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# WALKING, NOT FLOWING: THE MIGRANT CARAVAN AND THE GEOINFRASTRUCTURING OF UNEQUAL MOBILITY

BY POLLY PALLISTER-WILKINS



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In 2015 our TV screens, newspapers and social media were full of stories about ‘flows’ of migrants ‘pouring’ into Europe, set alongside photos and videos of people packed into boats at sea or meandering in long lines across fields. This vocabulary, and the images that accompanied it, suggested that migration was a natural force: like a flow of water that cannot be stopped, governed only by the forces of gravity. Now, this same language is being used to describe the ‘migrant caravan’ of the thousands of Hondurans leaving the violence of their home country and attempting to journey to the US.

This essay began life as an angry Twitter thread, hastily tapped out with my morning coffee. I argued that people were not flowing, but rather walking. In this [Twitter thread](#), I tried to forge a connection between the *how* of the journey—noting both the material and geographical aspects impacting and structuring how people move—and the physical impacts of that journey on the bodies of those

on the move. I called attention to the travelers' tired, blistered feet in an attempt to weave a thread between the material (and political) geographies of the journey and the embodied experiences of those making it. The Twitter thread drew some attention and solicited an invitation to write a short intervention for the small Dutch critical-journalism platform *De Nieuwe Reporter* where it appeared in Dutch with the title: "Dit is waarom media niet moeten schrijven over 'migrantenstromen'" ("This is why the media should not write about 'migrant flows'").

Time has passed since I wrote the intervention. Since then, the caravan has journeyed to the US-Mexico border. US and Mexican authorities have responded with tear gas and closures, highlighting in clear terms the violence of the border and corresponding mobility governance. This violence is too often obscured by talk of flows: in the intervention, I worked hard to make visible what watery metaphors of 'flow' do to shape how we think about migrant mobilities and what is lost in their usage. I attempted to highlight the uneven politics of mobility that is shaped by and made visible through a consideration of what I want to call *geoinfrastructuring*, alongside the embodied effects of this uneven mobility. Here, in contrast to modernity's quest for faster, more convenient, more efficient modes of travel to overcome the limits of the body as it encounters and moves through space, the migrant caravan's mode(s) of travel—walking, stopping, starting, bus hopping, sitting, waiting, sleeping—bring into sharp relief the ways that for those excluded from privileged mobility regimes, the body is in intimate concert with the material world it encounters.

The remainder of this essay will first reproduce the short intervention I wrote for *De Nieuwe Reporter* before thinking through more conceptually how this opinion piece relates to scholarly work on mobility and infrastructures.



*Edgard Garrido/Reuters*

What we call things matters (while often invisibilizing how they matter). A Reuters report on the status of the migrant caravan in English from October 21<sup>st</sup> had the headline “Thousands in U.S.-bound migrant caravan pour into Mexican city”, while two days earlier a report by Reuters had talked about a “bedraggled” migrant “surge” attempting to “breach” the Mexican border. Meanwhile in other news outlets, the watery theme continued with a migrant “storm” in the UK’s Daily Mail, and a “wave” in USA Today. And lest we think this was a something restricted to reporting in the Global North, the Latin American press has not been immune, with Venezuela’s Telesur talking of a “second wave of migration.” Meanwhile in the Dutch language media, *De Telegraaf* wrote of “Grote migrantenstromen trekken naar VS”, the headline handily highlighted in red in case the emergency nature of these “migrantenstromen” was not clear.

A counterpoint was offered by oneworld.nl, who talked of the dehumanizing effects of such language use. Indeed, what we call

things matters, because politicians also echo the language of the media creating a self-re-enforcing migration language.

Unsurprisingly Trump has talked of flows in his condemnation of the Honduran migrant caravan, while Mark Rutte earlier this year talked about Europe not being ready for a new “migrantenstroom” (“migrant flow”). However, what we call things also matters as much for what it reveals as what it conceals. The widespread use of watery and other natural metaphors when talking about migration journeys hides both the realities of and the reasons for the people’s journeys. To talk of rivers, streams, floods, and flows masks the experiences of the thousands of people who are walking thousands of kilometers. They are walking along roads, up hills and across borders; they are tired and hungry, and their feet hurt. Many are travelling with children as people are leaving lives of poverty and deadly gang violence and looking for a safe future in the United States. Just as the British-Somali refugee poet Warshan Shire urges us to consider that “No one would put their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land”, in the case of the Honduran migrant caravan it’s very unlikely that anyone would walk thousands of kilometers unless the road was safer than their homes.

One of those travelling is Orellana, an unemployed domestic worker travelling with her two five-year-old grandsons. She declared she had no choice after the boys’ father was murdered and she “[Could not] feed them anymore”, and she is too old to get a job herself. Orellana has decided to try and get to Texas where her daughter, who migrated three years before, now lives.

What the watery metaphors also hide is the agency of Hondurans like Orellana in attempting the journey and what the decision to travel in such a large group tells us about the realities of the journey itself. While the migrant caravan is walking to ostensible safety, the northbound journeys of Central American migrants through Mexico to the US are not safe. Many thousands attempt

this journey every year, encountering detention and extortion by the police and drug cartels, physical violence, rape, and death. The policing of Mexico's southern border, undertaken with the support of the US, does not only capture migrants in its net. Mexicans of indigenous appearance, suspected of being from Guatemala, Honduras or El Salvador because of crude processes of racial profiling, are routinely caught up in and detained in police patrols and at police checkpoints. In all this, women and teenagers are at particular risk. The risks of the journey are the reasons underpinning the choice of the Hondurans to travel in a caravan—the idea being that the greater the number of people, the lower the risk of capture and deportation, of physical harm from police, cartels and criminals along the route, and of being stopped by border controls. Moving in a caravan also removes the need to employ the services of smugglers who are often linked to cartels and are a source of the violence migrants face. In other words, people are reclaiming the right to move without paying large sums of money.

Talk of “flows” also hides the way the journeys of migrants are shaped by the infrastructures of their travel. Roads direct migrants in particular directions and border controls interrupt their movement and divert them into using different paths. Unlike a river, they are not a force of nature that can make their way to their metaphorical sea by the quickest and most efficient route possible. The obstacles migrants encounter on their journey are not only natural obstacles like rivers, deserts, or mountains, but also human-made obstacles like police roadblocks, border control points and migrant prisons.

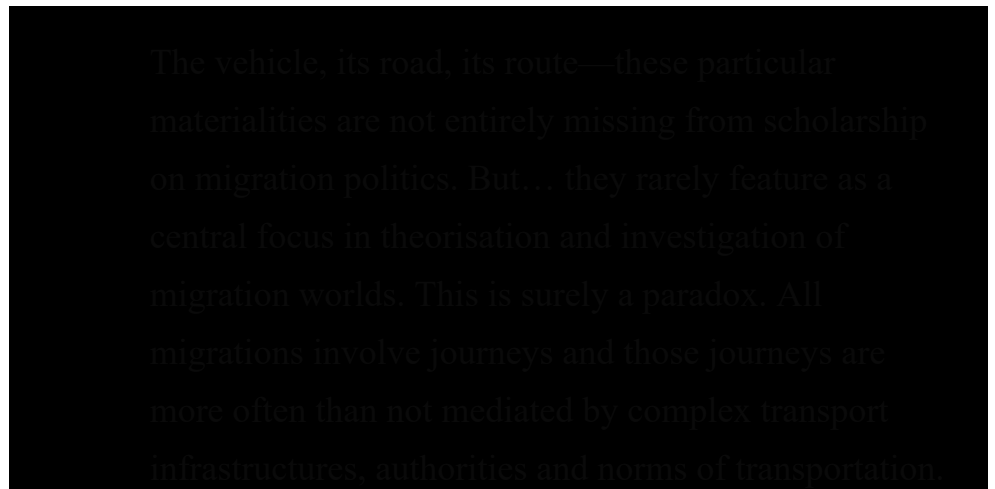
And yet in the face of all this, they still walk. Faced with the difficulties of the journey and the promise of repatriation, some have already returned to Honduras. But many in the caravan have now crossed two national borders, with Guatemala and Mexico.

Their numbers are growing as many people see the strength in numbers and the difficulty, both practically and politically, of preventing passage. Many others still are left sleeping on bridges, hungry and thirsty with little access to sanitation or shelter as they wait to enter Mexico. And yet they walk, they wait, and more join because “It’s even worse in Honduras.”



*Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters*

In my work on humanitarian borderwork I have begun to argue for a deeper focus on the ways infrastructures and geographies intimately shape not only the risks faced by those excluded from safe and legal travel but also how the excluded move (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018, 2019). This builds on William Walter’s earlier demand that studies of migration take the journey seriously:



Granted, in many instances those journeys may be rather uneventful and not in the least bit life-changing or politically salient. . . . Nevertheless, in many other instances, the journey is politically salient, perhaps even a life-or-death experience. (2015: 270)

Alongside taking the journey seriously, Mimi Sheller’s important work has shone a light on systems of ‘motility’, differential mobility capability, and mobility justice (2018) and Vicki Squire has drawn our attention to the biophysical role of deserts and seas in governing mobility (2016). Therefore, a focus on the journey and differential mobility capabilities challenges the watery metaphor of ‘flow,’ compelling us instead to understand how infrastructures and geographies—roads, bridges, deserts, mountains, border controls, police patrols, walls and fences, time and speed — make possible and condition particular types of mobility with embodied effects.

Infrastructures here, following Lauren Berlant (2016), are defined by use (and movement) coming to pattern social life. They are what organizes life. As such they are agents in the (re)production of social inequalities (Donovan, 2015) and uneven geographies (Chua et. al, 2018). Alongside the way infrastructures pattern social life, consideration of infrastructuring offers a dynamic way of understanding the *how* of unequal mobility beyond the crafting of policy, enabling a greater consideration of infrastructure as something dynamic and mutable in the context of use.

Infrastructures are not all encountered or utilized equally. A road driven is not the same as a road walked. Moreover, in thinking about context and use, Deborah Cowen (2014) has drawn our attention to the ways infrastructure, such as complex systems of just-in-time logistics, not only works to overcome the limits of space and time, but also offers opportunities for disruption and resistance. The essays in the “Investigating Infrastructures” Forum



on this site show the role of infrastructures in crafting and reinforcing uneven geographies.

With this in mind, I also want to consider the role of physical geography as an active agent working along with border, policing, and transport infrastructures in conditioning the *how* of unequal mobility as well as the embodied risks migrants face. The exclusive and privileged nature of various (safer) transport infrastructures and the growth of differential mobility regimes results in physical geographies and their attendant risks coming to matter to what Karen Barad would call matter (2003), in this instance to human life and well-being. In these instances, physical geographies have been politically made to matter through various policies underpinning mobility access and they come to matter at the level of the individual migrant bodies that encounter them.

Infrastructural projects—roads, railways, and shipping routes—are all attempts to overcome the limits of physical geography. Planes and their attendant infrastructures of airports, airlines, runways and air traffic control make the traversal of great distance and the geographies of seas, mountains, and deserts possible and less risky. By making air travel exclusive, not through cost alone but through border regimes that deny access to those without the correct documentation, physical geography comes to matter more. Those seeking life through movement are increasingly prevented from accessing such transport. Thus, at the level of individual bodies and the journeys they make, the physical geography of the route comes to play a greater constitutive role. As Mimi Sheller makes clear, “There is a relation between personal bodily vulnerabilities, the struggle for shelter, the splintering of infrastructural systems, and the management of citizenship regimes and borders” (2018: xiv).

Infrastructural projects such as roads, railways, and runways suggest attempts to overcome the limits of physical geography and

yet are also intimately shaped by them. Mountain roads, for example, contain hairpin bends necessitated by the gradient of the slopes they cross. Bridges span rivers where such engineering can practically and safely take place. Meanwhile, a lack of roads or bridges impedes mobility, encouraging migrants to use boats, to swim, or like the Rohingya's journeys from Rakhine into Bangladesh, to use the small narrow dykes that have shaped the environment of the wetlands of the Naf River delta.

As John Law noted in his study of the possibilities that the Portuguese ship created for long distance control and an apparent human-technological triumph over space, the physical geographies of the ocean—"the winds and currents"—are an ever-present actor working in concert with infrastructure networks (1986). According to Law, it is not possible to think about these infrastructural networks and the social, political, and economic forces they represent and bring into being without a consideration of what he calls the natural, or what I am calling physical geography. The nature of concern to Law is very different from the natural world evoked by discussion of migrant flows and the wide variety of attendant watery metaphors. In these discussions, flow is a description. For Law, flow would have and perform a relational role. This relational ontology becomes even more politically pressing when the natural has embodied effects on the lives of migrants bound up in such a relational system. Put simply, the physical geography alongside infrastructures affects how people move and the risks they encounter on their journeys.

Therefore, geoinfrastructuring, I argue, is important in considering how people exercise mobility. Geoinfrastructuring both conditions the journey of the migrant caravan and creates particular embodied effects, such as sore feet, blisters, joint pain, sprained muscles, and dehydration. Moments of enforced waiting on the journey, such as at border crossing points, generate their own embodied risks due to

poor sanitation, lack of access to clean drinking water, and exposure to extreme weather, which in turn creates the need for as well as the time and space for limited humanitarian relief (see Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). However, as the migrant caravan attests, geoinfrastructure also creates the possibility for a (conditioned) resistance to exclusionary political-material mobility regimes. Infrastructural spaces and systems—roads, transit areas, buses and pick-up trucks—are being claimed and used by Honduran migrants in their journeys to the United States. In Europe and in the context of my own research, one of the key architects of Médecins Sans Frontières’ Search and Rescue operations has impressed upon me the important interrelation of the sea, infrastructures of surveillance and visibility, and the boat in making possible humanitarian efforts not only at saving lives but in addition the “activist” element of such search and rescue. Here, the dynamics of the sea, in concert with European border surveillance systems such as EUROSUR and the boat, make possible certain political interventions and disruptions that, it is argued, are not possible in other environments such as the Sahara and speak to Law’s idea of a relational ontology.<sup>[1]</sup>

Away from the migrant caravan and my own research on search and rescue in the Mediterranean, I have become interested in exploring the relationship between physical, infrastructural and border geographies in how migrants choose to cross the Alps from Italy into France. These crossings occur at only a few points along the border, at crossing points that are manageable to migrants with differential mobility capabilities. Importantly, they are less risky than other crossing points due to lower altitude, better transport connections and a reduced police presence, such as at the Col de l’Échelle between the Italian town of Bardonecchia and the French city of Briançon. People do not cross through these places for lack of other routes. The town of Bardonecchia, for example, is located at the Italian entrance of both the Fréjus tunnel linking France and

Italy, carrying motor vehicles under the Alps, and the older Mont Cenis tunnel linking France and Italy by rail. The entry point to the Fréjus and the trains using the Mont Cenis are heavily policed. The policing of the Fréjus tunnel is further made easier by traffic having to stop and pass through toll booths. And yet, the presence of the railway and its attendant station in Bardonecchia means that it is relatively accessible for migrants travelling from the rest of Italy. Its proximity to the French border, only 7km and a relatively gentle walk away, means that this particular border region has become a particularly popular passage point for migrants wanting to leave Italy for France.

I have come to know this region well through its additional and complimentary infrastructures of tourism. The cross-border region is a popular holiday destination for people like me who are drawn there by the geoinfrastructure that makes for excellent cycling terrain. This tourism infrastructure for both summer and winter Alpine sports and outdoor activities means that the area is comparatively heavily populated for the Hautes-Alpes. This has resulted in services capable and willing to assist migrants with their journeys, from dedicated and well-equipped teams of mountain rescuers, to a large hospital specializing in mountain injuries, and solidarity activists offering food and shelter. In this region of the Hautes-Alpes, geoinfrastructuring, like with the migrant caravan, shapes not only *how* and *why* migrants make their journeys in particular ways: it also facilitates the exercising of political resistance to exclusionary border regimes by both migrants themselves and those who stand in solidarity with them.

With this short essay I have attempted to challenge the language of flows and in so doing drawn attention to the constitutive role of infrastructures and their embodied effects in how migrants, excluded from safe and legal forms of transportation, exercise mobility. I have argued that as political geographers we should also

consider the role of physical geography in making a difference in these journeys that occur in concert with roads, rivers, mountains, deserts, tunnels, bridges and vehicles. These physical geographies, as Vicki Squire argues, have biophysical effects. This is not to normalize the very real bodily dangers faced by migrants in their journeys by seeking to lay blame at the foot of the mountain, so to speak. Instead, it is to suggest that these physical geographies come to matter and have very real effects because of the political role ascribed to them by human decision-making concerned with (re)producing unequal mobility. It is to make the case for what I have termed here geoinfrastructuring—the assemblage of physical, material and political geographies—that shape how migrants move and the risks they face.

### Notes

[1] Interview with key architect of MSF's Search and Rescue Operations, Amsterdam, 10 July 2018.

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