

Improvised Transnationalism: Clandestine Migration at the Border of Anthropology and International Relations

NOELLE K. BRIGDEN

Marquette University

To travel undetected by state authorities and criminal predators, Central Americans pass as Mexican during their journey to the United States. This ‘passing’ underscores the ambiguities of social roles, such as nationality. Over time, these performances partially reconstruct imagined communities, blurring the boundaries between foreigners and citizens. However, international-relations scholarship tends to overlook how uncoordinated everyday practice complicates borders in a globalized world. By tracing the co-constitutive relationship between migration policing, national performances, and transnational routes, this article reveals the makeshift nature of the identities that underscore distinctions between citizens and foreigners. I argue for the continued inclusion of ethnography as a method for exploring the dynamic relationship between territory, state, and nation. Migrants complicate borders, but also suffer the very real, material consequences of both state and nonstate violence. My analysis of clandestine transnationalism therefore chronicles challenges to, and reconfigurations of, sovereignty.

The eight-year old Salvadoran boy, David,¹ sauntered through the yard of the migrant shelter, showing off his capacity for Mexican language; he used an exaggerated “guy” (a Mexican colloquialism) at the beginning of each sentence and mimicked in the cadence of his speech the melodic stereotype of Mexican Spanish. Looking for attention from adults, he exclaimed, “I can speak like a Mexican!” David had been in Mexico for several months now, idling at the shelter while his family applied for asylum because they had suffered persecution by criminal gangs in El Salvador. While they still hoped to ultimately arrive in the United States, Mexican asylum would allow them to move through Mexico more safely and work for better wages along the way, blending in with the citizen population without fear of deportation. However, social camouflage, not legal status, would save them from notice by criminal predators along the route north. David’s performances in the shelter yard garnered

him chuckles and smiles from his intended audience.² Nevertheless, he also demonstrated a potentially important survival skill that he was acquiring through play: the capacity to pass as Mexican.

The wider the range of national identities through which someone can ‘pass,’ the safer a transnational journey becomes. Indeed, if David could have ‘passed’ as American by speaking unaccented English, the border crossing into the United States would have been easier. His mother had considered borrowing the documents of another child and having her son pretend to be asleep as he crossed the US checkpoint in a car with US citizens posing as his parents; but she worried that the border patrol might wake him (Ixtpec, 12/13/10). Despite some tutoring he received at the migrant shelter and his father’s fluency in the language, David’s English would not have withstood even cursory questioning. Instead, he would have had to risk the dangerous desert crossing when they reached the border.

I argue that by walking in the shoes of this playful boy, we learn a great deal about the tenuous relationship between territory and nationality. The narratives presented in this argument demonstrate how unauthorized migration requires the negotiation of interpersonal encounters through which nationality is collectively re-imagined by migrants, migration enforcement agents, humanitarian aid workers, kidnappers, smugglers, and other people living along the route. All actors in the migration drama covet information about national membership, as leverage for expedient deportation by authorities, identification for criminal predation, or a potential signal about worthiness for humanitarian relief. Central American migrants learn to conceal this information, imitating Mexican or American national traits to avoid deportation and criminal victimization. For example, they frequently impersonate Mexicans in order to pass undetected through the migration checkpoints and public spaces of the interior of Mexico. Meanwhile, Mexican citizens sometimes infiltrate the migration stream, playing a role in a variety of transnational practices.

International-relations scholarship typically overlooks the role of these practices and the migrants who brave dangerous long-distance odysseys. It therefore supplies an incomplete

Noelle Brigden is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Marquette University. She earned her Ph.D. (2013) and M.A. (2009) degrees in Government at Cornell University. She held a 2013–2014 Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

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¹All names are pseudonyms.

²The eruption of laughter may be a symptom of a destabilization of identity (Butler 1990, 138–139).

view of globalization, one that focuses almost exclusively on top-down and collective challenges to the nation-state. However, ethnographic methods reveal a more complex transnational social process; through an anthropological lens we can see how the practice of migration complicates the cultural 'tells' that the state requires to distinguish between migrants and citizens.³ In this way, my study responds to Ted Hopf's (2013, 318) call to examine how ordinary people, sometimes unwittingly, impede the hegemonic projects of nation-states, thereby "bringing the masses back into world politics." Even if they never reach their destination, people embark on journeys that catalyze personal, social, and political transformations along the route they wander.

Over time, the unchoreographed practice of clandestine mobility blurs the cultural boundaries that states use to enforce territory. The cumulative footfall of everyday folk undermines the policing utility of "virtual checkpoints": racial stereotypes and national tells (Migdal 2004, 4). If the state continues its attempt to impede flows using these virtual checkpoints, wielding violence blindly without reliable social profiles that coincide with its physical terrain, it does so at the expense of citizens and foreigners alike. The state risks targeting its own population in cases of mistaken identities, creating an underclass of "authorized but unrecognized" people (Sassen 2006, 296; see also Sadiq 2009, 74); the state thereby erodes its own legitimacy with people who legally belong within its territory.

While the state may impede individual journeys and enforce a territorial boundary, neither collective action nor novel technologies are necessary to *complicate* borders. To be clear, I do not argue that territorial borders or the state are disappearing. I argue that the interplay between migrants and the state creates unintended consequences that we can best understand at the analytical and methodological borders of International Relations and anthropology. Viewing globalization 'from below' allows us to trace how migrants and citizens adapt existing roles, protocols, and rituals for the purpose of their survival. In so doing, they unwittingly rewrite social scripts along migration routes. Indeed, even if Goliath defeats Central American David, even if the boy never sets foot in the United States, his roaming through Mexico contributes to a process of cultural exchange that changes national and racial profiles. A more humble, speculative position emerges from analytical engagement with everyday people, like David.⁴ International-relations scholarship benefits from this humility, because we explore politics that matter to the survival of marginalized actors on the world stage, and in doing, we arrive at a richer understanding of the uncertain future of the nation-state.

To develop this insight, I take the reader on an ethnographic journey, introducing the people, places, and practices that constitute transnational migration routes. I describe the route from Central America through Mexico as a transformative space, and I outline the fieldwork undertaken for this project, borrowing methods employed in the anthropology of flows and clandestine activity (e.g. Coutin 2005; Galemba 2012; Nordstrom 2007; van Schendel and Abraham 1995). Then, in the first act of the argument, I examine the national performances of migrants in greater detail, highlighting the improvised nature of identity. Scholars describe nationality alternately as a naturalized imagined

belonging or a state invention (Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm 1992). Along the route, however, national identity becomes a makeshift collection of markers that cannot be completely trusted. Ascribed traits and the performance of narratives, not necessarily deeply ingrained self-images, constitute national identity and provide cognitive clues to other actors in the drama.⁵ Criminals and police rely on national tells to distinguish between citizens and migrants. In the second act, I describe the counter-performances of citizens. Mexican citizens also perform other national identities. By describing this fluid process of identity switching, I show how state and non-state violence structure the route, over 1,800 km of terrain across the interior of Mexico from the southern border to its northern limit.

Of course, we must not forget the human tragedy that necessitates these performances, and we should refrain from celebrating them as purposive resistance to the state. As the third and final act of this argument will make clear, migrants also become unwilling props in the political theater of borders (Andreas 2000). While migration complicates nationality and territory, border policing has a painful impact on the lives of migrants and citizens alike. Indeed, an ethnographic focus on undirected mass movement, as opposed to purposeful organized resistance to the state, brings this reality into stark relief and adds nuance to triumphant accounts of transnationalism and globalization (Mahler 1998, 72). Therefore, I conclude with a melancholy reflection on the transnational homelessness that accompanies contemporary migration policing in the Americas.

Disciplinary Migrations: At the Border of Anthropology and Political Science

Since the 1970s, scholars of International Relations have heralded the impending reordering of the nation-state under conditions of complex interdependence and overlapping sovereignties (e.g. Keohane and Nye 1977; Ruggie 1993). The inexorable forces of cultural and economic globalization shake, but do not dislodge, both the territorial and ideational moorings of the state (Castells 1996; Sassen 2006). Transnational media complicates the relationship between territory and cultural identity (Appadurai 1996). In particular, state attempts to impede unauthorized transnational flows of people and contraband generate perverse results (Andreas 2000). When international relations theorists attempt to account for these complications, they often look to social networks and novel communications technologies as vectors for the diffusion and resilience of transnational practice (e.g. Kahler 2009; Keohane and Nye 1998). Indeed, a variety of organized actors, including diaspora activists (Adamson and Demetriou 2007), harness these resources to challenge state sovereignty. And while political scientists also use the lens of immigration and trafficking to explore the discursive construction of national identity and sovereignty, notably Doty (2006) and Berman (2003), they make fewer attempts to understand the embodied deconstruction of nationality through everyday practice (Müller 2008).

By emphasizing lived experience, anthropology points to how everyday material practice shapes place, identity, and common sense understandings of the world around us. The experience of the journey is clandestine transnationalism, called into existence by the very effort of the state to stop it.

³Migration authorities require national and racial profiles to enforce borders (Sadiq 2009, 175).

⁴Special thanks to an anonymous reviewer who urged me to embrace "more humble postures."

⁵My understanding of identity differs from Sadiq (2009, 184), who implies that an authentic ethnic identity provides a proxy for loyalty. In contrast, my approach does not speak to loyalties or the elusive boundary between good faith and bad faith performances.

As the anthropology of criminalization reveals, clandestine activities are never autonomous from the state, but instead constituted by their illegality (Heyman 1999; Schneider and Schneider 2008). Migrants often make multiple journeys, not *despite* the state but *because of* it, as they return from deportations or failed border crossings. Both state and non-state violence structure these practices, rendering trust and community ephemeral along the route. Thus, it should be no surprise that clandestine transnationalism is an accidental, not purposive, challenge to state sovereignty. By definition, this social field is a world of disguise and concealment from official view that remains “hidden yet known” at the level of practice (Coutin 2005). As such, it cannot be understood from a lone vantage point, and it can be fruitfully examined through immersive experience.⁶

Taking its cue from this anthropological literature, my argument follows an ethnographic journey. I took seriously George Marcus’s (1995) exhortation to “follow the people,” not just to the places that they are going, but also to the places they happen to go to along the way. Thus, the transnational route, from home to destination and back again, became the obvious research site. I completed more than two years of fieldwork, beginning in September 2009. I divided my time primarily between Salvadoran hometowns and the Mexican transit corridor. However, I made targeted follow-up visits with migrants in the US transit corridor and destinations.⁷ In total, I conducted two hundred eighty-one semi-structured and unstructured interviews with migrants at various stages of their journey, human-rights activists, community members, government officials, family members, clergy, and others.⁸ In addition to formal interviews, I listened to countless real-time tactical discussions among migrants. In Mexico, to facilitate access and gain inductive insights, I engaged in approximately five hundred hours of participant observation as a volunteer at a Catholic migrant shelter about mid-point along the route. Over fifty Catholic shelters provide the poorest migrants a place of respite during their journey north through Mexico. I visited twelve of these field sites across Mexico. I also accompanied unauthorized migrants on a sixteen-hour segment of their journey atop a freight train.

As a source of knowledge, this immersive experience can be judged successful to the extent that it enables us to identify political practices important to local people (Jourde 2009, 201). In this sense, a focus on the practice of transnational migration does not simply fill a gap in mainstream international relations scholarship; it is a disruption of the boundaries of politics, in itself a political act (Aradau and Huysmans 2013; Squire 2011). Furthermore, this ethnographic lens offers a nuanced vision of globalization ‘from below.’ It emphasizes unanticipated changes in the state-society relationship and highlights the contingencies of that process. Thus, my

analysis not only points to otherwise-overlooked political practices, but also challenges *both* optimistic and pessimistic predictions about the potential for territorial control in a globalized world.

First Act: The National Hustle

To survive, migrants must have an uncanny knack for the national hustle. Central Americans face detention and deportation when they encounter migration authorities in Mexico, but they must also evade bandits, street gangs, organized kidnappers who demand ransom from US-based family, and corrupt officials (Martínez 2010; Nazario 2005; Vogt 2013). Due to this precarity, migrants prefer to be (mis)recognized as a citizen during the journey.

Precarity also characterized the experience of the hundreds of thousands of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees who fled their homelands, crossing Mexico, in the 1980s and 1990s.⁹ Even in that early period of mass migration, the journey was dangerous, requiring Central Americans to exercise both courage and wit to evade authorities and violent criminals (Frelick 1991). In 1983, Mexico began to more vigorously police and deport the migrants within its territory; Mexican migration officials removed hundreds of thousands of Central Americans throughout the decade (Frelick 1991; García 2006, 56). In response, many migrants in the interior of the country ‘passed’ as Mexican (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, 98). By the end of that decade, approximately two hundred thousand Guatemalans and five hundred thousand Salvadorans had made a temporary home in Mexico, with permission or not (García 2006, 45). After the end of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan civil wars in the mid-1990s, an unrelenting stream of labor migrants followed in the footsteps of the refugees.¹⁰ Thus, Central Americans have performed Mexican nationality on a massive scale for three decades, and the national hustle is a common practice along migration corridors.

While this hustle is as old as nation-states, Central American migrants face new challenges in the contemporary context. Mexico launched a major migration enforcement effort in 2001, targeting the southern border and internal points of control along highways (Casillas 2007). In 2006, President Felipe Calderon’s strategy targeted criminal leadership, exacerbating violent strife within and between competing gangs. Indeed, the disruptions caused by this policy unleashed unprecedented criminal violence in Mexico, killing perhaps as many as 120,000 people during his six years in office (Molzahn, Ferreira, and Shirk 2013, 13). As a result, the rules, routines, and social networks that underlie undocumented migration underwent profound change. In this context, territory changes hands quickly and without warning among competing gangs, leaving migrants vulnerable to kidnappings and extortions by rival smugglers. Previously trustworthy human smugglers may defect from their clients, unexpectedly breaking contracts and selling their human cargo to another potentially unreliable carrier. The old codes of conduct for dealing with corrupt officials can no longer be relied upon; bribes are often no longer sufficient to avoid brutality.

⁶For recent discussion of the promise and pitfalls of ethnographic methodology in political science, see Aronoff and Kubik (2013), Brigg and Breiker (2008), Jackson and Nexon (2013), Schatz (2009), and Varsti (2008).

⁷I returned to Mexico for two weeks in December 2014/January 2015, and again in May 2015. During those research trips, I revisited former fieldwork sites at the border between Guatemala-Mexico, and along the migration route through Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. I also visited three additional sites in Chiapas, Tabasco, and Oaxaca during these targeted trips. I conducted this fieldwork to develop a sense of recent changes in migration practice.

⁸I wrote shorthand notes during interviews and whenever possible in the course of each day, and all quotes come from these notes. The vast majority of interviews were in Spanish, but I also conducted a handful of interviews in English, in some cases alternating between the two languages. In all cases, the preference of the participant determined the language.

⁹The regional history of population movements, particularly the seasonal migration of Guatemalans to Southern Mexico, dates at least to the 1960s, and a porous Guatemala-Mexico border had been tolerated until the refugee crisis of the 1980s and 90s (García 2006, 45; Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991).

¹⁰For descriptions of the journey during that time period, see Coutin (2007), Mahler (1995) and Menjivar (2000).

Despite this upheaval, each year hundreds of thousands of Central Americans continue to flee the social disorder, economic malaise and criminal violence of Central America (Archibald 2013; Tuckman 2013). While reliable data on unauthorized transit migration through Mexico is lacking, it is clear that over three decades, masses of dispossessed Central Americans have moved continuously across the Mexican landscape. As we will see, the individual acts that constitute this sustained passage reshape society.

I focus on the Mexican segment of the Central American journey to highlight the important point that even ‘unsuccessful’ migrants challenge the nation-state. For many migrants, there is no arrival in the United States; some Central Americans spend years wandering the transnational corridor, never settling anywhere and never setting foot in ‘el Norte.’ Even when borders triumph and these migrants cannot gain entry to the United States, they contribute to a social process that ultimately renders the effect of state power ambiguous. To draw our attention to the surprising social and political impact of *non-arrivals*, I do not discuss post-arrival conditions in the US. To be sure, however, the process of renegotiating national and racial identities continues on the US-side of the border (Heyman 2009).

Improvised Identity

Under the conditions of violent uncertainty that characterize the migration route, people improvise upon the cultural tells and social scripts associated with national identity. Stephen Greenblatt (2005, 165) defines improvisation as “the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one’s own scenario...the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established.” In this vein, the actors along the route must develop an opportunistic grasp of racial, class, and national identities. For this reason, we can say that identity is make-shift. Like all information under conditions of strategic uncertainty, identity loses some of its utility as an indicator of solidarity the moment it becomes common knowledge. In other words, as identity acquires a predictable status in social relations, it simultaneously becomes a system for passing and loses some of its predictive value for people on the ground. Migrants, police, and criminal predators adapt. A focus on the everyday processes of identification, misidentification, and misdirection that accompany illusory national categories is fruitful for understanding the difficulties of territorial control (Brubaker 2004, 11). The long, dangerous journey through Mexico illustrates this point.

A trustworthy smuggler or experienced friend can be a cultural guide, but such cues are incomplete, because migrants must expect an interactive and unpredictable audience. Thus, performances cannot be fully scripted in advance. Not everyone has the dramatic talent, confidence, and attention to detail to play the part; migrants may miss the signals about how to travel or fail to improvise upon them, repeating stale performances rather than slightly revising them to avoid detection. Lacking the benefit of a Mexican childhood, Central American migrants may practice the correct accent, memorize local facts, or prepare the appropriate disguise (Menjívar 2000, 72). Nonetheless, social encounters with strangers in transit cannot be fully planned or anticipated in advance. Since no one knows exactly whom they might encounter or under what circumstances along the way, these interactions must be staged and realized in the same moment

(Goffman 1959, 73–4). For this reason, the knowledge of how to perform arises only through an active engagement with the audience rather than a strict pre-scripted routine; it is the culmination of experience, skill, talent, and a dash of inspiration.

During these performances, the national tells that ‘out’ migrants include language, ignorance of common knowledge shared by co-nationals, and physical appearance. Accents, grammatical constructions, and colloquialisms give migrants away. Any conversation can expose a foreigner, leaving them vulnerable to deportation or extortion. One man complained that he needed only open his mouth to order a bus ticket and, “they will say that I am ‘cachuco’ [an ethnic slur for a Central American in Mexico]... that I am a wetback, an imposter” (Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/4/11).

The content of conversation can also reveal national identity. National education systems inculcate a collective imaginary of the calendar (e.g. national holidays and work rhythms), symbols (e.g. recognizable flags, anthems, monuments, ethnic foods, and faces), and folklore (e.g. common historical narratives, events, and figures). Some given names, like Kevin, are more prevalent in Central America than Mexico. Tells include moments of hesitation that break the natural rhythm of a dialogue about places and people ‘known to be known’ by any Mexican.

Racial Scripts

Racial scripts intersect with nationality, producing constraints and opportunities for migrants, depending on the color of their skin. For example, I asked a US immigration agent to explain how he knew that a person was engaged in illegal activity at a port of entry, and he began to describe a sense or a gut feeling that agents develop with experience on line duty (El Salvador, 2/9/10):

But people develop a sense. It’s like at the border. The agents can see a car coming from half a mile away. Maybe the mannerisms are just not right. It’s just that something doesn’t feel right. The agents have a difficult time articulating the probable cause. They just know who to stop.

At this point in the interview, I stopped him to venture a naïve guess about the feeling he was describing, “We might call it tacit knowledge?” But he laughed at my idea, “In law enforcement, we call it profiling.” Indeed, both US and Mexican authorities use racial profiles to identify migrants (De Leon 2012, 477–95; Gilroy 1991; Heyman 2009; Sadiq 2009).

In Mexico, some of this reliance on racial markers can be attributed to the fact that many citizens do not carry documents in their own country. However, more complete documentation of citizens cannot solve these dilemmas for the state. Fake documentation provides a helpful prop in migrant performances, but does not alleviate the need to be a convincing Mexican. A poor performance of nationality will invite scrutiny, and failed attempts at passing with fake documents carry prison time (e.g. returned migrant, El Salvador, 6/2/10).

In Mexico, a country where the ‘mestizo’ of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage represents the dominant racial ideology, profiling renders black migrants most vulnerable to identification. Of course, since it standardizes practice in a dynamic strategic setting, racial profiling may also create opportunities for smuggling. Smugglers

sometimes blend high-paying Peruvian clients into travel groups with indigenous Guatemalans, because of their similar phenotype (smuggler, El Salvador, 7/5/10). The Peruvians pass as Guatemalan, and if they are captured, they only need to travel to Central America rather than returning to South America. This minimizes financial risks for the smugglers transporting them. Therefore, racial stereotypes can be harnessed, not only by state authorities, but by migrants and smugglers as well.

Like state authorities, criminals identify potential victims for kidnapping, rape, robbery, and extortion by trying to detect the accent, migrant clothing, and phenotype of Central Americans. In part because of racial profiling, Hondurans, and in particular black Hondurans, are most likely to rely on the dangerous train route where mass kidnappings and muggings occur with frequency, thereby avoiding buses that travel through migration checkpoints.¹¹ The proportion of migrants reporting Honduran nationality on the registration rolls of the shelters has been the highest of any national group since Hurricane Mitch in 1998, often by a very large margin (Ruíz 2001). One rumor circulating among migrants suggests that organized criminal groups particularly seek out Salvadorans, who are known to be better connected to established families in the United States and thus fetch higher ransoms, than the poverty stricken Hondurans, who throng the migrant shelters and crowd the most desperate routes to the US.¹² Whatever the preference of kidnappers might be, any identifiable Central American nationality invites legal, illegal, and extralegal violence en route.

Class and Urban/Rural Scripts

Class and urban/rural differences also shape performances of nationality. The most visible Central American migrants wear a unisex costume, shaped by the physical demands of the cheapest way to the United States: denim pants, dark and dirty clothing, sneakers, baseball caps, and backpacks (De Leon 2012). The style is comfortable for travel on the freight trains and treks through remote wilderness. However, in small transit towns, the style also makes migrants visible. For this reason, many migrants purchase local name brands and fashions at their earliest opportunity if they leave the train route behind (Vogt 2012). The adoption of Mexican or US dress and dialect facilitates survival when passing through densely populated portions of the route, such as the bus lines and urban areas. Migrants may also choose to travel without any identifying papers or possessions that might tie them to their homeland. The capacity to pass undetected through migration checkpoints along the highway saves migrants from the treacherous footpaths around them, where

bandits frequently lie in wait. As explained by a transgendered Guatemalan migrant, a former circus performer, keenly aware of the power of self-presentation:

My advice, from my point of view, I have seen some people... it seems to me that if you go well dressed, man or woman, whatever... if you are a woman if you go very well put together: skirt, heels, very pretty in bus... they [Mexican migration authorities or police] will not take you off the bus. Avoid the train. They realize that one is undocumented if you go dirty, if you smell bad, if you come dressed in dark clothes, if you carry your backpack and tennis shoes particularly... if you come comfortable, more like those here [in the shelter]... (Ixtepec, 3/2/11).

Indeed, this advice seems prudent if a migrant has the gumption and familiarity with Mexican national customs. People travel in this way, passing through the citizen population. Sometimes Central Americans work and beg their way through Mexico on a meandering path over the course of weeks, months, or even years.

Anonymity and Relationships in a Transient Social Field: Resources for Performances

The prolonged nature of some of these journeys highlights how sustained relationships and guarded anonymity become double-edged resources for national performances. Because of the double-edged nature of social relationships and anonymity, continued immersion in a transient social field both empowers and endangers migrants. One Salvadoran man, Roberto, interviewed at a midway point along the route, equated his strategy for *knowing* the route with the social relationships he formed during the journey:

Here [in the migrant shelter] you cannot confide in anyone. You must be prudent. I will stay in the D.F. [Mexico City] for four months or so, and build relationships... I do not *know* the route. It is necessary to meet and communicate with people (Ixtepec, 2/3/11).

In the relative safety of a diverse and anonymous urban environment, where transience is not necessarily associated with unauthorized migration, Roberto will adopt a strategy of selective social engagement. He compared the challenge to the way he navigated violence while working as a truck driver in his home country, transporting shipments of seafood along a dangerous route from the coast in La Unión to the capital of San Salvador. While moving across the country with valuable cargo, the driver must recognize that “there are places you go around because you don’t know the people. You cannot enter there (Ixtepec, 2/3/11).” In those instances, anonymity complicates mobility. On the other hand, he thought unauthorized crossing of international borders was, in an important sense, easier and safer than trespassing the interior boundaries set by competing street gangs in his neighborhood, because at home he could be easily identified with a community. In the context of Salvadoran gang rivalry, crossing these interior boundaries would render him suspect in the eyes of the gang controlling his neighborhood, as well as the competing gangs in surrounding

¹¹However, a smuggler attributed the increased vulnerability of Hondurans to their relative lack of resources to pay high-end service providers, like himself, not their race (El Salvador, 7/5/09).

¹²Furthermore, shelter workers describe migrants from far-flung countries, such as Cuba, as “like gold” for kidnappers, who assume that such long-distance journeys require more resources (Ixtepec, 5/31/10). Migrants repeat these rumors among themselves. Selvin, whose interview is recounted later, claimed that he had personally witnessed Mexican immigration authorities giving apprehended Indian and Brazilian migrants to kidnappers, who receive much larger ransoms for them than for Central Americans (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). His account, while believable, constitutes nothing more than rumor, because I could not verify the veracity of his claims. Shelter workers and humanitarian activists have documented similar corruption (Saltillo, 7/17/11). True or not, these rumors are nonetheless important, because they alter migrants’ perceptions of the dangers and thereby incentivize complex passing performances.

neighborhoods. Sometimes knowing people and being known complicates mobility. Thus, learning new strategies works through an alternation of partial concealment and partial social engagement, both of which require artful performances as the migrant negotiates encounters with potential allies and enemies in a transient social field.

As migrants meander along the route for a long period of time or make repeated attempts to cross the border, anonymity erodes. Social networks, based on trust and reciprocity, may begin to emerge from their repeated performances along the route. The longer a person spends on the road, the more likely they fall victim to multiple violent events (Hagan 2008). Thus, cultural and social capital does not accumulate a clear advantage, because the lack of anonymity and transgression of social boundaries produce vulnerability to violence.

These wanderers begin to bridge Mexican communities and the transit flow. Their role as potential 'enganchadores' (connectors) is both dangerous and helpful to other migrants. They might provide access to reputable smugglers or other useful information about opportunities and danger en route. However, using their contacts along the route, wanderers might also sell migrants to kidnappers or collaborate with thieves. This potential duality renders any advice they give to other migrants suspect. According to some migrants, the fact of simply knowing people along the route casts suspicion on a travel companion. When asked how to identify a 'ratero,' a spy for the kidnapping gangs, a Honduran migrant explained (Itepec, 3/4/11):

They carry a cell phone. If they have a cell phone on this journey, they are bad people. Suspicious. What would a migrant need a phone for? Who in Mexico would they call? How would they pay for one? Migrants do not carry phones. Who would they call?¹³

Second Act: Playing the Migrant

Mexican and Central American 'rateros,' and a surprising variety of other people along the route, assume or maintain the cultural markers associated with Central American migrants. These counter-performances illustrate two important points. First, intentional counter-passing as a method of infiltration transforms the cultural markers associated with vulnerability into an asset for criminal predators. Second, unintentional counter-performances emerge in the wake of sustained transnational transience, and they also complicate the policing of territory. Taken together, these two points highlight the tremendous social ambiguity that emerges along the route.

Why would it serve to camouflage oneself as a member of the most vulnerable national groups along the route? Rateros befriend other migrants to find out who among them might be the most profitable targets for extortion, watching who receives remittances during their journey and gathering contact information about migrants' families in the United States. These spies sometimes steer their

travel group into ambush, by guiding them to remote locations and then reporting their whereabouts to criminal accomplices. The shelters, train yards, hotels, and bars frequented by Central American migrants are full of these 'orejás' (ears), some of whom were themselves migrants coercively recruited through kidnapping and threats into the ranks of criminal groups.

Gangs with cliques along the train route, whether they are small franchises of organized Mexican crime groups or Central American street gangs, are often multinational bands of Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and sometimes Nicaraguans. Predators blend into the flow of humanity moving north and gather information and material resources along the route, learning about migrants by acting as one. A Honduran man repeated a common warning about 'rateros' (Itepec, 3/4/11):

They assault and kidnap. They come as a migrant and they spy on who carries money, who buys food. They hug like a friend, and they stick you with the knife. [He gestured the stabbing motion to illustrate.] You cannot confide in anyone, except the priest [in charge of the Catholic migrant shelter].

Improvisation on the role of the migrant, a leveraging of the material and symbolic resources available only to people in transit along the route, can be an unpremeditated survival strategy. This survival strategy sometimes takes migrants themselves into the business of spying for kidnappers, other trickery (including but not limited to theft), or other profit making from their travel companions (ranging from selling drugs to provisioning coyote services).

Class and Rural/Urban Scripts

Expressions of humility and other rural class-markers, such as simple dress appropriate for outdoor labor, homemade items, simple speech, and expressions of religion, serve as a proxy for a lack of worldliness and unfamiliarity with social networks that could include transnational gangs. These markers also signal a shared goal and normative orientation to the journey, indicating a lack of exposure to worldly vices. These preferences for 'humble' travel companions are not without basis; there are innumerable performances of class-based solidarity, even across national boundaries. Many stories of poor Mexicans sharing their modest wealth with Central Americans and unexpected (even lifesaving) moments of hospitality circulate along the route. Finally, a 'humble' appearance might also make migrants a less appealing catch for kidnappers, who gain the most from the extortion of those migrants with established family in the United States, capable of sending financial remittances. In an attempt to safeguard themselves, some migrants emphasized class-based tells to differentiate between humble campesinos and potential threats:

It's very easy [to know who to trust]. By their humility. If someone is very tattooed with eyes that [unfinished sentence coupled with a shifting of the eyes]. . . . One does not believe them. Look for simple, respectful people in whom you can see the desire to arrive (Guatemalan migrant, Itepec, 3/4/11).

¹³During follow-up research along the route in December 2014 – January 2015, and May 2015, it became clear that due to the diffusion of communication technology in the region, this cultural tell has expired. I observed many migrants travelling with cell phones, and the shelter in Itepec now offers some Wi-Fi service. Cultural tells come and go. Nevertheless, the suspicion cast on well-connected, 'known' travelers remains.

The tattoos and hip-hop styles popular with urban youth are read as stigmata associated with Central American street gangs, particularly when the individual fits the racial and class stereotype of gang membership. These gangs are best understood as a collection of transnational practice, rather than tightly organized criminal networks (Papacristos 2005). Cultural markers associated with these practices have been criminalized in Central America under *Mano Dura* (Strong Hand) anti-gang legislation. Such cultural markers indicate exposure to a wider world and sometimes signal access to financial resources that enable the purchase of luxury goods. Urbanized and transnational fashions are an outward expression of the ways that migration has complicated traditional Latin American class relations. These cultural transgressions provoke (often unwarranted) fear and unwanted attention from police authorities across the Americas (Zilberg 2011, 196–99).

Central Americans ‘dress-up’ in order to perform conventional Mexican class roles, passing through checkpoints along the route without the appearance of desperate poverty often associated with migrants.¹⁴ Conversely, unscrupulous people ‘dress-down’ to perform a rural class role to infiltrate the route. As soon as the association of class tells with trustworthiness becomes common knowledge, it becomes a resource to be improvised upon, mitigating somewhat its power to predict loyalties or nationality. Furthermore, both naïve Mexican authorities (many of them drawn from the ranks of campesinos themselves) and Central American migrants frequently misread contemporary fashions, which can fluctuate wildly.¹⁵ Therefore, inflexible rules about whom to trust or distrust and *how* to perform class can produce disastrous mistakes.

Racial Scripts

In contrast to the self-conscious manipulations of identity described above, some counter-passing is accidental and carries negative consequences for citizens. It is not unheard of for Mexican citizens to be wrongfully deported by Mexican migration authorities. I met a Mexican man of black Honduran heritage who, after receiving a savage beating that shattered his jawbone and a wrongful deportation, had been forced to return to his Mexican homeland alongside Central American migrants and seek legal assistance at a migrant shelter to prove his nationality (Iztepec, 11/4/10). He had been travelling to visit family in San Luis Potosí when migration authorities intercepted him. Life along the migratory route as the Mexican citizen child or grandchild of a Central American can be an insecure existence, relative to other Mexicans. Abuse and harassment of citizens are the perils of racial profiling along a long-standing migration route.

Of course, abuse and harassment of citizens along the route is not wholly limited by race. Humanitarian workers and Mexican friends of migrants sometimes fall victim to accusations of smuggling by authorities, even though non-profit assistance to unauthorized migrants has been legal in Mexico since 2008. More generally, among citizens, a sense of being suspect in the eyes of the state accompanies

their interaction with migrants in transit (e.g. humanitarian activist, Iztepec, 12/14/10).

Anonymity and Relationships in a Transient Social Field: Resources for Performances

To enhance security, the migrant shelters generally attempt to segregate Central American migrants, Mexican migrants, and non-migrant homeless people. Many shelters discriminate in reverse, turning away down-and-out Mexicans. They often limit migrants’ movement in and out of their compounds, accepting and releasing sojourners only during regulated hours and even locking people in their rooms at night. The shelters generally limit migrants to stays of three-day duration, and may limit the number of permitted visits.¹⁶ And they turn known people away if they cannot believably explain their repeated visitation. Shelter staff also watch for the cultural tells associated with gang membership (e.g. observation, Iztepec, 10/20/10). During a registration process, the shelter staff looks for familiar faces, and recognition might lead to exclusion as a suspected smuggler (e.g. observation, Iztepec, 11/6/10). Most shelters maintain a database with photographs that identify suspicious persons, as well as aid in the identification of missing persons and dead bodies recovered along the route. To gain access to migrant shelters, where many customers await opportunities to travel, ‘enganchadores’ (connectors) must pretend to be migrants, earnestly moving north.

Thus, decreasing anonymity and the concurrent maturation of social relationships with locals is a mixed blessing for migrants who spend a great deal of time along the route. On the one hand, friendships and potential business partnerships generate resources for migrants. On the other hand, decreasing anonymity marks them as ineligible for many of the humanitarian resources dedicated to migrants in the route, because those that aimlessly wander the route are no longer perceived to belong to a deserving class of people who are attempting to better their lives. Furthermore, decreasing anonymity undermines their capacity to hide among the nameless and generates suspicion. As a consequence, their recognition enhances their vulnerability to violent retribution from rival gangs and accusations of smuggling that can result in severe legal penalties in the United States and Mexico.

The fact that smugglers, Mexican homeless persons, and spies for kidnappers impersonate Central American migrants is an open secret. The possibility that predators might ‘pass’ as vulnerable migrants underscores the ambiguity of identity and the fluidity of relationships en route. People may slip from role to role depending on the performance, and anonymity facilitates such transformations. Social roles are not mutually exclusive, and people improvise upon them under dangerous conditions: changing from smuggler to kidnapper, from migrant to smuggler or from kidnapper to migrant. People in transit may have multiple or fluid motives for ‘being’ a migrant. They may be moving north, but they may also be profiting from other activities along the way. The potential for hidden agendas sows distrust among migrants and heightens

¹⁴Jason De Leon (2012, 487) describes how an attempt by migrants to dress-up inadvertently led to their identification by Mexican authorities. As soon as the means for passing are exposed, in this case recently purchased clothing, they lose their utility to migrants; social camouflage only works if the predator is unaware of its possibility.

¹⁵Elana Zilberg (2011, 198) explains the fallibility of “fashion police” with a compelling anecdote.

¹⁶Exceptions to the rules may be made under extenuating circumstances, such as for migrants awaiting asylum claims, denouncing human rights abuses they suffered en route, or volunteering a needed craft or skill at the shelter. Exceptions may also be made for women and children, which may put them in a privileged position to serve as ‘connectors’ along the route, producing advantages from the wide acknowledgement of their hyper-vulnerability to violence.

uncertainty along the route (e.g. Honduran migrant, Itepec, 12/3/10).

An Undocumented Mexican in Mexico and His Honduran Guide

Importantly, the fluidity of social roles along the route also impacts Mexicans living within their own country. This ambiguity produces anxiety for citizens who must fear false accusations of smuggling or kidnapping. As sustained migration disrupts and reorganizes the cultural markers of nationality, citizens come to inhabit positions of vulnerability alongside migrants. A story from a migrant shelter in Coatzacoalcos provides an example of a Mexican citizen's experience of suspicion living along the route (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). It also forcefully demonstrates how migrants and citizens come to occupy the same cultural markers, creating unintended consequences when state authorities attempt to control unauthorized migration:

The shelter in Coatzacoalcos was particularly dilapidated. Morale among the shelter volunteers was low, and one of the staff decried that the very migrants they served were criminals (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). He accused them of selling drugs, assaulting their comrades, and smuggling from within the walls of the shelter. Fearing that someone would be killed at night, they limited their service to a short respite during daylight hours, and they evicted the migrants after a single meal. Indeed, a man with a gold-plated pistol, tucked into his pants but conspicuously displayed, lounged in the afternoon sun within the courtyard. There was no pretense by this man of playing the part of a migrant; the gold plated pistol is a potentially deadly prop for the performance of the *narco* (i.e. a member of a Mexican drug cartel). The staff had resigned themselves to the lawlessness that pervaded the 'refuge.'

In this context, I met a migrant who freely admitted that he was not really a Central American. Marcos seemed older and more humble than his Central American travel companions. At first, he spoke timidly with a halting cadence that caused me to initially (and very incorrectly) doubt his intelligence, but over the course of the interview, he surprised me with his increasingly confident body language and well-spoken analysis of his situation.

Marcos was from Hermosillo in the state of Sonora, Mexico. I asked when he left home, and he shook his head (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11):

I don't have a home, and I never did. There was never a house. I was an orphan. I live in the streets. Washed cars [as they pass, stopped at lights for pesos]. I did not even have grandparents. I always lived in the streets. . . .

As he continued, it became clear that Marcos had, in fact, once had a father and mother. But they began new families that did not seem to have a place for him. His stepfather became abusive, and beat him with cables. As a boy, he would hide from his stepfather. He could not love his mother because she never protected him from this abuse, and he reasoned that the vast majority of street people share this background of domestic violence and neglect. Marcos thought that his grandmother might still be in a retirement home in Tucson, but it was too late to find her now. He sometimes lamented the loss of his family, longing for the opportunities that he saw other people enjoy. He knew that somewhere out there he had cousins, aunts, and uncles that he had never met. But for all purposes, he was alone.

With a new appreciation of the depth of his homelessness, I rephrased my question; I asked when he left the city of Hermosillo. Marcos replied, satisfied with my new question, "about a month ago," and he explained his motive for riding the trains along the route. He kept moving, because (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11):

There is much discrimination here in Mexico, when one does not have a job. They don't respect you. They take your money, even your own police. The authorities take your money when you sleep in the street.

Later in the conversation, he returned to this issue (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11):

Sometimes the Mexican authorities search your backpack and take your money, even if you don't have drugs or alcohol. When people see beggars, they call the police. But begging is not illegal.

Central Americans and transient Mexicans share a vulnerability to harassment and abuse by Mexican authorities, and in response, his travel group pooled their resources. Marcos trusted his mixed band of Central Americans and Mexicans, even though he had only known his present companions for three or four days and they would go their separate ways soon (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11):

When one goes in the street, when there is a multitude in the street, they unite to protect each other . . . Mexicans help everyone. We beg together, eat together, share cigarettes, everything, like brothers.

While he felt at ease with his temporary band of brothers, Marcos described the discrimination that he suffered in the shelter system, on the basis of his Mexican nationality (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11):

In many shelters, they discriminate against you, in some no. When I ask for money in the street, they [people in general] don't value me. I see how they look at me. I have had good jobs. . . . I arrived in a shelter in Tierra Blanca with much hunger, but it was purely for Hondurans and Guatemalans. They are not for Mexicans. They said I could not go there. I can travel without papers in all Mexico, but I also have necessity. I have never liked a shelter.

He had not yet mastered passing as a Central American migrant, but neither could he access his Mexican birthright. Marcos complained that many potential employers asked him for papers. Unfortunately, he had lost his identification card and had no idea how to replace it: "Now I am undocumented (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11)." I asked him what this meant for his relationship to the Mexican authorities (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11):

Sometimes the authorities accuse me of being a pollero [human smuggler]. In Guanajuato, we were a group, smoking cigarettes and migra

[migration agents] arrived. They have a psychological capacity to tell who is Central American and Mexican . . . They thought I was the pollero. One wants to help his friends, but it's dangerous. If I help, they think I am a pollero. I've lived with people from Chile, the United States, everywhere.

It was clear to me, at least, that Marcos, albeit an undocumented Mexican man, was not the smuggler in the group. Marcos's younger, tattooed Honduran companion Selvin made the decisions, signaling when it was time to go and indicating the direction. I interviewed this companion, and he seemed to be a more experienced traveler along the route than the native Mexican (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). Selvin immediately impressed me with an intimate knowledge of its places, grinning broadly as he shared what he supposed were the sorts of criminal secrets that would help a fledgling writer (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11): "That's good for your book, no?"

But I was more interested in his personal story. Selvin had grown up alone along the tracks in Mexico, leaving a broken home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras at the age of 11 (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). On that first journey, his best friend had been thrown from the train. After many adventures and four years of living in Mexico, Selvin arrived in the United States, where he managed to stay for three years before being deported. He did not fear a second deportation from the United States to Honduras, because it would be an excuse for an interesting plane ride and then simply a new beginning of his travels. And if they put him in prison for illegal reentry, so much the better; at least he would eat well. But it was unclear whether Selvin would ever again arrive at Mexico's northern border. He claimed to be on his way north, but he was clearly leading a roving life through Mexico, probably involved in occasional smuggling or some other gray activity. Marcos confirmed that he and Selvin would probably head south together for reasons that remained mysterious.

As they lose their claims to the status of legitimate migrants and legitimate citizens, these wanderers enter a liminal position within route. They are neither migrants nor citizens. As their faces become recognizable, rival smugglers and gangs may target them as potential competitors or enemies (e.g. Ixtepec, 12/1/10). Authorities may target them as smugglers. They make both friends and enemies by lingering on the route. Mexican families sometimes de facto adopt these Central American men as sons, and Central American migrants may de facto adopt their Mexican comrades as brothers (e.g. Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/5/11). They may fall in love (e.g. Honduran migrant, Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). They may become fathers of Mexican citizens along the way (e.g. Guatemalan migrant, Ixtepec, 4/15/10). They may become gang members or connect to smuggling networks. In the process, they bring news of distant events along the route with them. Thus, they embody both information and danger for others.

As Marcos's story of being undocumented in the country of his birth suggests, these improvisations on nationality diffuse along the route, merging national habits and obscuring cultural and racial boundaries while illuminating the arbitrariness of territorial boundaries. As Linda Schlossberg (2001, 1–2) explains:

Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing

becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation If passing wreaks havoc with accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility, it also blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender, and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct, and deconstruct one another. . . . The passing subject's ability to transcend or abandon his or her "authentic" identity calls into question the very notion of authenticity itself. Passing, it seems, threatens to call attention to the performative and contingent nature of all seemingly "natural" or "obvious" identities.

The national hustle and the ambiguities that accompany it have profound implications for the human security of migrants and citizens alike. For example, these ambiguities complicate the work of state authorities that rely on national stereotypes to carry out their official duties. Undocumented citizens may feel suspect in their own country.

Third Act: An Autopsy of Performance

Migrants and citizens transcend national categories and complicate territorial control, but the state has its revenge. People suffer and sometimes die during unauthorized migration. As Rocío Magaña (2011) explains, nation-states use migrants' deaths as a stage to project their authority. She argues that the Mexican state's management of death converts its failure to protect lives into a perverse expression of its agency. In other words, the efficient management of this bureaucratic process demonstrates state capacity (Magaña 2011). The state 'performs' its sovereignty in the behind-the-scenes negotiation of which bodies belong to what country, as well as in the front stage act of returning them to their proper burial place. The theatrical and political value of these acts has not been lost on government officials, who honor the dead. For example, following the massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas, flag-draped coffins of migrants returned to El Salvador in an official ceremony (Brigden and Vogt 2015).

For this reason, we must remember that unauthorized migration is never a fully autonomous activity, and the micro-politics of migrant death illustrate how people also become unwilling props in a macabre theatre of the state. This became clear to me as I stared, transfixed by the digital photograph of the dead man displayed on the computer in the office of the migrant shelter (Ixtepec, 11/4/10). I saw a young man with a tattoo around his neck and the initials ES tattooed in Old English across his chest. His face was swollen purple with dried blood filling his mouth, and he had a large open wound over his eye. His legs twisted oddly. He had been thrown from a train two days prior. On his body, they found the artifacts of a transnational life: an identification card, recording a birth in Usulután, El Salvador in 1988, alongside a Six Flags 2010 season "Play Pass" issued in California less than seven months before his demise. Tattoos branded him as a gang member, but something was wrong with the official documents. One of the migrants in the shelter, peering over the shoulder of the office manager at the photos, claimed to have seen the boy in the photo on the identification cards alive and well on the tracks.

The body had now become a prop in other people's performances. His death sent a message: to fear the gangs and to obey their rules. And now his corpse played a part in a farcical death of another mysterious young man known along the route only by a nickname, not the words inscribed on his identification cards. But the dead man, who lay there on the side of the train tracks, played these parts unknowingly.

Later that day, two men arrived, one of them wearing a black vest with the yellow letters AEI (the initials of a Mexican law enforcement agency that investigates homicides) scrolled across the back. Whispers erupted among the migrants as they watched the office door close behind the police, and the speculative drama unfolding around the body hit a crescendo. Rumors circulated. At one point, someone claimed to know that the dead man was, in fact, Panamanian. But this theory was quickly dismissed; Panamanians do not usually run with the street kids that live along the tracks in Southern Mexico.¹⁷ The Mexican police had to identify the body to repatriate it through the appropriate consulate, and they asked the shelter for help. The shelter manager questioned the migrants known to have friends in the gangs, which included most anybody who spent significant time living in the shelter. Several of the dead man's friends could identify the victim only by his nickname and reputation, not his family names.

Ultimately, a tattoo of a Salvadoran flag on his arm helped to lead to his burial in El Salvador, rather than an anonymous grave in Mexico (Itepec 11/5/10). Together, shelter staff, migrants, Mexican police, and Salvadoran consular officials came to a consensus about the national identity of the body, each performing a crucial role in its identification (Itepec 11/6/10). They redefined their relationships with one another, in this instance collaborating to know the transnational route and the dangers that lurk along it. In accepting a conclusion, they renegotiated and reconfirmed the symbols and material that delineate nationality.

This process continues in Mexico on a larger scale as forensic teams investigate mass graves of people presumed to be migrants, attempting to identify the proper consulates to carry home the bodies. In August 2010, Mexican authorities discovered a mass grave of more than seventy-two migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, and Ecuador, but the nationality of at least twelve of those migrants could not be identified. That highly publicized massacre marked only the first discovery of a mass grave of migrants; more mass exhumations and repatriations of foreign nationals have followed (Reineke 2013). The bodies are props in the opening scene of an unfolding drama between competing drug gangs and smugglers, and the discovery of mass graves becomes the set for the next act in which national governments claim those bodies as citizens. The Mexican government must identify each body with a nationality for shipment to country of citizenship.

Indeed, the process of returning the dead mirrors, however imperfectly, the process of identifying and deporting living migrants (Felix 2011; Magaña 2011). To do so, forensic anthropologists search for the informal cultural tells that can help identify nationality, ranging from tattoos to the prayer cards of local saints to national currency (Reineke 2013). They improvise upon the objects

intended for other purposes, things that are carried as an expression of faith, serve as personal mementos, or facilitate economic exchange; they must transform these artifacts into evidence supporting a performance of national sovereignty: repatriation. Such objects become contested sites that redefine the state, citizens, and even what it means to be human (Squire 2014; Sundberg 2008).

A desire to provide closure to the families of the dead motivates anthropologists and human rights advocates, but in the process, they must learn to read nationality when it has been unintentionally obscured by transnational lifestyles or intentionally disguised to mislead police (Reineke 2013). Human rights advocates must convince families to collaborate with government bureaucrats and scientists to assign nationality and receive an institutional response. As they establish the nationality of the deceased, the participants in this drama establish new cooperative roles for actors along the route. In other words, human rights activists and migrant families must briefly overcome the contentious scripts that usually attend their relationship with the state. The state attempts to reassert its sovereignty, claiming the authority and capacity to categorize the dead, but it must collaborate with social actors to do so (Felix 2011). Even when migrants fail in their quest to arrive safely in the United States, their drama changes the theater of the state; the state becomes tasked with repatriating the dead rather than protecting the living (Magaña 2011).

This final act reinforces the point that the nation-state and its boundaries have a lingering impact on the world. As people leverage national, racial, and class stereotypes to move across territory, transnational migration flows demonstrate tremendous resilience. However, the resilience of this practice comes with a terrible human cost, illustrated in this example by the mass graves that mar the landscape of Mexico. Thus, migration may challenge sovereignty, but with results we cannot yet fully formulate.

Conclusion

In the migrant shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, a way station where many Central Americans started the train route north, I sat next to a middle-aged man with a faded tattoo above his eyebrow (Arriaga, 12/2/10). He said that 'el norte' was blowing hard, and with that way of talking about the wind, I knew immediately that he was Salvadoran. He was in Los Angeles for a while. But, he explained, he is now a man without welcome into any society. It does not matter where he goes. He is always unwanted. He cannot go back to El Salvador, and he cannot go to Los Angeles. Why? I asked, even though I already knew the answer. He thought for moment about how to respond. He took his baseball cap off and licked his chapped lips; "You see, I got involved in things that were not good. I knew they were sins, but I got involved anyway. Drugs, and . . ." his voice trailed off.

This man no longer feels that people identify him as belonging to a Salvadoran, Mexican, or American community. His odyssey is not taking him home, nor will it transport him to a better life, but his presence and the presence of scores of other wanderers is transforming the route. They are a growing underclass of transnational homeless men. Their transience generates social ambiguity that complicates the fragile relationship between nationality, territory, and citizenship, revealing the makeshift nature of identity. Thus, they transform the route by

¹⁷In all my interviews, I only encountered one Panamanian (Arriaga, 12/2/10).

facilitating the cultural exchanges that blur social boundaries between migrants and citizens.

Importantly, the national hustle begins and ends with the nation-state. Mark Salter (2008) describes borders as a permanent state of exception, where individuals and the sovereign *perform* citizenship. State performances produce artificial boundaries, between both territories and peoples, and these boundaries unwittingly generate the borderlands: social spaces inhabited by novel forms of cultural hybridity and contestation (Anzaldúa 2007, 25). The policing of transnational flows in the interior of states extends and deepens the clandestine contestation that normally occurs at these frontiers. Policing extends clandestine contestation by moving 'passing' practices away from the geographic periphery of the state and into its heartland. It deepens the contestation by incorporating more citizens into a clandestine social field. As the state attempts to impede the movement of people and deport unwanted foreigners, a permanent social transience comes to characterize the stage where migrants, citizens, and state officials encounter one another. Passing along the migrant route blurs the defining traits of nations and renders citizenship boundaries difficult to enforce. By revealing this clandestine practice, ethnography provides a glimpse into how everyday people change, though not necessarily diminish, the territorial and symbolic sovereignty of the nation-state.

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