

Close encounters of the deadly kind: Gender, migration, and border (in)security

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss several findings of my study of migrant women, temporarily suspended in the “intersection” of diametrically opposed processes: those posed by border enforcement measures and those posed by transnational mobility. A pressing issue that emerged from this research was how close women come to encountering death as they sidestep the border wall to cross without authorization into the US. Their testimonies shed light on how the intersection of contradictory processes contributes to a humanitarian crisis on the US-Mexico border in which the likelihood of death is increasingly present.

Keywords: migrants; women; border; crossing; deaths.

Introduction

There is little doubt that the migration of women from Latin America has been steadily increasing since the 1980s. Paralleling many other regions in the world, women now comprise slightly over half of the total number of migrants in Latin America (Pessar 2005, Zlotnik 2003). Many studies show that more women are migrating not necessarily to join their husbands in the U.S. (Cerruti and Massey 2001, Donato 1993), but as part of powerful social network systems crucial to the economic support of families in settlement communities as well as sending communities by way of remittances (Ramirez, Domínguez, and Morais 2005). Through this agency, women not only actively resist policy measures designed to restrict their movement but also perhaps even alter them (O'Leary n.d.). In addition, similar to their male coun-

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terparts, once women begin migrating, they are virtually assured of cyclical, repeat migration (Donato 1994). These developments increasingly subject women to risks of all types, and in the process, contribute to the normalization of extreme suffering on the US-Mexican border.

It is in this vein that the tragic relationship between unauthorized border crossing and increased enforcement has been examined. Research on recovered bodies in the US Border Patrol Tucson Sector by the Binational Migration Institute at the University of Arizona¹ has determined that migrant deaths due to exposure have dramatically increased since 1994 when harsher measures to enforce the border between the US and Mexico were implemented. In addition, of the bodies² recovered in the desert from 2000 to 2007, it was found that when controlling for age (younger than 18 years of age), women were 2.70 times more likely to die of exposure than all other causes of death when compared to men (Rubio-Goldsmith, McCormick, Martinez and Duarte 2006). My study, "Women at the Intersection: Immigration Enforcement and Transnational Migration on the US-Mexico Border"³ was thus inspired by the scholarly interest on the impact of increased border enforcement. From September of 2006 to June, 2007, I collected the *testimonios* of 100 repatriated migrant women to document their encounters with immigration enforcement agents. These testimonies were contextualized within broader economic and social environments and the border crossing experience in an effort to render as complete a portrait as possible of migrant women who were temporarily suspended in the "intersection" of diametrically opposed border processes: those posed by im-

¹ The Binational Migration Institute at the Mexican American Studies and Research Center (MASRC) at the University of Arizona seek to comprehensively document and analyze the interaction between migrants and immigration enforcement authorities.

² Presumed to be of undocumented border crossers.

³ Support for the initial pilot study for this research was provided by a Social and Behavioral Science Research Institute (SBSRI) Small Grant at the University of Arizona. The research subsequently was made possible by a Fulbright grant awarded for 2006-2007.

migration enforcement and those posed by transnational movement. Not surprisingly, their stories provide additional evidence for what advocates of migrant rights have long argued: that both failed and successful attempts to cross into the U.S. without authorization are the result of extreme poverty and the involuntary migration that may help relieve it. However, failed attempts may prove fatal and this harsh reality lies at the heart of the issue of increased border enforcement. It follows public discourse that problematises migrants and how administrative solutions are conceived (Inda 2006). In this way the intersection can be seen as the “space” in which the politics of problem-making are carried out. As more and more women enter and exit the intersection of oppositional forces, the potentially deadly outcomes call into question the politics that drive efforts to secure the nation’s borders and thus reveal extratextual insight necessary for examining underlying social and xenophobic undercurrents upon which border enforcement policies are premised.

Immigration enforcement in the age of border (in)security

Steps taken to secure the US Mexico border can be traced to its militarization that began in the 1970s (Dunn 1996). In this context, the adoption of the Southwest Border Strategy⁴ in 1993 can be seen as an extension of a series of political measures to secure the border (Nevins 2002). More recently, the events of 9/11 have re-invigorated anti-immigrant political rhetoric calling for greater military intrusions into civilian life, such as the deployment of 6000 national guardsmen in 2006 to secure the US border with Mexico. This discourse has set the stage for the abuse of power by police⁵ and rise of paramilitary groups,⁶ leading to a *less* secure environment. For

⁴ This strategy involved the intensification of border closures known as Operation Hold the Line (1993), Operation Gatekeeper (1994), and Operation Safeguard (1995).

⁵ In 2004 alone there were four incidents of shootings of suspected migrants by Tucson Sector border patrol agents.

⁶ 2005 also has seen an increase in civilians assuming policing (vigilante) roles along the border.

example, critics have argued that in the interest of border security and the rapid hiring of agents, standards for screening, training, and supervising agents may have been relaxed (Steller 2001), which led to the rash of high profile cases involving the sexual misconduct of Border Patrol agents against migrant women between 1993-2000 (Falcon 2001). These developments have not resulted in reduction of migrant traffic but rather its shift into more remote desert areas as migrants attempt to avoid detection (Cornelius 2001). Thus, this has made them more vulnerable to all kinds of risks.

Research methods

The present research was conducted at a migrant shelter, Albergue San Juan Bosco, in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, which is 55 miles south of Tucson, Arizona. Like many other border cities, Nogales is experiencing rapid growth due to the high influx of migrants, 48% of whom are women (Monteverde García 2004).⁷ Like other migrant shelters that have sprouted along the US Mexico border, Albergue San Juan Bosco⁸ is dedicated to the aid of repatriated women and men who upon their release from the custody of US immigration enforcement authorities find themselves without shelter or a support system in the area. In this way, the shelter offers temporary safety and respite for otherwise highly vulnerable and often traumatized migrants.⁹ Guests at the shelter typically stay only one to two days before they either attempt to

⁷ This figure is consistent with the percent of female migrants in Latin America and North America (Zlotnik 2003).

⁸ Albergue Plan Retorno, which was closed in early 2007, sheltered only men, and Albergue Menores Repatriados typically only shelters unaccompanied minors under the age of 18, although on occasion, women may also be sheltered there.

⁹ Understanding the role that violence plays in border enforcement is critical to migration research and the development of effective policies to eliminate migrant vulnerability. However, postponed for now is a much-needed discussion on the emotional challenges presented by the research and the intellectual challenges that continue to unfold as the practical and political implications of how traumatic events are ethically analyzed and written about.

re-enter the US or return to their communities of origin. It was because of this that a Rapid Appraisal (RA) method of data collection was chosen for the research (Carruthers and Chambers 1981).¹⁰ The centerpiece of RA methodology is engagement in problem-solving dialogues with stakeholder communities in relatively short but often multiple field visits to the study area to get at the heart of the issue being investigated (Clift and Freimuth 1997). Unlike surveys, interviewees are active participants in the interview process and a semi-structured topic guide is used as a checklist of issues that are pertinent to the study. It is expected that not all topics will be discussed with all interviewees and that in fact each interview may depart from the basic questions to pursue interesting, unexpected, or new information. The emergence of data is enhanced by observation and secondary information (triangulation) and in this way RA enables the collection of detailed information on the issues that are of greatest importance to both the individual interviewee and interviewer. Each experience in this way became situated within broader environments in which decisions were made and the border-crossing ordeal that culminated in apprehension by immigration enforcement agents.

Conceptualizing the field site

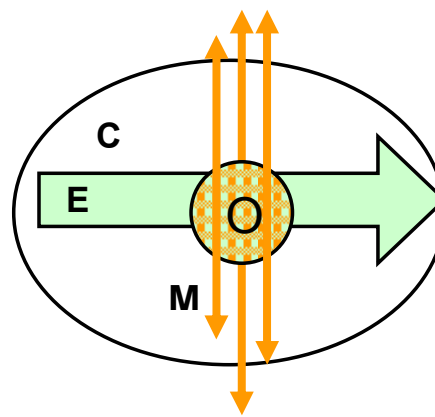
Cunningham and Heyman (2004) argue that national borders are particularly well suited for empirically examining two salient but diametrically opposed enclosure and mobility forces. Enclosure is best understood by the challenges that impede its implementation. Conversely, mobility is best understood in the context of the barriers that impede or restrict it.

¹⁰ Robert Chambers might be the scholar most commonly associated with pioneering “rapid rural appraisal” techniques. Beebe (2001) provides a comprehensive history of the adoption of the method in a wide range of disciplines. Often known by different names, RA remains consistent with the early procedures advanced by Chambers and others.

I have reworked this idea to conceptualize a space where these opposing processes intersect (Figure 1), and to help me delimit my field site. Conceptualizing the field site in this way also follows Hannerz' (1998) suggestion for organizing transnational research, where migrants are viewed as somewhere in between two points instead of in the conventional community study either at the end or beginning of their migration journey.

This space, the "O" in Figure 1, is thus structured by horizontal systems that "enclose" (such as walls, patrolling), and vertical mobility systems that facilitate transnational movement (such as commerce, smuggling).

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Horizontal and Vertical Processes**



C = Context: The U.S.-Mexico border region
 E = Enclosure: the immigration enforcement system.
 M = Mobility system(s)
 O = Intersection of competing processes

Emergent patterns: Close encounters of the deadly kind

Interviews¹¹ with women at the migrant shelter helped expose the intersection as a space where oppositional processes (horizontal and vertical) converge. The potential for tragedy as an outcome of this convergence became clear as the research progressed with more testimonies of abandonment and close encounters with death (O'Leary 2009). From these interviews, the following perilous patterns were revealed:

- An increase in the time needed to cross the desert was necessary, and accordingly, there was greater risk of harm due to greater exposure to the elements.

¹¹ With very few exceptions, the migrant women interviewed allowed me to record their accounts.

- An increase in the distance travelled was needed to elude enforcement measures, and accordingly, the need to be prepared with more water and food was greater.
- As migrants are pushed away from known routes, the navigation of unfamiliar and more treacherous topographies pose greater risk of physical injury.
- Confronted with exceedingly harsh conditions, women, many (85%) of whom identified themselves as “*madres solteras*” (single mothers) and who may have begun their journey already exhausted and stressed by the double-burden of being responsible for *both* productive and reproductive (domestic) activities, may be more likely to cede to fatigue.¹² A smaller percentage (9%) was indeed traveling with children and risked being abandoned by faster-moving members who were not.

Case studies illustrate that a combination of conditions contribute to possible abandonment. For example, one woman, Alejandra ¹³ and her two children, ages 10 and 15, were left behind by their *pollero* (guide) when she yielded to exhaustion and stress. They were unprepared for the time it would take to cross. She was told by the *pollero* (the guide) that the crossing would take one day (*Asi que desde un principio nos estafaron realmente.*” [They tricked us from the very beginning]). Her son, who was 10, seemed to keep up well enough at first: “*El niño aguantó el camino. Ya casi al último, donde los supuestamente nos iba a levantar las camionetas, `el ya no podía. Entonces el coyote se regresaba y me gritaba, ‘Hay chingado pues a que vienen!. Y le digo yo, pues mi hijo ya no puede caminar! Y empezó a discutir conmigo, pero ya le tenía mucho coraje al niño*¹⁴. Alejandra also became worried when the

¹² The overwhelming majority of the women interviewed (90%) were migrating primarily because they could not support their household with the incomes provided by agricultural sector economies. Highly related to the poor economic conditions that they faced was the inability to meet education costs and their health care needs or those of other family members.

¹³ The name used here as for all the migrant women interviewed are pseudonyms.

¹⁴ “The boy kept up on the way. Near the end, where supposedly we were going to be picked up by the vans, he could no longer keep up. Then the

guide began to drag her daughter to the front of the group, supposedly to keep her from falling behind. However, Alejandra kept falling behind and grew uncomfortable when she could no longer keep an eye on her. When she protested, the *pollero* just ignored her, furthering her distrust of him. She now feared that he might take her daughter in exchange for leaving her and her son behind: “*Le vi malos modos...Se la llevó adelante adelante adelante...y pensé, que se va a querer cobrar con mi hija.*” [I saw something malicious in him...He took her to the front, to the front, to the front...and I thought that he’s going to use my daughter as his pay back.] She finally decided that she had had enough and announced that she would not go on, that they would return to the border. So it was that the group went on without them. The three attempted to retrace their steps but subsequently became disorientated and wandered for two additional days in the desert trying to find their way back to the border. They endured near freezing temperatures, ran out of food, and covered themselves with plastic trash bags to protect themselves from the rain before they were finally spotted by a border patrol agent and repatriated.

Migrant women’s testimonies in this way not only shed light on harsh realities of border crossing but also embody the space where processes of enclosure and mobility intersect and contribute to migrant deaths. Their experiences thus provide a basis for a critical counter narrative to the dominant discourse—whether implied or explicit—that uncritically endorses a nation’s right to enforce its borders regardless of the cost in human life (Nevins 2003).

pollero would come to the back [of the group] and yelled at her ‘The fuck! So what do you come for!’ and I tell him ‘Well my son can’t walk anymore!’ And he began to argue with me, but he was already angry at the boy.

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