in Oaxaca awaiting a Humanitarian Visa. But as she explains, her journey began at home, when she decided to leave and could have her son stay with her parents, ‘I knew the journey was going to be difficult for me because my three cousins had told me about it. They are now in Houston, Texas and have work for me there. So I want to get there so I can work, send money to my family and eventually bring my son because it is dangerous for him there because of the *pandillas* [gangs].’

In addition to the material preparations that must take shape before a woman may have access to *escape*, there are emotional considerations as well. So, while scholars engaging with the mobile commons discuss knowledge about border crossings, routes,

shelters, policing and surveillance – another critical aspect for mothers is the knowledge about strategies of child care and emotional coping mechanisms to deal with family separation. For example, while Isabela explained that she was ‘lucky’ enough to have been able to leave (‘to escape’), she notes that the journey had an emotional toll on her with respect to her son stating, ‘the hardest thing for me to do was to leave my son crying while he pleaded with me to please not to go and I had to get on the bus.’ Isabela was able to leave her son with her parents, but constantly worries about him. Although a full discussion of the global care chains scholarship is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note how ‘reproductive’ or ‘intimate’ labour, which refers to ‘the myriad of activities, tasks, and resources expended in the daily upkeep of homes and people’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 23) is related to the patriarchy within the household and the reinforcement of gender roles that help sustain social hierarchies (Raghuram 2004). As women from the NTCA migrate for various reasons, such as better economic and social opportunities and/or to flee violence, a vacuum is left with respect to what has been labelled as ‘care work’, which includes childcare. Thus, as women migrate North, a ‘depletion of care resources’ (Parrenas 2005) is created and has an impact on the family who is left behind in the country of origin. Not only do these families have to organize themselves differently due to the mother’s absence but mothers and child(ren) may have to resort to ‘transnational mothering’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001, 25) refers to transnational motherhood as mothers who migrate to find work abroad while enduring a temporal and spatial separation from their own children where the ‘subsequent separations of time and distance are substantial; ten or fifteen years may elapse before the women are reunited with their children.’ Furthermore, this

separation and absence not only has an impact on mothers but also on the next generation of children who are growing up without their mothers (Yesilyurt Gunduz 2013). Thus, Isabela lives with constant uncertainty; not only does she not know how long she will have to wait at this shelter for her Humanitarian Visa but also, and even more difficult for her, she lives without knowing when she will be reunited with her son.

By infusing a critical feminist perspective into the AoM approach, scholars using the mobile commons concept can better engage with ‘embodied mobility’ (Hyndman 2004a, 174) where one’s mobility is relational to others immobility and also relates ‘to one’s positionality or the body one is in’ (Rygiel 2011, 144). This positionality is based on constructed social hierarchies of power, which may in fact hinder access to migration for women migrants, or what Hyndman (2004, 174) refers to as ‘corporeal access.’ So, before the journey physically commences, it has already begun while women, who are immobile, try to decide who will be responsible for their child(ren) or other dependents, such as elderly parents. Often, women in a patriarchal society do not have the possibility of ‘escape’ because of their maternal political subjectivities. Sharma (2009, 474) notes that when migrants are simply cast as ‘the migrants’ with ‘invisible knowledge’, for instance, there is a failure to distinguish them by their political subjectivities, which play a key role in ‘people’s highly differentiated access *to* escape.’ She further argues that the ‘migrants’ classed, racialized, gendered, sexualized, territorialized bodies, as well as people’s historical, geographical and metaphorical dislocations and relocations are emptied, both of people and meaning’ (Ibid.).

The AoM approach may also risk romanticizing mobility through the notion of an unencumbered single autonomous migrant, whose experiences, if based on that of only

migrant men, will not account for those of many women migrants. This can be said in relation to Sapik, a migrant who was able to move through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and then back to Greece without extreme difficulty (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 178), which may not necessarily be the case with a woman migrant travelling with children, for instance. When applying the mobile commons concept, in other words, scholars need to be mindful and pay attention to positionality and, as in the case of women from NTCA, their distinct embodied experiences, which invariably may present a different ‘invisible knowledge of mobility’. Spatially, this may include reconceptualising the journey to speak to moments of immobility at their country of origin (and beyond), while also being aware that access to migration may or may not be available to people due to their inscribed positionality.

### **The Paradox of (In)visibility**

While on the clandestine journey, navigating the risks becomes paramount for survival. Invisibility is often portrayed as advantageous for irregular migrants because clandestine migrants become ‘imperceptible’ to practices of control (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). Staying outside of the state’s gaze benefits migrants because they can move more freely and avoid border authorities and/or the police, for instance. This scenario could be the case for women migrants when they travel on *combis*<sup>17</sup>, often switching from one to another to avoid detection. However, navigating the journey for a woman involves gender-specific risks where invisibility may not necessarily be beneficial to her safety, as for example, when a woman is raped while walking along the vast wooded areas and ranches along Chiapas (Martínez 2014). Further, there is an interesting

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<sup>17</sup> Combis are small passenger vans that are used in Mexico for transportation.

irony with the idea of the mobile commons in that the ‘invisible knowledge of mobility’ is shared among migrants through the ‘infrastructure of connectivity’, but the more this knowledge is used and shared, the more it is also *known* – by both migrants *and* those who seek to control, extort, and/or abuse them. In this sense, the mobile commons concept may be flawed in practice because knowledge is, and needs, to be shared among migrants, often through the internet and social networks. Yet, these avenues of connectivity are also heavily monitored by governments and authorities, as well as non-state actors, like criminal gangs and drug traffickers. The ‘invisibility of knowledge’, is, therefore, often unsustainable and at risk of breaking down.

In the case of Mexico, a clear example of this paradox is found with the cargo train *La Bestia* [The Beast]. *La Bestia* is a commercial cargo train with routes that stretch from the southern border of Mexico to the northern border with the U.S. Although, not the preferred mode of transportation for many women<sup>18</sup> (Diaz Prieto and Kuhner 2014), women with insufficient financial resources often board the train as a means to travel North. As a result, the train routes became a major transportation corridor for transit migrants, with most of the migrant shelters’ operations set up along these prominent routes (ITAM 2014; WOLA 2015).

This travel strategy changed in the summer of 2014. What was supposed to be a form of ‘invisible knowledge’ was shared to the point of becoming hypervisible. Subsequently, the routes became immediate targets of government control through the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS). The PFS was implemented by President Enrique Peña Nieto as a border enforcement plan, which set up internal practices of border control

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<sup>18</sup> For physical and sexual safety, women who have enough money to travel north prefer to use buses for transportation.

within Mexico, including police and INM raids and checkpoints along the train routes and major highways, especially along the southern states (Isacson et al. 2014). As Mountz (2015) suggests in the context of offshore island detention, intensified border policy renders enforcement practices hypervisible. One migrant shelter administrator, Patricia, with whom I spoke, explained the effects of this border control first hand: ‘so much has changed with [the implementation of] *Programa Frontera Sur*. Before the train came every other day and each time it came, there were close to 800 people and we knew we could only take about 150 at the shelter’ (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). During my interview with her there were barely 60 migrants at the migrant shelter and many of them had been there for months awaiting their visas. The train still passed but now without migrants.

For women migrants, specifically, the effects of this ‘invisible knowledge’, which became hypervisible, were negative precisely because the border controls implemented along these routes meant that they had to venture even further into highly secluded areas in order not to be apprehended. In other words, the invisible became hypervisible, which then prompted women migrants to push further into invisibility; further into the woods, away from any help if they were attacked. According to Knippen et al. (2015, 6), this event translates into ever more clandestine and dangerous routes to avoid checkpoints, travelling on foot for longer periods of time, having less contact with migrant shelters, and becoming ‘easy prey for criminal gangs.’ One may argue, however, that this is the case for all migrants, not just women migrants. But, in this case, women on the run experience this invisibility differently because as Sonia, a woman migrant from Honduras explains: ‘Our sex enters into everything, [and] we are more vulnerable because of it.

Always as a woman, we are going to be the most unprotected, it is harder [for us] to get on the train, it is more difficult to endure hunger, to walk, we get tired more easily, it is harder [for us] to feel the cold, fear; it is more difficult in every way' (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). In this clandestine landscape, where established routes are no longer an option and women are forced further into invisibility, their physical and sexual safety is compromised. For women, hidden and secluded routes, as well as travelling by night, increases their risk of being kidnapped and being subject to sexual violence and even death.

Alma, a woman migrant from Guatemala with whom I spoke at a shelter, describes how being invisible causes more vulnerability as a woman: 'We had been walking for days, in the bush, when all of a sudden five men started chasing us' (Interview, 24 Oct. 2014, Mexico). During this traumatic experience, she was not fast enough to outrun these men and thus they caught up to her and surrounded her in a circle. They wanted to rape her, yelling at her to take off her clothes, 'I started to, but pleaded with them to please let me go because I was pregnant. I thought I was going to die.' Negotiating for her release with her unborn child appears to have worked as the men let her go. When speaking about Alma, Patricia, the shelter administrator, considers her 'extremely lucky' that these men did not violate her, as the probability of rape is extremely high for women crossing Mexico. According to reports, approximately 80 percent of Central American women and girls are raped while crossing Mexico en route to the U.S. (Bonello and Siegal McIntyre 2014).

## **Women on the Journey: Trust, Fear and Safety**

*Engendering* the idea of a mobile commons also involves understanding the complexities involved with the migrant journey, which include various stages of travel that may have been unforeseen when first conceptualizing the journey, as well as understanding the range of participants involved in the journey. For women migrants, when applying the mobile commons concept, the ‘infrastructure of connectivity’ is intrinsically tied to the ‘politics of care’. Isabela, mentioned above, relied on the care and emotional support of her cousins in Texas as well as their social networks to travel North and the support of her parents for her son. In this particular instance, the idea of the mobile commons may be applicable to women’s experiences. According to Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, 192), the ‘politics of care’ relies on the concept of caring for relatives and others and emphasizes feelings of trust and solidarity. Feminist scholars, however, argue that care is political, where the meanings and processes of care are socially-constructed and gendered in relation to the public/private binary. It is women who most often fulfill this reproductive labour role (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Given the greater insecurity and danger that women face while crossing Mexico, they often feel that they cannot trust anyone. Feelings of trust among women are rare amidst the violence that is embedded in their migration. Even Isabela, who had a family network at her desired destination, when asked about who she felt she could trust claimed: ‘You can’t trust anyone anymore; the only one you can trust is in God’ (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

Like Isabela, Sonia’s story also highlights how the elements of the ‘politics of care’ and the ‘infrastructure of connectivity’ within the mobile commons concept may



breakdown in practice for women. Originally Sonia was travelling with her male cousin who had previously attempted the journey to the U.S. The first time they tried the journey they were deported back to Honduras, where they waited and rested for a couple of days before leaving again. The second attempt, Sonia recounts, included walking for four days straight. As Sonia explains: ‘We had been walking for four days and when we were coming close to Tuxtla, we were attacked by the municipal police; they took us in their patrol car to a deeply wooded area’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). She describes how they told her that the only reason they were not going to rape her was because they found she had money. This did not, however, mean that they did not harass her in a sexual manner. As Sonia details: ‘They mistreated us by talking badly about us. They said many things to us because we were women and they kept looking at us in an ugly way, you can imagine.’ The municipal police robbed Sonia; her money, her documentation and her cell phone were taken from her and she was left with nothing in her possession. At that moment and in an instant, her only connection to virtual space, which is crucial for the ‘infrastructure of connectivity’, was taken from her. She was unable to obtain another cell phone. Sonia and her cousin continued their journey approximately 130 kilometres west to Arriaga. But, once they reached Arriaga, her cousin left her there: ‘He left me lying there in Arriaga... He said, “look today I’m leaving” and left with another woman.’ The person whom Sonia thought she could trust while in Mexico abandoned her. Advocates of the concept of the mobile commons affirm that the ‘politics of care’, which they define as ‘mutual cooperation, friendships, favours that you never return, affective support, trust, care for other people’s relatives and children, transnational relations of care’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 192) is a

critical element for the success for migrants' free movement. Yet, in the above example, family trust and emotional support broke down. However, travelling alone through Mexico is rarely an option for women, as it increases their already vulnerable situation. But trust and emotional support from relatives while en route may not always be a guarantee, especially if one is abandoned by those who allegedly are supposed to provide care and support. Sonia never imagined that she would be left by her cousin and felt betrayed: 'I didn't know anything about the journey and I felt really alone; I said, "now what do I do?"'

The concept of the mobile commons relies on these elements as well as 'transnational communities of justice' to subvert sovereign control. Yet, these communities of justice could also hinder a women's sense of safety or her access to the virtual space required in order to access this migrant knowledge. Although shelters are perceived as helpful spaces for migrants, the following two instances provide examples as to how shelters may inadvertently impede the success of a formation of mobile commons. Sonia's cell phone was stolen and she ended up at a migrant shelter in Oaxaca. The migrant shelter had four computer terminals set up for migrants to access their email and/or social media platforms. The lack of internet availability, however, was a common complaint, as the shelter administrators limited access to a couple of hours in the morning and in the afternoon. Another rule stipulated that if migrants had a cell phone, they were not allowed to use it while inside the shelter grounds, unless they were working in the community. In other words, the autonomy of migration is not so easily achieved because it is not simply about the binary between migrant knowledge and sovereign control. Migrant women, like Sonia, also have to grapple with a host of actors during their

journey, including migrant shelter administrators and/or volunteers, which may inadvertently hinder the mobile commons while also trying to promote migrant mobility. Thus, when accessing and (re)creating this migrant knowledge, migrants have to engage not only with each other, but also with other actors, entities and practices; not solely bordering practices of the state.

Furthermore, ‘communities of justice’, such as migrant shelters, are quite varied and may not necessarily be perceived by women migrants as providing safety. Such is the problem when conceptualizing ‘communities of justice’ as primarily promoting mobility and helping migrants; the relationship may often be more complex. As of 2013, there were 63 migrant shelters in total in Mexico (Pastoral Dimension of Human Mobility, 2013), but as they are not regulated, they are free to establish their own sets of rules and governance procedures. Shelters are supposed to be places where women feel safe. Yet, upon visiting one particular shelter in Veracruz, several issues became evident (Field notes, 11 Oct. 2014, Mexico). First, once a woman migrant enters the shelter, a staff member or volunteer performs an initial interview in order to learn basic information about where she is coming from, where she is going and if she has any health problems that need to be addressed. This is also the time where women are told all the rules of the shelter and must agree to them in order to receive entry. Following this stage, women are escorted into an ‘intake room’ where they must leave all their belongings – including their cell phones – until they leave the next day to continue on their journey. This particular shelter only allows migrants to stay for one day, whereas the more common practice in Mexico is three days. If they are not comfortable with this process and the rules of the shelter, or if they feel confined, they are welcome to stay outside of the

shelter under two large trees to rest. However, the shelter administrator also reveals that there are rumours that one of the houses near these trees may be a 'safe house' where kidnapped migrants are kept.

Perhaps inadvertently, this shelter has placed restrictions on a woman's liberty and has placed her in a vulnerable position by keeping all of her personal belongings. Although, women are provided with a choice and do not have to abide by the rules of the shelter, staying outside the shelter walls may place an already vulnerable woman in more danger due to the possibility of a rumoured 'safe house'. In addition, while on a tour of the shelter, the sleeping quarters (one for men and one for women) are found on the second level where the shelter administrator explains that at the end of the day, each group is locked up in these rooms from the outside until the following morning. Even though these measures are put in place for the migrant's safety, a woman coming into this shelter may feel very insecure, essentially being treated as a prisoner in a place that is supposed to be a safe haven and is meant to provide refuge.

### **Women's Strategies: Negotiating Survival**

Applying the idea of the mobile commons to conceptualize the experience of migrants may not always work or may work differently depending on the people involved and the types of knowledge they have available. As such, in order to build on the concept of the mobile commons, scholars need to further acknowledge and engage with the gendered differences embedded in the migration process. For women migrants, the survival strategies while on the journey principally revolve around the key aspect of gender. Women migrants are different than migrant men because they are aware of and have to be prepared for gender-specific risks and dangers throughout their transit in

Mexico. Women appear to have three principal survival strategies that are all connected to the fact that they are women and may therefore experience abuses associated with their sex during migration. Since the idea of the mobile commons may be applied differently to women migrants due to their sex, they organize themselves differently in order to attempt greater safety. These survival strategies also revolve around both visibility and invisibility. The reality for women migrants is that the ‘invisible knowledge of mobility’, one of the key elements of the mobile commons concept, is not only about the knowledge of border crossings, routes shelters and/or policing and surveillance, but, more importantly for them, is the knowledge about rape and the potential for being forced into prostitution and/or human trafficking rings because as Vogt (2013, 774) argues, ‘Central American women in particular are highly sexualized objects in Mexico, and the sex industry is highly profitable.’

*‘El Compañero’ and the Sexualized Body*

Creating a pseudo-type relationship with a man during the journey becomes one way that women may decide to grapple with the insecurity they face during their migration to the U.S. During one shelter visit, there were several women who appeared to be ‘committed’ to a male migrant and when speaking would refer to the male companion as their ‘husbands’ or ‘*compañeros*’ [partners]. However, upon closer observation, they were from different countries of origin and had only met recently (Field notes, 25 Oct. 2014, Mexico). The relationship negotiations may take many forms. Often women meet other male migrants while on the same transit route where together they agree to an informal arrangement by which sex is essentially exchanged for protection and they present themselves as a couple to other migration actors. They may be in this

‘relationship’ until they reach the U.S.-Mexico border or if they are taking different routes, they agree to part ways at a certain point and the woman may form another partnership. Sonia explains the logic behind this strategy:

Many women do this. They use their body, [because] if you’re pretty you can attach yourself to anyone, attract any man... you stick with a man because what you want is protection and you become a couple, a man to look after you and so you continue by paying with sex. There are many women who do this; they get a man and so they feel more protected (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

Although many women actively decide that this is a strategy they will deploy, it is not a decision that is taken lightly or a relationship in which they necessarily want to take part. There is a fine line between strategies and vulnerabilities. Paola, a migrant shelter volunteer, explains this vulnerability: ‘Women who have low resources and travel alone get together with a male “*compañero*” who they start to trust... [and] in exchange for protection, she must give a range of services, such as sexual services... they feel subjected to these kinds of favours in return for the protection that they receive from this relationship’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

It is important to note the complexity involved in a woman’s mobility. On the one hand, women may choose to use their knowledge of the propensity of sexual violence and being viewed as a sexualized object to become visible. In other words, rather than trying to remain hidden from this reality, they use their bodies, as women, to persevere. This strategy, however, presents a perfect example that illustrates the nature of gendered migration and the gendered experiences of mobility where while not all women may

choose to engage in these partnerships, there is clearly an unequal relationship between the parties involved in this agreement. Women are the ones that are often disadvantaged by having to use their highly-sexualized bodies as a form of payment or currency in order to negotiate safe passage. This gendered migration, in which women's bodies are highly sexualized, perpetuates this type of coping strategy as a means of survival. It is not solely the relationships between women and migrant men that demonstrate this inequality. According to an investigation done by Bonello and Siegal McIntyre (2014) in Mexico, sex is seen as a form of physical 'currency', especially for those women who lack the money to pay bribes. The commodification of a woman's body, with its multiple arrangements from paying off migration officials, or criminal gang members, or train operators, or truck drivers with sex, is often so common that there is now a slang term for it – '*cuerpomatic*' or '*cuerpomatico*' – which is akin to using one's body like an ATM machine, using the body as a form of currency (Ibid.). Rafael Moreno, an NGO director describes this reality: 'Not for everyone, but for many, the price for crossing Mexico is that they [women] will be raped [and] they use sex for many different possibilities, or to get someone to give them a ride, to get drivers to let them on their trucks... or to avoid migration officials from sending them back' (Interview, 13 Nov. 2014, Mexico). Sonia also confirms this by stating: 'Many have relations with people from state police or *migra* because they do not want to be detained; many women pay with their body to use the train' (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). In both types of coping strategies, women survive by using their bodies; their increased vulnerability as women migrants makes these difficult decisions consequences of the circumstances they face.

### *The Male Performance*

On the other hand, the not-so ‘invisible knowledge’ of sexual assault compels women to attempt to become unnoticeable, and thus, invisible. As portrayed in the documentary *La Jaula de Oro* (2013) [The Golden Dream], a survival strategy for women is, in fact, ceasing to be a woman at all. By choosing to dress and perform like a man, women hide their sexualized bodies and avoid the harassment and potential abuse that they may encounter along their journey. According to the migrant shelter volunteer, Paola: ‘There are many women who, for example, pretend to be men, cut their hair, cover their breasts by wrapping them, or pose as lesbians. It is a strategy that they use so that men do not notice them.... They project a more masculine image, and clearly the men think that she is a lesbian so they do not approach her’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Again, a critical feminist lens reveals how gender is embedded in migration where patriarchal structures in women’s countries of origin, construct women as inferior to men (Ruiz 2009), as highly sexualized (Vogt 2013), and as disposable (Wright 2006), all of which are motivators for migration and also continue throughout their journey. Women migrants must confront the issue of their bodies being highly sexualized. They are aware of this migratory context and, thus, survive using these strategies. Women, in addition to the risks associated with being an ‘unauthorized’ migrant, experience additional structural vulnerabilities and inequalities simply for being a woman and, in turn, have to hide or use their bodies as women in order to survive.

### *The Humanitarian Visa*

Lastly, the Humanitarian Visa, may be viewed as a strategy if women migrants were perhaps not ‘lucky’ with the above strategies and were victims of assault. This is a



strategy of visibility that ‘irregular’ migrants may choose. Obtaining a visa enables women to live more securely and move more freely in public because they have a legal status (however temporary). The Humanitarian Visa, also officially known as the *Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias* (TVRH), is a temporary visa that may be issued by the Mexican government if a migrant becomes a victim of a crime while on Mexican territory. This visa gives migrant women a ‘regular’ status while in Mexico and allows them to travel more safely because they cannot be detained or deported. The visa is issued for a period of one year, but may be renewed if the case is still being investigated. This visa, however, is not easy to obtain and requires much patience. Since the human rights violations have soared against migrants in the last couple of years in Mexico (Meyer and Boggs, 2014), migrants typically wait for months before receiving a decision on their application. According to Patricia, the migrant shelter administrator, there is a massive backlog in the current system where the application process can take over three months (Interview, 27 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Further, after investing all this time in this visa process, there is no guarantee that a favourable decision will be reached; migrants could be denied a ‘regular’ status and then be deported back to their country of origin. Returning to Alma’s story, both her and her husband were applying for this visa, but were still waiting at the shelter for a decision. Alma, however, will not be going to the U.S. if she obtains her visa. At first, she and her husband were planning to travel to the U.S. since her husband had already lived there on a couple of occasions. But, after she was almost raped, she lives with constant fear: ‘I’m too scared, I can’t sleep and I feel like they’re [gang members] going to come out and get me... we are going to stay in Mexico, we’ll go to D.F.’ (Interview, 24 Oct. 2014, Mexico).

The strategies mentioned above, allow women migrants in Mexico to organize themselves in such a way as to avoid insecurity and acquire some mode of safety while on their journeys. Although these strategies may have relative success, they provide women with particular coping mechanisms, which may help them to achieve a safe journey to the U.S. These survival strategies challenge the idea of the mobile commons by problematizing how ‘invisible knowledge’ and ‘trust’ work in practice. In this particular journey through Mexico, women migrants feel visceral fear and an overall lack of trust. The most important knowledge for their security is the knowledge about sexual violence, and therefore, strategies of how to avoid this situation or how to use their body as an advantage to survive the journey. While the concept of the mobile commons stands for communities created by migrants on the move, it tends to generalize migrant experiences, and does not consider women’s gender-specific experiences of migration. In this section I have focused on women’s particular survival strategies, which although they may be based on the experiences of individual women, are nonetheless relationally intertwined to common factors like family, violence and migration and thus constitute collective women’s’ knowledge. Additionally, feminist scholars have importantly long-drawn attention to the need to create alternative spaces for women in which women can nurture feminist bonds of solidarity (Mohanty 2003b; Rygiel 2011). Therefore, it is also important to recognize the instances of solidarity among women migrants. In one case, women migrants at one particular shelter created safe spaces, whether it was in the dorms or in the common areas, to gather and dialogue together whether about their families or their hopes of reaching the U.S. Even though they lived with fear and distrust, these spaces provided for them a retreat from their migration struggles. Future work could

engage with instances of how the concept of the mobile commons can be applied to feminist visions of solidarity. In all, looking at the experiences of migrant women complicates and troubles the concept of the mobile commons by accounting for embodied differences, which allows scholars to see how gender is practiced on the ground through distinct survival strategies based on unique forms of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The stories of women migrants and their journeys through Mexico provide a particular vantage point to consider the concept of the mobile commons. These stories complicate various elements of the mobile commons by highlighting how women are perceived differently than men while on the journey based on gender inequalities, experiencing gender-specific risks, and how these differences change knowledge structures of mobility, ‘infrastructures of connectivity’ as well as ‘communities of justice’ and the ‘politics of care’. The concept provides a tool to examine how migrants may use and share their knowledge vis-à-vis constraining border and citizenship regimes applied by the nation-state. But the aim of this article is to complicate and provide a feminist reading of the concept of the mobile commons by demonstrating embodied experiences of migrant women and how gender is embedded in the process of migration. Providing a gendered lens offers critical insight into the potential various ‘knowledge of mobility’, which in turn influences how the mobile commons concept is applied in practice.

Troubling the concept of the mobile commons by engaging with the concept of invisibility, for instance, means realizing that being invisible for women has more disadvantages than advantages. In the Mexican context, it means travelling, often on foot, through secluded areas that are far from the assistance of shelters and are the primary

targets of state and non-state actors. This seclusion translates into higher risk of being exposed to sexual trafficking, forced prostitution, rape, and death. But beyond the AoM scholarship, and more importantly for this analysis, understanding invisibility means critically evaluating why migrant women suffer from these disadvantages. It means understanding that societal structures place women migrants in positions of vulnerability and risk. Embedded societal structures associate women from the NTCA with prostitution, and/or sexual immorality, and/or as being bad mothers because they leave their children in their countries of origin. A feminist analysis highlights and addresses the asymmetrical and often violent relationships that exist in gendered structures that are reproduced through everyday interactions (education, socialization, cultural expectations). Thus, when discussing survival strategies, it is important to note that the strategies employed by women migrants are intrinsically tied to embedded gendered structures. If women from the NTCA were not represented as highly sexualized objects, they may not need to engage in partnerships with other men for protection or be placed in a position where they use sex as a form of currency. These gendered structures place women in unequal power relationships and disadvantaged positions vis-à-vis men.

Furthermore, *engendering* the mobile commons concept challenges the AoM literature to not so easily disregard the nation-state. I show that even if migrant women are trying to circumvent migration authorities through shared knowledge or strategies, the nation-state influences their decisions. A principal example was the implementation of the PFS, which directly altered their strategies of invisibility and their options for transportation. Also by problematizing the reductionist power binaries of state control and human movement, I illustrate how the migration journey for women in Mexico

includes various non-state actors which can constrain or facilitate movement (such as coyotes, criminal gangs, drug traffickers, train operators, truck drivers, shelter staff, shelter volunteers, and other migrants). This is important because it illustrates a more comprehensive picture of migration and highlights the messy nature of the migrant journey. Migrant women do not only have to struggle with the control of the nation-state but must also navigate various relationships with different actors.

Overall, this article contributes to advancing the AoM scholarship by calling for a more nuanced understanding of the mobile commons by analyzing different theories that add to the approach, but more broadly, focusing on migrant women's experiences and narratives that trouble the concept by highlighting that migration but also any 'commons' that emerges from migration, are always intertwined within larger structures and relations of power. Understanding these gendered power relations illustrates the differences in privilege with respect to mobilities rather than assuming that mobility is a given and necessarily positive phenomenon. Migration journeys include both moments of mobility and immobility, characterized by differentiated access due to a range of factors (most importantly due to intersections of gender, race, and class). For advancing change in policy, it means addressing the social inequalities that produce an environment where women are viewed as less valuable than men and/or are highly sexualized, which then places women in higher risk situations in order to survive their journeys.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the lived experiences of women migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras through qualitative research with migrants and those advocating for migrants, such as shelter staff and activists in Mexico. I have argued that navigating borders is not simply about experiencing the vulnerabilities and risks associated with restrictive and violent border enforcement practices. Although border enforcement policies and practices place migrant women in a clandestine space vis-à-vis documented migrants en route to the U.S., (im)mobility, is equally about the boundaries that are created by oppressive systems of subordination such as gender inequality, race, class, and nationality. By tracing border enforcement practices in Mexico, their connection to U.S. border security logics, and the ‘intersectional oppressions’ that are imposed on women migrants, I illustrate how navigating risks across borders is not solely about the territorial and/or virtual borders controlled by nation-states. Indeed, symbolic borders and/or boundaries, together with the effects of nation-state borders, form subjectivities and shape personal experiences of migrant women. This research provides a holistic understanding surrounding the politics of mobility, and challenges dominant political narratives by sharing women’s situated, relational and embodied experiences, which exposes the gendered nature of migration. This work also further contributes towards raising political awareness, and enhancing access to social justice for migrant women.

## **Living with Borders**

My dissertation is rooted in the concept of borders. As discussed in the introduction, the rationale for this study was to analytically engage with and investigate 1) Central American migration across Mexico's borders, 2) with specific attention to the experiences of women migrants, and 3) Mexico's border enforcement strategies. While uncovering the causes behind migration from the NTCA, it became clear that women migrants disproportionately experience more violence and discrimination due to prominent power structures or 'intersectional oppressions'. These 'intersectional oppressions', which include gender, race, class, nationality, are embodied. Oppressions result from women's 'lived' bodily experiences as they travel throughout their migration journey, which begins before they depart, continues during their transit and beyond.

Looking at the effects of border enforcement practices on 'unauthorized' women migrants enables the questioning of state-centric notions of security and evaluates the politics behind this security. However, only looking at the effects of border security practices is insufficient. Instead, by focusing on women's experiences of (in)security, I emphasize that being labelled 'unauthorized' is only one type of insecurity, which causes a certain set of vulnerabilities (for instance, being violently apprehended, detained and/or deported). Yet, there are other gendered and classed insecurities, which mean that many women must also navigate through Mexico with added vulnerabilities, such as being poor – which only affords them the transportation option of *La Bestia* or, worse, travelling on foot; or travelling with children; or facing heightened risks of sexual assault because they are women. My research approach ultimately focuses on a human-centred idea of security

by employing ‘embodied epistemologies’ and concentrating on ‘the security, or protection, of people [rather than nation-states]’ (Hyndman 2004b, 309). By highlighting women migrants’ experiences, fears, hopes, I reveal the emotions, feelings and stories of people who do not feel secure. The relations of race, class and gender, combined with national security narratives that spark criminalization and ‘othering’, further contribute to this insecurity.

### **All Borders Matter**

At the beginning of my dissertation I was interested in examining the complexities surrounding ‘national security’ discourses and their tension with human rights. This focus led me first to uncover how border security governance practiced in the name of the sovereign state is founded on perceptions of ‘threat’ that are based on social differences. These narratives frame ‘unauthorized’ migrants as ‘criminals’, ‘drug mules’, ‘prostitutes’, etc., labels which are then used to justify the practices by border authorities and state officials of degradation and violence at the expense of protecting migrants’ human rights. As Sonia, a woman migrant from Honduras reminds us when discussing Mexican authorities: ‘It’s one thing if they [authorities] detain you and deport you, but not to violate our rights; that [while they are doing this] they don’t treat you like an animal and that they don’t physical and verbally attack you like they do... they treat you worse than animals’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). Article #1 of my dissertation explicitly examines this tension between border enforcement controls that are supposedly intertwined in both national security and human rights narratives. The article shows, however, that despite the claim made by the Mexican government that it is protecting migrants with the border governance found in the PFS, the reality is that the human rights



narratives appear to be more for global audiences. On-the-ground, the effects of these border enforcement practices on migrants generally, and women migrants in particular, include experiences of fear, increased danger and vulnerability, and a lack of access to legal rights and protections.

Also, as I explored the effects of border practices on women's bodies, my field research illuminated how women who live with the category of being 'unauthorized' find themselves subject to additional boundaries and/or barriers. I began to observe how a woman was not only an 'unauthorized' migrant but also subject to greater vulnerability by being a *poor, racialized woman* from either *Guatemala*, or *El Salvador*, or *Honduras* and how these multiple vulnerabilities made her experiences of mobility more violent. Therefore, by problematizing borders I concluded that 'bordering' (Rumford 2011) should not only apply to practices and processes associated with border security and governance. The boundaries [borders] that are created and sustained by systems of oppression are equally important when experiencing (im)mobilities because together they create a 'lived' body that is both situated and relational, thus placing a body along a 'social location' continuum (Pessar and Mahler 2003). Women's mobility, therefore, depends to a large extent on their positionality in life and where they fall within their 'social location'.

This positionality will not only affect their experiences while navigating this clandestine space in Mexico, but also their access to mobility and their migratory options prior to their departure. I considered the autonomy of migration (AoM) literature because it shifts the perspective of migration from that of the nation-state to that of migrant experiences and struggles surrounding mobility. It focuses on and privileges migrant

agency over victimization. However, as a researcher, I was also on an academic journey. Coming from a political science and international relations background, I first explored literatures within the field of security and border studies. This is how I came across the AoM literature. However, as my research journey evolved and my writing began, I found that the AoM did not go far enough in highlighting the diverse subjectivities of migrants (especially those of women migrants) and tended to overemphasize migrant agency at the expense of appreciating how agency is exercised within structures of power. I thus also came across other disciplines, like mobilities studies (Sheller and Urry 2006, Cresswell 2010, Sheller 2010) in my research, which shed light on the diverse forms of movement, and how power relations and privilege are embedded not only in mobilities, but also in the capacity to move. One of the main insights that I learned on this academic journey is that going forward, it would be beneficial for the AoM literature to dialogue with the mobilities literature. As it stands, the AoM literature is too narrowly focused (to the point of being self-referential at times) and does not engage with bodies of scholarship that discuss similar concepts. Therefore, my dissertation highlights moments of immobility and questions the assumptions of the AoM in that the literature typically takes migration as the starting point of discussion and thus does not adequately address problems of *access* to migration. In addition, critically examining issues of access as I do in Article #2, demonstrates how migration is gendered and thus identifies gender blindness in the AoM approach. Lastly, my dissertation illustrates how migrant women are not just part of an overall population of migrants. It critiques the autonomy of migration approach for too often generalizing about the experiences of ‘the migrant’ and as a result placing everyone who is a migrant into one analytical container, complete with one ‘migrant knowledge’.

Instead, as I evaluate in Article #3, women migrants from the NTCA live with distinct ‘social inscriptions’ (Grosz 1987, 1994), based on their own unique situations and relations with their social world, which provides them with distinct forms of knowledge. This knowledge forces women to see the journey differently when compared to migrant men; they experience gendered risks and fears and deep emotional, and often, physical pain. As such, women migrants employ particular strategies and tactics in order to survive their journeys.

### **Practical Implications**

My objective with this research was to present the lives and experiences of a marginalized population. I wanted their voices to be heard through their narratives to show the injustices that occur while on their migrant journey and beyond. Not only have the experiences migrant women shared with me shown the visceral fear and strong emotional toll that they endure daily, but also their courage and strength. For most of these women, it is the emotional bonds that they share with their families that give them the strength to keep going despite the distance between them and their loved ones, which is a deep and everlasting pain. In addition to the scholarly objectives of this study, I also aim to raise political awareness about the systems of violence that exist in the first place, which put women in the position of having to choose between staying with their beloved children or leaving on a potential deadly journey to provide better opportunities for their children. That is not a choice any woman should have to make and yet women in the NTCA must make these decisions all the time. Including migrant women’s embodied, situated and relational experiences of ‘unauthorized’ migration is significant for three main reasons.

First, knowing these experiences reworks the understanding of nation-state borders by not only analyzing how they extend within and beyond territorial lines, but also how border enforcement policy materializes in practice, often in places outside of the nation-state that implements it (Hiemstra 2012). My fieldwork, for example, took place in the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca and in Mexico D.F., locations where neither the Guatemala-Mexico border nor the U.S.-Mexico border were present. Yet, all of my informants were discussing the effects of the PFS (a border enforcement policy). For these people, the border was present in their everyday interactions through the practices that were being implemented by the new border plan. Nation-state borders thus exist wherever ‘unauthorized’ migrants travel.

Second, and connected to the above, my research is significant because it reworks the understanding of how disembodied border policy affects *people*, specifically women, which acknowledges how migration processes are intertwined and interact with individuals, families, and communities, rather than being enacted in a vacuum. The qualitative research found in my articles reveals that personal and intimate decisions are influenced by macro-level forces, like community violence and/or structural violence. Migrant women are thinking about their loved ones as well as the effects of the border while they make their decisions to migrate. Bridging structural forces to personal and intimate experiences clarifies the processes of migration by showing that they co-constitute each other and thus cannot be separated.

Lastly, understanding how these policies interact with individuals reveals, rather than obscures, the violent experiences, the fear and the relationships that are neglected by disembodied macro-level governance (Mountz 2010), that contributes to the violence. By

engaging with concepts like invisibility and violence throughout my articles, I explore how disembodied border policies, like the PFS, force women into secluded areas in Mexico due to the fear of detention and deportation. In the Mexican context, the concept of invisibility is complex because while women migrants may avoid apprehension, detention and/or deportation from state authorities, hiding and becoming invisible to those authorities could mean becoming visible and within the reach of non-state actors that target secluded areas. In reality, women migrants are therefore always visible and susceptible to some form of violence. Therefore, I trouble the way invisibility is romanticized as a form of resistance within the AoM literature by showing that due to the gendered nature of migration, women are placed in more precarious positions. By implementing policies that categorize women as ‘unauthorized’ or ‘undocumented’ subjects, policy makers increase the violence that migrant women experience in Mexico. Furthermore, by engaging with an intersectional approach, I offer the possibility to move beyond experiences that happen while on the journey. Rather, I highlight how the migration process often begins at a point of immobility due to the intersectional barriers that may affect the potential journey. In this vein, structures of power influence migratory options, access and the resources available for migration.

Furthermore, there are practical implications for my research with respect to government responses. The steady increase in migration from the NTCA requires a regional response. In the lead up to the *UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants* in 2016, the UNHCR hosted a *Refugee Summit* in Costa Rica with leaders from the region to discuss the violence in the NTCA and seek effective responses to asylum (Brodzinsky 2016). Similarly, in 2014 on the occasion of 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Cartagena*

*Declaration on Refugees*, Latin American and Caribbean governments adopted the *Brazil Declaration*, which has only recently begun to consider issues of gendered migration in the region (ACNUR n.d.). But more can be done to better understand the feminization of migration in this context and incorporate solutions that account for the intersectional oppressions that women face during their journey. Sonia, a Honduran migrant, expresses how Central American governments need to pay better attention to the reasons why individuals migrate. She argues: ‘The most just thing would be for our governments to become aware of the reality that is happening right now and ask why we are actually migrating?’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico). She adds that every Central American country should give better life opportunities for their people so they would not need to migrate. Better life opportunities do not mean only more and better economic opportunities. Central American governments need to have the will and capacity to address multiple structural factors that, all combined, contribute to women being forced to flee the NTCA. The UNHCR (2016) has seen a fivefold increase in asylum-seekers arriving to the U.S. since 2008 precisely because there is escalating violence from multiple groups including criminal gangs and drug trafficking organizations. Yet, violence is only part of the problem. Governments in the NTCA must equally confront the excessive corruption within government institutions and the high levels of impunity that contribute to a lack of effective governance.

For women, specifically, to be able to achieve better life opportunities, addressing gender inequality, and GBV in particular, first in the NTCA, but also in Mexico, is critical. As analyzed throughout my dissertation, gender discrimination is a barrier that contributes to and is enmeshed in other systems of oppression. It creates and sustains a

gendered culture that is based on social exclusion and subordination. Tackling gender discrimination requires a structural, societal shift whereby women are not ‘othered’, and placed in subordinate roles and where gender expectations are not solidified through socialization processes and education. Equally important in this context is erasing the social stigma attached to domestic abuse or any type of gender-based violence (GBV). This embedded gender discrimination normalizes all forms of violence against women – both in the NTCA and in Mexico. Women often learn not to question this violence because it can become part of their everyday life. Through a feminist analysis, and utilizing the concepts of embodiment and intersectionality, my research highlights how women in the NTCA are born into historical, social, political, and economic structures based on power hierarchies. It is these social structures, like patriarchy, for instance, which constitute women’s lived experiences as women and as migrants. By employing a feminist lens, we can begin to see the problems in the gendered structures in the NTCA that privilege men when compared to women; that undervalue women in the labour market; that continue to place women primarily in the domestic sphere, responsible for reproductive labour; that view women as property and as highly sexualized. The public/private binaries continue in these gendered structures where the masculine is privileged over the feminine. Women are already ‘othered’ as women even before they are ‘othered’ as ‘unauthorized’ migrants.

The solution is not necessarily to protect women more than men. Rather, it is to understand that they would not necessarily need protection if they were not represented as subordinate subjects. It means understanding that women need protection because of gendered structures that exist in the first place. The way forward now is to actually

change these structures through education and prevention. Prevention needs to start early in life, through socialization processes in the communities that educate children about gender stereotypes. This prevention through education needs to continue throughout the school systems to further combat the roots of gender inequality and protect the rights of women.

Achieving human rights and equality for women migrants thus requires governments in Central America and Mexico to place a greater emphasis on education and training on gender equality and human rights, to begin to erase these entrenched socio-political structures. Combating impunity with respect to GBV requires governments to monitor, investigate and prosecute both state and non-state actors responsible for GBV, especially including but not limited to, femicide. Governments need to ensure that the gendered culture does not interfere with the human rights of millions of women who suffer from multiple forms of violence. The above examples address changes that would occur before migration is sought as an option. They are meant to address the comment made by Sonia, which is to understand some of the roots causes of migration and attempt to correct the structures that exclude and displace women and often force them to consider migration. Once women are on the move and actively migrating, however, governments need to create equal opportunities for accessing migration routes, as well as equal opportunities to work while in transit. Overall, the human rights of women on the move should be equally protected, regardless of status.

Lastly, for Mexico specifically, if the national government wants to practice the human rights rhetoric that it claims to promote, then it needs to take concrete steps toward the actual protection of the human rights of migrant women. One possibility is to



train, educate and build capacity for gender responsiveness among its migration authorities, like the INM, but equally for federal authorities who take part in border enforcement (UN Women 2007; Petrozziello 2013). State governments can coordinate and collaborate with federal authorities with respect to training and education vis-à-vis these rights. Since we know coordination and collaboration is a principal goal for intelligence, surveillance and national security, these mechanisms should not be so difficult to implement for human rights education and training purposes. Additionally, those members of state authorities who commit crimes against migrant women should be promptly prosecuted. Finally, women migrants would feel safer if they could move throughout Mexico without the fear of apprehension and detention. This would allow them to access legitimate forms of travel so they do not have to risk their lives on a freight train. They would be able to exercise their right to mobility without being extorted by numerous state and non-state actors due to their ‘unauthorized’ status. They would not have to use their bodies as currency when they do not have money to pay bribes or for protection in a ‘relationship’. In other words, the freedom to move requires the Mexican government to provide legitimate forms of regular status, such as a temporary tourist visa, to all NTCA migrants including women migrants so that they do not have to travel in invisibility and fear, making them more prone to abuse and danger. As I argued in Article #1, the *Tarjeta de Visitante Regional* has a limited ability to protect the security of women migrants and is not a useful mechanism in its current form. A more useful visa would be inclusive of all migrants transiting through Mexico, rather than only offered to those migrants who are either from Guatemala or Belize, and could be used throughout the length of their journey, in all Mexican states.

## **Future Directions**

In this final section, I discuss how my research can further debates in scholarship, as well as beyond academic circles to include institutions and communities involved in migration. First, advancing AoM scholarship in order to account for migrant women experiences requires bridging this literature with feminist scholarship in order to provide a more holistic picture of migration. My research has shown that nation-state borders and systemic barriers cannot be analyzed in isolation. Nation-state borders and symbolic borders intersect to form subjectivities and shape personal experiences. My research can be expanded by broadening the scope of intersectionality to analyze the interpersonal relationships of the family within this migration context. Similar to the work of Boehm (2012) and Mahler (2015), in order to build on this dissertation's findings, examining the intricacies of 'intimate migrations' and how notions of 'family' and 'motherhood' shift overtime would add considerable complexity toward understanding the gendered experiences of transit migration among NTCA migrants. Likewise, since understanding lived experiences is important to explaining migration possibilities and patterns, engaging with Chicana studies and research on borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987; Fregoso 2003; Hurtado and Sinha 2016) could further highlight how race and nation-state borders interact with everyday intimate processes and shape social identities in the Latin American context.

Beyond the AoM scholarship, mobilities studies scholarship would provide an alternative lens with which to also bring into dialogue with AoM approaches because the mobilities research complicates the concept of mobility and expands the analysis to include not only immobilities, but also questions why these immobilities may occur in the

first place. Bridging the AoM literature with mobilities literature (Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2010; Sheller 2011), helps to further examine the power tensions of different kinds of mobilities. In other words, starting from a position that understands that mobility is not a given, but is instead a resource that is differentially accessed depending on social relations of power, can yield different knowledge about migrant agency. Mobility is political and experienced where some people will have the privilege to move (by choosing to move, by choosing at what speed to move, by choosing their mode transportation and their route). The representation and practice of mobility for women from the NTCA may be quite different in that they may not be able to move and if they are able to move, it may be forced, it may take months, it may depend on dangerous routes and modes of transportation, and it will probably be unpleasant. Concepts like ‘motility’ (Kaufmann et al. 2004), which refers to the potential to become mobile and therefore engages with the social and political capacities that people may or may not have to exercise mobility, can draw further attention to issues of uneven motility and subaltern immobilities that may be particularly relevant to women in transit.

Moving beyond scholarship, thus far, I have discussed how this research can support advocacy work to call on governments to address the vulnerability and precarity encountered by migrant women. By highlighting the experiences of violence, I hope to challenge policy makers to acknowledge how these restrictive policies affect people, especially women, and therefore change the prime referent object of security from the nation-state to the individual, or at the very least to refocus the lens from state security to human security. Overall, the goal would be to push governments to be more accountable

to human rights commitments, and to provide safe and secure travel for women while in Mexico.

My study has also demonstrated the complexity of this migration and the multiple actors that are involved in this particular context. As such, addressing the social inequalities women face during their journey also requires that we move beyond state actors to recognize the role of a comprehensive network of non-state actors (civil society, shelters, communities) that facilitate migration. Future work could look into the intersection of these actors in conjunction with government institutions and authorities. For example, civil society organizations, like migrant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in facilitating migration for women migrants because they provide knowledge on the rights and laws surrounding migration in Mexico. They also play an important role in holding governments and authorities accountable through continued pressure to uphold these rights. In this migration context, they are critical for knowledge mobilization and institutional accountability. Their services, however, intersect with those of migrant shelters because it is through the migrant shelters that NGOs are often able to disseminate their knowledge, such as through focus groups or workshops. Future work could further look into these very important synergies.

In addition, the space of the shelter is, itself, a significant space to investigate in the future. It is one of the few spaces where migrants feel safe while on their journey, which then provides a good meeting point for other actors within this network. Migrant shelters collaborate with NGOs and government institutions because they have access to migrants. Shelters thus also play a role in knowledge dissemination. However, although shelters are significant spaces in this migration context, the increase in security and

human rights violations, also has serious implications for them. Specifically, shelters are now having to house migrants for months at a time because many of them are applying for Humanitarian Visas. Originally, these migrant shelters offered migrants a stay of one to three days because they assumed that migrants were travelling through Mexico. Now shelters have to accommodate many more migrants for multiple months, a new reality that has important financial ramifications for these shelters.

Lastly, building on my findings here, future research would benefit from examining the role of the local communities along migrant trajectories in Mexico. Local communities may act as important allies in this network for women migrants. Primarily, they can be of great support for migrant shelters by providing human resources (volunteers), material resources (food or clothing), and financial donations. Nonetheless, in order to receive these supports, communities need to feel safe, which means working to erase the negative stigma that is associated with migrants. Again, as I witnessed during my fieldwork, shelters help in this endeavour by organizing focus groups and inviting community members to talk and interact with migrants at the shelter. Together, such avenues for future research can better inform discussions on migration in Mexico and better address the personal security of migrant women.

Alongside the work above, other lines of future inquiry building off of my findings here could include the following research projects. Originally, in my research I wanted to concentrate on women migrants and their struggles in trying to achieve their journey to the U.S. However, the conversations I had with my interviewees revealed that ‘the many dreams [migrants] bring with them, become nightmares’ (Interview, 29 Oct. 2014, Mexico) and there is no longer the idea of the ‘American dream’ because people

must simply flee the violence. Mexico, is no longer strictly a transit country for many women migrants. Like Alma, a Honduran woman migrant to whom I referred throughout my dissertation, women may experience such traumatizing effects while in Mexico that they choose to remain in the country rather than risk any further violence, even if that was not their original intention. My dissertation has therefore opened new areas of investigation with respect to those women whose journeys to the U.S. were interrupted or halted in Mexico and those women that are able to achieve safe passage to the U.S. Both empirical cases have the potential of contributing critical insights into how we conceptualize migrant journeys and borders. For instance, as I show in my dissertation, the migrant journey for women from the NTCA begins at a moment of (im)mobility where they decide that they will migrate to the U.S. Even though they are not technically ‘in transit’, they have embarked on the journey by making specific preparations for their departure, such as setting up care for their family, hiring a coyote, obtaining documents, etc.

However, what happens if a woman decides to stay in Mexico? Does her journey end? What types of borders and barriers do such women experience within Mexico if they seek regular status? My research has shown the xenophobia that is present in Mexico, and that this discrimination may be coupled with other stereotypes based on gender, race and/or class which together affect the everyday life of women migrants. Furthermore, this line of inquiry would also shed light on issues related to refugees and asylum. More migrants are fleeing the NTCA due to the targeted violence and the credible fear of persecution. According to *Comision Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (COMAR) [Mexican Committee for Refugee Assistance], between 2013 and 2016 there

were close to 14,000 individuals who sought a refugee status in Mexico (Sanchez 2017). In 2016, UNHCR (2016, 66) noted that Mexico received approximately 9,000 new asylum applications from the NTCA, which represents a 156 percent increase over 2015. At the same time, however, Mexico only recognized 3,078 people as refugees, which may be a 206 percent increase from the previous year (ACNUR 2017), but still leaves a large number of people unprotected. These data speak to whether the Mexican government has the capacity (and willingness) to effectively take care of migrants. Future research can, therefore, concentrate on the connections between the traumatizing experiences of migrant women while travelling and how these experiences affect their decision to stay in Mexico; the precarity involved in accessing pathways to regularization available to them as well as the knowledge mobilization that is required in order to obtain access to these mechanisms; and the capacity of the Mexican government to integrate the increasing number of people who are choosing to stay in Mexico rather than continue to the U.S.

Finally, another line of research can examine women migrants' experiences in the U.S. While again problematizing the journey, it can be argued that the 'unauthorized' journey does not end for those women who have been able to arrive in the U.S. The borders they encountered while in Mexico and in their countries of origin continue to form their 'lived' body. The experiences of (in)security continue while trying to obtain better life opportunities in the U.S. Since the new Trump administration, border security enforcement policies and practices target 'illegals' in a very violent manner, for instance, threatening to end temporary protection status for many migrants (Ávalos 2017) and/or targeting children by ending a program that allows minors to apply for asylum while

living abroad (Rosenberg 2017). These security-migration narratives are intertwined with other structures of inequality. As follows, enforcement priorities and practices are but another boundary or barrier that contribute to the everyday embodied struggles in the U.S. This research has the potential to address and contribute insights into how the social hierarchies of gender, race and class are represented and intertwined in processes of migration and integration. Likewise, associated research can be done that examines what happens when families in the U.S. *become* transnational due to the increased effects of ‘bordering’. It is often a taken-for-granted assumption that the migrant family is transnational from the outset, but many more families in the U.S. are *becoming* a transnational family, especially with the new Trump administration, when the mother or father, or even the child(ren) is/are deported from the U.S. after fifteen years, for instance, due to internal border enforcement practices like ending the *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA) program. These practices redefine the transnational family imaginary and produce new identities in relation to that (im)mobility. What are the effects of these border policies on those who remain in the U.S., despite having relatives deported, and also, what are the effects on those who came to the U.S. as children, but are now deported back to a country that they do not know but are supposed to call home? This research can contribute to an ‘embodied’ understanding of borders and intersectional oppressions which is needed in order to shift dominant narratives and policies surrounding migration and security and, more importantly, address the social injustices women migrants face worldwide. Overall, by focusing on the stories and understanding the embodied, everyday experiences of women migrants, my research reveals that there are people and families behind the ‘unauthorized’ migration that is framed as a ‘threat’.



My work presents an opportunity to reflect on the structural factors that motivate migration and also influence (im)mobility.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: List of Interviewees

| <b>Interviewee</b>                              | <b>Location</b>   | <b>Date</b>            |
|---|-------------------|------------------------|
| Migration Research Expert                       | Mexico (D.F.)     | 04/09/2014             |
| Mexican Government<br>Representative (CEDH)     | Mexico (Veracruz) | 18/09/2014             |
| Migration Research Expert                       | Mexico (Veracruz) | 22/09/2014             |
| Migrant Shelter Staff                           | Mexico (Veracruz) | 30/09/2014             |
| Migration Research Expert                       | Mexico (Veracruz) | 30/09/2014             |
| Migration Research Expert                       | Mexico (Veracruz) | 30/09/2014; 07/10/2014 |
| NGO Representative                              | Mexico (Veracruz) | 11/10/2014             |
| Migrant Shelter<br>Administrator                | Mexico (Veracruz) | 11/10/2014             |
| Migrant Shelter Volunteer                       | Mexico (Veracruz) | 11/10/2014             |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (male)   | Mexico (Veracruz) | 11/10/2014             |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (female) | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 24/10/2014             |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (female) | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 25/10/2014             |
| Central American Migrant                        | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 26/10/2014             |

|   |                   |            |
|---|-------------------|------------|
| in transit (female)                             |                   |            |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (female) | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 27/10/2014 |
| Migrant Shelter<br>Administrator                | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 27/10/2014 |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (female) | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 28/10/2014 |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (female) | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 29/10/2014 |
| Central American Migrant<br>in transit (male)   | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 29/10/2014 |
| Migrant Shelter Volunteer                       | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 29/10/2014 |
| Migrant Shelter Director                        | Mexico (Oaxaca)   | 29/10/2014 |
| Migration Research Expert                       | Mexico (Veracruz) | 04/11/2014 |
| NGO Director                                    | Mexico (D.F.)     | 13/11/2014 |
| Migrant Shelter<br>Administrator                | Mexico (D.F.)     | 20/11/2014 |
| NGO Representative                              | Mexico (D.F.)     | 21/11/2014 |
| NGO Representative                              | Mexico (D.F.)     | 22/11/2014 |
| NGO Representative                              | Mexico (D.F.)     | 22/11/2014 |
| Migration Research Expert                       | Mexico (D.F.)     | 25/11/2014 |
|   |                   |            |

## **Appendix B – Government and Migration Documents**

### **In alphabetical order**

1. Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos de Mexicanos [Constitution of Mexico]
2. Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
3. Ley de Migración, 2011 [Migration Law, 2011]
4. Ley General de Población, 1974 [General Law of the Population, 1974]
5. Programa Frontera Sur, 2014 [Southern Border Plan, 2014]
6. Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias [Humanitarian Visa]
7. Tarjeta de Visitante Regional [Regional Visitor Visa]

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## **Conclusion**

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