While sitting on the train tracks in a small town outside of Mexico City, Milton explained to me what life in San Pedro Sula was like: “It’s like this,” he said, “In Honduras, if my buddy tells me that he doesn’t really like this other guy, *que no le cae bien*, I might kill the other guy to show my buddy that I’m a good friend.” After having been shot at a few times - he showed me the bullet scars on his back and legs as we spoke - like many young men his age, Milton decided to get out of Honduras. So he traded life in one of the world’s most dangerous cities for life along Mexico’s rail lines. Milton was on his way north, but with few resources at his disposal, he was making his way to the United States slowly, working as a *guía*, a low level people smuggler, showing other migrants the way across Mexico. At times he would strap on a backpack full of marijuana and sneak through the Arizona desert, earning around $1000 US dollars for each journey, a tidy sum for about a week’s work. The kidneys can only take so many dehydrating hikes through the desert, though, so between trips he would double back to southern Mexico, pick up a group of new migrants, and accompany them north, showing them how to climb onto a moving freight train without falling, how to loop their belts through the *reja* on top of the box car so if they fall asleep, they won’t fall off, and where, when, and how to jump off the train - knowing that immigration and police officials are often waiting just ahead.

The contours of Milton’s life trace the multiple kinds of violences embedded in the social process of undocumented Central American transit migration. Other scholars have focused on the structural and physical violence unauthorized migrants face at the geographical frontiers where nations meet, where armed immigration agents use military training, tactics, and gear to hunt down border crossers and organized crime groups use force to control the trafficking of bodies as well as illegal substances. Jason De León’s recent book, *The Land of Open Graves*, offers an excellent treatment of this, deftly detailing how the border enforcement strategy called Prevention Through Deterrence relies upon the dangerous and remote desert landscape to do violence to migrant bodies (De León 2015). My work - and what I will outline briefly today - draws from this, shifting focus to what happens in-between borders, long before Central Americans have to grapple with the US border patrol and the Arizona desert. To do that, I will discuss the landscape of violence in Central America at present, the multiple violences of transit, and the regional political regime which has shaped this situation.

A few years ago, I was sitting amidst a group of teenage Honduran boys at a shelter for Central Americans seeking asylum in Mexico City, and they started riffing off each other, telling me the myriad ways that you could say “he was shot” in Honduran colloquial Spanish - in *catracho*. It was one of those ethnographic moments that made me wish that I had a tape recorder running - my memory failed me as I tried to scribble down the long list when I got to a quiet moment and a notebook a few hours later. I could rattle off a few of the most common ones - *le balearon, le tiraron, le dieron un plomazo,* but this doesn’t even scratch the surface . While I can’t remember the colorful variety of slang terms these boys went through, I remember well the tenor of the conversation: it was jovial, full of laughter, they were amused at the variety of phrases available to them, trying to good-naturedly one-up each other, and they stated matter-of-factly, how they needed so many ways to say it since so many people were getting shot all the time. Like Milton, these young men speak with an easy casualness about the extraordinary violence of their country.

In 2012, Honduras became the most homicidal country on the planet, outpacing its neighbor, El Salvador, with a murder rate of over 90 per 100,000 people. It’s economic capital, San Pedro Sula, Milton’s home town, had a rate nearly double that. These are numbers that are hard to fully comprehend. In contrast, Mexico, in the throes of its bloody war against the drug cartels, has a murder rate that pales in comparison: a mere 20 homicides were 100,000 people. A lot of the violence in Honduras is attributed to *maras*, the street gangs that started among Salvadoran communities in Los Angeles, and were deported back to El Salvador in the 1990s. Honduras now has strong *clicas* of each of the primary *maras*, but there has also been a proliferation of home-grown *maras*. For example, the fans of the capital city’s two soccer teams have become *maras* in their own right, killing fans of the rival team. *Maras* control many of Honduras’s poor, urban neighborhoods - demanding *renta* from anyone with a small business, even like selling soda and chips out of your living room, or *tortillas* from your yard. Those who do not pay the so-called *impuesto de guerra* risk their own lives and that of their families. Public schools have become prime recruiting grounds for the *maras*, children as young as seven or eight years old are groomed to join the ruling *clica*, employed as lookouts and *orejas*, reporting on the activities of the neighborhood to those in command. Teenagers who do not want to join the *maras* often find themselves with no choice but to flee - and this is one growing group of the migrants trying to get across Mexico.

Murder in Honduras, however, is not limited to *marero* turf wars or displays of dominance. In the absence of a functioning justice system, murder is also a means of settling disputes and resolving problems. As one Honduran put it to me - *aqui hasta la justicia es injusta*. I went to the funeral of a fifteen-year-old boy who had stolen a bike. The family of the bike-owner killed him. At the funeral his family was sad, yes, very very sad, but they were also resigned - what did he expect, they said, he was a thief. Neither the bicycle-owner’s family nor the murdered young man’s ever considered going to the police. In another case, when a young girl went missing, and her family had good reason to suspect that an older man had abducted her, I reached out to a grassroots organization in Honduras that defends the rights of migrants to see what advice they had for this family. Their response was telling: this is why we migrate, Amelia, there is no justice here. There’s nothing for the family to do. Going to the police will only make things worse. Their resignation was well-founded: a few weeks later, when a body was found, the police demanded a bribe from the girl’s family before even letting them see the body to identify her (in the end, it wasn’t her.)

I tell these stories not to shock or pull on heart strings. Rather, I hope to paint a picture of the ordinariness of violence, the extent to which it is part of the everyday. Scholars have written about the way in which extraordinary violence can become unspeakable, rendered unsayable by its awfulness. In Honduras, it seems, the ordinariness of extraordinary violence has, perhaps, broken unspeakableness, rendered it mundane. People do speak about the violence, they laugh about it as the teenage asylum seekers explaining slang to me, or explain it frankly, as Milton. It is not that they are unaffected by it, they weep and mourn, get angry and afraid, of course. And they also look for ways to survive, ways to change things, and ways to escape. But they accept the violent reality around them, and, at times, must make use of it.

Trying to escape violence at home through migration necessarily embroils people in multiple other violences. From the moment migrants set foot in Mexico, they become targets. In her article, *Crossing Mexico*, Wendy Vogt details the structural violence that creates a situation where migrant bodies are commodified (Vogt 2013). Milton explained it to me in another way: the drug cartels and corrupt government officials have discovered *la mina de los migrantes*, he told me, the “migrant gold mine.” There is a lot of money to be made off of migrants.

In part to evade highway check points and in part because of it being a “free” form of travel, many migrants cross Mexico on top of the now-infamous freight train known as “*la bestia*.” This may keep migrants far from the eyes of immigration, but renders them highly visible - and vulnerable - to criminal groups. Organized crime groups demand a *cuota* simply to board this train - $100 per person. Just to get to the state of Veracruz - only three states towards Central Mexico from the Guatemalan border - there are at least four places where this kind of *cuota* is collected. The train company also employs armed private security guards known as *garroteros*, charged with keeping migrants off the boxcars. These individuals - like the police and many immigration agents - will often look the other way in exchange for a decent bribe, but recently they have been under extra pressure and migrants have been shot and killed by guards.

The violence of the migration route can also become embodied in multiple ways. Sexual assaults are commonplace - especially but not exclusively among women - and riding atop a metal boxcar for weeks on end leaves many people burnt, dirty, and sickly thin. Some of these effects are temporary - migrants who “make it” can bathe, get back in shape, put on make-up, cover their scars - emotional and physical - to varying extents. Many, though, like Pedro - a young man from Yoro, Honduras - become physically marked by transit in permanent ways. Pedro was rushing to get on a train as it sped past but his calculations were off, the ladder slippery from a recent rainfall, and he fell. The train sliced off most of his left leg, leaving Pedro, a muscular, 23-year old, amputee. He was lucky, in a sense, as a fall from the fast-moving train can mean losing life in addition to limb.

In addition, Central Americans are targeted for kidnapping by the drug cartels. They are rounded up, held in “safe houses” for months, and ransoms of 4-5000 are demanded from their loved ones. Those who cannot pay are either pressed into service or simply killed and discarded. Furthermore, there have been numerous cases where immigration agents or police officers have detained migrants and handed them over to cartel-affiliated kidnappers. It may seem counter-intuitive to kidnap poor, undocumented migrants but it is precisely their marginal status that makes them appealing. They are easy money - the cartels know that Central Americans in transit are low-risk targets.

As such, the landscape of violence is deeply intertwined with the reality of drug cartels, *plazas*, and corruption. In this economy of violence, migrants are targeted for exploitation, but they are also valuable - and disposable - recruits. Young Honduran and Salvadoran men fleeing *mara* recruitment often find themselves caught up in organized crime in Mexico. One-time migrants who never made it across the border, they get recruited as *guías*, like Milton, or muscle. Being Honduran or Salvadoran can bring with it a certain amount of fear and clout in this economy of violence. People know not to mess with *mareros*; their tattooed faces (though *mareros* seldom actually have tattooed faces) have come to represent the brutality of gang criminality. Failed migrants from Central America can trade on that reputation, making a living by extorting their countrymen. Many of the people *cobrando cuota* on the trains are, in fact, Central Americans. The dynamics of violence people have fled from in Central America spills over into the landscape of organized crime-controlled migration in Mexico.

This landscape is in many ways a direct product of structural violence, as a United States-dominated security agenda pushes migrants into the margins, into the hands of organized crime, and makes crossing more dangerous and more expensive all the time. Recently, after the so-called surge of unaccompanied minor migrants from Central America overwhelmed the US border’s immigration infrastructure, Plan Frontera Sur was launched in Southern Mexico. This relocated much of Mexico’s immigration agents to Chiapas and Tabasco, the states that border Guatemala. In doing so, Mexico has replicated both the logic and the architecture of the United State’s southern border strategy. Rather than stopping clandestine immigration at the borderline itself, enforcement really begins a few hours in, along the highways between major cities. Crossing the Rio Suchiate without authorization into Mexico involves climbing aboard a raft lashed to inner tubes. The bridge that connects Guatemala to Mexico - through which legal transit passes - literally looks down onto this “clandestine” crossing. Yet no immigration agents are there to pull people off the rafts as they wash ashore. A few hours further into Chiapas, however, the highway is dotted with a patchwork of immigration, customs, and federal police checkpoints. Elsewhere in the state Mexico has built giant new customs plazas that happen to look identical to similar structures in Arizona.

Like the US southern border strategy, the effects of Plan Frontera Sur, have been to increase the violence involved in the capture of the undocumented. Whereas a Mexican law passed in 2012 prohibited immigration raids from happening in remote areas, and along the train lines at night - Frontera Sur effectively suspended these protections. Raids are now conducted in the most dangerous areas possible, at night, in remote areas, and incidence of injury and death has gone way up. Mirroring the effects of increased enforcement in the US-Mexico borderlands, this has only served to push clandestine migration deeper into the hands of organized crime, make it more lucrative for them, and to blur the lines even further between the violence with which migrants must contend and the violence from which they are fleeing.

A discussion of violence and Central American migration would be quite remiss if it did not take into account the United States’ historical role in Central America. Supporting military and paramilitary violence against civilian populations, backing up dictators, and defending coups has everything to do with the region’s current descent into violence. El Salvador and Guatemala both have a complicated history of civil war and, in many ways, the current panorama of violence cannot be fully understood without looking at it in the context of past waves of violence. Noelle Brigden made the link explicitly in her article on Salvadoran transit migration (Brigden 2012). (Though it is worth noting that more people are killed in El Salvador now than were killed during war time.) Honduras, however, does not share this history - it never developed a comparable guerilla insurgency that posed a threat to state order, and didn’t suffer the same scope of state atrocities as its neighbors. Quite the opposite, Honduras was used as the US-backed staging ground for counter-insurgency in the region. Given this, linking violence now to past wars does not sufficiently explain what is happening in the region.

After a 2009 coup d’état against then-president Manuel Zelaya, however, Honduras took a sharp neo-liberal turn, auctioning off concessions to much of the country’s resources in order to convince the international markets that its economy was stable and attractive for foreign investment. So-called “charter cities” were established, a kind of hyper “company town,” where law and security is wholly privatized. With an eye to foreign capital, Honduras has recently boasted a reduction in its homicide rate - but there is healthy skepticism as to whether this reflects a real drop in violence or is simply a numbers game. After the last elections - and after the country’s murder rates made world headlines - the government changed how it keeps statistics - limiting the “murder” count to only include deaths where an autopsy was conducted and where a coroner ruled the death a homicide. When many families bury their dead before an autopsy can be performed and only the country’s three largest cities even have coroner’s offices, undercounting murders seems like a distinct possibility using this framework. Meanwhile, as the government has adopted *mano dura* policies to combat violence - whether or not they have actually contributed to a drop in homicides - they have certainly contributed to the criminalization of poor, urban youth. *Mareros* or not, young people are stopped, searched, abused, arrested and sometimes killed by the police - in the name of security. In this context, more and more people see little opportunity - or chance for survival - in Honduras and instead opt for braving the gauntlet that is Mexico. As one migrant put it to me while waiting for a train to arrive, “I might die trying to cross Mexico,” he told me, “But I might get killed any day just walking out my front door in Honduras. At least this way there’s a chance of safety at the end.”

In their introduction to the book, *States of Violence,* Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski write against treating violence as a kind of reified “autonomous agent that disrupts order and stands against society” (Coronil and Skurski 2005, 1). I have tried to operate using a similar approach in sketching the outlines of the multiple violences with which Central Americans engage as part of clandestine migration. Violence in migration is not something separate or intangible. Deeply embedded in the region’s political economy and a social process itself, violence isn’t just happening, it is being done, and it is being lived. Violences may provoke migration, but clandestine migration necessarily involves negotiating and employing myriad other violences. As Coronil and Skurski write, “Practices and discourses of violence, like currents that shape the ocean floor, sculpt social landscapes, imperceptibly chiseling their configuration and casting life chances” (Coronil and Skurski 2005, 3).

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