

Claremont Colleges

## Scholarship @ Claremont

---

CMC Senior Theses

CMC Student Scholarship

---

2023

# The Multi-Dimensional Relationship Between Immigration Policies and Mexican Migrant Women: A Cycle of Violence, Vulnerabilities, and Sobrevivencia

Jasmine Perales

Jasmine Perales

*Claremont McKenna College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses)



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Perales, Jasmine and Perales, Jasmine, "The Multi-Dimensional Relationship Between Immigration Policies and Mexican Migrant Women: A Cycle of Violence, Vulnerabilities, and Sobrevivencia" (2023). *CMC Senior Theses*. 3326.

[https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses/3326](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/3326)

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

The Multi-Dimensional Relationship Between Immigration Policies and  
Mexican Migrant Women: A Cycle of Violence, Vulnerabilities, and  
Sobreviviencia

Jasmine Perales  
Claremont McKenna College  
April 2023



In Partial Fulfillment for a Bachelor of Arts in  
Chicanx Latinx Studies

Presented to  
Professor Tomas Summers Sandoval  
Professor Arely Zimmerman

## Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Literature Review.....	6
Methodology.....	16
Chapter 1: The Construction of Legality.....	18
Race.....	18
Citizenship and Legality.....	20
The Latino Threat Narrative.....	22
Conclusion.....	23
Chapter 2: A Brief History of Immigration Policies.....	25
Pre-1900.....	26
1900-1965.....	27
1965-1990.....	31
1990-Present.....	33
Conclusion.....	44
Chapter 3: The Mexicana Migrant Experience.....	45
Gender.....	47
Reasons for Migrating.....	48
Planning for Migration.....	52
Crossing the Border.....	54
Claudia.....	55
Virgilia.....	59
Leticia.....	60
Elsa.....	62
Sheila.....	63
Fabiola.....	64
Iginia.....	66
Maria.....	68
Rosa #1.....	70
Isabel.....	59
Beatriz.....	72
Olga Salas.....	73
Rosa #2.....	76
Alejandra.....	76
Marcela.....	78
Lorena.....	78
Adela.....	80
Conclusion.....	81
Conclusion.....	82
References.....	84

## Acknowledgments

My thesis and achievements are all dedicated to mi mami, Alma Delia Flores Hernandez. Her strength, love, and passion have shaped me into the person I am today and grounded me. Gracias mami por todo lo que me has dado, todo lo que hago es para ti.

This process would not have been possible without the guidance of my two readers and thesis seminar professor: Professor Zimmerman, Professor Summers Sandoval, and Professor Ochoa. I want to thank my friends who supported me throughout this entire process, their support and feedback motivated me to keep writing. Lastly, I would like to thank the staff and faculty of the Intercollegiate Department of Chicanx Latinx Studies for welcoming me to a community that always inspires me to do more.



## Introduction



*Casas, Angelica, Cabral, Sam, and Bernd Debusmann Jr. "Texas Migrant deaths: Mexico blames poverty and US border crisis," BBC News, June 28, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61969006>*

At least 8,600 migrant deaths have been recorded at the United States-Mexico border since 1998, with mortalities recently spiking to unprecedented levels.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this statistic is an underestimate due to the extreme weather conditions and hundreds of miles that make it difficult to find the remains of those who did not make it through their journeys. Whether chasing the American Dream or escaping hostile living conditions, each one of them risked everything they had for an opportunity at a better life.

We hear on the mainstream American news that immigrants, specifically from Latin American countries, are labeled as criminals, gang members, rapists, and so much more. But we also hear about the frequency of deaths and violence occurring at the southern border, including

---

<sup>1</sup> "Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year." United States Border Patrol. <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-southwest-border-sector-deaths-fy1998-fy2018.pdf>

the recent incident in Texas where 53 migrants died in a big rig trailer due to extreme heat conditions.<sup>2</sup> As I sat with the news of these migrants who were searching for a better life, I thought to myself: How did we get here? Having come from a family of immigrants myself and being surrounded by communities filled with migrants, I did not see them as the criminals the news painted them to be, I saw humans who were seeking a better life. My community has faced many threats and challenges to simply exist in a country that exploits them, and their journeys to arrive here only touch upon a few of their many challenges.

Immigration is a very interconnected issue spanning decades of history in the U.S. It impacts everyone in the U.S., whether directly or indirectly. While every aspect of immigration is important to understand its structure, operations, and implications, it is impossible to cover them all in this thesis. I chose to focus on the experiences of Mexican migrant women because they experience a specific vulnerability and challenges that differ from the experiences of migrant men. Inspired by the perseverance and bravery of my mother, I hope to bring to the forefront the experiences of these women. To gain a better understanding of the layers of Mexicana migrants experiences, an introduction of how racial and migrant perceptions are formed will be discussed in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, a few immigration policies of the twentieth century are covered to show how the militarization and perception of Mexican immigrants has evolved over time to become what it is today. Lastly, Chapter 3 ties the previous chapters to examine the effects of modern immigration policies on Mexican women migrants and embeds their testimonies.

Before diving into the paper, I want to acknowledge the power that language can have. Many words have been used to discuss immigrants, in the media, academia, and everyday life, that carry negative connotations. It is very important to me to be able to break this trend and not

---

<sup>2</sup> Edison, Jaden & Patrick Svitek, “At least 50 people found dead in abandoned 18-wheeler in San Antonio.” *The Texas Tribune*, June 27, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/27/bodies-18-wheeler-san-antonio-lackland/>

dehumanize immigrants through the language I use. Immigration status and documentation is a legally and socially constructed phenomenon and is not static, subject to change over time. Documentation status holds a certain meaning in different time periods and will continue to evolve. I want to move away from these labels because they are a method of social categorization that leads to ostracization. Drawing from Joseph Nevins work, I seek to emulate the following: “‘illegal’ has become for many a code word for ethno-racial hatred toward unwanted migrants. As such I have tried to minimize its use. I do use it at times, however—sometimes to indicate what others have said or sometimes simply to reflect a particular perspective.”<sup>3</sup> I will also avoid the word “alien” because it is dehumanizing and implies a negative “otherness” that I do not want to associate with immigrants. Instead, I will use words such as: unauthorized, prohibited, unapproved, and unofficial. A few other words I will use throughout my thesis is Latine and Latinx when referring to a group of people from Latin America heritage to be more inclusive for gender non-conforming individuals. In reference to Mexican cisgender women, I will often refer to them as mexicanas, the term in Spanish.

---

<sup>3</sup> Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on Illegals and the Remaking of the U.S. - Mexico Boundary*, 15.

## Literature Review

The experiences of Mexican migrants have been extensively analyzed by scholars, with more literature being produced in the past few decades than ever before. This area of research is important because it is not largely discussed in mainstream media or education and when it is, it is often done in a negative light. This literature review will highlight a few of the many works that have centered the Mexican migrant experience to show what has been written about and what I drew from for my thesis. By doing so, this literature review will create a conceptual foundation that is helpful in understanding the complex migrant experience and will provide more context for the topics addressed in this thesis. To organize the literature under common themes, there are four sections in this literature review: Race, Gender, Perception of Immigrants, and Militarization of the U.S./Mexico Border.

### *Race*

#### ***The construction of race***

Mexican immigrants have often been treated in inhumane ways because of their perception as an inferior race, despite being considered racially White. To understand how this came to be, I draw from Tomas Almaguer who provides a historical analysis on how Mexican's racial status has changed over time in *Racial Fault Lines*. Through his analysis, he builds on the work of Herbert Blumer who viewed the construction of race as a collective process that influences other racial groups. Omi and Winant's work is very similar to Blumer's in defining what race is and how it is constructed. They argue that race is constructed through sociohistorical racial projects meant to organize people. As a result, race becomes embedded into societies as a way to interpret the world based on preconceived notions.

Although Mexicans born in the United States are legally white, they are not entitled to the same rights or privileges as those whose skin color is white. Instead, Mexicans are included with Latines as a racialized group deemed as “others” and outsiders. This construction of racial attitudes has occurred over time through racial projects and still have negative impacts on Mexican immigrants today. Natalia Molina writes about how this racialization of Mexican immigrants created racial scripts through a relational lens in her book *How Race is Made in America*. Racial scripts are those preconceived notions, ideas, and beliefs around a race that can be linked across time, space, and other racialized groups.<sup>1</sup> Molina explains how these have negatively impacted most Mexican immigrants since association with whiteness was difficult to obtain due to its correlation with the amount of economic capital they had. These racial scripts led to unequal citizenship that impacted how immigrants were perceived and were used to inform policies. Molina stresses how these negative racial scripts can be recycled over time and reapplied to different groups, making it important to recognize their role in policymaking to prevent more negative repercussions on racialized groups.

### ***The impact of race***

It is as equally important to analyze the impacts that race can have as its construction. Cristina Beltran uses the concept of race to look at how it has been mobilized in the U.S. to form anti-migrant sentiments and policies. In particular, she focuses on how whiteness has been used as a tool to create a racial hierarchy where White was at the top and Black was at the bottom. As a result, whiteness shapes society but is not static because it changes with the reactions of society. Whiteness ultimately led to the development of the U.S. ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom used as a justification for Western expansion. Yet, these ideals and policies were only to

---

<sup>1</sup> Molina, Natalia. *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, 22.

the benefit of White people and have become embedded into today's anti-migrant sentiments. Beltran's work falls in line with the work of other scholars who analyze racial violence by "reversing the optic"—focusing attention not only on those who have been injured but on the political and affective desires and racial imaginaries of 'those who generate injury.'"<sup>2</sup> Her application of this concept is useful in analyzing the impacts of policies on Mexican migrants because it sheds light on the role of race as a political tool to control the movement of people.

### *Gender*

Although there is a plethora of literature on the experiences of Mexican migrants transitioning and settling to the U.S., many lack a dimension of gender that focuses on the experiences of women. In a sense, by grouping the experiences of both men and women under the same umbrella of "Mexican migrants," it homogenizes their experiences. It also creates a sense of erasure of the experiences of mexicanas by not acknowledging the differences between the two groups. Therefore, it is important to recognize that past literature has tended to ignore the experiences of Mexican women, either intentionally or unintentionally. This lack of inclusion makes it all the more critical to look at literature that includes a gendered framework of analysis.

Donna Gabaccia analyzes past literature about immigrant women since the 1970s in "Immigrant Women: Nowhere at Home?" Gabaccia points out the flaws with this past literature to argue that they diminish or inaccurately report on the experiences of immigrant women. For example, she highlights how there was a primary focus on the family role in the lives of immigrant women, which suggested that these women could not think of themselves as individuals.<sup>3</sup> Other

---

<sup>2</sup> Beltrán, Cristina. *Cruelty As Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Gabaccia, Donna. "Immigrant Women: Nowhere at Home?" *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 70.

literature has only focused on the intersection of women with one other category, such as ethnicity or class, but not being more intersectional. In addition, the various scholars in gender studies go about their research in different ways depending on their field and positionality. For example, a white feminist may view the value of family differently from a working class feminist. As a result, the current literature on immigrant women is inconsistent and contains analytical gaps essential in understanding these experiences through an intersectional lens. Therefore, more literature is needed to bring to light to and not erase the experiences of immigrant women from history and to offer a more holistic account of the challenges they face.

I hope to build upon the foundational gendered analysis of Mexicana migration of Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo's *Gendered Transitions*. This book was written in 1994 and was one of the first scholarly pieces that really analyzes the experiences of Mexican women through a gendered lens that shows how gender shapes their migrations. Using ethnographic methods, Hondagneu-Sotelo conducted interviews with Mexican undocumented immigrant women and men in northern California to gain a better understanding of the forces that influence migration and settlement. He develops this argument by comparing many of the experiences the women face to those of men, showing how migration is different between the two groups. This book provides a foundation for a gendered analysis of migration that I hope to use in my thesis to continue to expand the implications of gender, an area still not fully explored.

Another important piece of literature that centers the experiences of Latinx migrants is *Sacrificing Families* by Leisy Abrego. In this piece, Abrego looks at the experiences of transnational families where parents from El Salvador migrate to the U.S. while their children remain in their home country. To discuss the challenges these families face, she uses testimonials from the family members throughout her book. Although the focus of this book is on families from

El Salvador, Abrego's ethnographic approach is one I hope to emulate in my writing. Furthermore, her gendered analysis of migration is important because it recognizes the differences migrant experiences on the basis of gender. She argues that the gendered opportunities available to migrant women, draconian immigration policies, and mothering make migrant women more likely to make larger sacrifices for their families. She concludes that experiences in the U.S. differ upon gender, and these have different impacts on the respective families. Abrego's piece is useful to my thesis because it sets an example of how a gendered analysis and testimonials can be incorporated into the experiences of migrants instead of excluded and as a result, be able to explore the implications.

I will also draw from "Buscando la Vida" where Maria de la Luz Ibarra uplifts the voices of undocumented, single Mexicana immigrants through interviews to fill the gap in literature focusing on the crucial journey of crossing the border. Ibarra argues that the movement of Mexican women across the border is a result of globalization and economic practices that created a need for cheap labor for service jobs. Mexicanas are lured by the idea of earning enough money to send back to their families, especially if they are from rural areas where there are limited job opportunities. Mexicanas do not impulsively act to begin the journey north, but take time to plan it out. Despite this planning, most recount the crossing as a traumatic event that leaves them with psychological and/or physical scars that they carry with them. Some recounted the fear in crossing through the desert, entering survival mode in the extreme conditions. Others were overwhelmed with emotion remembering how they saw other women being sexually assaulted. These are lived experiences that are hurtful to express because it takes the women back to the painful moments and are experiences they have to cope with for the rest of their lives. Ibarra's work is an example of how scholars can adequately look at the experiences of women immigrants and work closely with them in the process.



## *Perceptions of Mexican Immigrants*

### ***Perceived Threat***

To gain a better understanding into how immigration policies are created and their purposes, it is necessary to acknowledge that they have been informed by a negative perception of migrants. Leo Chavez addresses how the perceived threat of Mexican and Latin American migrants has shaped immigration laws in his book *The Latino Threat*. His analysis is unique because it interconnects policies, history, the use of media, and the concept of citizenship to show how they have all led to the dehumanization of Latinx migrants. For example, the media has been used as a tool of oppression by depicting migrants as “illegal aliens,” savages, and evil with the intent of reconquering the Southwest.<sup>4</sup> These perceptions are then accepted by society which can lead to the creation of nativist groups like the Minutemen who seek to “protect” the border. The Latino threat narrative does not only impact the undocumented immigrant, but extends to their family, associations, and future generations. Chavez’s holistic approach is very helpful in understanding how the perceived threat of migrants has impacted their lives in multiple ways.

### *Perceived Illegality and Criminalization*

There is extensive literature on how migrants over time have become associated with illegality and eventually, criminality, including the work of Rene Flores,<sup>5</sup> Cecilia Menjivar,<sup>6</sup> and Nolan Kline.<sup>7</sup> Most scholars ground this work through a historical analysis to show how these social perceptions were formed and changed over time. The following three scholars were selected because they each focus their analysis on a specific time period, organized starting from the earliest

---

<sup>4</sup> Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Flores, René D., and Ariela Schachter. “Who Are the ‘Illegals’? The Social Construction of Illegality in the United States.”

<sup>6</sup> Menjivar, Cecilia. “The Racialization of ‘Illegality.’”

<sup>7</sup> Kline, Nolan. “Constructing the Undeserving Citizen: The Embodied Consequences of Immigration Enforcement in the US South.”

time period to the most recent. They are all significant because they show how the perception of immigrants has changed over time and how this influenced the multidirectional relationship with laws.

One of these scholars that writes about immigrant illegality is Mae Ngai who interconnects the illegality of Asian migrants to that of Mexican migrants in her book *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. She focuses her analysis on the years 1924 to 1965 because it was the beginning of comprehensive immigration laws that were severely restrictive, including the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Through the immigration policies of these years, Ngai argues that undocumented immigrants have become “alien citizens” that are situated on the outside of formal societal membership. As a result, “aliens do not enjoy all the privileges of citizenship,” even if they have documented status.<sup>8</sup> Even though undocumented migrants can gain citizenship, Ngai argues that they are never able to shed the otherness that society perpetuates onto them. In my thesis, I will build on Ngai’s argument that connects the influence of racial ideology to the perception and treatment of migrants because of their perceived illegality.

Nicholas De Genova expands on Ngai’s framework of migrant illegality in his book *Constructing Immigrant Illegality*. Similar to Ngai, De Genova uses a historical foundation of immigration policies, focusing from 1965 to the present, to illustrate how they have constructed migrant illegality. He argues that after the 1930s, the U.S. sought to distinguish between “legal” and “illegal” migration as a method of controlling Mexican labor and who was “deserving” of rights. Furthermore, De Genova argues that “immigration laws are part of the effort to make

---

<sup>8</sup> Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 6.

particular migrations into disciplined and manageable objects.”<sup>9</sup> He applies this idea to his analysis of immigration policies by focusing on their racialized purposes and how they were rooted in the belief of immigrant illegality. On the other hand, Ngai uses immigration policies to show how they produced the idea of illegality and the impacts this had on the placement of migrants in society.

### *Perceived Disposability*

The effect of Mexican migrants being perceived as a threat, illegal, and criminals ultimately leads to their perceived disposability. Raymond Rocco ties these all together in his essay *Disposable Subjects* where he argues that the past 50 years of U.S. neoliberalism have contributed to the current disposability of Latinx migrants, including Mexicans. Through this economic lens, he claims that neoliberalism created the need of Latinx migrants for low-wage labor but then deemed them unworthy of citizenship or rights. This created a disposability that is characterized by the exploitation of workers in horrible working conditions, low wages, undocumented status that makes them deportable, and the ability to replace them with other undocumented immigrants easily. In addition, the racialized perceptions of migrants as threats was further used to promote their commodification and disposability. These perceptions are used as justification for not providing them the same rights as others, adding another way in which they contained and controlled their lives. Rocco’s essay ties economic, political, and racial dimensions of how perceptions of Latinx migrants affects their treatment, adding to the existing scholarship valuable insight.

### *Militarization of the U.S./Mexico Border*

---

<sup>9</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. “Immigration ‘Reform’ and the Production of Migrant ‘Illegality.’” *Constructing Immigrant ‘Illegality’: Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 43.

The movement of people across the U.S./Mexico border has been influenced by policies, but it has also been impacted by the physical border barriers. To understand how the physical border became militarized to be the apparatus of surveillance it is today, I draw from the work of Joseph Nevins in his two *Operation Gatekeeper* books. Both of them detail the actions, in the U.S. and transnationally, since the 1990s that strived to build the border apparatus. Nevins argues that the development of the U.S. into a nation-state and the perception of migrants as threats to national security were large contributors to the militarization of the border. Therefore, the border is a reflection of a shared belief in the U.S. of needing to control unauthorized immigration. Although Nevins is not clear about exactly which demographics in society accepted these beliefs, it can be inferred that he was referring to White Americans. He also acknowledges the role of politicians and the government in disseminating these images to the masses. Decades of pursuing these goals has led Americans to view these practices as normal and unproblematic. Although these books do not detail the entire history of the border, they offer an analysis of the contemporary period that takes into consideration political, economic, and social influences, providing a more detailed account.

While Nevins offers an important historical account of how the border became militarized, he focuses on it through an economic perspective. Kelly Lyttle Hernandez's *Migra!* adds to Nevin's work by analyzing the rise of the U.S. Border Patrol as enforcers of immigration law. She ties the expansion of the Border Patrol to the demands of labor and expansion of federal law enforcement throughout the twentieth century. Hernandez argues that the black/white racial binary made Border Patrol agents decide which immigrants to assign rights, legality, and protection. Unlike other literature focused on the militarization of the border that only focuses on policies in the U.S. that contributed to it, Hernandez highlights how Mexico also played a role in this

expansion. Mexico, like the U.S., had economic incentives in supporting certain immigration laws. Nonetheless, combining Nevin's focus on the militarization of the border apparatus and Hernandez's analysis on the expansion of the U.S. Border Patrol, the role of the border as a perpetrator of race and illegality is evident. Although they do not explicitly mention gender, they provide a historical foundation of the border apparatus that will then be used to analyze its implications on migrant women.

### *Future Literature*

Ultimately, migration affects each migrant in different ways, whether it be what drives them to migrate to where they settle in the U.S. Due to the vast experiences migrants can face, future literature must be conscious in not homogenizing their experiences. This is especially crucial in comparing these experiences through a gendered lens. But in addition to gender, future scholars should also acknowledge how socioeconomic class, documentation, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and other identities impact migration experiences. Drawing from Kimberle Crenshaw's work, scholars can implement an intersectional analysis into their work that creates an "analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, future literature should also acknowledge that there is not one single cause for the current immigration apparatus in the U.S. There are many relationships, institutions, individuals, and agents that have shaped immigration policy for decades. While it is difficult to address all of them in one piece of work, when focusing on one aspect, the others need to be acknowledged. This does not negate the knowledge of other important influences and paints a more accurate representation of the immigration apparatus.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," 788.

## Methodology

It can be very easy to become desensitized to statistics and stories we hear in the media, but I did not want the voices of the Mexicana migrants to be lost within this noise. While most of this thesis is rooted in academic and secondary sources, I wanted to bring testimonies to the forefront and humanize this writing. In addition, including these testimonials is a form of returning agency to the women: “Personal narratives contain a dimension of oppositionality, in that through stories, communities create discourses about themselves that can replace dominant representations and resist social determination.”<sup>1</sup> This is important considering “An *interactive element of research* usually is missing from both the literature and discussion of methodological design.”<sup>2</sup> Straying away from traditional scholarship that is distanced from emotion, I hope to show the humanity of those who I am writing about.

Although mothers have been fountains of knowledge, many hold back life lessons rooted in their experiences because of shame and embarrassment associated with them.<sup>3</sup> The process of migration in of itself is very challenging mentally and physically, which can also lead some women to suppress these experiences. In deciding how to integrate their experiences in, I did not want to exploit stories of women or reopen wounds of trauma. Instead, I will pull testimonios from past studies, interviews, or platicas that have been completed. This is rooted in the code of ethics from *Formation of a Code of Ethics* that grounds research in thoughtfulness with those you work with, respect, self-lessness, and responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Instead of objectifying the experiences of women in my

---

<sup>1</sup> Téllez, Michelle. “Doing Research at the Borderlands: Notes from a Chicana Feminist Ethnographer,” 57.

<sup>2</sup> Córdova, Teresa. “Plugging the Brain Drain.” *Latino Social Policy*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Andrade, Rosi and Hilda González Le Denmat. “The Formation of a Code of Ethics for Latina/Chicana Scholars,” 154.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

community, I want to bring these stories forward in instances where they have felt comfortable to share them.

Two scholars who have used ethnography methods in working with Mexican immigrant women are Joanna Dreby and Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo. Dreby focuses on the impacts legal status has on the women's families and Hondagneu-Sotelo on the way gender shapes migration and settlement. Although I do not directly use the testimonies in the works in this thesis, I draw from their ethnographic methods and analysis to emulate it. Similarly to them, I will pull quotes from testimonios to explore the implications of immigration policies on Mexicana migrants. Although I have a list of questions that I will be looking for answers to, I will let the experiences of the women guide me on what to include. This was inspired by the following: "We fit in by not fretting over those differences that make us stand out. In turn, we also must not make others fit into our image of them."<sup>5</sup> I will try to not review past testimonials with an agenda, but rather with an open mind wanting to gain a better understanding of the experiences of women.

To add another dimension of humanization and not lose sight of those I am writing about, I will include photographs taken at the southern border throughout my thesis. I want to illustrate the physical location I am referring to, as well as the people. I will pull these pictures from social media, news outlets, organizations, activists, and other academic sources that have included photography. Photos are a powerful tool that I hope will paint a picture on the issues I will discuss.

---

<sup>5</sup> Andrade, Rosi and Hilda González Le Denmat. "The Formation of a Code of Ethics for Latina/Chicana Scholars," 157.

## Chapter 1: The Construction of Legality

The perceptions of Mexican migrants have changed over time by society and the U.S. government, informing laws and policies. To understand the formation of these perceptions, one needs to understand how they became a racialized group. This chapter will cover what constitutes race and racial scripts, how they are formed, and their implications on Mexican migrants. To organize these concepts, there are three subsections: race, citizenship and legality, and the Latino Threat Narrative. The knowledge in this chapter will serve as a foundation for the analysis of immigration policies in Chapter 2.

### *Race*

To commence, race plays a crucial role in the experiences of Mexican migrants. Policies have explicitly or implicitly incorporated racial reasoning to reach a certain agenda. Yet, race is arbitrary because its definition changed over time in accordance with societal beliefs. Nonetheless, race has effects on the lives of all people because it is legally encoded into laws and other systems that are used by society, including the economy. Today, race is constituted of cultural, national, and physical differences.<sup>1</sup> According to Omi and Winant, race is a “concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies”<sup>2</sup> that is formed through a “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”<sup>3</sup> Race differs from other methods of identification, such as gender, because it does not have a biological basis, leaving it up to social interpretation.<sup>4</sup> While the concept of race has changed over time, it has become ingrained into the social fabric of the world today,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. “Racial Formation.” *Racial Formation in the United States*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



becoming an unconscious way of comprehending the world. As a tool of categorization, race has been co-opted to form a social structure and hierarchy in many ways. In the past, race was used to justify slavery and colonization. Today, race is similarly used as a political tool to justify the xenophobia in U.S. immigration policies. In the next chapter, a few important immigration policies that impacted Mexican migration throughout the twentieth century will reveal how race has historically been fundamental in U.S. immigration policies.

Now that race has been defined: how does it impact Mexican migrants? As Cristina Beltran describes, “the United States can best be understood as ‘a white democracy, a polity ruled in the interests of a white citizenry and characterized by simultaneous relations of equality and privilege: equality among whites, who are privileged in relation to those who are not white.’”<sup>5</sup> As a white democracy, the U.S. has always prioritized the interests of white people over everyone else: afforded them more privileges, rights, and advantages. Instead of acting as a democracy that treats all as equals, it can be categorized as a Herrenvolk democracy because it is “democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups.”<sup>6</sup> This engraved preference for whiteness creates a process of racialization that establishes a racial hierarchy: whiteness being at the top and subsequent races following according to their degree of association with whiteness. To further uphold this hierarchy, racial scripts are used. A racial script is constituted of stereotypes or myths associated with a racial group.<sup>7</sup> As Omi and Winant explain, “The whole gamut of racial stereotypes testifies to the way a racialized social structure shapes racial experience and socializes racial meanings.”<sup>8</sup> Starting with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, Mexicans were allowed

---

<sup>5</sup> Beltrán, Cristina. *Cruelty As Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Molina, Natalia. *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. “Racial Formation.” *Racial Formation in the United States*, 59-60.

to become citizens, being associated with whiteness, but not afforded the social privileges of whiteness. Throughout the twentieth century the degree of whiteness and respective privileges associated with Mexican migrants would change in accordance with social and political climates of the time in reaction to different racial projects as Omi and Winant would characterize. Chapter 2 will illustrate more in depth how these racial scripts and perceived whiteness impacted Mexican migrants over the decades.

One of the most impactful racial scripts that has affected Mexican migrants is their perceived illegality. The U.S. government has played a large role in creating this racial script by perpetuating a fear of Mexican migrants to society. As Rocco explains: “Illegality is concerned with the sense of constant threat, and the precarious, almost covert space of movement and existence that results from being unauthorized.”<sup>9</sup> While humans have always moved across territories, the creation of state sanctioned borders has only perpetuated a system that determines legality and rights. The U.S. government has used fear of illegality to support its draconian immigration policies and justify its increased militarization of the border. This has resulted in all Mexican migrants, and more broadly all Mexicans, to be associated with illegality, even if they did migrate legally. Immigrant “illegality” and racialization has transformed from a social perception to a government sanctioned belief that creates social stratification and exclusion of migrants.<sup>10</sup>

### *Citizenship and Legality*

Furthermore, draconian policies force migrants to enter through an unauthorized method, but this only creates one of many challenges in the migration process. Once in the U.S., the

---

<sup>9</sup> Rocco, Raymond. “Disposable Subjects: The Racial Normativity of Neoliberalism and Latino Immigrants,” 108.

<sup>10</sup> Molina, Natalia, HoSang, Daniel and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds. *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 258.

unauthorized migrant will live in an uncertain limbo, facing the fear of deportation at any moment. This is due to the fact that immigration policy is created by “Americans’ understanding of national membership and citizenship, drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion that articulate a desired composition—imagined if not necessarily realized—of the nation.”<sup>11</sup> This exclusion and limited pathways to citizenship strips unauthorized migrants of rights and protections. Although documentation status is not static and can change, current immigration policies limit the possibilities to gain legal status. For example, “About one million people manage to become ‘lawful permanent residents’ in the United States each year. This is a large number, but nearly all of these people gain legal residence either because they have close relatives living here (66 percent), meet requirements for a special work visa (16 percent), win a ‘diversity visa’ (5 percent), or qualify as refugees or asylees (12 percent).”<sup>12</sup> To provide some context, there are currently a little over 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., almost half of which are from Mexico.<sup>13</sup> It is evident that there is a much greater need for pathways to citizenship and the current system only scratched the surface of the issue.

While “illegality” is a condition that is not static, it is a label that is difficult to overcome and carries legal implications. One example of this is that 490,000 immigrant visas were issued in 2022.<sup>14</sup> When taking into consideration that this encompasses those migrants entering the U.S. with a visa and the adjustment of status of some of the 11 million undocumented people in the U.S., this makes a small dent on a much larger issue.<sup>15</sup> Not to mention, the application and

---

<sup>11</sup> Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Guskin, Jane, and David L. Wilson. *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers*, 70.

<sup>13</sup> “Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States.” Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>

<sup>14</sup> “Visa Approvals Bounce Back to Pre-Pandemic Levels in 2022.” *Boundless*, January 25, 2023. <https://www.boundless.com/blog/state-department-visa-report/>

<sup>15</sup> “Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States.” Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>

processing times of green cards are several months or years. This is only one of the types of documentation immigrants can apply to, but each is riddled with its own challenges. It reveals how legal documentation is not as easily accessible as nativists may believe. Furthermore, a survey in 2005 found that 98% of those undocumented in the U.S. would attempt to obtain legal status if it was available to them.<sup>16</sup> While this survey was conducted almost two decades ago, the same sentiment is probably still true today since undocumented immigrants do not want to live in a state of deportability. The current immigration system does not have the capacity to accept the petitions of all undocumented immigrants, leaving many vulnerable. Thus, it is evident that while there are pathways to change an immigrant's documentation status, there are institutional and systemic barriers that impede this process.

### *The Latino Threat Narrative*

It is important to note that in addition to the U.S. government, society has also played a large role in the racialization and spreading fear of undocumented migrants. The media are a reflection of societal beliefs but are also a tool that widely disseminates this onto mass amounts of viewers. Thus, there is a constant feedback loop where society impacts what is on the media but the media also impacts societal beliefs. This is important to acknowledge because as the number of undocumented immigration rose, the anti-immigrant sentiment rose as well. The media increasingly became a way to associate all undocumented immigrants from Mexico as “illegal aliens,” “illegitimate recipients of organ donations,” “highly fertile invaders,” and “unassimilable separatists bent on a reconquest of the U.S. Southwest,” embodying what Leo Chavez refers to as the Latino Threat Narrative.<sup>17</sup> At the core of these beliefs is that they are needed to help preserve

---

<sup>16</sup> Guskin, Jane, and David L. Wilson. *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, 34.

the societal hierarchy from the threat Mexicans pose to the “dominant culture, a threat to democratic values, a threat from foreigners, and as the threat of violence and criminality.”<sup>18</sup> The implication of such negative immigrant rhetoric is that there is an unaccepting U.S. society that will be more inclined to be exclusionary towards immigrants and endorse draconian immigration policies.

The long-term implication of the media negatively portraying Mexican migrants is that it has caused these stereotypes to be applied to all Mexicans, and even other Latine groups. Mexicans who were born in the U.S. or have documentation are associated with illegality nevertheless. The same is true for children who were born in the U.S. but have undocumented parents or are now documented by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This is an issue that affects the growing population of Mexicans in the U.S. since they will continue to be met with racialized stereotypes associated with illegality, regardless of documentation. To illustrate, from 2000 to 2020, there was a growth of 15 million of Mexicans in the U.S. who have different documentation statuses but many of whom will have children.<sup>19</sup> The Latino Threat Narrative will follow their children and generations to come regardless of status. This forces Mexicans to live in a society that largely sees them as disposable, deportable, and illegitimate members of society.<sup>20</sup>

### *Conclusion*

By knowing how stereotypes about immigrants form, their illegitimate foundations are exposed. At the core of the Latino Threat Narrative is racism and xenophobia that is meant to preserve a racial hierarchy in the U.S. It purposefully results in social, political, and economic

---

<sup>18</sup> Rocco, Raymond. “Disposable Subjects: The Racial Normativity of Neoliberalism and Latino Immigrants,” 109.

<sup>19</sup> Zong, Jie. “A Mosaic, Not a Monolith: A Profile of the U.S. Latino Population, 2000-2020.” UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute, October 26, 2022.

<https://latino.ucla.edu/research/latino-population-2000-2020/>

<sup>20</sup> Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, 127.

exclusion of those who are undocumented or deemed as a threat. This narrative is continuously reinforced through U.S. government policies, mainstream media, and society. Despite illegality being fluid, it is projected onto almost all Latines and carries with it a stigma. The sense of deportability puts immigrants in vulnerable positions and are difficult to overcome because of the convoluted immigration system. In the next chapter, some of the most influential immigration policies from the twentieth and early twenty-first century will be analyzed to show how racial scripts and the Latino Threat Narrative are embedded into them.

## Chapter 2: A Brief History of Immigration Policies



Domonske, Camila and Richard Gonzales. “Fact Check: What’s Happening on the U.S.-Mexico Border?” NPR, November 27, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/27/670807343/fact-check-whats-happening-on-the-u-s-mexico-border>

Current immigration policies are draconian, pushing migrants to more dangerous methods of entry. Yet, these policies were not created overnight. They have precedent from decades worth of immigration policies that have transformed over time. While each immigration policy is a reflection of the political agenda at its time, all are based on underlying beliefs about race. There are four periods of time I will group policies into: pre-1900, 1900-1965, 1965-1990, 1990-present.

Throughout this chapter there will be references to terms that I will define to provide clarity. One of these terms is voluntary departures defined as: “the confirmed movement of an inadmissible or deportable alien out of the United States not based on an order of removal,” and are referred to as “returns” in more recent U.S. government data.<sup>1</sup> Formal deportations, referred to as “removals” by the U.S. government, are expulsions of migrants carried through an order of

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America’s Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, 208.

removal, usually entailing hearings and detention stays.<sup>2</sup> Self deportation refers to migrants who voluntarily leave without the involvement of government officials. Drawing from Goodman's work, I will refer to these three types of departures under the umbrella term of "deportation" unless referring to a specific type. This is in part due to the lack of distinction among deportations in historical government immigration records that makes it difficult to determine which type of deportation occurred.

### *Pre-1900*

One of the most influential pieces of policy that would impact future immigration policies was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. This Treaty was signed at the end of the U.S.-Mexico War and granted Mexicans residing in the newly acquired territory the opportunity of U.S. citizenship.<sup>3</sup> At this point, citizenship had been afforded to only racial groups considered "White." By allowing Mexicans to become citizens, it began to alter the racial hierarchy by associating them with whiteness. This would start a complex racial history of Mexicans in the U.S. where they become legally associated with whiteness and citizenship, but would be associated with a sense of otherness by society. As a result, the racial hierarchy shifted in a way where: Europeans were at the top of this hierarchy because of their association with whiteness and Mexicans were at the next level because Spanish colonization projected some of its characteristics onto Mexicans, including Christianity, that distanced them from their indigenous roots.<sup>4</sup> Below Mexicans were Black, Native American, and Chinese groups. This created legally racialized ethnic groups that would lead to policies such as the 1892 Geary Act that sought to eliminate Chinese immigration and deport those

---

<sup>2</sup> Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Almaguer, Tomas. *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*, 4.



who were in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> Although this policy was not targeted towards Mexicans, it set the precedent for the ability of the U.S. government to use its power to deport, criminalize, fine, and deny entry to immigrants. The federal government would create similar policies in the following decades tailored to their perceived needs, each time expanding their scope and power.

### *1900-1965*

Furthermore, the combination of the informal racial hierarchy with neoliberalism created the view of Mexicans as dispensable labor needed to meet capitalist production levels. The growth of agriculture in the Southwest and industrialization in cities fueled migration so much that “In 1910, L.A.’s Mexican population numbered five thousand; in 1920, it was thirty thousand; and by 1930, it had more than tripled, reaching ninety-seven thousand.”<sup>6</sup> This growth in migration was also shaped by the 1924 National Origins Act, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, that set quotas for a number of immigrants allowed to enter from each country or region each year.<sup>7</sup> While Asian immigrants continued to be excluded, European immigrants made up 96% of quota slots.<sup>8</sup> This policy was mainly meant to restrict off-white Europeans and exempted the Western Hemisphere from the quota system. One of the reasons for this was the continual need for Mexican low-wage labor and as a result, Mexicans continued to migrate in search of better economic opportunities considering the economic turmoil they were experiencing in the 1910s caused by the Mexican Revolution. On the surface, this seems like a win for both Mexicans who were able to secure a job and the U.S. who was able to maintain their production levels. But in actuality it reinforced a pattern of dehumanizing migration that would continue for decades to come. Specifically, as the

---

<sup>5</sup> Hernandez, Kelly Lyttle. *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> Molina, Natalia. *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*, 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Hernandez, Kelly Lyttle. *City of Inmates*, 133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

first restrictive immigration law in the U.S., it created an ethnic hierarchy that afforded different privileges and set a foundation for the surveillance state.<sup>9</sup>

Despite being allowed to migrate legally after the 1924 National Origins Act, this law was accompanied with the creation of the Border Patrol.<sup>10</sup> The function of the Border Patrol was to act as an enforcer of legal seasonal migration and the subsequent deportation after the agricultural demands for labor ended.<sup>11</sup> Although there was not a quantitative restriction on legal migration, there were qualitative measures of immigration law that could result in denied entry including: \$8 immigrant head tax, \$10 visa fee, illiteracy, violation of prohibitions against contracted labor, public charges, and association with anarchism.<sup>12</sup> Many migrants would avoid the legal points of entry to avoid the expenses associated, estimated at half a million unauthorized entries during the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> Being exempted from the quotas and finding alternative entry routes, Mexican migrants became one of the largest groups of immigrants by the end of the decade.<sup>14</sup> By entering through unauthorized entry points, Mexican migrants began to be policed as “illegal,” beginning their association with their racial script of criminality. Ultimately, the sentiment of the revolving door and justifications for deportation continued to enforce the sense of deportability and disposability of Mexican migrants, despite residing in the U.S. legally, with the Border Patrol as the enforcers. This is further exemplified by the Border Patrol being operated under the Department of Labor from its creation until 1940.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Hernández, Kelly Lytle. *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> De Genova, Nicholas, and Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas. *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and the Politics of Race and Citizenship*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Hernandez, Kelly Lytle. *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*, 134-135.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. “Immigration ‘Reform’ and the Production of Migrant ‘Illegality.’” *Constructing Immigrant ‘Illegality’: Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 40.

The Great Depression further propelled immigration policies in the direction of creating a restrictive immigration infrastructure. The dire economic conditions led many Americans to view immigrants as stealing the few jobs on the market. This evolved into more anti-immigrant sentiments and a perception that Americans needed to be protected. To illustrate, at the start of the Great Depression in 1929 Senator Blease proposed that “‘unlawfully entering the country’ would be a misdemeanor punishable by a \$1,000 fine and/or up to one year in prison, while unlawfully returning to the United States after deportation would be a felony punishable by a \$1,000 fine and/or up to two years in prison.”<sup>16</sup> The racial scripts of illegality and criminality soon began to be projected onto all immigrants and caused immigration offenders to be the second largest population in the federal prison system.<sup>17</sup> Anti-immigration sentiments manifested into the 1930s, resulting in the federal government deporting over 400,000 Mexicans, even if they were born in the U.S., in what is referred to as the Mexican Repatriation.<sup>18</sup> Not only were Mexicans physically excluded from the country, they were also excluded from the state and society. An example of state exclusion is how employment and economic relief were preserved for “Americans,” meaning White Americans, leaving Mexicans systematically excluded in a period of financial hardship.<sup>19</sup> For those Mexicans who remained in the country, they were socially excluded through ostracization and perceived illegality, often taking the form of racism.

---

<sup>16</sup> Hernandez, Kelly Lyttle. *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>18</sup> Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. “Immigration ‘Reform’ and the Production of Migrant ‘Illegality.’” *Constructing Immigrant ‘Illegality’: Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 41.



*"A family deported from McAllen, Texas, begins the 400-mile trek home to the central Mexican state of San Luis Potosi, 1953." In Goodman, Adam, "The Deportation Regime," 50.*

Once the U.S.' economy had recovered, there was an economic pressure to meet the agriculture needs of the nation. As a result, they created the Bracero Program in 1943 that lasted until 1964, authorizing Mexican immigrants to

enter the U.S. as temporary labor workers.<sup>20</sup> Sandwiched in the duration of the Bracero Program was Operation Wetback that took place 1953-1954. This operation deported two million Mexicans as a response to decreased agricultural labor demand and fear that there would not be employment for returning soldiers following the conclusion of the Korean War.<sup>21</sup> These two programs show how Mexicans continued to be viewed as disposable and were only valued for their physical low-wage labor they offered to supplement the needs of the U.S. Once this labor was no longer needed, the state did not see migrants as worthy of remaining in the U.S. The precariousness of the legality of Mexican migrants during the period 1900-1964 was intentionally created through immigration policies to allow the government to leverage deportation whenever it saw fit.

<sup>20</sup> Katz, Michael B., Mark J. Stern, and Jamie J. Fader. "The Mexican Immigration Debate: The View from History," 166.

<sup>21</sup> Ganster, Paul, and David E Lorey. *The U.S.-Mexican Border into the Twenty-First Century*, 119-120.

1965-1990

From 1965 onwards the immigrant makeup of the U.S. would radically change. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart Cellar Act, replaced the previous national quota system established in 1924 that set a maximum number of visas to be issued for the Eastern and Western hemispheres.<sup>22</sup> Instead, it implemented broader caps on visas: 170,000 for the Eastern Hemisphere, 120,000 for the Western Hemisphere, and 20,000 for individual countries.<sup>23</sup> It also placed a preference on immigrants with familial ties with U.S. citizens and those who were skilled and educated.<sup>24</sup> Although this act was intended to bring in more European, skilled migrants, European migration began to decrease. Instead, Asian and Mexican migrants became the majority of the makeup of migrants to the U.S. With the Bracero Program ending and this being the first policy placing a quota on migration from the Western Hemisphere, there were limited pathways of authorized entry. Yet Mexicans continued to migrate to work in the U.S., only now unauthorized because they were not processed through the program. So much so that in 1968, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reported that there was a 40% increase in apprehensions of “deportable” Mexicans.<sup>25</sup> As a result, from 1965 to 1985 INS deported thirteen million people.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the increasing trend of unauthorized immigration began with a response of mass deportations.

---

<sup>22</sup> Chishti, Muzaffar, Hipsman, Faye and Isabel Ball. “Fifty years on, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Continues to Reshape the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, October 15, 2015.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/fifty-years-1965-immigration-and-nationality-act-continues-reshape-united-states>

<sup>23</sup> “Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965,” US House of Representatives History, Art and Archives. <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Immigration-and-Nationality-Act-of-1965/>

<sup>24</sup> Chishti, Muzaffar, Hipsman, Faye and Isabel Ball. “Fifty years on, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Continues to Reshape the United States,” <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/fifty-years-1965-immigration-and-nationality-act-continues-reshape-united-states>

<sup>25</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. “Immigration ‘Reform’ and the Production of Migrant ‘Illegality.’” *Constructing Immigrant ‘Illegality’: Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America’s Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, 107.

Large numbers of migration during this period were also a result of economic circumstances. Neoliberalism began to establish its dominance in the 1970s that gave economic justification for the disposability of migrants for the maintenance of the economy, a belief rooted in the racial hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, neoliberalism sought to decrease costs and expand markets and did this through “deindustrialization, introduction of flexible automated technologies to replace labor, shift to part time and temporary labor, downsizing, and replacing high wage, unionized labor with low-wage workers and eliminating health and other benefits.”<sup>28</sup> The economy of Mexico was deteriorating by the end of the decade as oil prices increased, inflation rose, GDP and wages fell, and unemployment increased.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, migrants went to the U.S. to fill in low-wage jobs, but with little to no benefits or protections because of their low placement on the racial hierarchy.

As a response to the large number of undocumented migrants in the U.S. and heightened fear among Americans of immigrants, Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 (IRCA). This law prohibited employers from knowingly hiring undocumented individuals, allowed those who arrived before 1982 the opportunity to gain permanent residence, and created a visa for seasonal workers.<sup>30</sup> While this law is praised for providing a path to citizenship for many migrants already in the U.S., it failed to create a solution for unauthorized migration which would have included expanding methods of legal entry and a program for low-skilled workers. Following this law, the 1990s would begin the establishment of the modern immigration system we see today. This decade and the following would establish more draconian measures aimed at decreasing

---

<sup>27</sup> Rocco, Raymond. “Disposable Subjects: The Racial Normativity of Neoliberalism and Latino Immigrants,” 100.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Katz, Michael B., Mark J. Stern, and Jamie J. Fader. “The Mexican Immigration Debate: The View from History,” 167.

<sup>30</sup> “U.S. Postwar Immigration Policy,” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-postwar-immigration-policy>

undocumented migration at the southern border, fueled by racism and further projecting it onto the migrants.

### *1990-present*

The past decade's worth of immigration policies set the foundation for the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border by offering a justification for it: the need to keep "illegal" immigrants out of the country. During the 1990s, politicians and the government worked together towards this goal and led to the shift of the U.S.-Mexico territory being seen as a border to a boundary meant to separate people.<sup>31</sup> The decade started with the Immigration Act of 1990 that included family reunifications in quotas, increased resources to the Border Patrol, broadened the qualifications for deportations and expedited deportation proceedings by reducing protected due process rights.<sup>32</sup> Although this policy temporarily increased caps on visas and created a diversity visa, it heavily criminalized unauthorized migrants.<sup>33</sup> As a key immigration policy that serves as a model for subsequent policies, it began the creation of conditions in which migrants would be forced to decide to migrate through more dangerous routes to avoid being treated as a criminal.

---

<sup>31</sup> Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on Illegals and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. "Immigration 'Reform' and the Production of Migrant 'Illegality.'" *Constructing Immigrant 'Illegality': Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> "Immigration Act of 1990," Immigration History. <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/immigration-act-of-1990/>



*Constructed in 1997 as part of Operation Hold the Line in New Mexico. In Bowden, Charles. "Juarez the Laboratory of Our Future," 37.*

Beginning in 1993, many states began implementing their own draconian immigration policies that would augment the power of Immigration and Naturalization Service and its related enforcement entities. Moreschi names a few of these initiatives including: Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, Texas; Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, California; Operation Safeguard in Arizona; Operation Rio Grande in Texas; and Operation Arizona Border Control Initiative.<sup>34</sup> All of these increased border surveillance and militarization with the intent of deterring migrants from crossing

without authorization. They represent how anti-immigrant sentiments were not localized but rather prevalent in most if not all the border states. Furthermore, there were draconian deterring policies being proposed in states to minimize protections and rights of undocumented migrants already within the U.S. For example, Proposition 187 passed in California, allowing the state to deny public education, public social services, and public health care services to unauthorized

---

<sup>34</sup> Moreschi, Alejandra Aquino. "Cruzando la frontera: Experiencias desde los márgenes."



immigrants.<sup>35</sup> While this law did not take effect, it is a representation of the rampant anti-immigrant sentiment that was present during this decade.<sup>36</sup>

More specifically, the 1990s dramatically increased the number of Border Patrol officers and expanded their powers, strengthening the surveillance state. To illustrate, “Between Fiscal Year (FY) 1994 and the end of FY 2000, the number of Border Patrol agents expanded from 4,200 to 9,212. That number has since more than doubled as there were 20,000 agents by the end of FY 2009. Meanwhile, the budget for immigration-related enforcement efforts along the Southwest boundary grew from \$400 million in FY 1993 to \$800 million in FY 1997.”<sup>37</sup> This would create an increasing trend into the present where more funds are being allocated to border enforcement and more BP officers are being stationed. The funds have continuously been allocated to more technology, fences, barriers, and infrastructure at the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, from 1994 to 1998 in the San Diego border area, fencing expanded from 19 to 45 miles, underground sensors increased from 448 to 1,214, and infrared scopes from 12 to 59.<sup>39</sup> This rise in enforcement tools and practices is a reflection of American society’s fear of undocumented migrants, the Latino Threat Narrative rooted in racial scripts, leading to their support of border expansion measures such as the ones above.

---

<sup>35</sup> Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on Illegals and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 5.

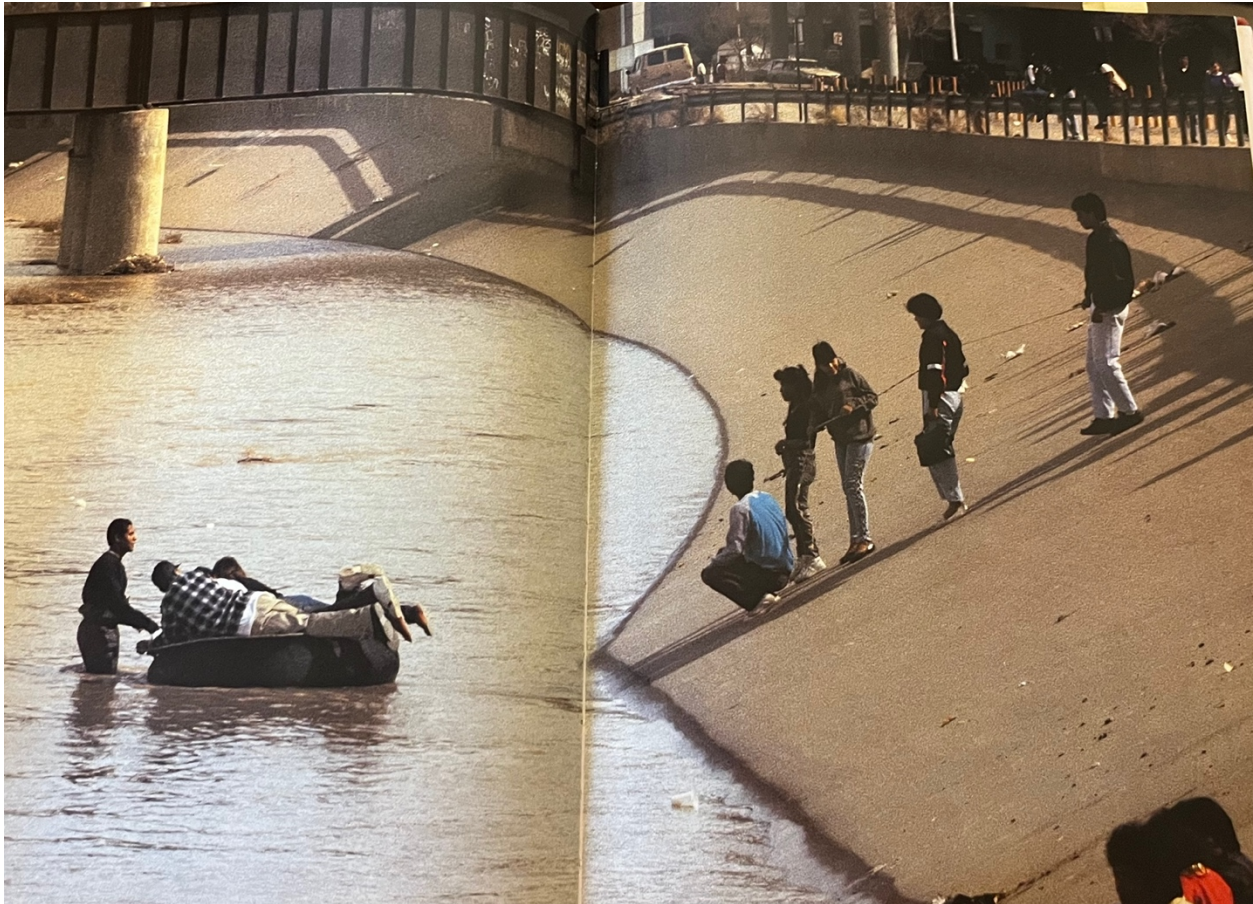
<sup>36</sup> “CA’s Anti-Immigrant Proposition 187 is Voided, Ending State’s Five-Year Battle with ACLU, Rights Groups,” ACLU.

<https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/cas-anti-immigrant-proposition-187-voided-ending-states-five-year-battle-aclu-rights>

<sup>37</sup> Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on Illegals and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Guskin, Jane, and David L. Wilson. *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers*, 157-158.

<sup>39</sup> Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*, 33.



*“Before operations Border Blockade and Hold the Line, Mexicans working in El Paso would cross the Rio Grande regularly and openly.” In Bowden, Charles. “Juarez the Laboratory of Our Future,” 38-39.*

The increased criminalization of unauthorized migrants that occurred in the 1990s was in part due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that was established in 1994. While NAFTA was meant to create more economic opportunities and prosperity for Mexicans, it instead caused consumer prices to rise and thousands lost their jobs, especially farmers.<sup>40</sup> While there is not a defined correlation between NAFTA and a rise in migration, it is highly plausible that it had a role to play in migration patterns, policies, and receptiveness. For instance, the economic recession the U.S. experienced in the 1980s carried anti-immigrant sentiments into the 1990s due to a fear of migrants stealing jobs from the market.<sup>41</sup> This anti-immigrant sentiment

<sup>40</sup> Guskin, Jane, and David L. Wilson. *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers*, 32-33.

<sup>41</sup> Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*, xv.

could have been projected onto Mexican farmers migrating to the U.S. after being unable to compete with U.S. agribusinesses. Militarization policies in the following years could have been a response to a fear of increased unauthorized border crossings caused by NAFTA. While NAFTA allowed the participating countries to trade more freely, it came with its downsides that could have led to stricter immigration policies.

One of the defining immigration policies of the 1990s was the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), often characterized as one of the most punitive policies against undocumented migrants. IIRIRA reclassified many nonviolent offenses and aggravated felonies.<sup>42</sup> It also expanded the power of border police by allowing them to deport unauthorized migrants without the typical judicial review of these decisions, decreasing oversight and rights of migrants to a hearing.<sup>43</sup> Still being in effect to this day, IIRIRA expanded the scope of illegality and criminality by increasing the number of qualifying deportable crimes. By expanding the powers of border police, it augmented surveillance and enforcement that contributed to the cycle of policing instead of reform. IIRIRA was one of the many policies during this decade that would legally inscribe anti-immigrant racial scripts into the fabric of the country, being reproduced for decades to come.

These same sentiments would be continued to be reproduced into policies until the present. The 9/11 terrorist attacks further exacerbated fears of terrorism and threats to national security that would be used as a justification for militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. One of these implemented policies was the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 which increased funding to INS, hired more investigators and inspectors, and interconnected databases

---

<sup>42</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. "Immigration 'Reform' and the Production of Migrant 'Illegality.'" *Constructing Immigrant 'Illegality': Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

of terrorism and immigrants.<sup>44</sup> While immigrants had been informally associated with criminality, this policy legally associated them with criminality. Furthermore, the Patriot Act formed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003, creating an agency that would oversee and enforce immigration.<sup>45</sup> The fear of the border being used by terrorists was reflected in proposed policies such as the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (HR 4437). This law passed the House but not the Senate and would have established the following: “more border fences and surveillance technology, increased detention provisions, employer verification of employees’ work eligibility, and increases in the penalties for knowingly hiring undocumented immigrants. Moreover, it would have made living in the country as an undocumented immigrant a felony, thus removing any hope of becoming a legal immigrant.”<sup>46</sup> Although this bill did not pass into law, the fact that it passed the House is a reflection of the anti-immigrant sentiments that were common at the time and support for draconian immigration policies.

The anti-immigrant structures continued to be heavily perpetuated by President George W. Bush during his presidential terms under the justification of a need for national security. During his term, he passed the Secure the Fence Act of 2006 that built hundreds of miles of fencing at the border and added technology to detect unauthorized migrants.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, a White House statement released in 2006 states what Bush has accomplished since he took office in 2001:

More than doubled funding for border security - from \$4.6 billion in 2001 to \$10.4 billion this year; Increased the number of Border Patrol agents from about 9,000 to more than 12,000 - and by the end of 2008, we will have doubled the number of Border Patrol agents since the President took office; Deployed thousands of

---

<sup>44</sup> “H.R.3525 - Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002,” Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3525>

<sup>45</sup> Gonzalez, Alfonso. *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State*, 2.

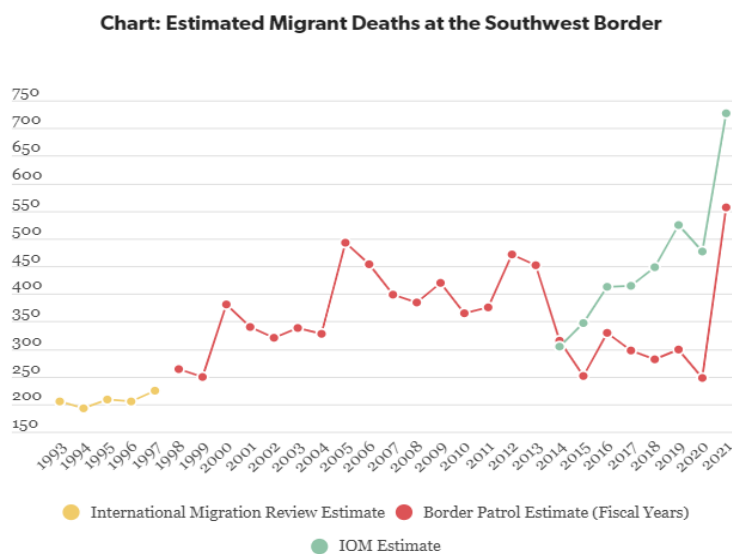
<sup>46</sup> Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> De Genova, Nicholas. “Immigration ‘Reform’ and the Production of Migrant ‘Illegality.’” *Constructing Immigrant ‘Illegality’: Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, 56.

National Guard members to assist the Border Patrol; Upgraded technology at our borders and added infrastructure, including new fencing and vehicle barriers; Apprehended and sent home more than 6 million people entering America illegally; and We are adding thousands of new beds in our detention facilities, so we can continue working to end "catch and release" at our Southern border.<sup>48</sup>

It is evident that this period was marked with increased border enforcement and expanding it for the future. Yet, these oppressive policies only pushed migrants to attempt to cross through more dangerous routes. To illustrate the impacts of these policies, “Migrant border crossing deaths doubled between 1995 and 2005, though there was no corresponding rise in illegal entries. More than three-fourths of the increase is attributable to deaths in Arizona...”<sup>49</sup> The consequence of the decades worth of increased militarization of the border was an increase in migrant deaths. Draconian immigration policies push migrants to seek more dangerous routes of entry, a trend that began in the 1990s and would continue into the present (See Figure 1).

Figure 1<sup>50</sup>



<sup>48</sup> “Fact Sheet: The Secure Fence Act of 2006,” The White House Archives, October 26, 2006. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061026-1.html>

<sup>49</sup> Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> “Explainer: Migrant Deaths at the Border,” National Immigration Forum, September 12, 2022. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-migrant-deaths-at-the-border/>

While President Barack Obama campaigned on a progressive immigration reform platform, his presidency did not completely protect migrants. Although he ordered that those convicted of crime be the priority among deportation cases, there were still over five million deportations alone during his presidential terms.<sup>51</sup> Also under Obama, the annual budget for Border Patrol multiplied by thirteen from its \$263 million budget in 1990 to \$3.6 billion in 2014.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, compared to his predecessors President Clinton and Bush, under the Obama administration there occurred more formal deportations but six to nine million less voluntary deportations (See Figure 2).<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Obama responded well to the increasing fear of “anchor babies” that encapsulates the belief that undocumented migrants have their children in the U.S. to be able to later apply for citizenship through their child.<sup>54</sup> For example, Obama implemented the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 that grants temporary authorized stay of two years for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children.<sup>55</sup> Obama’s presidency can be characterized as a softer approach to undocumented migrants already in the U.S. that did not associate them as much with their racial scripts, but continued to uphold the draconian border state that would impact incoming undocumented migrants.

---

<sup>51</sup> Chishti, Muzzafar, Pierce, Sarah and Jessica Bolter. “The Obama Record on Deportations: Deporter in Chief or Not?” Migration Policy Institute, January 26, 2017. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/obama-record-deportations-deporter-chief-or-not>

<sup>52</sup> Guskin, Jane, and David L. Wilson. *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers*, 158.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, 134.

<sup>55</sup> “DACA,” National Immigration Law Center. <https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca/>



Figure 2<sup>56</sup>

Year	Total Apprehensions	U.S.-Mexico Border Apprehensions	Removals	Returns	Total Deportations
1993	1,327,261	1,212,886	42,542	1,243,410	1,285,952
1994	1,094,719	979,101	45,674	1,029,107	1,074,781
1995	1,394,554	1,271,390	50,924	1,313,764	1,364,688
1996	1,649,986	1,507,020	69,680	1,573,428	1,643,108
1997	1,536,520	1,368,707	114,432	1,440,684	1,555,116
1998	1,679,439	1,516,680	174,813	1,570,127	1,744,940
1999	1,714,035	1,537,000	183,114	1,574,863	1,757,977
2000	1,814,729	1,643,679	188,467	1,675,876	1,864,343
<b>Totals for Clinton Administration</b>	<b>12,211,243</b>	<b>11,036,463</b>	<b>869,646</b>	<b>11,421,259</b>	<b>12,290,905</b>
2001	1,387,486	1,235,718	189,026	1,349,371	1,538,397
2002	1,062,270	929,809	165,168	1,012,116	1,177,284
2003	1,046,422	905,065	211,098	945,294	1,156,392
2004	1,264,232	1,160,395	240,665	1,166,576	1,407,241
2005	1,291,065	1,189,031	246,431	1,096,920	1,343,351
2006	1,206,408	1,071,972	280,974	1,043,381	1,324,355
2007	960,673	858,638	319,382	891,390	1,210,772
2008	1,043,759	705,005	359,795	811,263	1,171,058
<b>Totals for Bush Administration</b>	<b>9,262,315</b>	<b>8,055,633</b>	<b>2,012,539</b>	<b>8,316,311</b>	<b>10,328,850</b>
2009	889,212	540,865	391,341	582,596	973,937
2010	796,587	447,731	381,738	474,195	855,933
2011	678,606	327,577	386,020	322,098	708,118
2012	671,327	356,873	416,324	230,360	646,684
2013	662,483	414,397	434,015	178,691	612,706
2014	679,996	479,371	407,075	163,245	570,320
2015	462,388	331,333	333,341	129,122	462,463
2016	530,250	408,870	344,354	106,600	450,954
<b>Totals for Obama Administration</b>	<b>5,370,849</b>	<b>3,307,017</b>	<b>3,094,208</b>	<b>2,186,907</b>	<b>5,281,115</b>

Following Obama, President Trump gave a voice to nativists who believed their country was being taken over by migrants. Trump specifically characterized Mexican migrants with criminality during his presidential campaign and promoted their racial scripts: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”<sup>57</sup> Not only did he reproduce these harmful racial scripts in his speeches, he acted upon them through his

<sup>56</sup> Chishti, Muzzafar, Pierce, Sarah and Jessica Bolter. “The Obama Record on Deportations: Deporter in Chief or Not?” Migration Policy Institute, January 26, 2017. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/obama-record-deportations-deporter-chief-or-not>

<sup>57</sup> Reilly, Katie. “Here Are All the Times Donald Trump Insulted Mexico,” *Time*, August 31, 2016. <https://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/>

immigration policies. His nativist remarks were rooted in the belief that Mexicans were storming the border, entering through unauthorized methods at unprecedented levels, stealing jobs from Americans, and causing crime in the U.S. These beliefs were largely exaggerated because in actuality, the number of unauthorized Mexicans living and migrating to the U.S. has been decreasing since 2007 (See Figure 3).<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, Trump used his power to target immigrants and make the migration process more difficult. One of his policies included constructing more physical walls at the U.S.-Mexico border and eventually constructed 458 miles of border walls, which pushes unauthorized migrants further into the desert.<sup>59</sup> In addition to that, Trump continued to increase funding to the Customs and Border Protection (CPB) budget during his presidency to up to \$26 billion,<sup>60</sup> including funding for 600 additional officers.<sup>61</sup> In the immigration process, Trump implemented the Remain in Mexico policy that forces non-Mexican asylum seekers to remain in Mexico as they await their case to be heard and decided upon by the immigration courts.<sup>62</sup> He also halted the DACA program from accepting or renewing applications in 2017.<sup>63</sup> During his four year term, Trump garnered support on beliefs that criminalized unauthorized migrants and passed policies that only put their lives at risk.

---

<sup>58</sup> Beltrán, Cristina. *Cruelty As Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Hansen, Calire. "How Much of Trump's Border Wall Was Built?" *US News*, February 7, 2022.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2022-02-07/how-much-of-president-donald-trumps-border-wall-was-built>

<sup>60</sup> "The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security," American Immigration Council, January 20, 2021.

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-cost-of-immigration-enforcement-and-border-security>

<sup>61</sup> "President Donald J. Trump's Border Security Victory," The White House, February 15, 2019.

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-border-security-victory/>

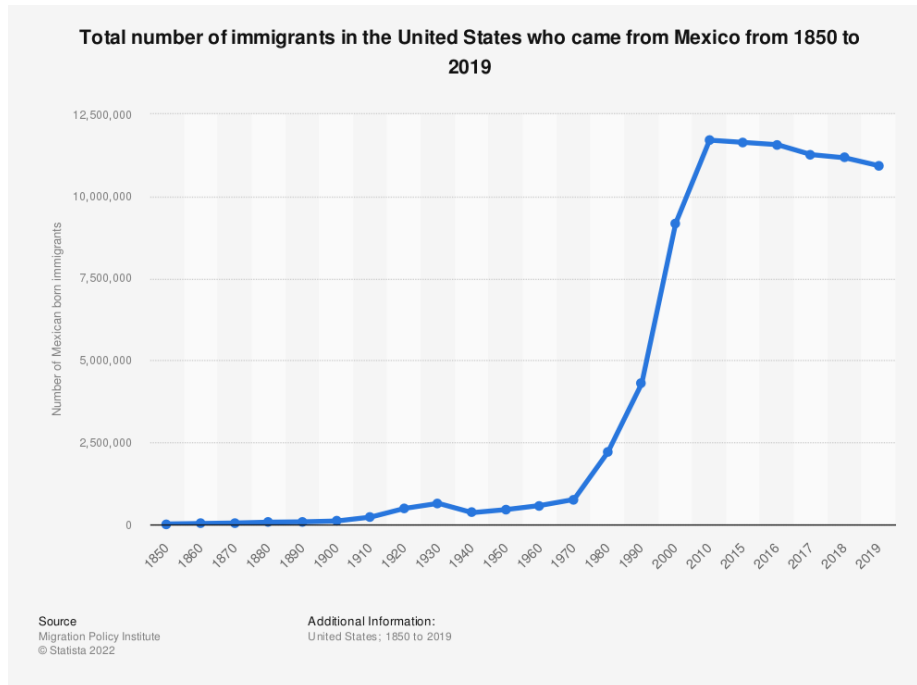
<sup>62</sup> "Q&A: Trump Administration's "Remain in Mexico" Program," Human Rights Watch, January 29, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/29/qa-trump-administrations-remain-mexico-program>

<sup>63</sup> Edelman, Adam. "Trump Ends DACA Program, No New Applications Accepted," *NBC News*, September 5, 2017.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/trump-dreamers-daca-immigration-announcement-n798686>



Figure 3<sup>64</sup>

On the other hand, President Biden has created more lenient immigration policies and is attempting to undo many of the Trump policies. For example, Biden’s administration briefly halted the Remain in Mexico policy until the courts reinstated it.<sup>65</sup> His administration has also fought to reinstate DACA and has been able to do so to a certain extent by allowing current recipients to continue renewing their DACA status, but not securing the ability to accept new applicants.<sup>66</sup> In regards to the border apparatus, Biden has reduced the budget allocated to CPB in 2022 to \$14.6 billion and has stopped further funds to be allocated to building more walls.<sup>67</sup> Despite these

<sup>64</sup> Duffin, Erin. “Number of Mexican immigrants in the United States 1850-2019,” Statista, September 30, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/673350/mexican-immigrants-in-the-united-states/>

<sup>65</sup> Ables, Kelsey. “U.S. judge in Amarillo halts Biden administration’s attempt to end ‘remain in Mexico’ policy,” *The Texas Tribune*, December 16, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/12/16/remain-in-mexico-mpp-judge-ruling-migrants/>

<sup>66</sup> “DACA,” National Immigration Law Center. <https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca/>

<sup>67</sup> “Homeland Security, 2022,” Senate Appropriations Committee - Republicans. [https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY22%20BILL%20HIGHLIGHTS\\_DHS\\_final.pdf](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY22%20BILL%20HIGHLIGHTS_DHS_final.pdf)

positive changes, there is still a lot of work to be done in immigration reform to allow more migrants to enter safely and offer pathways to citizenship.

### *Conclusion*

It is evident that the current humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border has been one that has been created by decades of immigration policies that have been rooted in racial scripts. While the views of Mexican migrants have changed over time, their exploitation and disposability have remained at the core of these policies. Often they have only been tied to deservingness for the cheap labor they can provide to meet U.S. economic needs. Despite having limited options for legal migration, not to mention the external circumstances and challenges with this process, they are continuously associated with criminality and deemed a problem that needs to be addressed for the safety of American citizens. Draconian immigration laws and the militarization of the border from the past decades have created a system that pushes migrants to seek dangerous routes of entry riddled with challenges and lack protections. Instead of continuing immigration policies and practices rooted in these racial scripts, the U.S. government needs to take steps to address the humanitarian crisis it has created at the border. In the following chapter, the effects of these policies on Mexican migrants will be revealed through their testimonies.

### Chapter 3: The Mexicana Migrant Experience



*Although these are Central Americans pictured, they face many of the same structured vulnerabilities as mexicanas.*  
<https://i.huffpost.com/gen/2050984/images/o-CENTRAL-AMERICA-CROSSING-BORDER-facebook.jpg>

The experiences of Mexicana migrant women are at the forefront of the humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. Decades of racialization and immigration policies have made the process of crossing the border more physically and psychologically difficult. The combination of the militarization of the border and lack of resources migrants have access to leads many to attempt more dangerous, unauthorized methods of entry. Research has shown that deaths due to exposure to the elements have risen since 1994, aligning with increased implementation of tactics to expand the militarization of the border.<sup>1</sup> Of those found in the desert, “women were 2.70 times more likely to die from exposure to the elements than all other causes of death when compared to men.”<sup>2</sup> Figure 4 also highlights the increased dangers of crossing the border by the sharp increase in search and rescue efforts along the border in recent years.

<sup>1</sup> O’Leary, Anna Ochoa. “In the Footsteps of Spirits: Migrant Women’s Testimonios in a Time of Heightened Border Enforcement.” In *Human Rights along the U.S.–Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

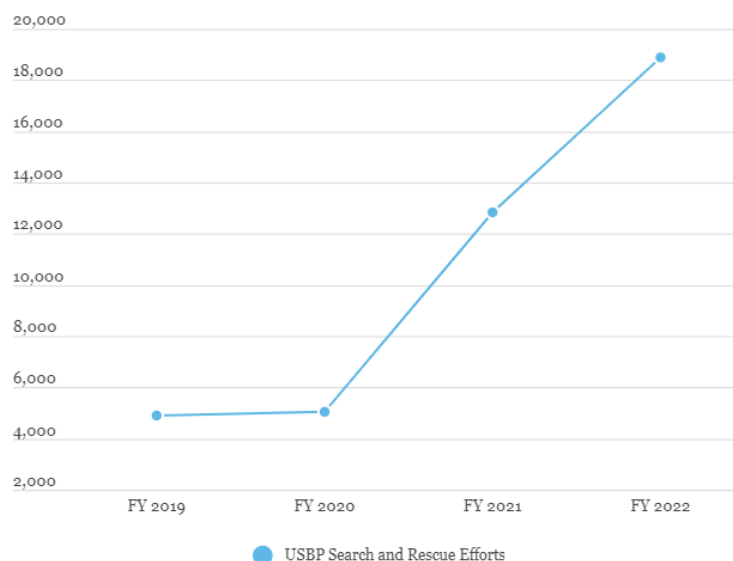
The experiences of all migrants are important and homogenizing their experiences would be doing an injustice to them. In this chapter, the testimonies of Mexicana migrants will be incorporated into the analysis of their experiences crossing the border. As Ibarra remarks, “To ignore the pain that marks women's narratives of crossing is to sanitize history and not fully understand the meaning of Mexican labor migration in the New World Order.”<sup>3</sup> This chapter will include subsections regarding gender, reasons for migrating, planning for migration, and crossing the border to detail the multi-layered migration experiences of Mexican women.

The testimonies in this chapter are drawn from secondary sources. Most of the testimonies are told by the women themselves, but some of them are told through the author’s voice recounting what they were told. Two pieces I draw the most testimonies from are *La Migra me Hizo los Mandados* and *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State*. The former is a collection of 29 testimonies of Mexicans and Central Americans who submitted them to a radio show before its publication in 2022. The latter is a book centering the testimonies of women from Mexico and Central America that were collected in detention centers from 2012 to 2017. Each testimony is valuable and important, but to remain aligned with the topic of this thesis I take quotes from parts of the testimonies that are most relevant.

---

<sup>3</sup> De la Luz Ibarra, Maria. “Buscando La Vida: Mexican Immigrant Women's Memories of Home, Yearning, and Border Crossings,” 276-277.

*Figure 4<sup>4</sup>*  
**Chart: Southwest Border Search and Rescue Efforts**



### *Gender*

Mexican migrant women face a particular set of challenges and vulnerabilities that differs from that of Mexican migrant men. Today, *machismo* is a cultural belief intertwined with the structure of Mexico, placing more importance on men over women. Economic structures also impact Mexican migrant women disproportionately. Globalization has caused economic conditions in Mexico to worsen and neoliberalism has contributed to the rise in exploiting undocumented workers through cheap labor.<sup>5</sup> As a result, both Mexican men and women are impacted, but in different ways. Specifically in Mexico, women face unequal or limited economic opportunities compared to men. As O’Leary states, “For migrant women, the need to negotiate the U.S. system of enclosure reflects the contradiction between U.S. immigration laws, its concurrent

<sup>4</sup> “Explainer: Migrant Deaths at the Border,” National Immigration Forum, September 12, 2022.

<https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-migrant-deaths-at-the-border/>

<sup>5</sup> De la Luz Ibarra, Maria. “Buscando La Vida: Mexican Immigrant Women’s Memories of Home, Yearning, and Border Crossings,” 276.

need for labor, and the devastation of the Mexican rural economy.”<sup>6</sup> These intersecting issues impact Mexicana migrants in a way that creates an “otherness” in which they are pushed to the periphery and more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Both U.S. and Mexico policies, laws, and cultures have played a role in creating this structural vulnerability and consequently, created the human rights issue that is occurring today. Mexicana migrant women face unique challenges because of the created and sustained systems of exploitation.

### *Reasons for Migrating*

The reasons mexicanas choose to migrate are unique for every person but share many overlapping reasons. One of the gendered reasons for their migration is motherhood. For some Mexicana migrants, migration is a pathway to seek a better future for themselves and their families. Migration for these women is a maternal sacrifice where they leave their homes and lives in Mexico and



Abdalla, Jihan. “US advocates say ‘Congress needs to act’ amid migrants arrival,” *Aljazeera*, November 9, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/9/us-advocates-say-congress-needs-to-act-amid-border-arrivals>

put their lives at risk for their families. This noble act however is not acknowledged as such by the

---

<sup>6</sup> O’Leary, Anna Ochoa. “In the Footsteps of Spirits: Migrant Women’s Testimonios in a Time of Heightened Border Enforcement.” In *Human Rights along the U.S.–Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, 101.

U.S. government. This can be continuously seen through their constant family separation, detention, and deportation instead of providing authorized stays for these women and their families.<sup>7</sup> Claudia Garcia's experiences exemplify the sacrifices of motherhood. She migrated from Mexico in 2013 in hopes of finding better medical care for her two-year-old daughter who was born with a hearing impairment:<sup>8</sup>

I lived in a small town in San Luis Potosí. My daughter Nati and I had a good life there. She was the baby, and everyone loved her a lot and protected her. Recently I had discovered that Nati was sick in her ears. I told [my husband] and that's why he told us to leave. He told me there were more opportunities to help her over here in the United States. "Arregla tus cosas y te vienes," he said. In reality, I didn't have a choice, but I learned to understand he was right. Entonces nos venimos. I left on October 17 or 19 of 2013. We left that day for real.<sup>9</sup>

Olga also migrated to the U.S. after struggling to provide for her two children in Mexico. Olga initially migrated alone and had her mother look after her children for a year until she could be reunited with them in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Love and care for their children is at the heart of migrating for some mexicanas, risking everything for a better future for their families.

Fleeing from domestic abuse is also a common reason for migrating among mexicanas. According to a survey completed in 2022 by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography, "more than 70% of 50.5 million women and girls aged over 15 have experienced some kind of violence" in Mexico.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, 35% of the respondents reported being a victim of physical violence and 52% of psychological abuse.<sup>12</sup> The gendered violence against women

---

<sup>7</sup> Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*, 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Andes, Tom, Holmes, Annie, Menon, Jaykumar and Peter Orner, eds. *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Morland, Sarah and Aida Pelaez-Fernandez. "Violence against women in Mexico rises to over 70%, study finds," *Reuters*, August 31, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/violence-against-women-mexico-rises-over-70-study-finds-2022-08-31/>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

forces women to flee for survival. Euphemia endured years of domestic violence from her husband and mother in law before migrating. Her husband continually blamed her for the loss of their child during her pregnancy and her difficulty becoming pregnant again. He formed a relationship and family with another woman while continuing to demand that Euphemia continue being his wife and appeasing his wishes. She felt hopeless in leaving her situation because she did not own land, had limited economic opportunities, and was deemed the problem by the police when she called them for help. She ultimately fled to a different city and lived there for a year until she ran into a person from her hometown. Afraid that the person would tell her husband where she was, she decided to migrate to the U.S. for safety.<sup>13</sup> Euphemia's experiences reveal how mexicanas can be locked into situations by their culture, economics, and laws that inhibit their ability to leave abusive relationships and remain safe. Like Euphemia, Virgilia also fled from Mexico to escape domestic abuse. When she decided to migrate, she left her two children in the care of her sister. While it was difficult for her to leave them in Mexico, she was afraid that her husband, who was involved in gangs, would kill her. She gathered money from her family to pay the coyote \$3,000.<sup>14</sup> Virgilia faced abuse from her father and partner, two men in her life, and had to find a way to remove herself and family from the abusive situation. Similarly to Euphemia, Virgilia mentions that in her small town there are limited economic opportunities for women, many being constrained to domestic work or staying at home.<sup>15</sup> In both stories, abuse is prevalent and the limited economic opportunities as women make it more difficult to escape these relationships. Not being able to turn to the government who silences women's voices, many women turn to migration for a better life.

---

<sup>13</sup> Speed, Shannon. *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State*, 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



The prevalence of gendered violence and structural exclusions in Mexico often push mexicanas to migrate.

Another reason for migration is lack of economic opportunities, which is even more exacerbated in rural areas. Gendered opportunities in rural areas limited women to domestic work, staying at home, or relying on their partner's source of income.<sup>16</sup> For some Mexicana migrants, migrating is a way to achieve economic independence and have more opportunities to be financially stable. For example, Doña Audelia migrated in the 1985 after being fed up with constantly paying interests on debts from her banana business: "Me voy a vivir a Estados Unidos para salir de mis compromisos, porque si no, nunca lo voy a hacer."<sup>17</sup> Being bound by the gendered economic conditions in Mexico, the U.S. seemed to many as a better option for more economic freedom. Teresa also had economic motivations behind migrating: "El dinero que mandaba mi mamá desde Los Angeles alcanzaba cada vez menos para sostenerme en la escuela. Menos pensar en entrar a la universidad. La solución era reunirme con ella, estudiar inglés y trabajar."<sup>18</sup> Not having enough money to continue her studies and with other limited economic opportunities, Teresa chose to migrate to the U.S. to find a job and earn a living. While these are two individual women who thought about their individual economic stability, for many other Mexicana migrants their economic status is directly tied to that of their partner's and/or families. Migration for economic reasons in these cases may be a sacrifice for more people in their lives. Nonetheless, the few economic opportunities available to mexicanas is often one of the main reasons for migration to the U.S.

---

<sup>16</sup> De la Luz Ibarra, Maria. "Buscando La Vida: Mexican Immigrant Women's Memories of Home, Yearning, and Border Crossings," 26.

<sup>17</sup> "El trabajo lo tengo en mis manos," Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana.

[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx)

<sup>18</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 33.

### *Planning for Migration*

Although the decision to migrate and the physical process of migrating occur at different times for every person, there generally is a process of planning out the migration process. Leo Chavez considers crossing the border as a rite of passage where a person is moving from one social status to another physically, but acknowledges that there is significant planning that goes into this passage.<sup>19</sup> One of the steps that mexicanas might have to complete in their planning process is to persuade their partners or families.<sup>20</sup> Doña Audelia spoke about convincing her family to allow her to migrate: “Hasta eso que si me tuvieron confianza, de toda mi familia yo era la primera que se iba para allá, me fui en el 85 la primera vez, y regresé ese mismo año, en marzo.”<sup>21</sup> Being the first in her family to migrate, she sought their support to start on this endeavor. On the other hand, other mexicanas did not wait for their loved ones’ support before migrating such as Olga: “Yo era una muchacha de dieciséis años que decidió que con o sin permiso de mi familia se iría a Estados Unidos. Quería tener lo que tenían los que llegan del norte: carro, ropa, joyas. En Guanajuato nunca iba a tener eso. Convencí a dos amigos y sin pensarlo mucho nos fuimos a Tijuana para de ahí cruzar a los Estados Unidos.”<sup>22</sup> Although Olga did not put as much emphasis on acceptance from her loved ones, she still sought support through her two friends who migrated with her. Loved ones’ permission to migrate may be a reflection of emotional support for mexicanas migrating, acting as motivators throughout the challenges. Mexican culture rooted in strong family unity may also play a part in this trend of asking for loved ones’ permission. Although checking in with family

---

<sup>19</sup> De la Luz Ibarra, Maria. “Buscando La Vida: Mexican Immigrant Women's Memories of Home, Yearning, and Border Crossings,” 269.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> “El trabajo lo tengo en mis manos,” Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana. [https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx)

<sup>22</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 181.

before migrating is not universal, it is an important step for some Mexicana migrants who may need moral support throughout their journey to come.

One of the other common steps of planning is connecting with networks both within Mexico and in the U.S. While in Mexico, many mexicanas begin to speak with people in their communities who have had loved ones migrate or know of resources to help cross the border, such as coyote recommendations. Leticia recalls how her mother used her networks in Mexico to figure out a way to take her and her siblings across the border: “En Laredo, mi mamá no tenía a nadie, la que empezó a contarle de la frontera fue la nana que tuvimos, su familia iba por fayuca, posiblemente ella le dio el nombre de una conocida, pero a mi siempre me quedó la duda de cómo pudo conocer a esa familia, que era dueña de la casa, donde había gente esperando pasar al otro lado.”<sup>23</sup> This relayed information acts as a safety net from potential dangers, such as a coyote who will abandon migrants or sexually assault women. In Leticia’s case, her family was able to be safely sheltered while waiting to cross the border, a safety that other migrants without connections do not have. By receiving recommendations of migration resources from locals, mexicanas are taking action towards ensuring their safety.

The migration support network extends beyond Mexico into the U.S. through the community of Mexican migrants within the country. Although this is not directly part of the planning process for migration, it is equally important because it helps newly arrived migrants acclimate to a new environment. As Gordillo refers to them, these kinship systems expand to incorporate the immigrant experience because they are transnational.<sup>24</sup> Doña Audelia recounts how her connections to other Mexican women in the U.S. helped her migrate: “Cuando recién llegué

---

<sup>23</sup> “Familia dividida,” Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana.  
[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx)

<sup>24</sup> Gordillo, Luz Maria. *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration: Engendering Transnational Ties*, 152-153.

me ayudaron unas amigas de mi pueblo que había visto una vez que fueron de visita... Fueron ellas las que me consiguieron el trabajo y me llevaron, fue en una casa de modas, como era costurera conseguí ese trabajo, quedaba en Oakland, ahí fue donde empecé.”<sup>25</sup> With the help of mexicanas who had previously migrated, Doña Audelia was able to have a support network as soon as she migrated to the U.S. While these support networks are valuable they are not flawless as with community members from San Ignacio: “On the one hand, women emphasize their satisfaction in sharing their lives with their families and friends arriving from San Ignacio, to whom they feel a strong sense of obligation. On the other hand, the gendered division of labor means that the burden of helping new arrivals falls heavily on women, who feel the strain of accommodating them and helping them adjust to a new home.”<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that Mexican men do not help migrants transition to the U.S., but it does show how Mexican women may carry more of a gendered burden of assisting them. It could also be a reflection of how these networks are gendered: men help other men and women help other women. Yet, these migrant networks are necessary because the U.S. government has not and will continue to not be welcoming to unauthorized migrants, leaving them to find their own resources.

### *Crossing the Border*

The previous sections illustrate how mexicanas come to the decision to migrate and their planning process. This section will center the stories of 16 Mexicana migrants recounting their migration experiences. Through these experiences, the vulnerability and violence that they face comes to light. Many of the stories share common threads of challenges with coyotes, cartels, sexual assault, physical terrain, and physical limitations. At the core of their stories is that their

---

<sup>25</sup> “El trabajo lo tengo en mis manos,” Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana.

[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx)

<sup>26</sup> Gordillo, Luz Maria. *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration: Engendering Transnational Ties*, 101.

vulnerability is a consequence of the decades of policies militarizing the southern border and limiting pathways of legal entry. Bringing these stories to the forefront humanizes the ongoing immigration debate and validates the mexicanas' experiences with the hope of pushing for immigration reform.

### **Claudia**

As previously mentioned, Claudia migrated with her daughter to seek better medical care attention for her and be reunited with her husband. She recounts her story to Elizabeth Farfan Santos:

My stepfather took us to the border and left us there with a man. He was short and impatient. I'm not sure why I remember he was short. Maybe it was just my nerves trying to distract me. We had to say our goodbyes quickly. You can't stand around, you know, and say ni ya me voy, ni ya vine. They just told us to get in a van and we left. The ride was quiet. My husband had organized everything, so I had no idea where they were taking me. When the van stopped, we were dropped off at a house where we stayed until we could successfully cross the river. I didn't know who lived there, but there were a lot of men there—yes, mostly men. I crossed the river by boat. They didn't want us to get anything wet, not even our feet, so when we got closer to land, they took us and carried us the rest of the way. But then all of a sudden someone would yell, “¡La migra! La migra is coming!” And we had to all go back to the boat again, and we couldn't cross until we knew it was safe. We would go back and forth like that again and again, or we'd go back to the house and wait another day. The day we finally crossed into El Valle, it took two attempts. We tried at 9 a.m. and then again at four in the afternoon. That time it was quick. That's when we went to El Valle to stay with a family. There were two little girls, the mom, and the man that brought me. My daughter and I stayed there for fifteen days. They treated us very well there, but every day I would ask, “When are we leaving? When are we leaving?” I couldn't wait to get out of there—to be safe with my husband. They treated us well there, but who knew how long that would last. I was still very nervous not knowing what the plan was or when it would all be over, and they wouldn't tell me anything. I would only find out about a part of the plan when it was happening.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*, 8-9.

In this quote, Claudia's fear penetrates through her story in a way that it brings her back to the moment she migrates. She is not only fearful of the migration journey, but also her and her daughter's safety while awaiting in the coyotes' houses before crossing. Her multiple attempts of crossing are also a by-product of the border militarization that has made it more difficult to cross without detection.

Claudia took a deep breath, then continued. Me dijeron que le comprara un medicamento a la niña para que se durmiera.

Claudia expressed concern about being separated from her daughter and having to medicate her. A maternal instinct, she wanted to be able to cross with her to ensure she was safe. Unfortunately, the coyote had them cross separately.

“They pushed my body into that hole,” Claudia continued, “along with another man, and right there, I learned that two people fit in there. I never would have known, but I know now. The truck was already turned on, and the hot metal burned my skin, but I had to stay quiet because the truck driver had no idea we were there. They had just chosen any truck that had Texas plates.”<sup>28</sup>

The coyote instructed Claudia that she would cross by climbing into a compartment of the roof of a big rig along with other migrants. She was forced to endure the uncomfortability that came with this method of entry.

“Do you understand that I can go to jail or worse? I don't even know! No! I'm not taking you anywhere.” He left us there, in the desert, and all we could do was run to find somewhere to hide.

When the driver of the big rig discovered that Claudia and the other migrants were hiding in the compartment, he was angry and left them stranded along a road. As undocumented migrants, they had to hide in an effort to not be seen by border patrol officers.

They really put the fear of God in you because they're so mean, te hablan bien feo. They yell at you and tell you all kinds of things to scare you, that they'll leave you to die if you don't listen. Es muy feo. “They put us in another truck, and then the

---

<sup>28</sup> Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*, 11.

same thing happened. The driver threw us off and left us again. This time the coyote had stayed close by and picked us up faster.<sup>29</sup>

Claudia recalls being treated badly by the coyote when their plan was not going smoothly.

The coyote yelled at me so bad. He threatened me that if I didn't find a truck and get on, they would leave me there so that some other gang would get me, and that they would probably cut out my eyes or kill me!<sup>30</sup>

When she told the coyote she did not want to continue finding random big rigs to hop into their roofs after multiple failed attempts, the coyote threatened to leave her there alone. Claudia had to obey his orders because she had no other guide or method of asking for help.

I called my husband, desperate, crying, to tell him they wanted to leave me behind. He called the original coyote that took me across the river, because supposedly he was the one responsible for me, and he told him I didn't want to go like that anymore. I guess it worked because the next thing I knew they had sent some other men to get me and take me back to the house. When I got there, it was late. I found my little girl sleeping on the floor.<sup>31</sup>

After multiple failed attempts, Claudia decided to have her husband advocate on her behalf. In this way, her husband acted as a safety net as his opinions would be taken into consideration by the coyotes. Although he was not physically present, his monitoring of the process helped Claudia migrate safely.

They put us in a car and drove us to the trailer that would take us across. They put me in the front end of the trailer because I was wearing a fluorescent-colored shirt, and who would've thought I would be trying to cross illegally wearing that, right? Everyone else was in the back, crouched down and hidden. Some people went in the trunk. Imagine that! Can you imagine that? There were a hundred and thirty people in that trailer—people from Honduras, Guatemala, and different parts of Mexico.

In her next attempt to cross the border, Claudia was crammed into a trailer with other migrants trying to cross.

---

<sup>29</sup> Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

I was there trying not to let my fear take over when I heard a woman. I couldn't tell at first if they grabbed her or she went on her own because all I heard was that a man called her outside and she went, but there were other men out there waiting for her. I heard them rape her. I heard her scream. I heard her beg, que no quería, that she didn't want to. She cried, but it was too late, and there were too many of them. They covered her mouth. Her screams were muffled, but we could all still hear all of it. It was horrifying. Everyone was too scared, I think, to do anything to help her. Me and some of the other women started to cry. I think we were all thinking the same thing. We were all waiting for them to come back and rape all of us. We didn't have any protection. We couldn't stop it if it happened. We were outnumbered. I don't know how long it was, but eventually the woman came back in the trailer crying. I wasn't raped that night. It was just luck or God, or I don't know. I spent three days in that trailer.<sup>32</sup>

Claudia recounts the fear she felt when she heard one of the migrant women being raped by the coyotes. In an undisclosed location with no technology or protection, she was in a vulnerable situation to also be raped. She was able to make it through the migration journey without being raped, but she had to live in fear of it occurring, a feeling that lingers for migrant women.

We had walked for hours, for eight hours, I think. I was so tired, I couldn't handle it anymore. No aguantaba los pies. I couldn't stand the pain in my feet. I was ready to give up and, well die there in the desert, but there was a man that pulled me up and dragged me along. "Ándale, Mexicana, camina," he said. "You can't die here." We rested for a few minutes and then we kept going, but I couldn't stand my feet. They were covered in blisters and bleeding. It was horrible. Along the path we walked over cadavers. The whole time we could hear the howling of wolves. We came across snakes.<sup>33</sup>

Once out of the trailer, each migrant was given a gallon of water for their trek across the desert. She recounts the physical pain the rough terrain caused her to the point she was willing to give up and die. The cadavers she walked past are those migrants who could not make it through the challenging terrain. Not only was she battling her physical pain and being hyperaware of her security, she also had to be aware of the animals near her.

When we all got across, they put us in the back of a truck, packed us into rows like sardines, some looking forward and others looking back, like that, and the women

---

<sup>32</sup> Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



all in front. I have no idea how we all fit because there were thirty of us! We traveled another two hours in that truck until we got to Houston.<sup>34</sup>

As a mother, it was difficult for Claudia to be separated from her daughter while migrating without knowing what was going to happen to her. In addition to the safety of her daughter, she was also hyper-aware of her own safety. She was willing to sit at the top of a truck's hood for hours to cross the border. In the end, she traversed through a river and the desert to be reunited with her family. Her witness of a rape of another young female migrant is traumatizing and she explains that she was scared she would be raped as well. Although the coyotes did not sexually assault her, it seems that they only took her seriously when her husband called them. Many other Mexicana migrants do not have this privilege and are subjected to violence. Although Claudia herself did not experience physical violence, she witnessed other women being violated, was not taken seriously as a woman, and risked the safety of herself and her child through her migration journey.

### **Virgilia**

Mentioned earlier, Virgilia migrated to escape her violent husband and start a better future for her and her children. Virgilia spoke with Shannon Speed about her migration experience when she was in a detention facility.

She and others were stranded for days—eventually without food and water—when the train they were riding broke down in a remote area. A man who offered her and two others shelter in his house threatened to rape her in the middle of the night. She was held for ransom for a number of days by drug cartels in Reynosa, during which time she was sexually assaulted. She was freed after a brother living in Oklahoma City paid the ransom. She then spent days—she is unsure how many—in the desert after crossing the border, and she was abandoned by her pollero when the U.S. Border Patrol approached and she could not run fast enough to stay with the group. He shouted, “Córrele pinche india! Apúrate!” (roughly, “Run, damned Indian!

---

<sup>34</sup> Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*, 24.

Hurry up!”) as he ran off. Virgilia was apprehended and taken into Border Patrol custody.<sup>35</sup>

Virgilia, without the protection of a coyote or another male accompaniment, was in a vulnerable position to be subjected to violence. If it were not for the help of her brother, she could have continued to be sex trafficked and eventually died without her family knowing. Even when she attempted to cross with a coyote, she was abandoned because she could not keep up with the pace of the group.

In custody, Border Patrol agents attempted to threaten and cajole her into accepting voluntary departure to Mexico, but Virgilia refused. When she told them she was afraid to return to her country, she was placed in political asylum proceedings and pitched into the vast immigration detention system, eventually winding up in the Hutto facility. Less than two months later, an asylum officer who interviewed her only by video conference, in Spanish, deemed her not to have a “credible fear.” Despite the clear physical evidence of her severe abuse, which included a twice-broken clavicle and visible scars on her face and back, Virgilia was deported.<sup>36</sup>

Virgilia’s structural vulnerability continues to be seen when she is denied political asylum from her abusive, gang-related partner. While in detention, she faces coercion by the Border Patrol agents, one of their common tactics to have migrants agree to voluntary removals. Virgilia’s experience highlights how many Mexicana migrants are stuck in a cycle of structural vulnerability created by U.S. immigration policies.

## **Leticia**

Continuing Leticia’s story from earlier, once she had established a connection with a coyote she continued to detail her experience crossing the border:

También me tocó ver cadáveres en el río, de gente que me enteraba se trataba de cruzar y los mataban, o de que se ahogó, vi muchos casos, ahogados y ahogados.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Speed, Shannon. *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State*, 45-46.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>37</sup> “Familia dividida,” Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana. [https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx)

While crossing, migrants see the bones of other migrants who passed away on the journey. This is often a powerful image that stays with migrants even after their migration journey has ended.

Nos dijo mi madre que íbamos a pasar como americanas con una amiga, pero las cosas cambiaron, la que nos iba a pasar se había ido, no quedó otra que llegar a casa de una ex-compañera de la prepa, eran muy pobres.<sup>38</sup>

As previously mentioned, Leticia was able to tap into her network to find the proper connections to migrate, which played a role in her migrating safely. Nonetheless, her migration experience was far from luxurious from having to stay in a dirty house while waiting for a coyote to cross the border through the Rio Grande.

Duramos 8 días esperando pasar, durante ese tiempo mi madre nos mandó ropa americana para disfrazarnos, también mandaba instrucciones a la mamá de mi amiga, esa señora nos llevó con un pollero.<sup>39</sup>

Leticia had to wait several days in a house made of wood and full of cockroaches until she received instructions from the coyote.

Nos iba a llevar a Laredo en una lancha, a medianoche, era mucho lo que cobraba, a lo mejor nos vio de mucho dinero, nos veía de tal forma que a mí y a la señora nos dio desconfianza, le dije a mi prima que con ese no, le hablamos a mi madre y le dijimos que con ese coyote no pasábamos, ella nos había conectado con él por medio de otros amigos.

Being aware of how the coyote was sexually perceiving her and her cousin, Leticia decided to find another coyote to be more protective. Her mother in this instance also helps her in a beneficial way in her migration journey.

Traíamos una bolsa de plástico cada quien y una llanta, nos quitamos la ropa, quedamos sólo en ropa interior, me acosté sobre la llanta, mi prima se sentó sobre mí; el agua estaba asquerosa y fría, pero como hacía calor no era tan desagradable, el güero agarró la llanta con un brazo y con el otro nadaba, había muchos remolinos, no nos dio miedo, llegamos rápidamente, en la orilla había un borrego muerto.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> “Familia dividida,” Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana.  
[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



*In Bowden, Charles. "Juarez the Laboratory of Our Future," 77.*

Leticia recounts the details of crossing the Rio Grande floating on a tire.

Caminamos como veinte cuadras, era desierto, la señora, esposa del señor, tenía papeles, se había pasado al otro lado, en carro, para esperarnos, de ahí nos condujeron hasta la casa donde vivía mi madre.<sup>41</sup>

Leticia directly benefited from having access to informal migration networks throughout her migration journey. These networks are a direct effect of immigration policies that have militarized the border and forced undocumented migrants to find other methods of entry. Over decades, the migrants who have successfully crossed the border form communities within the U.S. that support incoming migrants and they help relay information and recommendations to those actively looking to migrate. Through word of mouth recommendations, undocumented migrants have a little more security in migrating instead of choosing random coyotes. Leticia was able to migrate safely because of her migration network, but this is not the case for many other Mexicana migrants.

### **Elsa**

Elsa had been having suicidal thoughts because of her living situation when she decided to migrate in search of a better life at the age of twenty.

---

<sup>41</sup> "Familia dividida," Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana.  
[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx)

En Tijuana mi prima se encargó de buscar y hacer trato con un coyote. Esa misma noche nos pasamos, tuvimos que correr, agacharnos, tirarnos al suelo, retroceder, volver a correr. Con el alma en un hilo por el suspenso, sentía que tenía el corazón en las orejas por lo fuerte de los latidos. Era la primera vez que huía y me escondía de alguien como si fuera un delincuente. Tenía miedo de chocar contra un árbol a un caballo de los agentes que andaban por ahí. Aun así, tenía que correr a oscuras o me dejaban atrás.<sup>42</sup>

Elsa recalls the fear and anxiety she felt crossing the border, trying to evade being caught by Border Patrol.

Llegamos a South Gate. Me quise bajar en un estacionamiento, pero el compañero del gordo, me pregunto que a donde iba, que no me bajara. El gordo intervino, le dijo que me dejara en paz, que yo ya le había pagado, y era cierto. Se llevaron a mi prima y a la otra muchacha. Ellas no tenían con qué pagar.<sup>43</sup>

Once she had made it across, she had met a second man in San Clemente that would take her to her final destination. Elsa's story highlights the precariousness of safety for Mexicana migrant women crossing the border. Not only is there fear for mexicanas in crossing the challenging physical landscape, there is fear of physical safety from those they are crossing with. She was let go because she had paid but her cousin and another woman were kept behind.

Mi prima después me dijo que por mi culpa, el coyote la había violado.<sup>44</sup>

Once Elsa was reunited with her cousin, she found out that she had been raped because she did not have enough money to pay their fees. The only safety net Elsa had in the vulnerable situation with the coyotes was that she had the funds to pay their fees. With no documentation or resources for help, mexicanas are forced to place their trust in coyotes who may abuse their vulnerability. While Elsa made it safely into the U.S., her experience was filled with traumatic challenges.

## Sheila

---

<sup>42</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 145.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Sheila and her stepfather decided that they would cross the border together to finally live in the U.S.

Ya no podía más, pero Juan, mi padrastro, me agarró de la mano y me dijo: —Sigue corriendo, ya pronto llegamos. —Corrimos, pero tuvimos que parar más adelante porque muchas de las señoras que nos acompañaban ya no podían. Yo era la única niña en el grupo. Nos escondimos detrás de unos árboles. Como a los cinco minutos, otra vez tuvimos que correr, correr y correr hasta la segunda parada. Allí nos escondieron en botes de basura. Pasaron unos minutos y nos sacaron de los botes de basura para que cruzáramos una malla. Ya estábamos en San Isidro.<sup>45</sup>

Sheila could have evaded physical violence from the coyote because she was accompanied by her father who could protect her. Yet, many other Mexicana migrants undergo the journey alone and do not have this type of security. Nonetheless, she was still scared of being detained while crossing the border.

Nos deportaron a Tijuana. Ese mismo día decidimos intentarlo con otro coyote. Sin esperar la noche, el otro coyote nos explicó que pasaremos en una van a la que le habían quitado los asientos. En el hueco cabía solo una persona. A mi me tocó pasar primero. Hecha ovillo en el reducido espacio, cubierta por una alfombra y una llanta sobre la cabeza, podía escuchar los pasos del agente de la migra. En español le pidió los papeles al coyote. También pude escuchar los gruñidos de los perros que husmeaban la llanta.<sup>46</sup>

It is not uncommon for Mexicana migrants to attempt to cross multiple times, which places them at risk of violence multiple times as well. Furthermore, Sheila's second migration experience shows the lengths that migrants have to go through to cross the border without being detained. Luckily, she was able to successfully pass the second time. With each deportation at the border of unauthorized migrants, the border apparatus pushes migrants to more dangerous methods of entry, as seen with Sheila.

## **Fabiola**

---

<sup>45</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 169.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

Fabiola remembered seeing other women in her town waiting for their husbands who had gone to the U.S. come back for them. She knew she never wanted to be like them. She fell in love with a man who had gone to the U.S. and came back to visit their hometown. The day after their wedding, they decided to migrate together to the U.S. and headed to Tijuana.

Después de varias horas, mi esposo noto un enorme agujero a un lado del cerco, era como una grieta profunda. Nos asomamos. Había como treinta personas adentro. Llevaban el pelo y las mejillas llenas de tierra. El coyote se identificó con nosotros. Llegaron a un acuerdo, también nos pasaría a nosotros. No había mucho espacio para moverse, pasaron varios minutos, adentro había dos mujeres con niños de brazos. Uno de ellos empezó a llorar. El llanto era desgarrador, lloraba de hambre. La mujer delgada, casi cadavérica se subió el suéter, dos pechos flácidos saltaron, empezó a amamantar al niño que desesperado empezó a succionarle el pezón. El silencio era total. La otra mujer la miraba nerviosa. Los hombres miraban hacia arriba. El chillido del niño rompió el silencio. Se empezó a agitar. La otra mujer intervino —Damelo, yo te lo termino de llenar.—La mujer delgada le extendió al niño. Bajo la cabeza para ocultar las lágrimas que se le resbalaban por las mejillas.<sup>47</sup>

Similar to the other Mexicana testimonies mentioned, Fabiola having a male accompany her on her migration experience may have contributed to protecting her from physical violence. Furthermore, seeing the mother having to hand off her baby to another woman for milk is heartbreaking. The migration process takes a physical toll on a woman's body to the point where they are unable to produce milk, the body's reaction to preserving itself for survival.

Las mujeres avanzaban hincadas con los bebés en sus brazos. Los ojos me ardían. Seguimos avanzando cuando se escuchó una voz de mando: —Parar torous. No moverse nadie. La orden había salido de una patrulla que se desprende de las sombras y avanzaba hacia nosotros.<sup>48</sup>

Fabiola recounts the instructions the coyote gave and what she saw. Unfortunately, her and her husband were the only ones from the group that were detained by Border Patrol. They were

---

<sup>47</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

separated in detention and were both deported to Tijuana. After two days in Tijuana, they found another coyote that would cross them through Tecate.

Los pies los sentía entumidos. El jovencito me daba ánimos. Me apoyé en él. Mi esposo pareció encelarse: —Nunca te dije que iba a ser fácil. Debiste de haber hecho más ejercicio. No dije nada. Intente seguir sin la ayuda del joven.<sup>49</sup>

After walking for three hours, Fabiola began to experience physical pain. This is a common experience among other Mexicana migrants who are not prepared for the challenging terrain. While she received help from another young migrant, she had to stop because she did not want to upset her husband.

¿Por qué nada de esto pasa en la televisión? Pensaba. Tampoco nadie lo platica. Todo lo que sabemos es que Estados Unidos es muy bonito y que se gana mucho dinero. Eso es lo que dicen los que llegan del norte. Empecé a sospechar que también la televisión me había mentido.<sup>50</sup>

Fabiola recognizes that this gruesome migration process is often negated from the media and personal discussions. This is still something that occurs today and I argue, has contributed to the support for draconian immigration policies. The media's way of reporting immigration is removed from emotion or true migrant experiences and framed in a way of enhancing the border apparatus to ensure national security. By removing this humanity from the issue, voters and politicians are more willing to support draconian immigration policies.

Ya hacía esfuerzos por no desmayarse del cansancio.<sup>51</sup>

She pushed her body to its physical limits, at one point being on the verge of fainting. Eventually, her and her husband made it to Chula Vista. Overall, Fabiola is not alone in her migration experiences and challenges that have been a result of U.S. immigration policies.

## Iginia

---

<sup>49</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



Iginia crossed the border with the help of her children and was accompanied by her niece.

Yo le conteste: —Si yo no puedo pasar, tampoco mi sobrina pasa. —Bueno, ni modo, van a caminar un gran trecho. —Contestó enojado y nos llevó a otro lugar por donde sí se podía pasar caminando.<sup>52</sup>

Iginia's first attempted border crossing was by attempting to jump the border wall, a symbol of physical separation and exclusion on behalf of the U.S.

Fue una tensión tan fuerte que solo las personas que lo pasamos lo podemos comprender. Por fin llegamos corriendo hasta una ladera muy empinada. Ahí se me quedó atorado el pantalón en un tronco. Lo jale y, con los jalones, el tronco se desprende y me fui rodando junto con él sin poder detenerme. Caí boca abajo y con la ayuda de mi sobrina me pude parar. Con muchos trabajos seguí caminando.<sup>53</sup>

Iginia's inability to cross over it led her to cross through the desert, a direct response to a structure built as part of developing the border apparatus. However, she was injured when she fell attempting to climb a hill.

Al fin llegamos a un lugar en donde había varios hombres. Nos robaron lo poco que traíamos e intentaron violar a mi sobrina. Gracias a la gente que venía con nosotros pudimos defendernos.<sup>54</sup>

After walking for some time with her injury, a few men men robbed her and attempted to rape her niece. Throughout her journey, she was concerned about her own safety but also that of her niece.

Thankfully, the other migrants helped Iginia in protecting her niece from violence.

Seguimos corriendo hasta que llegamos a un lugar donde pensamos que estábamos a salvo pero descubrimos que estábamos rodeados por la Migra. Nos arrestaron y nos regresaron por Tijuana. No teníamos nada, ni dinero, ni a quien recurrir, ni que comer.<sup>55</sup>

After the encounter with the men, Iginia and her group began to run away from Border Patrol agents. Without any resources left, she did not know what to do when returning to Tijuana.

—Yo no cruzó por nada del mundo —le conteste, pero al recordar a mis hijos cambié de idea. El amor a mis hijos era más grande que mis aflicciones y esto me

---

<sup>52</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 112.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

dio el valor para tratar de nuevo. Volvimos a intentarlo y nos volvió a agarrar la Migra.<sup>56</sup>

When remembering her initial reason for migrating, she decided she would attempt to cross one more time. Like other Mexicana migrants, this was a maternal sacrifice for Iginia to be reunited with her family.

Tomamos más precauciones: cuando escuchábamos carros, nos escondimos entre piedras y lodo. Así duramos dos noches y un día. Sin comer, sin tomar agua, y lo que es peor, a mí me pica un animal, no supimos que fue. Empecé a arrojar espuma por la boca. El cuerpo me empezó a entumir. Lo último que recuerdo es que me subieron a un carro. Mi vida pasó frente a mí como una película.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to being hyper-aware of her safety from assault and being detained, she also had to be aware of the dangers in crossing. Her body was once again pushed to its limits of survival when she had an adverse response to a bite from an animal.

Juntas habíamos desafiado todos los peligros y no estábamos dispuestas a que nadie nos volviera a sacar de Estados Unidos.<sup>58</sup>

After many hours of being unconscious, she woke up in the hospital alongside her children and niece. For her, reunification with her children was worth the maternal sacrifice of migration and she never wanted to be separated from them again. Iginia's experience highlights the interactions Mexicana migrants have with the border apparatus and how it can create their vulnerability to violence from the physical environment and other people.

## **Maria**

Maria migrated at a young age after not having a close relationship with her family. She found someone to help her cross the border through one of her friends in Tijuana.

---

<sup>56</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 114.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

Me escondieron al final de la van, debajo de un asiento. Todos traían documentos, menos yo. Me dijeron que no hiciera ningún ruido.<sup>59</sup>

After successfully passing, the coyote told her that she would stay in his house until she found a job.

Ahí llegaban carros con gente a diario. Yo los atendía, me di cuenta que me había convertido en la sirvienta. No protesté porque sentí que era la forma de pagarle la pasada. Todo cambió una noche cuando sentí las manos frías del puertorriqueño entre las piernas. Mi recámara era un colchón tirado en el piso. —No te hagas la santa que tú también quieres cogel. El corazón empezó a bombearme en las sienes. Traté de librarme de aquel abrazo que me contaminaba. Forcejeamos, un sudor frío me recorría la espalda. Montado sobre mi restregaba su pene flácido abajo de la cadera. El corazón me iba a estallar en las sienes. No se donde saque las fuerzas, pero me levanté y lo empujé hacia la pared. El puertorriqueño cayó de lado y rugió como un animal.<sup>60</sup>

While Maria had access to a coyote through her network during her first crossing, this coyote took advantage of her lack of funds and gender by trying to rape her.

Salí corriendo y no volví a entrar a la casa hasta que llegó un carro. Era un gringo como de cincuenta y cinco años. Se llamaba Mr. Green. El puertorriqueño salió y me ordenó que entrara. Me dijo que al siguiente día me iría con Mr. Green, que ya no me quería en su casa.<sup>61</sup>

Having to choose between staying in a house where she was almost raped and escaping the situation with someone new, Maria chose the latter.

Estaba lista para continuar el viaje cuando Mr. Green me llevó a presentar con el dueño del hotel. Era un armenio de piel morena, sin arrugas. Me miró de arriba abajo. Los dos se alejaron unos pasos. La respiración se me cortó de repente. Estaban haciendo negocio conmigo. Mr. Green me esta a vendiendo al armenio.<sup>62</sup>

Maria soon realized that she was being sold to someone else. She was to live in the house of this man as his servant and be paid fifty dollars per week without a rest day. Without knowing anyone or having someone she could reach out to, she was forced into this situation.

---

<sup>59</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 120.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Yo estaba limpiando el baño cuando él entró y, sin cerrar la puerta, con la mayor naturalidad, se bajó el pantalón y empezó a orinar enfrente de mí. Iba a salir cuando me jalo del brazo, trato de guiarme la mano hacia su pene erecto. Me espanté y salí corriendo. Nunca más regrese.<sup>63</sup>

After almost being sexually assaulted by the man she was working for, she decided to return to Mexico to see her family. It is easier for Mexicana women to be violated because of their vulnerability. After spending two weeks in Mexico, she decided to go back to the U.S.

Trate de sacar un permiso, pero eso fue como soñar despierta. Me lo negaron. Decidí cruzar sin la ayuda de nadie. Con la experiencia de la primera vez, me fue más fácil llegar a San Diego.<sup>64</sup>

The first time she attempted to cross, she was detained in San Clemente. When she did try to cross legally, she was unable to. While she made it across on her second attempt without the guidance of a coyote, she had to resort to precarious means due to the lack of funds she had, also putting her in a vulnerable position to be kidnapped or assaulted. Maria's multiple migration experiences reflect some of the many ways Mexicana migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

### **Rosa #1**

Rosa migrated with her daughter Yeni to be reunited with her husband who was in St. Louis. In her testimony, Rosa mentions how many women from her town migrate because of the gendered opportunities and discrimination they face. Deciding to no longer limit herself to these opportunities, she decided to migrate with her daughter.

At five in the afternoon on December 30, the group was hustled into a van whose middle and back seats had been removed. They were told to lie down flat, and since there were twenty-five of them, most everyone had to lie on top of or below somebody else, squirming about to find a way to not crush or get crushed. They were driven for about forty-five minutes, probably eastward, to a part of the border where the massive steel wall separating downtown Nogales, Mexico, from downtown Nogales, Arizona, becomes a laughable barbed-wire fence about four feet high. They crossed the line without a hitch. It was so easy, Rosa thought. One

---

<sup>63</sup> Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*, 125.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

step and you're in America. The migrants marched out into the dusk, climbing hills and descending ravines. When night fell, there was only the sliver of a moon and starlight to walk by, and the temperature dropped rapidly. They moved at a steady, fast pace for about four and a half hours. Rosa carried Yeni slung in her rebozo the entire time, her neck and back increasingly strained.<sup>65</sup>

Crossing with her daughter was challenging because she needed to keep her safe and carry her throughout the journey. This is a gendered aspect of migration that most men do not have to endure as they migrate alone. In addition, Rosa's journey illustrates how further into the desert, there are less physical border divisions when she encounters only barbed wire. This is the incentive for migrants who view these areas as easier to cross.

The coyotes, along with the other men in their group from Cheran, started drinking early in the afternoon and by midevening they were stumbling about town. The women were left behind in the safe house, of course, prompting a long discussion about macho irresponsibility. Machismo itself was one of the primary reasons that so many women were heading north these days. The old migrant tradition in small towns like Cheran permitted only the men to become adventurer-providers, journeying north alone to tame the frontier.<sup>66</sup>

When the group was detained and deported, the men of the group decided to drink. This made Rosa reflect on how gender continued to impact her even during her migration journey.

The women were driven east of town again, for about an hour. They hiked in rugged terrain, in an area that appeared similar to that of the first attempt—soft sand, occasional rocks, desert scrub. But this was by far the most difficult hike. Crawling underneath a barbed-wire fence, Rosa got her rebozo caught in the rusty metal and Yeni scratched her leg badly. Still, the two-year old didn't cry. This time they walked for six hours, the moon helping them with its silvery blue light.<sup>67</sup>

After the women in the group were detained and deported on the second border attempt, they tried one more time crossing through the desert. Throughout this grueling journey, she was constantly concerned about her daughter's safety.

Soon her thirst was unbearable and she asked a woman she'd seen carrying a water bottle for a sip. But the woman had discarded it hours ago. Indeed, the women had left everything behind by now, including backpacks and bags of food, in a desperate

---

<sup>65</sup> Martínez, Rubén. *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail*, 179-180.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-181.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

attempt to lighten their loads and move more quickly. Rosa's mouth was cold and dry, her face burning and wet with sweat. The van picked them up at the appointed spot.<sup>68</sup>

Rosa had finally made it across safely with her daughter, but went through many physical challenges along the way. As seen with Rosa's experience, crossing the physical border barriers in these remote areas is only the start of a longer journey where they must walk through miles of tough terrain. Her testimony also shows how gender can motivate and impact the migration experience for mexicanas that differs from that of men.

### **Isabel**

Isbael's story is recounted through Norma, a samaritan who helped her receive medical attention after sustaining injuries on her migration. She took on the migration journey because there were limited job opportunities in her town.

The group was to sleep there and meet up with the coyote the following day. The crossers had not been at that location long when a gang of banditos arrived. At gunpoint the thieves took everyone's money and forced the women to line up and strip off all clothing. As the queue of women stood there naked, a bandit walked up to one, leaned into her face with a sneer, and began first stroking, then squeezing her breasts. As if on cue, his comrade came up behind a teenage girl and began rubbing up against her buttocks and running his hand up the inside of her thighs. The women dropped their heads. They stared at the ground, refusing to look at the ladrones. Some of the women began to sob, tears falling on the dusty ground. The aura of shame and degradation crowded out their fear. But not Isabel. When the other women started to disrobe, the intruders said to her, "Never mind." She must have wondered if she had been spared the terrible humiliation because of her obesity.<sup>69</sup>

Isabel's, along with the other Mexicana migrants, vulnerability to sexual abuse is evident in her story. Without the protection of the coyote, other men are more capable of sexually assaulting these migrant women. In these situations, it seems that men still have preference for a certain type of

---

<sup>68</sup> Martínez, Rubén. *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail*, 184-185.

<sup>69</sup> Ferguson, Kathryn, Price, Norma and Ted Parks. *Crossing with the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail*, 68.

woman and are able to “choose” their target because of their lack of protection. In this instance, Isabel was not targeted because of her weight and age. However, later on she is targeted by the coyote for not being able to keep pace with the group, leaving her behind alone.

The next morning their pollero rejoined the group to guide them north to meet their pickup vehicle. Isabel stumbled and fell more than the previous days. When the pollero realized that she couldn't keep up, he pointed toward a road. He told her to wait there, and probably someone would come by and help. The rest of the group continued its journey. She had not known any of her fellow travelers, but they were sympathetic, and one woman offered to contact her family in Mexico.<sup>70</sup>

Isabel was left behind by her group because she could not continue on the terrain. If she was not found by Norma, she could have died waiting for help. Now in the U.S., Isabel needs medical attention on her ankle from the injury she sustained. Isabel's story shows how women are in vulnerable situations when migrating without protection, making them targets of abuse in various ways.

### **Beatriz**

Beatriz's migration story is also told through the samaritan Norma who assisted her. She migrated to the U.S. to find a job after Chiapas was hit with a hurricane and agricultural jobs were devastated. She hoped to send her earnings back to Mexico to help support her immediate family. She crossed the desert alone for twenty three days, drinking water from bottles left behind by others and eating cactus fruit. Similarly to Isabel, Beatriz sustained an injury during her migration that led her group to leave her behind. She used a tree branch as a cane and slowly kept moving forward. When she finally stumbled upon two other migrants, they temporarily helped her until they also had to leave her in fear of being apprehended by border patrol.

Beatriz took a scrap of carpet from a trash pile, and put it on the ground to pad her knees. Again she moved forward, and the crusty scabs were scraped off as she put first one knee and then the other on the carpet. One knee was bleeding and the other

---

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson, Kathryn, Price, Norma and Ted Parks. *Crossing with the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail*, 68.

was covered by a patchy, purple scab with yellowish fluid oozing from under the crust. Beatriz made the rest of her “pilgrimage” that way, knees on the carpet, inching forward. By the time she had reached the road, both knees were a blackish-purple pulp. Tiny rocks and grit had become embedded into the tissues. Vertical lacerations dissected the skin over her patellas. In the middle of each leg where her knees should have been were large overripe purple figs, bulging with pulp and oozing juice from linear splits in the skin. “When I reached the road I waited, hoping someone would stop to help,” she said. Car after car passed by without stopping. At last, a Mexican American man, probably a rancher, stopped to see if she needed help. “Mija, es mojada?” “Dear, are you a wetback?” he asked. She said yes, and that she couldn’t walk. “Don’t worry my child; I will call an ambulance.” He told her to wait fifteen minutes and he would return. True to his word, he came back, and an ambulance arrived soon after. She was taken to the hospital where she was treated for severe dehydration, her knees were cleaned, X-rays were taken, and she underwent surgery on her fractured ankle.<sup>71</sup>

Beatriz’s experience has many similarities to Isabel’s in that they both left their homes in search of better economic opportunities. Both of them also faced physical challenges walking through the tough desert terrain, becoming injured in different capacities. Despite these challenges, Beatriz’s persistence in completing the trek is a reflection of the stakes that are on the line for her and other migrants. Mexicana migrants are willing to risk death for an opportunity of a life in the U.S. The factors that increase the likelihood of death at the border are a result of the militarization of the border that pushes migrants to the desert, putting them at risk of death.

### **Olga Salas**

Olga recounts her migration experience through a media interview. She was initially working for a family in Mexico under horrible conditions. The family she worked for decided that she would cross the border with one of the family members through the desert.

La cosa es que nos dejaron una madrugada a las dos de la mañana y eran las cuatro de la tarde y todavía no encontrábamos la carretera. Sin agua y sin comida.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Ferguson, Kathryn, Price, Norma and Ted Parks. *Crossing with the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail*, 148.

<sup>72</sup> “Inmigrante mexicana narra su primer intento en cruzar la frontera de manera ilegal,” Univision Noticias, August 21, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWmcpZGm5m0>



Olga walked without any sense of direction for a long time with the family member. Without the guidance of the coyote, they could have continuously walked with no end in sight. After fainting, the Border Patrol agents found her and provided her with medical assistance. Once they found the man she was crossing with, they were detained and deported to Nuevo Laredo.<sup>73</sup>

Dentro de todo, gracias a Dios, a pesar de que iba drogado, siempre tuvo ese cuidado para mí, que iba su novia e iba yo de mujer y otros dos hombres.<sup>74</sup>

In her second migrating experience, she did cross with a coyote who would keep an eye out for her. In this case, the coyote acted as a protector against violence instead of the violator.

La primer vez, grite. Me saqué de la bolsa porque estaba ahí cerca de mí, quería que me saliera de la bolsa verdad y me empezó a quitarme la ropa. Cuando yo grite, se levantó el muchacho que nos traía y ahí el chaval le dijo que no. Entonces el chaval se detuvo verdad y ya no seguí.<sup>75</sup>

When the man she was crossing with attempted to rape her, the coyote intervened and helped protect Olga. Not only are coyotes capable of taking advantage of the vulnerability of Mexican migrants, but also other men in the migrant groups.

“Ese es el trato que hacemos aquí. Que si viene una mujer, pues se presta. Y todas las mujeres que se han pasado, pues siempre han prestado. Andale va a ser un ratito no más allí rápido.”<sup>76</sup>

In her second attempt, she was almost sexually assaulted twice. While in the first attempt the coyote protected her, in the second attempt he was the one trying to coerce her into agreeing. As the only guide, coyotes can abuse of their power to force women to perform sexual acts with the threat of leaving them to fend for themselves. Without documentation, these migrant women are vulnerable to sexual abuse along their journeys.

---

<sup>73</sup> “Inmigrante mexicana narra su primer intento en cruzar la frontera de manera ilegal,” Univision Noticias, August 21, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWmcpZGm5m0>

<sup>74</sup> “Inmigrante mexicana tuvo que hacer favores sexuales para poder llegar a su destino tras cruzar la fr,” Univision Noticia, August 20, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7pAPMR-4pk>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

**Rosa #2**

Rosa, like Virgilia, also shared her migration experience with Shannon Speed while in an immigration detention facility. In her first attempt, she was caught using a false ID and deported to Reynosa. Being a Mexicana migrant alone, the gangs kidnapped her and held her for ransom until her brother paid the fee for her release.

When she attempted to cross again, she was apprehended, and when she begged them not to send her back, stating that she was afraid for her unborn child's life, she was held in detention, eventually ending up in the Hutto facility. Rosa was deemed to have a credible fear of return to Mexico and was released on bond pending her asylum proceedings after her brother presented a letter stating that he would be financially responsible for her. Before her release, she expressed extreme anxiety about what would happen next.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly to Virgilia, Rosa also had an encounter with gangs at the border. Although she was not sex trafficked, this could have been a possibility if her brother did not pay the ransom. Her brother also helped fight for her release on bond while she awaited her asylum case decision. Many other Mexicana migrants do not have family members who can financially support them during emergencies like these while crossing the border. Furthermore, if Rosa would have migrated more recently with the Stay in Mexico policy that forces those migrants with pending immigration cases to wait in Mexico until a decision is made, she would have been vulnerable to more violence. Thus, it is evident how the U.S. plays a role in this structured vulnerability through their immigration policies.

**Alejandra**

Anna Ochoa O'Leary interviewed Alejandra at a migrant shelter in Nogales in 2007 who had attempted to cross through the desert with her two children, a 14-year-old girl and 12-year-old

---

<sup>77</sup> Speed, Shannon. *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State*, 92.

boy. After walking for two days in the desert, she began to see the physical toll it was taking on her children and began to become concerned that they would not be able to complete the journey. In addition to the physical concern, Alejandra was concerned that the coyote would sexually assault her daughter after he made several gestures towards her.

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 trash can 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.<sup>78</sup>

As has been seen through the testimonies of other Mexicana migrants, one of the reasons for migrating is making a sacrifice for their children's lives. While some mexicanas choose to migrate alone and leave their children with family, others bring their children with them on the journey. Mexicana migrants are vulnerable alone and have an added layer of vulnerability and concern for safety when migrating with their children. Without a guide and minimal resources for survival, they were on the brink of death. The initial lack of aid from Border Patrol shows a lack of care for migrants, serving only to detain those actively trying to cross the border. This carelessness could be a contributing factor to deaths at the border. Alejandra's story displays the sacrifices of motherhood, but also the vulnerability Mexicana migrants face of sexual assault and death while on their trek.

---

<sup>78</sup> O'Leary, Anna Ochoa. "In the Footsteps of Spirits: Migrant Women's Testimonios in a Time of Heightened Border Enforcement." In *Human Rights along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, 97-99.

## Marcela

Marcela was also interviewed by O’Leary at the same migrant shelter at Alejandra. After experiencing years of psychological abuse from her husband who kept accusing her of trying to kill him, she decided to cross the border with the goal of escaping her abusive relationship and being reunited with her nieces in Houston. As a woman living in a country rooted in machismo, Marcela saw her options as limited and not worth being subjected to more abuse from her husband.

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).<sup>79</sup>

While crossing the border, her injury made her group leave her behind and fend for herself. She was close to death from falling off of the cliff but ultimately escaped the situation with an injury. Similarly to Alejandra, Marcela did not have any guidance on where to go and minimal food to survive. She drifted in and out of consciousness for a few hours after her fall.

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.<sup>80</sup>

Unable to encounter other migrants or grab the attention of Border Patrol, Marcela was on the edge of death. When she finally came across a ranch, she was able to ask the rancher for help. While she was eventually detained and deported back to Mexico, she was alive. If it were not for her perseverance, she would have been left to die in the desert, possibly never being found.

## Lorena

---

<sup>79</sup> O’Leary, Anna Ochoa. “In the Footsteps of Spirits: Migrant Women’s Testimonios in a Time of Heightened Border Enforcement.” In *Human Rights along the U.S.–Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, 100.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Lorena crossed the desert when she was six years old with her mother, stepfather, and two brothers.

I was so hungry. That is something I don't ever wish on anybody, that kind of hunger. And the only thing I could think of was, if I'm hungry, then my brothers must be hungry. I started getting worried. We were literally in the middle of the desert.<sup>81</sup>

Lorena migrated at such a young age but this experience is still vivid in her memory. While she did not recount any physical abuse her or her family experienced, she details the physical toll crossing the desert took on her and her family.

That night, we fell asleep in between bushes. It was early in the morning, like six or seven o'clock, when I woke up. We were in the middle of bushes on top of other bushes, so we were completely covered. It was all dry, so it was really noisy. And so nobody could move. I remember waking up, and I kind of jerked my foot to the side a little bit, so the bushes made a loud rustling noise. And there were actually INS agents on the other side of the bush. When they heard that rustle, they looked in the bush, and we got caught. There were other people with us. I think it was seven, eight of us. But they weren't family, so I don't remember who they were.<sup>82</sup>

She recounts the lengths her and her family went through to try to evade apprehension by the Border Patrol agents.

I felt horrible. This was totally my fault, and I knew it, and I just could not live with myself. I remember my mother and stepfather getting their hands tied with those plastic handcuffs. I wanted to kick the INS agents, because I was thinking, We are good people. People that get tied up are bad people.<sup>83</sup>

Seeing her family handcuffed was a reflection of the associated criminality of undocumented immigrants. Although they are "breaking the law," they do not pose a threat to the U.S. and have only been painted to do so. This perceived criminality embedded into U.S. policies is what causes Border Patrol agents to act forcefully towards migrants instead of empathetic. Breaking down these

---

<sup>81</sup> Andes, Tom, Holmes, Annie, Menon, Jaykumar and Peter Orner, eds. *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 188.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

harmful racial scripts will begin a trend where migrants are treated with human decency and do not suffer at the hands of Border Patrol agents like Lorena and her family did.

### **Adela**

Adela's husband had migrated to the U.S. and left her and her daughter in Mexico. When he came to visit them, Adela decided to join him on his second migration journey to the U.S., taking their daughter with them.

We walked for two nights in the mountains. It was just our guide and the three of us. At one point in the night, as we were walking in a canyon just below one of the Border Patrol trucks, Estrella started to cry. It was so quiet otherwise that, even though she was covered with a blanket, everyone else who was making the crossing around us heard her. They started whispering for me to quiet her, and getting worried. I tried to move her into different positions, and then I tried to feed her because I thought she might be hungry, but she just kept crying. I thought, Oh my God, what should I do? My husband said we should take the blanket from her head, let her breathe—and that was the trick. The moment Estrella saw the night sky, and the mountains and trees we were walking through, she stopped crying. After that she stayed silent the rest of the trip, even when I slipped in mud while I was holding her, and even when we crossed the freeway. Silent.<sup>84</sup>

Adela, like other Mexicana mothers crossing with their children, was concerned with crossing smoothly while keeping themselves and their children safe. On top of this, Adela is concerned about the surveillance of Border Patrol while traversing through the terrain.

When we came out of the hills by San Clemente, we were tired, scratched up from the thorns, muddy. The guide told us to wait in a tree grove. There were hundreds of us migrants gathered there. They told us not to talk, scream, not even whisper, because the Border Patrol station was right on the other side of the trees. I was scared the entire time.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Andes, Tom, Holmes, Annie, Menon, Jaykumar and Peter Orner, eds. *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, 310.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 310-311.

Pushed to her physical and mental limits, Adela and her family were able to make it into the U.S. undetected. A mother crossing with her baby, willing to risk it all for a chance of a better life, is a result of draconian immigration policies that do not offer accessible pathways of authorized entry.

### *Conclusion*

The testimonies of these Mexicana migrant women represent their structured vulnerability and are not unique. All Mexicana migrants share commonalities with at least one of these testimonies. These commonalities are a result of their structured vulnerabilities that have been an effect of immigration policies. Mexicanas face gendered oppression and experiences in Mexico, putting them into a social category similar to second-class citizens. While migrating, their gendered discrimination follows them. As women, they are vulnerable to sexual assault by the coyotes or other migrants. They are also at risk of being sex trafficked or being held for ransom by gangs or cartels. The U.S. sustains this vulnerability through their immigration policies that criminalize undocumented migration and militarize the border. If there were more accessible authorized pathways for entry and authorized migrants were not associated with criminality, they would have more protection and ability to ask for help in dangerous situations. The militarization of the border has only pushed migrants further into the desert or to seek more dangerous ways of entering the U.S. undetected. Evidently, since 2002, the Arizona desert has been the border region with the most reported migrant deaths.<sup>86</sup> The deaths and experiences of Mexicana migrants will only continue unless the U.S. government reforms their immigration policies.

---

<sup>86</sup> Da Gloria Marroni, Maria and Guillermo Alonso Meneses. "El fin del sueño americano. Mujeres migrantes muertas en la frontera México-Estados Unidos," June 2006.  
[https://scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1665-89062006000100001&lng=es&tln=es](https://scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-89062006000100001&lng=es&tln=es)

## Conclusion



*Alvarenga, Jess. December 2, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ClrFzjzJGJm/>*

The humanitarian crisis migrants are facing in the U.S.-Mexico border is a consequence of immigration policies over the past decades. Immigration policies are influenced by social perceptions of immigrants which are rooted in beliefs about race and form racial scripts that are attributed to all migrants. Today, immigrants are associated with the racial scripts of criminality and illegality. These perceptions of migrants continue to become embedded into not only the social fabric of the U.S., but also the legal as more draconian immigration laws pass.

As I highlighted in Chapter 2, the twentieth century established many immigration policies that continue to have effects today. At the core of these policies was the disposability of migrants by allowing them to enter the U.S. with authorization when they were needed for their cheap labor. However, as soon as their labor was no longer needed, they would be criminalized. In conjunction



with these policies, the southern border was also being militarized through more funding, border agents, technology, and physical barriers. These immigration policies have created legal and physical barriers to authorized entry, consequently causing the humanitarian crisis at the border.

The perception of immigrants and immigration policies particularly impact Mexican migrants crossing the border. Draconian immigration policies that limit their pathways for authorized entry force them to seek more precarious routes of entry. Without legal protection, the state has created structured vulnerabilities that many experience where they are unable to ask for help. These include vulnerability to: death, rape, injury, emotional trauma, kidnapping, torture, extortion, and physical assault. As seen through the testimonies of the Mexican migrants, these vulnerabilities are common and leaves them in dangerous situations.

With at least 853 migrant deaths at the southern border in 2022, immigration policy needs to be reformed.<sup>1</sup> The government must expand upon its current visa options with more quantities and types of visas being issued each year. Instead of continuously adding border patrol agents, the government should hire more USCIS employees to improve the efficiency of the system. Furthermore, the government should change its perception of immigrants to not be as hostile and not criminalize undocumented migrants. This starts with ending the Remain in Mexico policy, allowing unauthorized immigrants to file a case with immigration court instead of being coerced into voluntary removal, and decreasing deportations of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Without immigration reform, the border will continue to be a place of human rights violations, especially for women, and increasing deaths at the hands of the U.S. government.

---

<sup>1</sup> Montoya-Galvez, Camilo. "At least 853 migrants died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in past 12 months — a record high," *CBS News*, October 28, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/>

## References

- Ables, Kelsey. "U.S. judge in Amarillo halts Biden administration's attempt to end 'remain in Mexico' policy," *The Texas Tribune*, December 16, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/12/16/remain-in-mexico-mpp-judge-ruling-migrants/>
- ACLU. "CA's Anti-Immigrant Proposition 187 is Voided, Ending State's Five-Year Battle with ACLU, Rights Groups." <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/cas-anti-immigrant-proposition-187-voided-ending-states-five-year-battle-aclu-rights>
- Abdalla, Jihan. "US advocates say 'Congress needs to act' amid migrants arrival," Aljazeera, November 9, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/9/us-advocates-say-congress-needs-to-act-amid-border-arrivals>
- Alarcón, Alicia. *La Migra Me Hizo Los Mandados*. Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 2002.
- Alarcón, Rafael. "U.S. Expansionism, Mexican Undocumented Migration, and American Obligations." *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 3 (2011): 563–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41622819>.
- Almaguer, Tomas. *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*. University of California Press (Berkeley, CA), 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520942905>.
- American Immigration Council. "The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security," January 20, 2021. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-cost-of-immigration-enforcement-and-border-security>
- Alvarenga, Jess. December 2, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ClrFzjzJGJm/>
- Andes, Tom, Holmes, Annie, Menon, Jaykumar and Peter Orner, eds. *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*. [2017 Edition]ed. Voice of Witness. London: Verso, 2017.
- Andrade, Rosi and Hilda González Le Denmat. "The Formation of a Code of Ethics for Latina/Chicana Scholars." *Frontiers* 20 (1), 1999: 151-160.
- Armenta, Amada. "Who Polices Immigration?" In *Protect, Serve, and Deport: The Rise of Policing as Immigration Enforcement*, 1st ed., 15–35. University of California Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1w8h204.6>.
- Ayers, John W., C. Richard Hofstetter, Keith Schnakenberg, and Bohdan Kolody. "Is Immigration a Racial Issue? Anglo Attitudes on Immigration Policies in a Border County." *Social Science Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (2009): 593–610. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42940606>.
- Beltrán, Cristina. *Cruelty As Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- Boundless. "Visa Approvals Bounce Back to Pre-Pandemic Levels in 2022." January 25, 2023. <https://www.boundless.com/blog/state-department-visa-report/>
- Bowden, Charles. *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*. 1st ed. New York: Aperture, 1998.
- Burns, Peter, and James G. Gimpel. "Economic Insecurity, Prejudicial Stereotypes, and Public Opinion on Immigration Policy." *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 2 (2000): 201–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657900>.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017.

- Casas, Angelica, Cabral, Sam, and Bernd Debusmann Jr. "Texas Migrant deaths: Mexico blames poverty and US border crisis," BBC News, June 28, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61969006>
- Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat. Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*. Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Chishti, Muzaffar, Hipsman, Faye and Isabel Ball. "Fifty years on, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Continues to Reshape the United States," Migration Policy Institute, October 15, 2015. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/fifty-years-1965-immigration-and-nationality-act-continues-reshape-united-states>
- Chishti, Muzaffar, Pierce, Sarah and Jessica Bolter. "The Obama Record on Deportations: Deporter in Chief or Not?" Migration Policy Institute, January 26, 2017. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/obama-record-deportations-deporter-chief-or-not>
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>.
- Congress. "H.R.3525 - Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002," <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3525>
- Córdova, Teresa. "Plugging the Brain Drain." *Latino Social Policy*, eds. Juana Mora and David R. Diaz. New York: The Haworth Press, 2004.
- Cornelius, Wayne A., and Philip L. Martin. "The Uncertain Connection: Free Trade and Rural Mexican Migration to the United States." *The International Migration Review* 27, no. 3 (1993): 484–512. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547097>.
- Council on Foreign Relations. "U.S. Postwar Immigration Policy," <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-postwar-immigration-policy>
- Da Gloria Marroni, Maria and Guillermo Alonso Meneses. "El fin del sueño americano. Mujeres migrantes muertas en la frontera México-Estados Unidos," June 2006. [https://scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1665-89062006000100001&lng=es&tlng=es](https://scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-89062006000100001&lng=es&tlng=es)
- De Genova, Nicholas. "Immigration 'Reform' and the Production of Migrant 'Illegality.'" *Constructing Immigrant 'Illegality': Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, edited by Cecilia Menjivar and Daniel Kanstroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 37–62. doi:10.1017/CBO9781107300408.003.
- De la Luz Ibarra, Maria. "Buscando La Vida: Mexican Immigrant Women's Memories of Home, Yearning, and Border Crossings." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24, no. 2/3 (2003), pp. 261–281. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3347362>.
- Domonske, Camila and Richard Gonzales. "Fact Check: What's Happening on the U.S.-Mexico Border?" NPR, November 27, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/27/670807343/fact-check-whats-happening-on-the-u-s-mexico-border>
- Dreby, Joanna. *Everyday Illegal: When Policies Undermine Immigrant Families*, 1st ed., University of California Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt130jt47.5>.
- Duffin, Erin. "Number of Mexican immigrants in the United States 1850-2019," Statista, September 30, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/673350/mexican-immigrants-in-the-united-states/>
- Durand, Jorge, Douglas S. Massey, and Rene M. Zenteno. "Mexican Immigration to the United States: Continuities and Changes." *Latin American Research Review* 36, no. 1 (2001): 107–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2692076>.

- Edelman, Adam. "Trump Ends DACA Program, No New Applications Accepted," *NBC News*, September 5, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/trump-dreamers-daca-immigration-announcement-n798686>
- Edison, Jaden & Patrick Svitek, "At least 50 people found dead in abandoned 18-wheeler in San Antonio." *The Texas Tribune*, June 27, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/27/bodies-18-wheeler-san-antonio-lackland/>
- Fairchild, Stephen T., and Nicole B. Simpson. "Mexican Migration to the United States Pacific Northwest." *Population Research and Policy Review* 23, no. 3 (2004): 219–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40230858>.
- Farfán-Santos, Elizabeth. *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*. University of Texas Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.7560/326121>.
- Ferguson, Kathryn, Price, Norma and Ted Parks. *Crossing with the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010.
- Flores, René D., and Ariela Schachter. "Who Are the 'Illegals'? The Social Construction of Illegality in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 5 (2018): 839–68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48588674>.
- Gabaccia, Donna. "Immigrant Women: Nowhere at Home?" *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, no. 4 (1991): 61–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27500871>.
- Ganster, Paul, and David E Lorey. *The U.S.-Mexican Border into the Twenty-First Century*. 2nd ed. Latin American Silhouettes. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Goldman, Noreen, Anne R. Pebley, Mathew J. Creighton, Graciela M. Teruel, Luis N. Rubalcava, and Chang Chung. "The Consequences of Migration to the United States for Short-Term Changes in the Health of Mexican Immigrants." *Demography* 51, no. 4 (2014): 1159–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42920051>.
- Gonzalez, Alfonso. *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*. Princeton University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvs1g9p1>.
- Gordillo, Luz Maria. *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration: Engendering Transnational Ties*. University of Texas Press, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.7560/722033>.
- Hansen, Calire. "How Much of Trump's Border Wall Was Built?" *US News*, February 7, 2022. <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2022-02-07/how-much-of-president-donald-trumps-border-wall-was-built>
- Hernandez, Kelly Lyttle. "Not Imprisonment in a Legal Sense." *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965*. The University of North California Press, 2017, pp. 64-91. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469631196\\_hernandez](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469631196_hernandez).
- Hernández, Kelly Lytle. *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 1st ed., University of California Press, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnfhs.6>.
- Hirota, Hidetaka. "The Moment of Transition: State Officials, the Federal Government, and the Formation of American Immigration Policy." *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (2013): 1092–1108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44307505>.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*, University of California Press, 1994. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppnvq.4>.

- Human Rights Watch. "Q&A: Trump Administration's "Remain in Mexico" Program," January 29, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/29/qa-trump-administrations-remain-mexico-program>
- Immigration History. "Immigration Act of 1990," <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/immigration-act-of-1990/>
- Jenkins, J. Craig. "Push/Pull in Recent Mexican Migration to the U.S." *The International Migration Review* 11, no. 2 (1977): 178–89. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2545157>.
- Jewell, R. Todd, and David J. Molina. "Mexican Migration to the U.S.: A Comparison of Income and Network Effects." *Eastern Economic Journal* 35, no. 2 (2009): 144–59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20642475>.
- Jonas, Susanne. "Reflections on the Great Immigration Battle of 2006 and the Future of the Americas." *Social Justice* 33, no. 1 (103) (2006): 6–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768348>.
- Katz, Michael B., Mark J. Stern, and Jamie J. Fader. "The Mexican Immigration Debate: The View from History." *Social Science History* 31, no. 2 (2007): 157–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40267936>.
- Kline, Nolan. "Constructing the Undeserving Citizen: The Embodied Consequences of Immigration Enforcement in the US South." In *Embodying Borders: A Migrant's Right to Health, Universal Rights and Local Policies*, edited by Laura Ferrero, Chiara Quagliariello, and Ana Cristina Vargas, 1st ed., 41: 60–79. Berghahn Books, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2tsxjts.5>.
- Leisy J. Abrego. 2014. *Sacrificing Families : Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=713523&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Martínez, Rubén. *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail*. Second Picadored. New York: Picador, 2013.
- Menjívar, Cecilia. "The Racialization of 'Illegality.'" *Daedalus* 150, no. 2 (2021): 91–105. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48691405>.
- Merolla, Jennifer, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Chris Haynes. "'Illegal,' 'Undocumented' or 'Unauthorized': Equivalency Frames, Issue Frames, and Public Opinion on Immigration." *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 789–807. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43279647>.
- Migration Policy Institute. "Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States." <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>
- Milkman, Ruth. "L.A.'s Past, America's Future?: The 2006 Immigrant Rights Protests and Their Antecedents." In *Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*, edited by Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad, 1st ed., 201–14. University of California Press, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnrp7.15>.
- Milkman, Ruth, and Veronica Terriquez. "'We Are the Ones Who Are Out in Front': Women's Leadership in the Immigrant Rights Movement." *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 723–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23720205>.
- Molina, Natalia. *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2006. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnkb5>.



- Molina, Natalia. *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2014.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt4cgfv5>.
- Molina, Natalia, HoSang, Daniel and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds. *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019.
- Montoya-Galvez, Camilo. “At least 853 migrants died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in past 12 months — a record high,” *CBS News*, October 28, 2022.  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/>
- Moreschi, Alejandra Aquino. “Cruzando la frontera: Experiencias desde los márgenes.” *Frontera Norte* Vol.24, No.47 (2012).  
[https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0187-73722012000100001](https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0187-73722012000100001)
- Morland, Sarah and Aida Pelaez-Fernandez. “Violence against women in Mexico rises to over 70%, study finds,” *Reuters*, August 31, 2022.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/violence-against-women-mexico-rises-over-70-study-finds-2022-08-31/>
- National Immigration Forum. “Explainer: Migrant Deaths at the Border,” September 12, 2022.  
<https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-migrant-deaths-at-the-border/>
- National Immigration Law Center. “DACA.” <https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca/>
- Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on Illegals and the Remaking of the U.S. - Mexico Boundary*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2010.
- Nicholls, Walter J., and Tara Fiorito. “Dreamers Unbound: Immigrant Youth Mobilizing.” *New Labor Forum* 24, no. 1 (2015): 86–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24718574>.
- Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton University Press, 2004. <https://www-jstor-org.ecl.idm.oclc.org/stable/j.ctt5hhr9r>.
- Noorani, Ali. “Race, Class, and the Emergence of an Immigrant Rights Movement.” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2007): 185–202.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45289391>.
- O’Leary, Anna Ochoa. “In the Footsteps of Spirits: Migrant Women’s Testimonios in a Time of Heightened Border Enforcement.” In *Human Rights along the U.S.–Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, edited by Kathleen Staudt, Tony Payan, and Z. Anthony Kruszewski, 85–104. University of Arizona Press, 2009.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2vt02s6.8>.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. “Racial Formation.” *Racial Formation in the United States*, Thirded. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, pp. 53-76.
- Plascencia, Luis F. B. “The ‘Undocumented’ Mexican Migrant Question: Re-Examining The Framing Of Law And Illegalization In The United States.” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 38, no. 2/3/4 (2009): 375–434. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40553655>.
- Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana. “El trabajo lo tengo en mis manos.”  
[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda1-es.aspx)
- Proyecto Sobre Migración Mexicana. “Familia dividida,”  
[https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life\\_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx](https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/expressions/life_histories/hdvda9-es.aspx)

- Reilly, Katie. "Here Are All the Times Donald Trump Insulted Mexico," *Time*, August 31, 2016. <https://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/>
- Rocco, Raymond. "Disposable Subjects: The Racial Normativity of Neoliberalism and Latino Immigrants." *Latino Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 99–117. doi:10.1057/lst.2015.51.
- Schmidt Camacho, Alicia R. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Nation of Newcomers. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Senate Appropriations Committee - Republicans. "Homeland Security, 2022," [https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY22%20BILL%20HIGHLIGHTS\\_DHS\\_final.pdf](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY22%20BILL%20HIGHLIGHTS_DHS_final.pdf)
- Sostaita, Barbara. "These 24 poems may help women survive the border crossing," *Feministing*, 2017. <https://feministing.com/2016/08/22/these-24-poems-may-help-women-survive-the-border-crossing/>
- Speed, Shannon. *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469653143\\_speed](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469653143_speed).
- Téllez, Michelle. "Doing Research at the Borderlands: Notes from a Chicana Feminist Ethnographer." *Chicana/Latina Studies* 4:2, Spring, 2005.
- The White House Archives. "Fact Sheet: The Secure Fence Act of 2006," October 26, 2006. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061026-1.html>
- The White House Archives. "President Donald J. Trump's Border Security Victory," February 15, 2019. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-border-security-victory/>
- United States Border Patrol. "Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year." <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-southwest-border-sector-deaths-fy1998-fy2018.pdf>
- Univision Noticias. "Inmigrante mexicana narra su primer intento en cruzar la frontera de manera ilegal," August 21, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWmcpZGm5m0>
- Univision Noticias. "Inmigrante mexicana tuvo que hacer favores sexuales para poder llegar a su destino tras cruzar la fr," August 20, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7pAPMR-4pk>
- US House of Representatives History, Art and Archives. "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965," <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Immigration-and-Nationality-Act-of-1965/>
- USA Today. "How many people die crossing the US-Mexico border?" October 25, 2022. <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-many-people-die-crossing-the-us-mexico-border/> <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-southwest-border-sector-deaths-fy1998-fy2018.pdf>
- Zong, Jie. "A Mosaic, Not a Monolith: A Profile of the U.S. Latino Population, 2000-2020." UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute, October 26, 2022. <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/latino-population-2000-2020/>