The Border and Its Bodies
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Published by University of Arizona Press

Sheridan, Thomas E. and Randall H. McGuire.
The Border and Its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk Along the U.S.-México Line.

For additional information about this book
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“Como Me Duele”
Undocumented Central American Bodies in Motion

Jason De León

WELCOME TO THE PLEASURE PALACE

A disheveled group of Central Americans tries to not make eye contact with the road agents. They nervously pass them on their way toward the heavily fortified front door of the migrant shelter. Maynor is shirtless and profusely sweating. This godforsaken humidity doesn’t mix well with cocaine. He is perched on a plastic bucket and surrounded by garbage and abandoned construction debris. A wiry hand grips his cheap cell phone that is tethered to an illegal power outlet someone has jerry-rigged onto the side of an electrical pole. He gives the slow-moving group a hard stare while tinny horns and squeaking clarinets accompany Valentín Elizalde’s banda declaration, “Como me duele” (How it hurts me). Maynor holds a bifurcated plastic soda jug against the cell phone’s speaker to amplify the sound. “Como me duele.” Ana reclines on a weathered piece of cardboard under the shade of a nearby tree. She clutches her angelic three-year-old daughter Dulce and pretends to ignore the group. From the corner of her eye she tries to assess who is traveling alone, who looks gullible, who looks scared shitless. Marco scrambles toward the passing crowd to intercept a teenage pareja before they reach the door. “Oye papi,” he says to the young man in the couple, “go inside the shelter. The door is right there. They are going to serve lunch in a little bit.” The kid naïvely thanks him for the information. As they turn away, the smile on Marco’s face turns to a grin. He gives Ana a quick knowing glance.

Chino is in too much pain to take stock of this newly arrived clutch of potential clients and victims. He winces as his running partner, Chimbo, drags an erratically functioning homemade tattoo gun across his left forearm. With drops of jet-black ink, intended for computer printers, Chimbo fills in the giant hand-scrawled outline of the word “Catracho.”
Honduran. **Hondureño. Compa.** The machine grinds into his brown flesh. The cell phone battery powering the gun keeps cutting out; a hard shake until it starts rattling again. The mechanical pencil casing that holds the tattoo needle, a guitar string someone found on the ground, starts to clog with blood. Chimbo wipes the needle’s tip with two stained fingers and dips it into a capful of *caña*, the hangover in a bottle that everyone around here drinks when they can round up 20 pesos. “Como me duele. Como me duele.”

Welcome to the “Pleasure Palace”—a 30-foot patch of dirt and gravel in front of a religious-run migrant shelter in southern México where people eat, sleep, kill time, kill each other, drink, do drugs, sell drugs, talk shit, and involve themselves in various activities associated with clandestine movement. *Aquí todos son Catrachos.* The crowd at the Pleasure Palace left their homes in Honduras, one of the most violent countries in the world, and now find themselves eking out a violent living in the working-class colonia of Pakal-Na, on the outskirts of Palenque, Chiapas. Palenque is where thousands flock annually to see the ancient Maya ruins of the same name. If you Google it, you are greeted with photos of impressive ancient pyramids surrounded by lush jungle. If you Google “Pakal-Na,” which in Maya means “House of Pakal” (a reference to Palenque’s most famous ruler), the first image to come up is a blood-covered corpse, the victim of a stabbing. Separated by only a few kilometers, the Pleasure Palace is several circles of hell removed from the world of camera-wielding tourists gawking at jade-rich tombs and stelae covered in ancient Maya glyphs. Recent shifts in migration patterns between Central America and the United States have turned this part of México into a popular route for those heading north. To get here from the Guatemala border, people will cling to the deadly freight trains known as La Bestia (The Beast), hitchhike, take combis (where they are overcharged by unscrupulous drivers), and occasionally walk the almost 300 kilometers. Pakal-Na is home to one of the few humanitarian shelters in the region and is hence a popular way station. The running joke is that it is now a distant colonia of Honduras.

If you asked them, Maynor, Ana, Chimbo, and Chino would tell you that they are migrants, and in many ways they fit this label. They have left their home country. They are undocumented in México. They are homeless (for the most part) and in a constant state of movement.
They are subject to abuses by Mexican immigration officials and locals. They are poor, vulnerable, and desperate. Their flesh bears the markings and bruises of the migration process. But while they are caught up in the undocumented migration stream, they are also fundamentally different from their paisanos entering the shelter today. The Pleasure Palace crew is part of a disorganized and precarious transnational criminal network that preys on border crossers and exists on the edge of life and death.

I argue three related points about these people I initially came to know in the summer of 2015. First, the tendency to focus on (and perpetuate) simplistic notions of who migrants are, and what they do en route, has limited our understanding of the complexity of this social process. Second, embodied approaches to undocumented migration have largely ignored those who are involved in everyday violent activities that make for less than sympathetic character sketches. Finally, I posit that a focus on the bodies of those caught up in migrant extortion, assault, and smuggling can tell us much about how border enforcement and clandestine movement are physically experienced. It can also shed light on the ways that the body is utilized as a tool of survival and how it functions as a site of accumulation of unique forms of capital that are used during the migration process.

**PLAN FRONTERA SUR**

In the summer of 2014, a tidal wave of migrants from Central America, most of them unaccompanied minors from Honduras, crashed at the U.S.-México border. A July 2015 report written by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2015:x) noted: “The recent [Central American] migration increase was likely triggered, according to U.S. officials, by several emergent factors such as the increased presence and sophistication of human smugglers (known as coyotes) and confusion over U.S. immigration policy. Officials also noted that certain persistent conditions such as violence and poverty have worsened in certain countries.”

Decades of political instability and neoliberal economic reforms, along with the crime and inequality that spawn from both, have long made the Northern Triangle of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador an important source for America’s undocumented labor pool (e.g., García
It is only recently, though, that centroamericanos have come to rival Mexicans in terms of who the U.S. Border Patrol most commonly arrests along the southern geopolitical boundary (U.S. CBP 2017). The spike in Central American migration in 2014 was by no means surprising given the current murder and poverty rates in the region (Martínez 2016). What was shocking to most were the images of scrawny brown children being arrested by the Border Patrol and then stuffed into overcrowded detention cells. For a brief moment in time the phrase “humanitarian crisis” was used to describe America’s decades-old and often hidden undocumented migration problem. However, just as quickly as this “crisis” appeared in south Texas and on the front page of the New York Times, it vanished from sight.

Under political pressure from the U.S. federal government (coupled with its economic support), the Mexican government began to step up its own immigration enforcement to stop the forward progress of Central American migrants through its country. On July 7, 2014, México unleashed Plan Frontera Sur, a nationwide program whose stated objectives were to bring order to the clandestine movement of Northern Triangle migrants entering the country and to ensure the protection of this population’s human rights while in transit (Boggs 2015). This resulted in the tremendous growth of government activity focused on stopping migrants. Ironically, México now arrests and deports more Central Americans than the United States (Speck 2016). In southern Chiapas alone, there are dozens of temporary immigration inspection points, along with an industrial-sized permanent checkpoint and detention facility in the town of Catazajá. Southern México is starting to look a lot like southern Arizona’s immigration enforcement archipelago. More troubling, Plan Frontera Sur has been accompanied by a sharp rise in reports of abuse at the hands of local, state, and federal officials, as well as by savvy criminal organizations seeking to profit from this shift in migration patterns.

In the summer of 2015, two dozen researchers associated with the Undocumented Migration Project spent six weeks conducting fieldwork in a range of locations in Palenque, Pakal-Na, and the nearby town of Tenosique. We interviewed hundreds of Central American migrants who were en route and recorded a mix of ethnographic and archaeological data from humanitarian shelters, the train tracks that pass through Pakal-Na, and other locations that border crossers frequent. Researchers
also interviewed local community members and state and federal agents about the impacts of Central American migration on the region. This included talking to vendors who sell goods and services to migrants (e.g., cheap hotel rooms and food) and employees of agencies charged with assisting those in transit. I spent the bulk of my six weeks of fieldwork hanging out in the Pleasure Palace and on the nearby train tracks with the eclectic mix of Central Americans who could not enter the shelter either because they had overstayed their welcome or were involved in various activities that included alcohol and drug consumption, human smuggling, human trafficking, drug dealing, robbery, and extortion. My goal was to understand how these individuals fit into the Plan Frontera Sur world and what their day-to-day experiences could tell us about aspects of clandestine migration that are typically ignored or avoided in academic discourse.

“COMO ME DUELE”

Two intellectual frameworks have largely shaped how social scientists view the undocumented migrant body in recent years: migration-specific habitus and the critical phenomenology of illegality. The first builds on the work of Audrey Singer and Doug Massey, who in 1998 outlined a predictive model for border crossing that they characterized as a “well-defined social process whereby migrants draw upon various sources of human and social capital to overcome barriers erected by U.S. authorities” (1998:362). They argue that things such as age, physical strength, prior crossing experience, access to cash, and other factors determined a person’s ability to sneak past la migra at the U.S.-México border. The more human and social capital you have, the more likely you will be successful during a border crossing. Sociologist David Spener later added to this model (and built on the work of Bourdieu [1977]) by arguing that a crucial component of the crossing experience was the development of a migration-specific habitus or a disposition for high levels of pain and suffering that generally accompany this process. Spener argues that the ability to tolerate the brutal conditions that characterize a border crossing is partly shaped by the often impoverished lives that migrants are fleeing. If you grow up in a world where hunger, pain, and violence are the norm, you are likely better equipped to handle these phenomena while migrating clandestinely (e.g., see Chavez 1998; De León 2013).
In a related approach, Nicholas De Genova (2002), Sarah Willen (2007), and others (e.g., Talavera et al. 2010) have focused attention on how notions of “illegality” shape people’s way of “being-in-the-world” (Willen 2007:838). These scholars highlight how the unstable and unprotected status of undocumented people is a source of great anxiety that impacts how they go about their daily lives. The looming specter of the state and its potential to deport people at a moment’s notice means that immigrants (and their families) are always looking over their shoulder and making daily adjustments to avoid unnecessary encounters with law enforcement. This process of hyper-vigilance both constrains how people exist in the world and is the source of psychological and physical stress (Boehm 2012, 2016; De Genova 2002). This “critical phenomenological approach” has brought much-needed ethnographic attention to the everyday lives of undocumented people. Combined, these two frameworks demonstrate how the physical processes of clandestine movement and relocation impact people’s bodies in violent ways both while in motion and once settled in new countries. Migrants might be predisposed to dealing with difficult social environments because of their upbringing, but their precarious juridical status in receiving and transit countries means that their pain and suffering doesn’t end once they cross an international boundary.

A focus on the physical/embodied nature of migration has provided new insight into what is involved in the clandestine movement (e.g., see Köhn 2016). However, these frameworks when applied to North American migration have tended to overgeneralize about the process in several key ways. First, the discussion of “undocumented” Latino migration typically focuses on Mexicans to the exclusion of people coming from farther south (see Coutin 2005 and Vogt 2013 for some exceptions). Although in previous decades Mexicans made up as much as 98 percent of those apprehended by U.S. immigration officials (e.g., in 2000), the recent spike in outmigration from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (non-Mexicans represented 44 percent of apprehensions in 2015) suggests that more attention needs to be paid to these changing demographics. More importantly, it has long been understood that migrants from Central and South America face more obstacles than Mexicans and have significantly different types of experiences (e.g., Pribilsky 2007). This population must cross numerous countries before getting to the
U.S.-México border. As a result, they have developed their own unique migration-specific habitus that is often shaped by having to deal with corrupt Mexican government officials, transnational gangs that rob, kidnap, and extort migrants, and the American Border Patrol, whom they must convince that they are Mexican nationals (see discussion in De León et al. 2015). Many ride La Bestia, the Mexican cargo trains that are equal parts free transportation and potential human meat grinder (Martínez 2013). The viciousness of the crossing experience for Mexicans generally starts at the political boundary with the United States, but the Central American gauntlet can span thousands of kilometers and multiple borders. Migration-specific habitus is thus diverse and inextricably connected to nationality and geography.

A second issue that is often overlooked in the discussions of both the habitus and phenomenological experiences of border crossers (Mexican and non-Mexican) is the tendency to focus on those who fit the traditional mold of “economic” migrant. By this I mean people who are viewed as industrious, hardworking, and worthy of empathy. A great deal of the literature on undocumented migration focuses on people who embody

Figure 3.1 Pakal-Na, Chiapas, México, June 2015 (Fuji XT-1, photograph by author).
(or seemingly embody) the idea that border crossers are generally good people whose circumstances have forced them into difficult and pitiable situations. These caricatures of a noble migrant type are visible both in the language used to describe people and the general framing of border crossers as the often passive victims of structural violence (Nevins 2005; Vogt 2013). Spener expresses this value judgment when he writes, “Migrants learn to expect and then bear bad conditions as a matter of course in their lives, including as they make heroic efforts to improve their condition by heading north” (2009:227).

Few attempts have been made to shine a light on the everyday crime and violence that people engage in when they find themselves caught up in the social process of undocumented migration (see Slack and Whitteford 2011 for a rare exception). The tendency is to paint the world of clandestine movement in black and white, with the protagonists (i.e., economic migrants) doing battle with various evildoers (e.g., smugglers, gangs, Border Patrol). We have yet to use ethnography to understand the gray realities that characterize border crossings in Latin America. This is partly because much of the research on this topic has emphasized what happens within the relatively “safe” confines of humanitarian shelters (see discussion of this methodological issue in De León 2015:1313130), while outside these bounded spaces remains terra incognita. Here I draw on recent work focused on the “local ethics” that shape how interpersonal violence is used in relationship to historically contingent political economies (Karandinos et al. 2014). In what follows, I explore what the lives of Central American migrants who are trying to “improve their conditions” via efforts that would never be characterized as “heroic” can tell us about the complicated, dynamic, and brutal moral economy (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Levi 1989) of undocumented movement. I also seek to understand how bodies impacted by the migration process can become productive sources of contextually dependent biosocial capital (Miah 2013). In simple terms, How is the migrant body simultaneously a resource and a liability?

**Racialized Bodies**

“Hey Chino,” I ask, “how you gonna pass for Mexican if you have that ‘Catracho’ tattoo on your arm?” He laughs and then makes a measuring
motion with his thumb and forefinger. “Well, everyone knows, especially the ladies, that Hondureños have a little bit extra compared to Mexicans. You know what I mean? This way, the ladies know what to expect. This way the paisas know I’m one of them.” This extreme form of nationalism is largely unneeded in Pakal-Na. Everyone knows you can pick a Honduran out of a crowd of southern Mexicans. They tend to wear the fashion of Central American urbanness that starkly contrasts with Chiapan ruralness. Men may have regional hairstyles, which you can get touched up at the local Pakal-Na Honduran barbershop. Catrachos are also phenotypically distinct from local Mexicans. They may be taller and more fair skinned than Chiapans, who have a high degree of indigenous ancestry. Or they may be significantly darker because of the higher rate of African admixture in Honduras. For those that “look Mexican,” they still may struggle to hide their accents and avoid using Honduran slang, which is quite distinct from the regional Spanish spoken in Chiapas. “¡Aha vos! ¿Que pedo mai?” Adding to this situation is the simple fact that those hopping off the train or staggering into town are usually scrawny from malnourishment, physically exhausted, bruised, and covered in either machine grease or jungle grime. Like the dust-covered
and dehydrated migrants who emerge from the bowels of the Sonoran Desert of Arizona (De León et al. 2015), Central Americans wear their experiences on their sleeves.

Unfortunately for Hondurans and other non-Mexicans, there is often very little local compassion for those landing in Pakal-Na from south of the border. Taxi and bus drivers, store vendors, and restaurant owners racially profile newly arrived migrants and are quick to overcharge this easily identifiable population. The implementation of Plan Frontera Sur has led to an increase in harassment of migrants by local police and daily arrests and deportations by federal immigration officials. Newcomers are always looking over their shoulders. Because of their inability to blend in, the movements of Central Americans are largely restricted to the train tracks and the neighborhood around the migrant shelter where people can run and hide in the surrounding jungle. Only the most brazen (or uninformed) venture out onto the streets of Pakal-Na, where they risk being profiled and arrested. Even fewer set foot in the nearby tourist town of Palenque.

Ana, whose job it is to size up newly arrived migrants in hopes of finding people to kidnap or swindle, would often complain to me that she was unfairly discriminated against by locals because of what she called her “Honduran appearance.” Ana rented a room nearby, and was always able to shower and wash her clothes. She did not fit the stereotype of a haggard-looking border crosser. Her identification as a Honduran was largely because of her daily association with arriving migrants and her tendency to affiliate closely with Honduran gang members on the tracks who spent much of the day in a thick cloud of marijuana smoke. When necessary to attract clients or sympathy, Ana would exaggerate her accent and loudly complain that she and her daughter were living the impoverished lives of migrants and thus worthy of pity and economic help. This declaration would often happen when Mexican and foreign humanitarian aid workers walked by Ana when she was in front of the shelter. She would play up her “dire” circumstances by lying on the ground and complaining about some untreated medical condition or illness. Her living situation, clean attire, and the income generated by her hustle (and that of her drug-dealing boyfriend) enabled Ana to move freely through Pakal-Na with little worry. She displayed her “Hondurananness” when it was advantageous to do so and downplayed it when she needed to blend
in with locals. Similar to what Chaney’s (2012) study of newly arrived Honduran Garifuna in New Orleans finds, the identities that people like Ana accentuate or downplay in Pakal-Na has much to do with whom they encounter and where.

Although many of those we interviewed commented that brutal immigration raids occurred primarily at night while they were sleeping in the woods near the tracks or on the dirt in front of the shelter, we observed two raids that occurred in broad daylight. In one instance, police were seen beating migrants who had been dragged off a stopped train. In another case, immigration vans attempted to enter the neighborhood where the shelter is located. Dozens of migrants scrambled to get away, while members of the Pleasure Palace armed themselves with rocks and charged after the vehicles. Chino stood in the middle of the unpaved road and screamed at law enforcement to come get him. He raised his arms high in the air so that everyone could see his new “Catracho” tattoo.

Chino left Honduras when he was 17. He was the wildest of many children being raised by a single mother and figured he was more help to everyone if he was out of the house. He spent much of his teen years getting into trouble on the streets of San Pedro Sula and later riding the rails across México. He has just recently reached his twentieth birthday. We are sitting on a rickety bench next to the train tracks when he starts talking about the cyclical and seemingly endless journey he has been on:

**Chino:** I’ve ridden the train a lot. Coming and going. Coming and going. If they catch you, they send you back to Honduras. You learn and go around that place the next time.

**Jason:** How many times have you tried to cross [the U.S.-México border]?

**Chino:** Man, like five times. . . . Once I got across and was hiding in a tree in Laredo, Texas. It was incredible. I climbed up and put some wood up in the tree to lay on. I had my bottle of water and my backpack tied up there. I had my cigarettes and my lighter and I was in my little house. I slept up there at night. I was sleeping in that fucking tree for eight days [laughing]. Seriously. Immigration would come through but they couldn’t find me. They didn’t see me. Chino was up there [laughing]. . . .
They caught me at a 7-11 when I was coming out of the store. . . .
I was [in Texas] for like a month but the problem is you get across the border and then what? Where you going to go? On the street. That’s where.

After failing to join America’s undocumented labor force, Chino (like his partner Chimbo) fell into working the train tracks as a soldier and guide for MS-13, the transnational gang that largely controls Central American migration across México. He had developed the necessary skills for this type of work during his involvement in various gang and criminal activities in Honduras. He became disillusioned with the violence he was surrounded by in his home country and the abject poverty his family was living in. He explained to me why he left: “I could go back to Honduras if I wanted to, but I would have to kill people. I could go back and I would have women, cash, and drugs, but I would have to kill people whenever they told me to. I don’t want to live like that anymore.” Although he was fed up with his lifestyle in Honduras, Chino found that his ability to mobilize violence served him well on the tracks, where he is respected and feared by both his comrades and the many migrants he comes into contact with daily. As a gang enforcer and guide, he must do a balancing act between being scary and charismatic. Charisma helps him attract possible clients. His ability to intimidate and deliver blows functions to protect the gang’s various interests in Pakal-Na and while en route.

One of the racial stereotypes that Mexicans have about Hondurans is that they are violent and not to be trusted (e.g., see De León 2015:122–124). Chino and the crew play up these stereotypes, and it is generally understood by local residents that they are *malandros* who should be given a wide berth. Unlike new arrivals, who may try to downplay or hide their nationality for fear of being profiled and arrested (e.g., see Coutin 2005), Chino and company wear their Catracho identity like a badge of honor. Their overt expressions of national identity and racial difference (sometimes hypersexualized) help them to connect with migrants needing guides while instilling fear in Mexicans. For example, smugglers would often party on the train tracks, which was also the backyard of various houses in Pakal-Na. Families would be eating dinner on their patios within earshot and inhalation range of the reggaeton and enormous
clouds of weed smoke that followed the Pleasure Palace crew. It was obvious that residents did not approve of these *pachangas* in such close proximity to their living quarters, but few ever complained. Most were too afraid to confront the sketchy-looking group of Honduran smugglers.

Perpetuating a Catracho identity in Pakal-Na is a defense mechanism but also serves as a point of pride. This group of displaced people caught up in the smuggling business can’t seem to get to the United States themselves, nor can they realistically return to their home country. Many of them struggle to hide their identity (especially their accents), and most have been repeatedly arrested and deported by Mexican and American immigration authorities. This inability to pass for Mexican can be frustrating, and some opt to hyper-identify with their nationality (see Chaney 2012) as a form of resistance (Scott 1985). In contrast to migrants who are running scared and trying to avoid detection, Chino sees his racialized body as a source of cultural capital and pride on the tracks.

**Battered Bodies**

Those who reach Pakal-Na often show the physical wear and tear that one would expect of a population that leaps on and off moving freight trains, hikes dozens of kilometers through dense jungle in cheap sneakers, and has periodic encounters with bandits and corrupt law enforcement. Exhaustion, dehydration, malnourishment, and blistered feet are the norm. In June 2015 I listened in while federal agents lectured migrants on the importance of filing formal complaints with the police if they have been abused while traveling. A young Honduran man quipped, “What if it was the police who robbed you?” The room erupted in a combination of laughter and verbal confirmation that *la policía* are not to be trusted. The two officials who gave this lecture would later be fingered by several people as the men who kidnapped them and tried to extort money from their families.

As Mexican law enforcement cracks down on migrants, the corporeal traces of Plan Frontera Sur are becoming more visible. There is the young Garifuna kid sporting two broken ankles being pushed around the shelter in a wheelchair; he was injured when he jumped off a train while trying to escape a raid. His traveling companion’s skull is wrapped in gauze after almost losing an eye during the raid when he ran into the woods and took
a tree branch to the face. Ask these migrants about Mexican immigration and they will show you an empty wallet and bruises. Some will reveal sets of small burn marks on various parts of their bodies, evidence that the stun gun is now the shiny new weapon of choice for Mexican border patrol who want to subdue uncooperative Catrachos. Those who come through Pakal-Na (“economic” migrants and migrants turned hustlers) often bear similar markings on their bodies. Because people like Chimbo and Chino are going through the same experiences as those they are guiding through México, they, too, look spent and road weary. What sets the Pleasure Palace crew apart, though, is that they have various ailments, wounds, and markings that reflect activities beyond train hopping and running from the police.

With a scar-riddled hand, Chimbo runs a lighter across the plastic wrapping on the barrel of his tattoo gun. The flame softens the scotch-tape that holds the contraption together, which allows him to adjust the battery connection to increase electricity flow. He is a migrant bricoleur (Lévi-Strauss 1966). “Your ability to fix things with whatever you find laying around is pretty impressive,” I tell him. “Well, they call me Chimbo because I’m really good at making guns out of pipes [called ‘chimbás’ on the street]. You just need a couple of pipes, a nail, and a cartridge. I can make you whatever you want. I can even make a revolver version. When I was in jail in Honduras I learned how to make these machines,” he says, referring to the tattoo gun.

All morning I have watched him work on different clients with the same needle. He is currently tattooing Buki, who has just arrived and has requested his girlfriend’s name on his left forearm. Carlos, Buki’s partner, sits quietly and watches. I can’t help but stare at Carlos, who has a deep purple bruise around his eye and the bloodiest eyeball I have ever seen. It looks like someone hit him in the face with a pipe. No one bothers to ask what happened, and he doesn’t volunteer any information. Two people will later point him and Buki out as the men whom they fought off after they tried to kidnap them while walking on the train tracks. Later that same day, Chimbo shows off a series of thin, evenly spaced marks cut in parallel lines on both of his forearms. They look purposeful and meticulous. Hash marks to keep score in some vicious game. “I was kidnapped by the cartels on the northern border. They locked me in a room and tortured me with a knife. They tried to get me to call my family
to ask for money, but I had no one to call. I finally escaped.” For someone now involved in robbery, extortion, and smuggling, this experience is on-the-job-training, a lesson in suffering and the practice of extracting information (Scarry 1985). Chimbo’s kidnapping left a physical mark on his body that functions as both a macabre memento for him and a clear signal to others that he is no stranger to pain. Hyperactive Chino is busy admiring the new ink he has recently acquired. In addition to “Catracho,” he has a Batman logo on his calf and some initials of family members on his left hand that are starting to scab over. His right arm is a catastrophe of twisted flesh populated by giant centipede scars. These markings are the result of a near fatal attack in Honduras when two assailants mistook him for someone else and ambushed him with machetes. Because of this injury, several fingers on his right hand incessantly twitch. It is impossible for him to hold still long enough to tattoo that arm, and besides, there is very little unblemished real estate for an artist to work with. On numerous occasions Chino has told me and anyone within earshot that he killed his attackers in self-defense. Everyone usually nods in solemn approval. Justifiable homicide is not difficult to sell in this particular milieu. This boasting functions as a verbal message to all that he can get

Figure 3.3 Pleasure Palace, July 2015 (Fuji XT-1, photograph by author).
crazy when he needs to, which is probably not necessary. His scars are so intense and obviously machete derived that they speak for themselves. They are intimidating and impossible to ignore. Newly arriving migrants quickly take note of this disfigurement and either avoid him or speak to this young man with great deference.

In the context of clandestine movement, these markings of brutality are a source of what Andrew Miah calls *biocultural capital*, or modifications to the body that people can exploit to “more adequately pursue their life goals” (2013:296). Unlike the people Miah discusses in his development of this concept—those who willingly undergo corporeal modifications (e.g., cosmetic surgery)—Chimbo did not choose to be tortured and Chino did not elect to have his body mutilated. However, after surviving these moments of trauma, both men were able to convert their wounds (i.e., biological modifications) into biocultural capital on the train tracks. Survival for smugglers and hustlers in a place like Pakal-Na is often based on the ability to intimidate and quickly engage in physical attacks. Having a scarred body is thus a productive enhancement in this specific context (Miah 2013:300) that marks the Pleasure Palace crew as unique players in the crowd of those who come and go daily through Pakal-Na. Their bodies symbolize their elevated status as either the people to steer clear of or the ones to seek out for protection from others who wish to do you harm. This also illustrates how context and a person’s social role in the migration process influence the (re)constructions of the body into various forms of capital.

**SEXUALIZED BODIES**

One of the least researched elements of the migration process is the rampant sexual assault that people, primarily women, experience while en route. While some have attempted to document the high levels of rape (Falcon 2001; Ruiz 2009), this troubling phenomenon is still poorly understood and often clouded in problematic rhetoric. Those seeking to raise awareness about this issue frequently fall into the trap of perpetuating gendered and racist stereotypes about the perceived vulnerability of women and the aggressive and base nature of Latino men (see discussion in Gokee and De León 2014:156). This is compounded by the fact that women migrants are often viewed through the hypersexualizing male
gaze. For example, American men falling in love with or raping a Latina migrant are two pervasive tropes in popular culture production. Bruce Springsteen’s song “The Line” tells the story of a white Border Patrol agent who arrests a Mexican female border crosser and then becomes enamored with her. Springsteen’s protagonist eventually leaves his job after unintentionally helping this woman (who seduces him) to cross drugs into the United States. The porn website www.borderpatrolsex.com produces videos that show actors dressed as federal agents arresting female migrants and then raping them in the woods. The numerous reports of sexual assault at the hands of federal agents (Falcon 2007; Lee 2015) indicate that the pop culture male fantasy of raping an undocumented woman is based on a brutal reality. It is largely accepted that female migrants are subjected to physical harassment and sexual assault at high levels (Ruiz Marrujo estimates 80–90 percent). Still, more data are needed to understand both how these phenomena articulate with the overall social process of undocumented migration and how migrant women (of differing nationalities) specifically navigate issues surrounding their bodies, sex, and sexual assault. Although the bulk of the smugglers and train track hustlers I interviewed in 2015 were men, some of our conversations shed light on issues of sex, sexual violence, and the experience of women.

“Those guys aren’t migrantes. They’re guides. They move people. Chino and Chimbo can’t do nothing until El Ciego [the Blind Man] gets here. He tells them what to do. He brings the groups up from the south that they will have to move. Those guys move a lot of people.” Marco and I are standing on the train tracks when he makes this declaration. He says it to me as if he has just revealed one of the great mysteries of the universe. Of course, Chino and Chimbo are smugglers. They have both made this clear on numerous occasions, although they have always tried to soften the nature of their occupations as if to save face or protect me from getting a full view of their worlds. Both of them often accentuated the good parts of their jobs (i.e., they were helping people by providing a service) while avoiding discussions of the swindling and rape that border crossers, the Border Patrol, and the media often associate with coyotes. On a few occasions, however, Chino did hint at the sexual violence that pervades the world of smuggling. Once when he was using an abandoned train car to show me the proper way to jump on and off, he offhandedly remarked: “Sometimes women are traveling by themselves and they want

“Como Me Duele”
protection. Someone might say to them, ‘I will take you and protect you, but you have to do whatever I want, whenever I want.’ Do you understand what I am saying?” He says this last line to me while grinning ear to ear. Chino doesn’t want to say out loud that he is the “someone” who offers women “protection” for sex, but he makes it clear that this is part of his job and he derives pleasure from it. This is one way for people to pay him for his services.

I finally meet El Ciego at the end of our summer field season when Chimbo takes me to the outskirts of town, almost a kilometer away from the Pleasure Palace. El Ciego stands tall and imposing in the middle of the tracks. He is in the midst of rolling an enormous blunt when I walk up on him and the group of women he is traveling with. Chimbo introduces him: “Jason, this is my friend who I met on the train tracks. I am going to help him and his wife move farther north.” It is unclear which of the young girls in the group is supposed to be El Ciego’s wife. Chimbo tells me this bullshit as if protecting me from something. I am introduced as the investigador who is writing about Honduran migrants. El Ciego immediately warms up to me, probably because he knows I am harmless and am likely to pitch in for food if asked. He lights his blunt and starts telling stories about his own migration experiences and how hard it is to be on the train tracks. This wide-grinning man is funny and disarming. At 32 years old, he is a respected elder in this world. His laughter and friendly gestures cut through the swirl of dense marijuana smoke and the bright Chiapan sun. He passes his blunt to his cronies and chats as if we are sitting on some jungle veranda enjoying a summer day. As we talk, everyone in the crew quietly gets his approval before they do anything. Most just listen to him tell stories. It’s like being in the company of a brown-skinned, tattooed Colonel Kurtz—equal parts magnetism and terror.

The women in the group all look exhausted. One is a teenager pushing the six-month mark of pregnancy. With indifference they watch the men smoke marijuana and talk shit to each other. The pregnant woman says she wants to take a nap, but there is nowhere to lie down on the tracks. Her friend tries to cheer her up with a bottle of soda and some chips. Chino waves me over and introduces me to Larissa. She shakes my hand and smiles. Chino giggles and puts his arm around her. She hugs him back. The blunt makes its way to Larissa, who steps up and takes an
enormous hit. She French inhales. The powdery smoke billows from her mouth as she smirks at all the men.

The odd demographic makeup of this group, six young women and three tattooed and scarred gangbangers, means that they can’t go into the migrant shelter and have to stay out of sight or risk arrest for smuggling and potentially trafficking. Everyone seems to be willingly with El Ciego, Chino, and Chimbo, but the circumstances of their traveling arrangements are vague. “How do you know Chino?” I ask Larissa. “We met on the tracks when I was walking. I was alone after my friends got arrested by immigration,” she tells me. It is clear that she and Chino are now a couple, at least for the time being. It is common for women traveling alone or those separated from their companions to team up with men, who may be migrants heading north without a guide or someone like Chino who is involved in smuggling. These men offer “protection” with the understanding that there is the potential for engaging in a sexual relationship. Larissa will later comment that she started traveling with Chino because he sweet-talked her and she subsequently fell in love with him. “I wasn’t really thinking that much about it,” she told me a year later back in Honduras. “I just thought he was good looking and that it would be fun to go with him north. . . . I know I should have been more scared, but I wasn’t. I don’t know why. I wasn’t scared at all. It was more like an adventure.” Their relationship was largely based on mutual attraction and not Larissa’s perception that Chino was a resource to be exploited or that she felt particularly vulnerable on the migrant trail.

In general, sex (of all different forms) is a common occurrence on the train tracks at night. This was confirmed by both migrants and the numerous used condoms we came across during archaeological surveys. Under the cover of darkness, migrants may engage in consensual and transactional sex (Cole 2004) with other migrants or local citizens. Participation in the informal sexual economy on the migrant trail is a way for people to make a little extra cash in order to continue their journey north. Chino remarked that Mexican men in Pakal-Na were known to pay male migrants for sex, especially Hondurans who (according to him) were known to be better endowed. He also hinted on numerous occasions (to me and Larissa) that he may have sold his own body to men when he needed the money. In addition to these forms of sex, rape and the threat of rape is a constant concern for women, especially at night on the
tracks. Many spoke of only traveling in groups after sunset and avoiding poorly lit areas of Pakal-Na. Because of their undocumented status and the difficulty of filing a formal complaint against a Mexican assailant, Central American women are often targeted by rapists on the migrant trail (see Martínez 2013).

While the female migrant body is a hypersexualized target in both popular discourse and during the migration process, little attention has been paid to how women themselves may use sex and their bodies as a form of capital. In her honor’s thesis, University of Michigan undergraduate student Anna Forringer-Beal (2016) documents how female migrants at a shelter in Tenosique commented that they often used makeup and particular types of clothes to “emphasize femininity and intentionally use gender-based stereotypes to illicit sympathy from combi drivers or officials who can provide goods or safety.” These women played with “traditional gender roles, ones in which women were cast as vulnerable and men their saviors.” Forringer-Beal cautions against researchers painting migrating women as vulnerable subjects with no agency. Her preliminary work suggests that in the context of migration, exploiting various forms of one’s gender, sexuality, and body for protection and economic support are common practices that defy simple moral critique and require more in-depth ethnographic inquiry.

In this particular instance, it is difficult to know whether the women in El Ciego’s group are being smuggled or trafficked (see discussion of this type of ambiguity in Brennan 2014). Larissa would later confirm that she was simply in love with Chino, which is why she joined him and his companions. According to her, though, other women in the group had been coerced with false promises by El Ciego, who was likely going to hand them all off to kidnappers farther up the train tracks. He had apparently even tried to broker a deal with the pregnant girl whereby she would give him the baby in payment for passage across the U.S.-México border. In the end, rather than continuing north, Larissa and Chino decided to break off from the group and stay in Pakal-Na.

A few days later Chimbo and I were sitting on the dirt in the Pleasure Palace while El Ciego and the women were still hiding on the tracks. Larissa and Chino were renting a room nearby. Chimbo had his backpack with him and started organizing his clothes and his tattoo equipment. He pulled out a small blue Bible and started reading. “What are you doing?” I ask. “I always read the Bible before I leave. My favorite is the Book of
Revelations. I read it for luck and for strength so that nothing happens to me.” After a few minutes of staring at a page, he got up and walked off. The next time I heard from him was when he sent me a Facebook message to let me know he made it to the northern Mexican border town of Piedras Negras. He offered no news about the women he was traveling with.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have proposed some different ways of thinking about the bodies of those involved in human smuggling and migration-related crime. Much has been written about the physical abuse that border crossers experience en route. These analyses, however, have tended to generalize about this population, often painting this social process as simple working-class struggles against the various actors who seek to slow (or profit from) their movement. By focusing on the bodies of individuals such as Chino, Chimbo, and Ana, I seek to complicate our understanding of what constitutes a migrant and undermine the generalizations about a “migration-specific habitus.” The bodies of migrants are not monolithic or static. People differentially experience racism, sexism, pain, suffering, and abuse while en route. Context and social roles subsequently determine how individuals conceptualize and use these physical experiences.

By dividing the migrant body into the categories of race, trauma, and sex in this chapter, I have seemingly avoided a discussion of the intersectionality of the diverse components that make up a person’s identity. My goal has not been to avoid dealing with this interplay, but rather to temporarily parse out some of the key bodily attributes that people must constantly negotiate. Future analyses of the corporeality of the undocumented migration experience will have to address the complex and dialectical nature of one’s overlapping identities and how those identities shape the roles that the body plays in different moments. Furthermore, additional attention is needed to understand how the migrant body feels the brunt of various structural forces while simultaneously being an evolving site for the accumulation of human, social, and biocultural capital. The bodies that I have described here speak to aspects of the morally and socially complex world of migration that are often overlooked or easily judged. Clandestine migration is not as cut and dried as some would have us believe. Rather than focusing exclusively on those who fit
the sympathetic mold of “economic migrant,” we need to spend more
time understanding the other players who shape this process (e.g., smug-
glers who are undocumented). A close-up look at the “violated bodies”
(Karandinos et al. 2014:3) of smugglers and those they seek to exploit tells
us much about localized ethics and elucidates the production of biosocial
capital in the dynamic “gray zone” (Levi 1989) of the train tracks.

In 2008, anthropologist Jon Wolseth wrote, “In escaping to the United
States, the supposed land of opportunity for these young [Honduran] men . . . [they] would also escape their imminent deaths, the physical
dearth of murder or the social death of not being able to make something
of themselves” (2008:328). In the eight years since this publication, the
rates of murder and out-migration from Honduras have skyrocketed.
Estimates by the United Nations in 2012 calculated murder rates at 90.4
per 100,000. In 2014, the British news agency the Telegraph reported a
rate as high as 169 per 100,000. Although the reliability of these statistics
is debatable, there is no question that Honduras is a dangerous place, es-
pecially for young males. I do not highlight these statistics to further the
naïve assessment that countries like Honduras are dangerous places that
breed dangerous migrants. Instead, we cannot begin to understand the
violent and morally complicated world of Central American migration
without recognizing that the governmental instability and economic tur-
moil in sending countries has shaped people’s difficult lives and encour-
aged them to migrate. These “push factors” are directly linked to decades
of American interventionist political and economic meddling coupled
with the impacts of America’s insatiable appetite for imported drugs and
the ongoing massive deportation of Central American gang members
(who honed their skills on U.S. soil) back to the Northern Triangle. There
are many global structural forces at play in Honduras and on the train
tracks of Pakal-Na that have left people like Chino, Ana, and Chimbo
with few chances or options. If we look behind the curtain to see the
linkage between American foreign and domestic policies (including the
outsourcing of southern border enforcement to México) and the lives of
Central Americans, it becomes difficult for anyone (especially U.S. citi-
zens) to judge these migrants on the basis of simplistic notions of “good”
and “bad.” When we focus on what life is like on the migrant trail, we
see that the categories of “economic migrant” and “criminal smuggler”
become blurry and lose some analytical power.
NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms.


3. The Undocumented Migration Project is a long-term anthropological study of clandestine migration that I have directed since 2009. The group that worked in Pakal-Na in 2015 consisted of a mix of senior scholars and undergraduate and graduate students who were associated with a semiannual field school that is organized through the Institute for Field Research (see www.ifrglobal.org).


5. This is not always true. Many impoverished (often indigenous) Mexican migrants ride La Bestia and are sometimes subject to the same abuses as non-Mexican nationals.

REFERENCES


