

In the Footsteps of Spirits

MIGRANT WOMEN'S TESTIMONIOS IN A TIME OF
HEIGHTENED BORDER ENFORCEMENT

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IT WAS EARLY SPRING when I interviewed a group of four migrant women who found refuge at the Nogales, Sonora, migrant shelter, Albergue San Juan Bosco. The weather outside had yet to shed the harshness of winter but inside the shelter the women radiated warm support for each other after their border-crossing ordeal. The objective of my research, "Women at the Intersection: Immigration Enforcement and Transnational Migration on the U.S.–Mexico Border," had been inspired by my scholarly interest in death on the border, and in the spring of 2006, I began to systematically collect the *testimonios* of repatriated migrant women on their border-crossing experiences.¹ The interviews with migrant women focused on their encounter with U.S. immigration enforcement agents, and these experiences were couched within broader social and economic contexts that informed their decisions to migrate. My conversation with four of the women on this cold March evening began like many others. Their stories by then had become all too familiar: descriptions of the arduous trek through an inhospitable desert; the almost inevitable attack by border bandits ("bajadores"), who robbed them of their meager possessions; and, ultimately, apprehension by the U.S. Border Patrol and eventual repatriation to Mexico. This particular evening, however, the dialogue turned towards reflection on the women's vulnerabilities and fears. They described the familiar pattern of being led in groups across the border by their *guías* (guides), and the practice of short rest periods after hours of fast-paced walking. One of the women, Rosario, gave her account: "Ya después de muchas horas corriendo, subiendo y bajando terrazería, ¡pura terrazería! descansamos, pero yo no pude descansar." (And after running for many hours, up and down hills, almost all hills! we rested, but I could not rest.)

SOURCE: *Violence, Security, and Human Rights at the Border*, Kathleen Staudt, Tony Payan, and Z. Anthony Kruszewski (Eds.). Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 91-112.

The other women nodded in agreement. Another of the women, Catalina, added: "Yo no se cómo, pero los hombres sí, así como iban cayendo así, ¡a dormir! ¡Hasta roncando!" (I don't know how, but the men could, just as they fell to the ground, go to sleep! Even snoring!). At this the women again nodded and laughed. Then Rosario grew introspective and solemn, saying:

Yo—yo no pude descansar; ¡tenía mucho miedo, mucho miedo! Como se oían ruidos. Se oían como pasos, cómo si caminara algo sobre el suelo, y me daba miedo . . . creo que eran los pasos de los que habían ya caminado por allí, de sus almas que todavía caminaban por el desierto. [As for myself—I could not rest, I was too scared, very scared! It was like I could hear noises. I could hear like footsteps, as if something was walking over the ground, and I became frightened. . . . I think they were the footsteps of those who already walked through there, of their spirits that still walked the desert.]

Interviews with women at the Albergue San Juan Bosco highlight an intersection as a place where opposite processes converge, not only theoretically but in concrete terms as well. In part, being caught in the intersection can be understood by the fact that for decades, the United States' need for labor and the desire for family reunification have been historically central to decisions to migrate. Research on gendered migration patterns, for example, shows that the movement of unaccompanied men is generally followed by that of their wives and family members (Cerrutti and Massey 2001; Donato 1994). In the current study, almost all of the migrant women interviewed had children but considered themselves single mothers by the abandonment of their partners. Counter to this tendency towards family reunification is the hardening of border security measures that, in effect, contribute to family separation (O'Leary, forthcoming). Thus, it is not surprising that the most pressing issue that emerged from this study was that as more and more women migrate, more are likely to encounter conditions that may turn fatal. Their situations can be summarized as having been developed by the following patterns:

- A general increase in the time needed to cross the desert and, accordingly, an increase in the time all migrants are exposed to the elements.

- A general increase in the distance of the trek in order to stay out of reach of the Border Patrol and, concomitantly, greater physical stress of carrying water and food over greater distances is placed on all migrants.
- Encounters with unfamiliar terrain and, compared with more traversed migration routes, more treacherous topographies predispose migrants to greater risk of physical trauma, such as broken or sprained limbs.
- Because of the above, many of the women interviewed stated that they had given up in the middle of their trek through the desert.
- Due to any of the circumstances above, or combination of circumstances, many women were ultimately abandoned in the desert by their guides.

The case studies highlighted below further illustrate these troublesome patterns and indicate how women may be at higher risk than men when crossing into the United States without authorization.

Women at the Intersection of Border Security and Transnational Migration

There is little doubt that the migration of women from Latin America has been steadily increasing since the 1980s. By some estimates, female migrants represent about half of all migration from Latin America (Zlotnik 2003). In the Sonora-Arizona region, estimates range from 37.1 percent (Castro Luque, Olea Miranda, and Zepeda Bracamonte 2006) to 48 percent (Monteverde and García 2004). However, perhaps what is most important is the dramatic rise in female migration since 1994, as illustrated in table 5.1.

In spite of this dramatic rise, little is known about women's border crossing experiences. We know very little about the effects on women of intensified efforts to secure the border from unauthorized entry into the United States or about their encounters with immigration enforcement officials. Since the Southwest Border Strategy² and other measures to seal the border were implemented beginning in 1993, Nogales, like other Arizona-Sonora border cities, has experienced exponential growth in migration-related activities due to the "rechannelling" or "funneling"

TABLE 5.1. Migrants by Gender, Nogales, 1993–1999

	1993–94	1994–95	1996–97	1998–99
Men	92.4	95.1	84.3	62.9
Women	7.6	4.9	15.7	37.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Castro Luque et al. 2006.

of migration traffic through Sonora (Cornelius 2001; Rubio-Goldsmith, et al. 2006, 7). Up until now, many undocumented migrants who were apprehended in Arizona were “voluntarily” removed³ from the United States at the Nogales, Arizona, port of entry. According to a Department of Homeland Security web site,⁴ the Tucson Border Patrol sector, which includes Nogales, led all other sectors with 439,090 apprehensions in 2005. Unfortunately, these statistics are not disaggregated by gender categories, obfuscating information that would shed light on gender and migration.

The research on the brutal murders of women in Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico (Camacho 2004; Urquijo-Ruiz 2004) has been important for bringing to the public’s attention the unprecedented level of violence against women who migrate in the post-NAFTA period (Greenlees and Saenz 1999; Hirsch 2002; Márquez and Padilla 2003). Little is known about women once they cross into the United States. We can assume that they face the same numerous risks as their male counterparts: exposure to unscrupulous human smugglers and border bandits, drowning, pedestrian and automobile accidents, and risk of injury and even death as they scale fences and hike through inhospitable desert terrain in an effort to avoid detection (Eschbach, et al. 1999). However, how risks vary by gender is still underresearched. Newspaper accounts have been instrumental in making public several cases of border patrol agents’ sexual assault of migrant women (Cieslak 2000; Falcon 2001; Steller 2001; Urquijo-Ruiz 2004). Yet, these cases have only raised more questions than answers about how common these occurrences are. The five-year research on the sharp rise in migrant deaths on the U.S.–Mexico border since 1993 by Eschbach and his colleagues considered gender as one of several variables but was inconclusive in terms of a gendered distribution of migrant mortality due to intensified border enforcement (1999). In this study, women

accounted for only 15 percent of approximately sixteen hundred migrant fatalities on the U.S.–Mexico border between 1993 and 1997. It was speculated that women were more likely than men to avoid the dangerous journey over rough terrain by using false documents to enter through official ports of entry and thus contributed significantly less to the total migrant mortality rate. However, more recent information strongly indicates that women may indeed shoulder a disproportionate risk of death with stepped-up efforts to secure the U.S. border with Mexico. Research on the number of bodies recovered in the U.S. Border Patrol Tucson Sector since 1991 by the Binational Migration Institute at the University of Arizona⁵ confirms that deaths of presumed migrants due to exposure to the elements increased dramatically since 1994 when harsher measures to enforce the border between the United States and Mexico were implemented. In addition, of the bodies of presumed undocumented border crossers recovered in the desert from 2000 to 2007, it was found that after 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 with men (Rubio-Goldsmith, et al. 2006). Moreover, with the rising costs of migration correlated with increased border surveillance and enforcement, women may be less able to procure false documents (*papeles chuecos*) at three thousand dollars per person that would enable them to cross by car and in this way avoid the more perilous route through the desert on foot (O’Leary 2009).

After summaries of the political and historical bases for this research and the task itself, I will discuss some of the findings by way of three narratives. Through these, a prominent feature of the intersection will be fleshed out, which consists of the potential for encountering death. Both the goal of crossing into the United States undetected and the failure to do so can be seen as opposite sides of the same coin: both the result of poverty and the involuntary migration that may help relieve it. Poverty thus lies at the heart of women’s encounters with the physical and psychological migration trauma that may prove fatal. Moreover, the ways in which women are subjected to harsh and punishing realities lie at the heart of border enforcement practices. At the international border, boundaries that delimit nation and nationhood reflect sociopolitical practices created by established power relations that designate who belongs and who does not. The intersection can be seen as the “space”

in which the politics of "otherness" and marginalization is carried out. However, as more and more women enter and exit the intersection of oppositional forces, the outcome in terms of risk calls into question the established disciplinary mechanisms by which exclusion is enforced. The intersection thus reveals the extratextual insight necessary for assessing underlying social currents upon which immigration enforcement policies are premised and for raising concerns about the clash between economic and political realities. These testimonies also recount women's brushes with death in attempting to cross into the United States through the inhospitable Sonoran desert. Their experiences have been contextualized within broader economic and social environments 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: immigration enforcement and transnational movement.

Immigration Enforcement in the Age of Heightened Border (In)Security

The increased policing of the U.S.–Mexico border area began long before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (Dunn 1996). While a concern for national security justifies to a large degree military intrusion into civilian life, it also invites the escalation of the use and abuse of armed enforcement by policing authorities⁶ and civilians alike,⁷ leading to a less secure environment. The extent to which undocumented migrant women are made vulnerable by the increased policing along the border is still underresearched. Critics have long 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, which led to the rash of high profile cases involving sexual misconduct by Border Patrol agents between 1993 and 2000 (Steller 2001). More recently, the intensification of anti-immigrant rhetoric during the 2006 elections has worked to aggravate a climate of fear and distrust, and greater insecurity for residents of border communities. The existing political climate is important for understanding how information about noncitizens' rights is obscured. Under U.S. law, migrants are entitled to protections regardless of their legal status (Hull 1983). Racist attitudes and hate messages, however, threaten the rights of noncitizens

(Johnson 2004) and have been known to justify, condone, and encourage the use of harsher mechanisms of control of racialized groups, including legal residents and citizens. Furthermore, the harsh treatment of racialized groups may go unreported because offenses often take place outside public purview or lie outside the legal definitions of misconduct (Milovanovic and Russell 2001). Offenses against racialized groups also may go unreported because those victimized are members of social groups already marginalized based on other social divisions, such as gender and ethnicity. In the case of undocumented migrants, violations of their rights remain undisclosed by the simple fact that victims are repatriated or deported and they have little or no opportunity or incentive to denounce their offenders.

The Research

The present research was conducted at a migrant shelter, Albergue San Juan Bosco, in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Nogales, Sonora, a Mexican border city fifty-five miles south of Tucson, Arizona, lies within the funnel, or channel, created by the Southwest Border Strategy. Like many other cities along the Arizona-Sonora border, Nogales is experiencing rapid growth due to the high influx of migrants, of which up to 48 percent are estimated to be women (Monteverde García 2004).⁸ Many studies suggest that gendered migration patterns, those in which the movement of unaccompanied men is followed by that of wives and other family members, are undergoing change (Cerrutti and Massey 2001; Donato 1993). These studies suggest that the migration patterns of women increasingly resemble those of their unaccompanied male counterparts. For example, the growing research on domestic workers, one of the fastest growing labor sectors and one that undocumented women are most likely to engage in, shows that more Latina women are leaving their own children behind to take care of the families of others in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002; Ibarra 2003). In addition, similar to their male counterparts, once women begin migrating, they are virtually trapped in a migrating cycle (Donato 1994). The increase in the migration of women without spouses and family and the cyclical nature of migration also raises the chance that they will experience multiple detentions and also the chances that they will become the victims of

violence (Monteverde García 2004). Without systematic documentation of what occurs at the intersection of two powerful but contrary processes, border enforcement and mobility, such policies may very well be institutionalizing and normalizing death and extreme suffering.

The research began in the spring of 2006 with six weeks of piloting the logistics and the semi-structured questionnaire at the migrant shelter that was the site chosen for the study, Albergue San Juan Bosco. Like other migrant shelters that have sprouted along the U.S.–Mexico line, Albergue San Juan Bosco is dedicated to the aid of repatriated migrants who, upon their release from the custody of U.S. immigration enforcement authorities, find themselves without shelter or a support system in the area. Unlike the other two shelters in Nogales, Albergue San Juan Bosco is a nongovernmental organization and depends almost entirely on local volunteers. It accommodates both male and female migrants.⁹ Guests at the shelter typically stay only one to two days at Albergue San Juan Bosco before either attempting to re-enter the United States or returning to their communities of origin. On account of this fast-paced population turnover, a Rapid Appraisal (RA) method was chosen for this research. RA emerged initially from development research (Carruthers and Chambers 1981) but it has increasingly been used in the development and assessment of public health interventions.¹⁰ Consistent with RA methods, a topic guide was used to interview migrant women who arrived at the shelter and to get at the heart of migrant woman's experiences. The topic guide was designed to investigate, among other things, what women's experiences were while in the custody of immigration enforcement agents in Arizona and how those experiences affected their lives and their decisions to attempt to cross again or to return to their communities of origin.

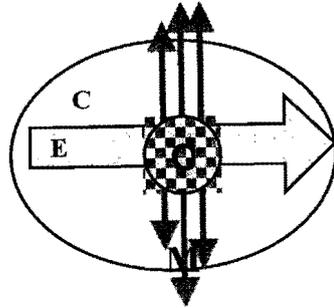
In September of 2006, I began to visit the shelter every two weeks, with the goal of systematically collecting data. Each "visit" consisted of three consecutive nights from 7:00 p.m. to approximately 10:00 p.m. in which I interviewed women who had been repatriated by U.S. immigration officials. In the ten months of the study (September 2006 through June 2007), my research assistant and I interviewed one hundred women. The number of participants for each interview varied, as the number of women who showed up at the shelter each night was unpredictable. With more visits to the shelter, I fell into the shelter's

rhythm, and gained rapport with the managers and volunteers. Being of Mexican heritage and a native speaker of Spanish, while not a guarantee that I would be considered a person to be trusted, was, I believe, also helpful in projecting myself as trustworthy (*de confianza*) among shelter guests. This enabled me to ask and receive their permission to record the interviews.

Although perceived policy needs were built into the research design, the research also adopted a postmodern approach through the use of women's narratives. These small narratives, or testimonies, that explain practices and local events contrast large-scale, dominant explanations of social phenomenon, or grand narratives. Postmodern scholars argue that grand narratives mask the contradictions inherent in existent social orders and view opposition as disorder, deficient or irrational (Lyotard 1984). Discovering oppositional thinking is seen as key to challenging the existing order and to destabilizing the grasp of oppressive systems. The discovery of this individualized knowledge represents an attempt to "deconstruct"—to unmask and make transparent the rationales that support authoritarian structures and systems. Through deconstruction, then, the dominant forces in articulating ideas that maintain harmful constructs may be transformed.

Conceptualizing the Field Site

For this research, I reworked a framework suggested to me by Cunningham and Heyman (2004) who argue that national borders are particularly well suited for empirically examining two salient but diametrically opposed processes: those posed by enclosure and those posed by mobility processes. The process of enclosure is better understood by the challenges that impede its implementation. Conversely, mobility is better understood in the context of the barriers that impede or restrict it. I used this framework to conceptualize a space or field site where these two processes intersect (fig. 5.1). This framework is also consistent with Hannerz's suggestion for organizing transnational research where, instead of the conventional community study of migrants at the end or beginning of their migration journey, migrants are viewed as somewhere in between two points: temporarily suspended in an interstitial space (1998). This space, the "O" in figure 5.1, is thus structured by horizontal systems that



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

FIGURE 5.1. A conceptual framework of horizontal and vertical processes.

“enclose” (such as walls, surveillance, patrolling), and vertical mobility systems (such as migration, commerce, smuggling) that facilitate transnational flows. In keeping with the “intersection” concept, migrants at the shelter can be seen as temporarily unable to move forward in their migration journey and unable or unwilling to go back to their communities of origin. Theoretically, such spaces exist wherever oppositional forces come to be situated and compete with each other, which might be true wherever immigrants are found.

In the Footsteps of Spirits: Migrant Women's Testimonios in a Time of Heightened Border Enforcement

What follows are three cases in which migrant women described to me their experiences with being abandoned by their guides in the middle of their journeys through the desert. These three women were chosen in part because they represent different stages of the life cycle. In this way, their stories enrich our understanding of the issue of abandonment with a wider range of worldviews, predicaments, and social contexts.

Gabriela

In September of 2006, I met 24-year-old Gabriela, who had come from the state of Mexico.¹⁴ She had traveled with a group of people on the bus. At first they were strangers, but through the course of the long bus trip to the North, they all became friends. As their friendship grew (perhaps with the tension upon their approximation to the border), Gabriela and her companions bonded. They resolved to make the crossing together and support each other no matter what. Gabriela's story about her ordeal and the migrating group members' commitment to each other is different from most stories of migrant women in that Gabriela was profoundly touched and spiritually inspired by the strength of the group's solidarity. Upon telling me her story, she grew animated and, in spite of her ordeal, seemed to radiate a renewed hope and resolve. She would attempt to cross again into the United States as soon as she could.

Gabriela explained that there were eighteen people traveling together as they commenced their walk through the desert. One group of ten walked ahead, and the rest, those she considered her friends, walked behind the lead group. She felt lucky in that they encouraged and supported each other as they grew tired. By the third day of walking, they had developed into true friends:

Mi grupo por suerte fue muy bueno. Todos se convirtieron en muy buenos amigos. Un rato uno me iba jalando, otro me arrempujaba allá atrás . . . Éramos ocho personas, seis hombres y dos mujeres . . . El tercer día ya nos hicimos buenos amigos . . . Nos lo demostramos todos. Hicimos un pacto de que nos íbamos a apoyar y lo cumplimos. [It was fortunate that my group was very good. Everyone became fast friends. At once, one would be pulling me, then another would push me from behind . . . There were eight of us, six men and two women . . . On the third day we became friends . . . We proved it to each other. We made a pact that we would support each other and we honored it.]

Gabriela mentioned that the group was already in U.S. territory when they had to stop because the Border Patrol was performing a search, utilizing dogs. She says it was already nighttime so they stayed in that area overnight to avoid the Border Patrol. A day of travel had been “lost.”

According to her, after they stopped, she and some of the other women began to feel really tired, because the “*terreno*” (terrain) was difficult to navigate. The last day was the most difficult, but it was when she came to realize she truly had friends. The other woman reassured her that they would not leave her behind.

Llego un momento en que sí ya me sentí desesperada porque veía que el grupo se iba quedando atrás. Ya en ese momento estábamos dentro de Estados Unidos, nada más teníamos que alejarnos un poco más, para que la migra no nos echara. La migra pasaba cada cinco minutos, y pensé ‘no, en realidad estoy poniendo en riesgo la vida de diez y ocho personas, y no se me hizo justo.’ [There came a moment in which I felt desperation because I saw our group lag farther and farther behind. We were at that moment inside the United States, and we had but go a bit farther so that the Border Patrol would not toss us out. The Border Patrol passed by every five minutes and I thought, ‘No, in reality I am putting at risk the lives of the eighteen others,’ and I did not think that was right.]

So after she noticed that her group of eight was falling behind because she could not walk any faster, she decided to tell them that she could not go on, and that it was not fair that she should be holding them back. She sat down on a rock and told them, “Chicos, I cannot go on. (*Están a un paso.*) You are nearly there. Continue onward (*¡siganle!*).” She felt that they had made it this far and she would not risk the chance of the group reaching their destination because she was no longer able to continue. However, her friends chose to stay with her saying, “¡Si te quedas tú, nos quedamos todos!” (If you stay, we all stay!) She sensed a mixture of both courage and sadness: “Sentí tanto valentía como tristeza.”

After they talked about it for a while, the group asked her to try again—“¡Échale ganas; ya estamos cerca!”—but she could not walk anymore. She told them she just could not do it, and she told them that she would just walk down so the migra could see her, and they would find her. Again, she expressed her mixed feelings: “Me dio más sentimiento; pero también me dio más fuerza.”

She said her female friend was the youngest and the strongest of the group. “Ella estaba extremadamente fuerte, no sé de donde sacó fuerza.” The young girl told all the men to go. She told them that she was more

familiar with the area and with a powerful voice she told the men to go and that she would stay with her until the migra came: “Con una voz así de mujer dominante les dije, ‘váyanse, yo me bajo con ella hasta que nos encuentre la migra.’” However, no one wanted to leave. So Gabriela turned around and started to walk down the hill. They had no choice but to leave.

Gabriela explained that her young friend had told her from the beginning that she would stay with her, because she herself had experienced being left behind on her first attempt to cross. She had suffered terribly because she did not know the terrain, nor had she a friend in the group to lean on. She had been terrified. Gabriela felt that because of this experience, her friend had the courage to stay with her. She made a promise, and Gabriela became emotional upon remembering this and began to cry. Her voice broke again as she continued with her story:

Y sí, ella . . . ella fue como . . . ella fue mi . . . mi angelito. Ella me llevó del brazo y ella fue mi bastón cuando ya no podía. [And yes, she had become like . . . she became my little angel. She took me by the arm and she was my cane when I could no longer walk.]

Gabriela says that she never imagined in her life that she could ever come across people like those in her group.

Alejandra

In January of 2007, I met Alejandra, a mother of two from San Felipe de Progreso, Toluca. It was a particularly busy night at the shelter with many women arriving. Alejandra walked about stiffly, a characteristic I had begun to recognize in many migrants whose muscles were sore after days of walking in the desert. Experts explain that a buildup of lactic acid in muscle tissue occurs during strenuous exercise, commonly resulting in muscle spasms or cramps and subsequent soreness. With increased conditioning, it takes longer for lactic acid to build up in the muscle tissue. However, most migrants are unprepared for the two- to four-day vigorous walk through the desert, one that is more often than not punctuated by sprints and often up and down hills and gullies. Alejandra thus suffered on this night through the routine of tending to her two children who

accompanied her, a 14-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy. She seemed relieved to have gotten them showered and fed and could now attend to her own needs while I talked to the other women. She untangled her wet hair, attentive to the accounts of others, nodding her head on occasion to agree with common experiences.

Alejandra and her children had also faced a harrowing ordeal, which began after they had been walking through the desert for two days. They had been led by a guide and were among a larger group of about twenty migrants. After two days of walking, Alejandra began to fear that she and her children could not continue. The weather was cold and rainy when she decided she could not go on. Adding to the physical stress was her concern over the safety of her daughter. She suspected that the *pollero* had developed a sexual interest in her daughter, so she was working extra hard to keep a watchful eye on him. The guide would pull her daughter by the arm so that she would walk in front of the others next to him. He scoffed when Alejandra protested, saying that he was only doing it to keep the young girl from getting left behind. Alejandra, who measured around 5'2" and weighed about 160 pounds, was having considerable difficulty in keeping up with them. She finally decided that she had had enough and would return to Mexico. The guide retorted that she and her children were only keeping the group from advancing and left them. Alejandra then made an attempt to retrace her steps but soon the three became disoriented. They wandered for two additional days in the desert trying to find their way back. In that time, it rained and the temperature dipped to near freezing. The small supply of food that they carried was soon gone, and they huddled together at night, covering themselves with the plastic trashcan liners they had taken to protect themselves from the rain. At one point they lit a fire to keep warm and to attract the attention of the Border Patrol, so they could be picked up. At another point, they met with a Border Patrol agent on an all-terrain vehicle, but he did not stop. He simply waved at them as he passed them by. They continued walking until they met with another agent, who did pick them up and took them to the processing center. They were then repatriated. Both children were very polite and attentive to my inquiries. The daughter was slight and timid, but Eric, the son, was engaging. Eric was eager to join in the conversation to explain how they used black plastic garbage bags to cover themselves from the rain and the wind and

how they rested under whatever bush they could to protect themselves from the elements.

Marcela

Marcela was one of the oldest women I interviewed. She was a patient and sympathetic listener as some of the other women told their stories on the evening of Thursday, March 22, 2007. She entered the United States on foot through the desert somewhere near Sasabe, Arizona. She was traveling with a group led by a guide. Two of the others were individuals she knew from her home state of Hidalgo. She did not know the guide. In Hidalgo, she had contacted a guide through a *coyote* she did not know personally and who told her to go to Altar. She left Hidalgo in the hopes of finding her nieces in Houston, Texas. She had only three boys, and her nieces regarded her as their mother, calling her "*mámi*," and insisted that she go visit them. However, there was more to this story. Her situation at home was perhaps the most important reason why she journeyed into the unknown. By her description of her husband's behavior, it appeared that her husband was suffering from paranoia. Earlier that evening, we had listened to Guadalupe and her account of domestic abuse by her husband. Marcela added that physical abuse was just one kind of abuse. The other, which she thought might be worse, was psychological abuse, such as she endured. For years, her husband had been accusing her of trying to kill him. He made her taste all of his food before he ate and insisted that she was trying to kill him to keep all of their possessions. "*¿Cuáles?*" she said, since they had nothing. The psychological drain on her was so extreme that at times she felt that she, too, was going insane. She left him for a while, only to find another woman living with him upon her return. Without a place to call home, she decided to take up her nieces' invitation to go to Houston. She was worried about getting a job because of her age. She was afraid to work in a maquiladora after hearing of the deaths of migrant women in Juárez. However, to have remained in Hidalgo with her husband, she said ("*fuera peor*"), would have been a worse fate. There was no one there now to support her. She said that she had read about the risks involved in crossing the desert. As she weighed those risks, she felt that staying on in Hidalgo and being subjected to the type of abuse she had experienced offered equally deadly risks.

Marcela said that her experience crossing the desert paled compared with accounts she had heard. Her journey with a group of migrants began in the late afternoon. She estimated that they had walked for about eight hours and into the night when the accident occurred. Because it was dark and she could not see, she fell several feet off a cliff (*un barranco*). She remembered rolling several feet before she caught hold of a grassy type of plant with her hand, and this saved her from further injury. Her leg was hurt, but not broken. However, she was unable to get up and this clearly posed a serious problem for everyone. What devastated her more, however, was the group's decision to leave her behind. With this decision, her faith in humanity was destroyed. Two members of the group were from Hidalgo, *compatriotas*, no less. On hindsight, she realized that she could not hold them back in their quest for "el famoso sueño" ("the famous dream.") She was even more disillusioned that no one, not even her so-called friends, offered to stay with her. She wondered if she suffered this fate because of her age. Although she was 56, she appeared to be in good health. But the group left her. They set a gallon of water beside her, a pint of "suero" (the electrolyte drink), and some crackers. In severe pain, she drifted in and out of sleep for several hours.

At some point, she woke and evaluated her situation. She drank the water and the suero. She said that she had an awakening and said to herself that this was not the way that she wanted to die: alone with her face in the dirt. No, she said, she would not die here, not like this.

So she pulled herself up and found that she could manage to walk. For three days she walked in the desert trying to find a road so that the migra could pick her up. At night, she was guided by lights that she said she saw in the distance. She made a fire to keep warm and hopefully to attract the migra. She saw the helicopters overhead, but no one came. Towards the end of the third day, she came to a water tank. Cows gathered around the tank, and she became again afraid when she saw some of the steers paw the ground, thinking that they were warning her to keep away. She sat in the shade until finally the cows began to lie down. She then proceeded to walk quietly around the herd so as not to upset them. She decided to follow the trail of cow dung which lead her to a path that she hoped would lead her to somewhere or someone. Indeed, she soon came to a road and followed it to a ranch, "Las Margaritas," with a flag bearing a skull and crossbones. She remembered thinking that

perhaps the flag was meant to discourage intruders. Not dissuaded, however, she approached and saw a man, an Anglo rancher. She drew nearer and communicated "migra" to him. He did not seem to know Spanish but appeared to understand because shortly thereafter, a Border Patrol truck came and picked her up. She was taken to the detention center and processed, then returned to Mexico.

Conclusion

With my focus on the notion of "intersection" and on the migrant women who temporarily inhabit it, their near encounters with death illustrate the cost of immigration enforcement measures in terms of their toll on the human condition. For migrant women, the need to negotiate the U.S. system of enclosure reflects the contradiction between U.S. immigration laws, its concurrent need for labor, and the devastation of the Mexican rural economy. Interviews with women at the migrant shelter reflect where they have been and what their next step may be in fleshing out the intersection and allow us to formulate a more humanistic understanding of the border-crossing phenomenon. Migrant women's testimonies in this way not only shed light on physical realities grounded in extreme poverty, but also illustrate how the intersection of conflicting processes contribute to a humanitarian crises in which the likelihood of death is increasingly present.

A common theme that emerged from the interviews with women was their lack of preparation for the increased time that was needed, with the increased surveillance and patrolling, to cross the border. Women complained that instead of the expected two-day walk through the desert, they were being asked to walk for longer periods of time before arriving at their pickup point. Many said they had been assured of only a two-day walk and felt that they had been deceived by those helping them make the journey. The confusion in terms of the time needed to reach their destinations may be related to changes in enforcement policies that began in June 2006. At that time, a border enforcement measure entitled "Operation Jumpstart," designed to support U.S. Customs and Border Protection, was implemented. It consisted of deploying six thousand National Guard members to border states to assist with "executing logistical and administrative support, operating detection systems, providing

mobile communications, augmenting border-related intelligence analysis efforts, building and installing border security infrastructure, providing transportation and conducting training." After receiving assistance with these tasks, agents who were currently performing them would be free to resume enforcement and patrolling duties, "arresting aliens illegally entering the country" (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2007). In part, this may have accounted for the increase in time migrants needed to arrive at their destinations. For example, Gabriela complained that because of increased surveillance, their group spent an extra night hiding to avoid detection and in this way, a day of travel had been "lost."

One implication of this measure is increased exposure to the elements, such as extreme cold or heat. Alejandra and her children were forced to shield themselves from freezing cold and rain after she decided she could not go on. Another implication is the need to plan for additional water and food. And unplanned events, such as Alejandra's concern for her daughter, may lead to additional days in the desert, which could deplete an already small supply of food. Based on the number of complaints, such as having been deceived by their guides, it is very probable that migrants may be experiencing longer periods in which they are deprived of food and water, further increasing their susceptibility to becoming weak and dehydrated, which would lessen their survival rate if they are abandoned.

Guides also appear to be moving farther from the areas that are intensely patrolled, and they may be leading migrants into less-familiar environments. This would expose them to a greater probability of getting lost and the increased risk of physical trauma. Women seem to be particularly vulnerable in this regard and are more likely to give up, and many are ultimately abandoned in the desert. Gabriela complained that she began to feel really tired, as did some of the other women, because the terrain was difficult to navigate, and she decided she could not go on. In a similar way, Alejandra experienced considerable difficulty in keeping up with the guide until she finally decided that she had had enough and would return to Mexico. However, prior information of the trials that are in store is also no guarantee that migrants will be prepared for the arduous journey. For example, Marcela had heard about how difficult it would be, but this did not prepare her for the experience. Perhaps her fatigue, combined with low visibility, had caused her to fall, which predisposed her to possible death if not for her resolve.

The fact that these women survived their ordeals does not diminish the role that the potential of death plays in mediating the process of rejection and expulsion in the context of immigration enforcement policy. As Inda argues, death does not have to be direct but can be indirect in that the risk of death is multiplied and distributed among those who are perceived as less worthy of living (Inda 2007, 138). In providing narratives of women who experience these situations, I hope to provide a counterbalance to the political rhetoric largely based on a "rational" appraisal of what increased border security measures hope to accomplish. If direct death is not a goal, then the multiplication of the risk of death (indirect death) appears to be. In this regard, women's narratives about their near encounters with death may, in a postmodern sense, have the power to influence others to take action and encourage a more productive dialogue about the assumptions upon which current immigration enforcement policies depend.

Notes

1. 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.
2. This strategy involved the intensification of border closures known as Operation Hold the Line (1993), Operation Gatekeeper (1994), and Operation Safeguard (1995).
3. Not all migrants that are apprehended are charged with a crime, but are simply "removed" from the United States. In this way, "removal" is differentiated from "deportation." Many migrants may be apprehended and released several times before being charged with "illegal re-entry after removal." When found guilty of this charge, migrants serve sentences, after which they are deported. The vast majority of the detainees in Arizona, roughly between 75–90 percent, are serving sentences for illegal re-entry after removal.
4. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. 2005. Data on Enforcement Actions Table 36. <http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/> (accessed March 11, 2007).
5. The Binational Migration Institute at the Mexican American Studies and Research Center (MASRC) at the University of Arizona seeks to comprehensively document and analyze the interaction between migrants and immigration enforcement authorities.
6. In 2004 alone there were four incidents of shootings of suspected migrants by Tucson Sector Border Patrol agents.
7. There has also been an increase in civilians assuming policing (vigilante) roles along the border in 2005.

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

9. 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 eighteen, although on occasion, women may also be sheltered there.

10. Robert Chambers may 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.

11. The names used for all the migrant women interviewed are pseudonyms.