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"Is it worth risking your life?": Ethnography, risk and death on the U.S.–Mexico border

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ABSTRACT

Every year, several hundred people die attempting to cross the border from Mexico into the United States, most often from dehydration and heat stroke though snake bites and violent assaults are also common. This article utilizes participant observation fieldwork in the borderlands of the US and Mexico to explore the experience of structural vulnerability and bodily health risk along the desert trek into the US. Between 2003 and 2005, the ethnographer recorded interviews and conversations with undocumented immigrants crossing the border, border patrol agents, border activists, borderland residents, and armed civilian vigilantes. In addition, he took part in a border crossing beginning in the Mexican state of Oaxaca and ending in a border patrol jail in Arizona after he and his undocumented Mexican research subjects were apprehended trekking through the borderlands. Field notes and interview transcriptions provide thick ethnographic detail demonstrating the ways in which social, ethnic, and citizenship differences as well as border policies force certain categories of people to put their bodies, health, and lives at risk in order for them and their families to survive. Yet, metaphors of individual choice deflect responsibility from global economic policy and US border policy, subtly blaming migrants for the danger – and sometimes death – they experience. The article concludes with policy changes to make US–Mexico labor migration less deadly.

Introduction

Transnational migration is changing quantitatively and qualitatively. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that there are 214 million transnational migrants worldwide, almost 50% more than a decade prior (Migration News, 2011b). The IOM indicates that almost all countries in the world today are both sending and receiving migrants and that financial remittances from migrants are rising, in some countries making up the largest economic input (Migration News, 2010).

In the United States, immigration continues to be an important topic of debate. The U.S. has an estimated 10.8 million unauthorized foreigners according to the Current Population Survey (Migration News, 2011a), 6.1 million of whom are from Mexico according to the Pew Hispanic Center (Migration News, 2012b). In 2011, 328,000 people were apprehended by the border patrol just inside the US–Mexico border (Migration News, 2012a).

The US–Mexico border has been called the "most violent border in the world between two countries not at war with one another" (McGuire & Georges, 2003, p. 192). During the second year of my field research on immigration and health, over 500 people died in the Tucson sector of the border alone (Humane Borders, 2012; see also GAO, 2006) and the county medical examiner had to rent a refrigerated semi truck to store the backlog of migrant bodies to be processed (*Arizona Replublic* 2005). Many people died of heat stroke and dehydration, some from automobile accidents or direct violence. Migrants face numerous mortal dangers in the US–Mexico borderlands. There are Mexican and American assailants and kidnappers after their money; heat, sun, snakes and cacti after their bodies; armed American vigilantes after their freedom; and Border Patrol agents after their records.

Many scholars have concluded that US border policy is directly responsible for an increase in border deaths. Specifically, social scientists have analyzed the deadly effects of the US border policy begun in the mid-1990s known as "prevention through deterrence" – intentionally re-directing migrants to more dangerous, remote areas, including the area referred to by the US Customs and Border Patrol as the "corridor of death" (quoted in Doty, 2011, p. 608). Cornelius calls this "a strategy of immigration control that deliberately places people in harm's way" and shows the resultant increase in deaths (2001, p. 681, see also Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernandez, & Bailey, 1999). He quotes Doris Meissner, former INS Commissioner, stating that this policy would attempt to close urban areas in San Diego and El Paso and "geography would do the rest" (2005, p. 779). Johnson concludes that this border policy "was deliberately formulated to maximize the physical risks for Mexican migrant workers, thereby ensuring that hundreds of them would die" (2007, p. 112). Even the US Government Accountability Office

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indicates that "border-crossing deaths have doubled since 1995" and signals a link to geographical changes in crossing routes, though falls short of linking this to upstream policy (2006, p. 1).

My Triqui (an indigenous group from the mountains of the Mexican state of Oaxaca) migrant research subjects and companions often explain their lives in terms of *sufrimiento* (suffering) in relation to their living conditions, working conditions, sicknesses, and interactions with doctors and nurses (Holmes, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2011, 2012). But one of the sites of *sufrimiento* most frequently described by Triqui migrants is the border crossing from Mexico into the US. One Triqui woman explained to me that she was kidnapped for ransom with her four year-old boy. They escaped with one other hostage through a window from the house where they were held captive for several days in Phoenix, Arizona. One young man described multiple chemical burns on his skin and in his lungs after being pushed and closed inside a tank on a train by his *coyote* (border crossing guide). Another man recounted being raped by a border patrol agent in exchange for his freedom. Because of the distressing numbers of deaths, their increase related to US border policy, the polarized political debates regarding immigration and the border, and the important health implications of the associated danger and trauma (see McGuire & Georges, 2003; Villarejo, 2003; see also Coker, 2004; Grønseth, 2010; McKay, MacIntyre, & Ellaway, 2003 related to the health effects of immigration in other contexts), the US–Mexico border deserves our close and focused attention.

This paper will utilize the methodology of ethnography – with its unique strengths in investigating lived experience as a long-term eye-witness, reflexively analyzing social positionality and social difference, and paying attention to linkages between micro level lived experience and macro level political economic structures – in order to analyze the experiences of suffering, fear, danger, and vulnerability in the US–Mexico borderlands. The paper makes two related but distinct arguments; the first regarding the political economic structures producing experiences of danger in the US–Mexico borderlands, and the second concerning the possibility of ethnography bringing to light such often overlooked connections while potentiating changes in public perception and policy. First, the paper argues that danger and death along the border are not, as commonly portrayed in popular and public health media, results of individual decisions rationally weighing so-called "push" and "pull" factors. Previous social science research (see Burawoy, 1976; Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007; Massey, Durand & Malone, 2002; Massey & Pren, 2012; Massey, 1987; Portes & Bach, 1985; Wood, 1982) has indicated multiple ways in which politics, economics, and social networks –increasingly recognized in public health as social determinants of health – produce the risks and dangers inherent to unauthorized migration for certain structurally vulnerable groups (see Quesada, Hart, & Bourgois, 2011). The current article thickly describes the experiences of fear, risk and danger on the border and indicates that these phenomena are not experienced by migrants as chosen, but rather as imposed by larger forces outside themselves. Simultaneously, the paper demonstrates the unique lenses ethnography gives us into structural vulnerability on the border through its reflexive analysis of social positions and its attention to connections between lived experience on the ground and social, historical, political, and economic structures more broadly. I suggest that the thick description of ethnography provides complex and powerful narratives of the everyday lives of real people that have the potential to influence public opinion and policy.

Methods: participant observation on the border

Between 2003 and 2005, I spent approximately 18 months engaged in full-time ethnographic fieldwork migrating back and forth between the village of San Miguel in the mountains of Oaxaca and the Western United States with indigenous Triqui Mexicans. This group was chosen for an ethnographic study of the impacts of migration, the border, and social structures on health because their migration to the United States was still in the relatively early process of development and because their social position as indigenous Mexicans experiencing discrimination from multiple fronts held the potential to shed unique light on the question of how social hierarchies relate to health. This fieldwork was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California and included picking berries, living in labor camps, planting and harvesting corn, and trekking across the border desert from Mexico to the US. Since that time, I have continued fieldwork with my Triqui companions in shorter visits to Washington State, Oregon, California, Arizona, and the mountains of Oaxaca.

Early in my fieldwork, I decided that an ethnography of social structures, health, and migration would be incomplete without participant observation of such an important site of suffering for Latin American migrants. I had read several powerful accounts of border crossings (see especially Bustamante, 1971; Conover, 1987). However, there have been very few first-hand accounts since the significant militarization of the border post-9/11 and most of these are rather limited. For example, the Pulitzer Prize winning "Enrique's Journey" in the L.A. Times in 2003 involved powerful photographs and stories from a train ride through Mexico to the border, but the photographer and his team did not observe the actual crossing of the border. Most of the ethnographic, journalistic, and documentary studies of the border since 9/11 similarly explore the conditions on one or both sides of the border but do not witness or participate in the immediate crossing itself.

I communicated with lawyers in the U.S. about the possibility of my crossing the border. They warned me about death by dehydration and sunstroke, kidnapping and robbery, rattlesnake poisoning, and the possibility of being misunderstood to be a *coyote* and charged with the felony of "aiding and abetting". While contemplating the dangers and risks, I asked my Triqui companions what they thought of the possibility of my crossing the border. They warned me of robbers, armed vigilantes, rattlesnakes, and heat. At the same time, they reminded me that the border crossing is a principal site of *sufrimiento* that I should understand and write about and they began introducing me to people who might let me cross with them. While the participant observation of the border crossing offered unique experiential, bodily and contextual data and possibilities for theorization, since experiencing the danger of the borderlands first-hand, I am not sure I would make the same decision to attempt a crossing and definitely would not encourage future students of immigration to take on such risks.

Before, during, and immediately after the border crossing in which I participated, I wrote hundreds of pages of field notes involving observations, conversations, and my own embodied experiences. In addition, I took photos and tape-recorded conversations and interviews. The field notes in this article were taken during this in-depth, extended case study of a border crossing beginning with preparations in the mountains of Oaxaca and culminating in the borderlands of Arizona. The field notes are analyzed in the context of the 18 months of full-time migratory participant observation in Mexico and the US with extended indigenous Triqui families. This paper analyzes direct ethnographic field notes instead of synthesized summary statements in order to understand not only the health, bodily, and phenomenological implications of the border crossing but also the potential of ethnography to bring to light hidden realities and influence publics and policies in relation to health and immigration. The field note excerpts have been redacted due to space constraints while attempting to maintain the authentic narrative as I typed and tape-recorded during and immediately after the events in order to present clearly the immersion eyewitness narrative aspect of ethnography.

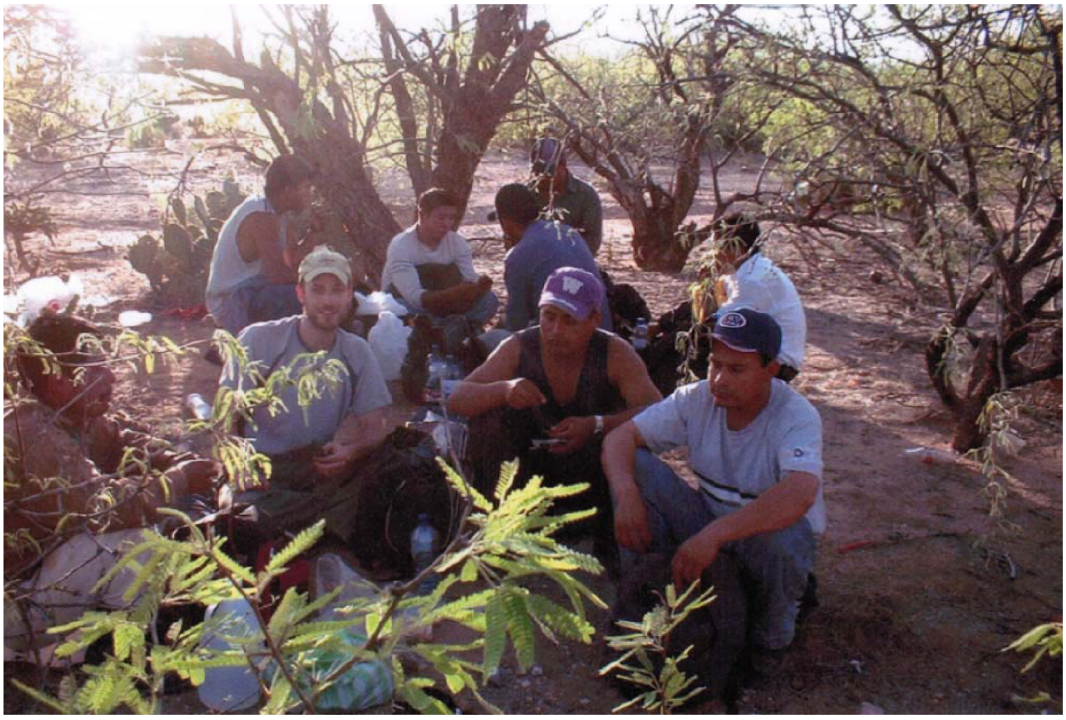
Results: ethnography

The Triqui village of San Miguel, Oaxaca

San Miguel is one of the largest Triqui villages with approximately 3000 inhabitants. During most of the year, however, one quarter to one half of the inhabitants are in the US working. The village has a small central square with a basketball court, Catholic church, town hall, concrete school house and small under-funded and under-staffed federal clinic. Once a week, there is a market set up on the basketball court including fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, eggs, and clothing. There are a few small stores in town run out of people's homes with basic supplies such as soap, toilet paper, salt, and soda.

San Miguel is located at almost 9000 feet elevation in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. This region of the mountains is dry, with large agave cactuses and small pine trees surrounded by arid soil. The climate includes cool fog and clouds in the evening and hot, direct sun during the day. Most of the houses consist of one large room made of wooden planks with no insulation and dirt floors. Some houses have been built or are being built out of concrete, sometimes with more than one room per house. Most people cook over an open fire in a small dirt-floor cooking hut next to their homes. The walls of these huts are black, covered with soot. Very few of the houses, including those of the families of a few people who have been migrating to the US for many years, have gas stoves in their concrete houses. There is no running water in the village and the nearest river is a significant hike downhill. This is the river where children play, women wash clothing, and entire families fill water buckets daily to carry home for drinking, watering plants, cooking, and bathing. Firewood is cut in the nearby forest. If a family has oxen, goats or sheep, they are taken each day, usually by the children or elderly family members, to a far away pasture to eat and drink. In these pastures, women and children gather greens to eat, making up a staple of their diet. The men of the village, along with some women, plant several varieties and colors of beans and corn, which are later harvested, dried, and saved for cooking throughout the rest of the year.

However, over the past 10–15 years, villagers have watched genetically-engineered, corporately-grown yellow corn from the US become more common and cheaper in the local markets. In the past, Triqui villagers explained that they would grow enough corn and beans and gather enough greens for their family's diet and sell any extra corn, beans, and greens in the village market or in the nearby towns of Tlaxiaco and Juxtlahuaca. They used the money from these sales to buy the required uniforms for their children's schooling, as well as salt, fruit, eggs, and meat to supplement their diet. As the cheaper yellow corn from the US first entered and later dominated the markets by underselling the locally grown diverse varieties of corn, these families have felt compelled to send at least one person away to find work elsewhere. This was never described as a choice, but rather as something they felt forced to do.



Villagers explained to me that in the 1980s and 1990s, men migrated seasonally to and from various places in Mexico, especially Baja California, to work in agriculture. In the 1990s, Triqui men began migrating in small numbers to Washington State for the berry-picking season in the summer and returned to San Miguel in the winter to attend the town's patron saint festival and help their families with the corn harvest. Much of this shift can be explained by neoliberal economic policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) described further below (see Massey et al., 2002; Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007; Stephen, 2007). Since 9/11 and the increasing militarization of the border with Operation Gatekeeper and other programs whose explicit goal of "prevention through deterrence" pushes migrants to cross in increasingly dangerous areas, most Triqui migrants have taken to staying in the US several years at a time before returning (see Cornelius, 2001; Massey et al., 2002). It has become simply too dangerous and costly (with significant increases in *coyote* fees) to cross the border

each year (see Cornelius, 2001). Everyone in San Miguel knows someone who has died in the deserts of Arizona and someone who was kidnapped or robbed along the way. While most Triqui migrants make between $4000 and $7000 a year in the US, each crossing costs between $1500 and $2500 for rides, food, and a *coyote*. Some of the village's men migrate to the US alone and some families migrate together, depending on the ages of children, the make-up of the family, and the risk and difficulty of the border-crossing route. Most have a specific financial goal such as saving enough to build a house or to pay a bridewealth to get married. Some of the migrants in their late teens and early 20s still attempt to return each year for the patron saint festival in early November and stay through Christmas. Because of this, the population of San Miguel is largest in November and December and then shrinks slowly as winter turns to spring and people take buses north to the border to attempt another crossing.

In March, 2004, I was invited to cross the border with a group of nine young men from San Miguel and one from a neighboring Triqui village. Two of the men were in their late teens, hoping to enter the US for the first time. One of these young men was the nephew of the *coyote* we planned to meet at the border for the final leg of the journey. The other men were in their mid- to late- twenties and were returning to California. These men left their families in various agricultural areas of Central California to return home to San Miguel, share money with their relatives, help with the corn harvest, and attend the village's patron saint festival. Many scholars have described and theorized such communities as transnational circuits of people, material, and information (e.g. Rouse, 2002; Stephen, 2007).

One of the men who returned for the patron saint festival, Macario, had been my neighbor in the labor camp in Washington State the previous summer. He was a 29 year old father of three, with a reputation for being one of the fastest strawberry pickers. Macario's two youngest children, born in the U.S., stayed in Madera, California, with his wife. His two older children lived in San Miguel with his parents to attend elementary school until they were old enough to cross the border themselves. Over the few weeks prior to our departure from San Miguel to the border, Macario introduced me to Joaquin, his good friend who planned to return to his wife and baby boy in a berry growing region along the coast of Central California, close to Watsonville. Answering my question about why people were going to the US to work, Macario reflected the common experience described to me in San Miguel, "there is no option left for us."

Every Saturday in March and April, a bus full of border crossing hopefuls – primarily men – leaves Tlaxiaco, the closest town to San Miguel. Each of these busses includes one or two groups of close to ten people from San Miguel. When our group left San Miguel to start the journey north, almost all the Triqui people I knew from Washington and California had already returned to the States. Most people – including all the women and children – attempt to cross before the desert gets too hot in late April and May. Due to the lack of job opportunities in San Miguel, especially since the passing of NAFTA, every household in the Triqui town of San Miguel has at least one person working in the US and sending back remittances (see also Stephen, 2007). Our trip was saturated with fear and risk and it was under rather ideal circumstances: trekking with all healthy, young, fast hikers. In addition, my Triqui friends are fortunate to cross with *coyotes* from their hometowns, people they know, sometimes extended family members. Those who arrive at the border – for example, from Central America – and search for a guide in one of the border towns cannot know if they will find a *coyote* or a con-person.

Traveling to the border, ethnographic field note excerpt, April 2004

It is now early April and our group is leaving San Miguel, each of us wearing dark-colored, long-sleeved clothes with a small, dark-colored backpack with one change of clothes, a plastic bag with coyote fur and pine sap made by a Triqui healer for protection, called a "suerte" ["luck"], *along with many totopos* [smoked, hand-made tortillas] *and dried beans to eat. I was instructed by Macario to bring these things. Each of us carries between $1500 and $2500 to pay for the bus ride to the border, food at the border, rides on either side of the border, and the coyote.*

After buying our bus tickets in the nearby town of Tlaxiaco, we walk through the market, buying food to share with each other on the bus. Macario buys a slingshot to use against rattlesnakes in the desert and asks if I want to carry one, but I've never used a slingshot. When we return to the bus, the nuns from San Miguel are waiting to wish us well as we board. The younger nun explains to me that every weekend they pray for the border-crossers because of the mortal risks involved.

Two times a day, the bus stops for food at a roadside restaurant. The conversation during these meals often revolves around past experiences of violence and suffering on the border. Everyone appears to be on edge, nervous about what might lie ahead. People talk about whether or not we will be caught by the border patrol and whether or not we will die trying to cross. The bus drives throughout the night and we try to sleep as much as possible since we know we will need all our energy for the upcoming desert trek. The bus is reminiscent of one that may have been owned by Greyhound decades prior, the seats reclining only two or three inches. It is cramped, full of people and small backpacks as well as fear and anxiety.

The Mexican side of the border

Altar, the desert town where the bus stops in northern Mexico, is small with several hundred residents and approximately two thousand others preparing to cross the border. Outside of town, at an abandoned gas station, the bus driver makes us all quickly jump off and walk into town because, "Altar está caliente" [Altar is hot]. *Macario says to no one in particular, "De por si, Altar es caliente"* [That's how it is, Altar is hot]. *This brings nervous chuckles from those within earshot. "Caliente," in this context means both "hot" and "dangerous".*

Laughing quietly, perhaps to cover up our anxiety, we enter the scorching sun, curse the bus driver for dropping us off so far away, and follow one of the young men in our group. He is the nephew of the coyote we plan to meet in town. My skin is already peeling from the dry, hot wind in the bus. Now, I begin sweating profusely.

This town scares me. It's impossible to know which person dressed in dark clothing is an assailant wanting money from easy targets and which is a person hoping to cross the border. Macario tells me to guard my money well. He remarks, "people know how to take your money without you even noticing." I push an empty soda bottle in my pocket above my money and feel a bit safer. There are people, mostly men, from all over Mexico and Latin America, some appear to be chilangos from Mexico City and most look like campesinos from rural Mexico. The only shops in town are small money-changers, a Western Union, a few restaurants, grocery stores with aisles full of water bottles and Gatorade, and open-air markets full of dark-colored clothing and small backpacks. I try to figure out when to mail the anthropology textbooks I carry in my backpack to my address in the US so I won't have to carry them on the trek.

The cathedral at the center of town has hand-drawn posters along the inside walls facing the pews depicting the many dangers in crossing the border: rattlesnakes, scorpions, desert insects, several species of cacti, dehydration, heat, and assailants. Each poster asks in bold, red letters in Spanish, "Is it worth risking your life?" There is a small side room where people light candles and pray for safe passage. Macario and I plan to do this, but run out of time.

Everything in this town is so clearly and obviously set-up for border-crossers. I wonder to myself why the whole operation hasn't been shut down by the U.S. border patrol if their primary goal is to stop unauthorized entry.

From border town to border

The man leading our group takes us down a residential street several blocks and through a doorway into a one-room apartment with no furniture. This is where we will stay until our coyote arrives. The damp concrete floor is covered in several places by swaths of old, grimy carpet. The bathroom has no water service and reeks of old garbage and urine. The shower behind the apartment consists of a hose connected to an iron rod above a mud floor, with wet sheets for minimal privacy. The shower is shared by several apartments with back doors to the same yard.

As we sit in the muggy apartment, every couple hours someone walks in unannounced and questions us or asks for money. We did not rest well. After our forty nine hour bus ride and this night of intrusions, I am fatigued and wonder if this desert trek is doomed before we even begin walking.

The next day, we walk through town, some in our group call relatives asking them to wire money because they do not have enough, and we all buy gallons of water and bottles of Gatorade. Our coyote directs us to buy mayonnaise to put our money in such that it is hidden if we are attacked by rateros along the way. Apparently, we are not the only group doing this; the grocery store has several aisles of small mayonnaise jars.

In the afternoon, a man I don't know comes in suddenly and tells us to run out the back of the apartment for our ride. The driver is a tall, light-skinned Mexican man with a cowboy hat, clean jeans and a button-down shirt. The ten of us pile into the furthest back seat of a twelve-passenger van already holding thirteen people, for a total of twenty-three adult passengers. Joaquin finds a teen tabloid magazine behind the seat, reads it aloud, and laughs, lightening the mood some.

We drive fast, without air conditioning or vents, for approximately three hours along dirt roads through the desert sun. During this time, we pass at least two buses, ten other vans, and a handful of cars and pickups headed back toward town. The driver tells us it is caliente today and that he is nervous about getting caught.

Suddenly, the driver swerves off the road into the cacti and drives even more quickly through soft sand. He stops at a small outpost of a few houses made of bricks, cardboard, and tin piled together without mortar. Outside, there are several light-skinned mestizo men with cowboy hats and large pistols talking in the sun, squatting on concrete blocks and overturned buckets. I feel like I am entering the Mad Max movie with Tina Turner and crazy motorcycle cage fighting: an outpost of lawless rebel gangs with large guns and makeshift shelter. Some of the men turn and watch as I get out of the van. I clearly stand out. I move into the shade, hoping to hide from the sun and their watching eyes.

Our coyote leaves with the driver for a half hour without explaining to us what is happening. We stand together silently, waiting, thinking. Again, I worry about the identity and intentions of everyone we meet. Which of the men outside is trustworthy? Which is an armed ratero ready to steal our money, knowing that we each carry a large sum of cash? Could this whole situation be a set-up?

Without explanation, our coyote motions for us to pile into the back of an old pickup truck with two other men. The floor has several holes large enough for us to see the desert below. We ride standing up looking alternately ahead and through the floor below for over an hour. Every once in a while we seem to be followed by another car. The pick-up seems to take several unnecessary detours only to return to the main road.

A few minutes after we drop off the two other men at a smaller outpost, a camo-colored Hum-V of the Mexican Grupo Beta [the Mexican Army organization whose mission it is to stop border violence] *stops and asks us — especially me — questions. Luckily for me, one of the Grupo Beta soldiers is from Oaxaca and knows that I answer all the geographical questions about where I was in Oaxaca correctly. My friends from San Miguel support my story as well. The soldier looks at my passport and seems satisfied, "To my countrymen, good luck; to my friend from our sister country, God bless".*

Crossing

The pickup drops us off in the middle of the desert. We thank the driver and walk over to the tall cacti to hide in their partial shade. Our coyote sneaks ahead for several minutes, then comes back and tells us there is a lot of border patrol activity and we need to wait here. We sit in a circle and a few people pull out their food; we all share their totopos and dried beans. It feels good to share food with each other. It feels like family, solidarity, almost like a communion ritual before a dangerous trial of biblical proportions. Two people in our group have diarrhea and ask me for anti-diarrheal pills I have in my bag. One sprained his ankle the week before on a hill by his house and asks for ibuprofen. Each time we hear the sound of an automobile, we know it could be assailants, border patrol agents, or other migrants planning to cross. We sit silently on edge. Macario pulls garlic cloves out of his bag and rubs one on his boots. He instructs me to do the same to keep away the rattlesnakes. After an hour of nerve-wracking waiting, we put on our backpacks and follow the coyote in a single-file line further into the desert, toward the north. I can see another single-file line of Mexican border crossing hopefuls walking in the distance as the sun begins to set. Deep in my pocket, I hold my suerte tight.

The coyote tells us to duck down and wait. He walks ahead, then motions down low with one arm and we all run as fast as we can to and through — mostly under — a tall barbed-wire fence. We run across a sand road and through another barbed wire fence and keep running until we cannot breathe anymore. Now we walk quickly. It is around 6:30pm and the sun just finished setting. We do this at least ten more times through, under, and over tall wood and barbed-wire fences. Though I am a runner and backpacking guide in the summers, we move faster than I have ever moved without taking breaks. My mouth gets dry and I drink through a gallon of water every few hours. I carry five gallons of water and several bottles of Gatorade and pedialyte.

We continue walking and running, occasionally ducking under or climbing over fences. We pull cactus spines out of our shins from cacti we did not see in the dark. We walk without talking, just breathing loudly and thinking. I think of the mountains to our right and how the desert might be beautiful under different circumstances. I hear a dog bark and think of the towns to our left and how the people living there are likely asleep and comfortable. Macario tells me we are in Arizona now. I see no difference.

After hiking several more hours, we stop in a dried-up creek bed. I am thankful there are no hidden cactus spines when I sit down. Again, we sit in a circle, three people pull out food and we all share. We rub garlic on our shoes again and a few of us ready sling-shots in our hands. The moon is almost full and the desert is eerily quiet.

After hiking and running another hour, we hear a helicopter. I try to hide under tall cacti. Joaquin tells me not to look at the chopper because it can see my eyes. I remember that Triqui hunters in the mountains of Oaxaca use flashlights at dusk to find the eyes of rabbits in order to shoot them. I feel like a rabbit, vulnerable and hunted. Macario hides under a cactus that has a snake rattling at him, but he does not move for fear of being seen. The helicopter flies off into the distance until we barely hear it.

After two more hours of hiking, we stop in another dry creek. One of the younger men enlists help pulling large cactus spines from one of his legs. We sit in a circle sharing food. Two people share cooked grasshoppers from the open-air market in Tlaxiaco. The tastes link us to loved ones and Oaxaca.

After we have hiked through blisters for many miles and I have shared all my ibuprofen with the others, we rest in another large, dry creek bed under the cover of several trees. We fall asleep, using torn open plastic trash bags as blankets. Our coyote leaves to talk with his contact on a nearby Native American Reservation about giving us a ride past the second border checkpoint to Phoenix. He returns, anxious, telling us his contact no longer gives rides due to increased border

patrol activity. We discuss pooling our money and buying a car to drive ourselves or looking for someone else to drive us. Two of the men try to convince me to drive them into Phoenix, past the internal Border Patrol checkpoints. I tell them that would be a felony and would mean I could go to prison and lose the ability to work. They seemed satisfied by my response, respecting the need to work. After we decide to look for another ride, our coyote sneaks off to look for a different driver. We wait for a few hours, rest quietly, drink Gatorade and brush our teeth in the creek bed.

Suddenly, our coyote runs back speaking quickly in Triqui. Two border patrol agents – one black and one white – appear running through the trees, jump down into our creek bed, and point guns at us.

Discussion

"Is it worth risking your life?": reframing risk on the border

In much mainstream public health research, the focus remains on individual risk behaviors and choices. This can be seen in the focus on the "decisional balance" (see Bandura, 1997) in much of public health, in which the individual is understood to choose to take on risk based on various perceived pros, cons, barriers, and abilities. In the area of immigration specifically, much of the literature still frames the individual as deciding to emigrate and cross the border based on an assumed economic weighing of "push" and "pull" factors. This view assumes a rationally acting individual, maximizing their self-interest and having control over their destiny through choice. Missing in these analyses is a serious focus on the social determinants of health, the structural forces constraining choice and producing suffering or health.

Even the classic scholarly critiques of this model of immigration retain a subtle focus on choice. Wood, who criticizes this micro-economic individual behavior model of immigration, simply replaces the individual with the "household" as the decision-making unit (1982). Portes and Bach critique prevailing theories focused only on "push factors" by describing the importance of labor recruitment and other "pull" factors (1985). In 1987, Massey add social networks to the list of "pull" factors weighed by potential immigrants as they decide "whether to begin migrating, whether to continue migrating, whether to settle in the United States, and whether to return to Mexico" (p. 319). In 2002, Massey et al. analyze the conditions under which people are "willing" to migrate to work (p. 17). More recently, Massey and Pren betray this underlying assumption when they argue that children should be granted amnesty because "it was not their decision to be undocumented" (2012, p. 26). This statement implies that adult immigrants made the "decision to be undocumented".

In addition, many mainstream migration studies assume a dichotomy between voluntary, economic, migrant on the one side and forced, political, refugee on the other. The logic behind this dichotomy claims that refugees are afforded rights in the host country because they were forced to migrate for political reasons. Conversely, labor migrants are not allowed these rights because they are understood to have chosen voluntarily to migrate for economic reasons. This dichotomy parses out "deservingness" largely based on whether a person is understood to have crossed the border by choice or by force (see also Willen, 2012).

In the mainstream media – including statements by federal officials, migrant workers are often understood in a similar way. Migrants are seen as deserving their fates, including untimely deaths, because they are portrayed as choosing to cross the border of their own accord. Border Patrol officials "suggest that responsibility for assuming…risks lies with the migrants themselves" (Eschbach et al., 1999, p. 449). On a related note, the US Government Accounting Office concludes one study, stating that "many aliens…risked injury and death by trying to cross mountains, deserts, and rivers" (2001, p. 3). Here, migrants are made linguistically the subject of the verb, risk. Thus, it is migrants who put themselves at risk as opposed to being *put at risk* by policy makers and political economic structures, including the "prevention through deterrence" policy. Doty argues

that migrant border deaths are "deemed of little consequence", a manifestation of Agamben's "bare life" (2011, p. 599). She uses Foucault's concept of "biopower", arguing that migrants are excluded from what is understood to be "the population" such that they are conceived of as dispensable (Doty, 2011). She indicates that geography and the metaphor of "natural causes of death" serve to deflect responsibility from US border policy (Doty, 2011). However, I would add that the metaphor of choice individualizes responsibility, blaming migrants for their own deaths and obscuring the effects not only of US border policy but also of the neoliberal political economic policies and practices forcing people to cross national borders in the first place (see also Ho & Loucky, 2012).

The focus on individual choice can be seen also in the posters in the border town cathedral asking, "Is it worth risking your life?" At first blush, it seems clear that for the hundreds of thousands who cross the border from Mexico to work in the US, the answer to this question is a resounding "yes." However, taking this question at face value misses an important opportunity to question its framing. As many scholars (e.g. Butler, 2010; Chavez, 2008; Voss & Bloomraad, 2011) point out, frames powerfully shape our perceptions of a phenomenon. Like much of the media discourse about migrant deaths in the borderlands, the question, "is it worth risking your life?", frames the crossing of the border as an individual decision, a choice to take on mortal risk. In the US, this framing results in a relative lack of grief for those who die, an eschewal of responsibility by policy makers and voters, and a lack of action toward meaningful change.

However, my Triqui companions experience their labor migration as anything but voluntary. Rather, they told me repeatedly, as stated by Macario above, "there is no other option left for us." Further consideration of the reality of survival for Triqui migrants shows their economic and bodily vulnerability in San Miguel living without work, money, food or education. In this context, crossing the border is not a risk-producing choice, but rather a lack of choice, a determined process necessary to survive, in fact making life *less* risky.

This reality fits the framework of "structural vulnerability" (Quesada et al., 2011), proposed as an alternative to the individualization of risk. Quesada et al. define structural vulnerability as a positionality, explaining that "the vulnerability of an individual is produced by his or her location in a hierarchical social order and its diverse networks of power relationships" (Quesada et al., 2011, p. 341). This framework extends from the concept of structural violence (see Bourgois, 2001; Farmer, 2004; Scheper-Hughes, 1990, 1992; see Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997 on social suffering more generally), however focusing on the bodily, material and phenomenological state produced instead of the phenomenon or mechanism through which it is produced. Structural vulnerability inheres a critique of an acontextual focus on individual choice because it "requires an analysis of the forces that constrain decision-making, frame choices, and limit life options" (Quesada et al., 2011, p. 342). In this way, structural vulnerability, along with the growing frameworks of social determinants and fundamental causes of health (e.g. Adler, Boyce, Chesney, Folkman, & Syme, 1993; Link & Phelan, 1995; Marmot, 1991), confront the subtle moral judgment inherent to the assumption that risk is primarily individually chosen.

In addition, the distinction between economic and political migration is often blurry in the context of international policies enforcing neoliberal free markets (not to mention active military repression of indigenous people who seek collective socioeconomic improvement in southern Mexico). As mentioned above, especially important in this context is US-initiated NAFTA banning economic barriers, including tarrifs, between signatory countries (Durand & Massey, 2003; Fernandez-Kelly & Massey, 2007; Stephen, 2007). Thus, the relatively poorer Mexican government was forced to erase tarrifs, including on corn, the primary crop produced by indigenous families in southern Mexico. However, NAFTA and other free trade policies do not ban government subsidies. Thus, the relatively wealthy U.S. government was allowed to increase corn subsidies, effectively enacting a reverse tariff against Mexican corn. During my fieldwork in San Miguel, I watched genetically-engineered, corporately-grown corn from the U.S. midwest underselling local, family-grown corn in the same town as each household sent at least one member to the US to work and send back remittances. In these ways, the vulnerability of a group of people is determined by political economic structures forcing them to cross a dangerous border even while that group of people is subtly blamed for choosing their risky transnational lives and deaths.

How can the immense physical risks and mortal dangers as well as the mental fears and traumas be worth the risk of crossing the border? Hidden behind this implied decisional equation are heartless economic markets and global and national politics. Due to neoliberal policies and economics at this point in history, staying in San Miguel means not having enough money for food and not being able to buy the school uniforms required to allow your children to attend public schools. Staying in San Miguel without sending a family member north involves a slow, communal death by the unequal market. The calculus involves slow, but certain death on one side of the equation and immense risks on the other. My Triqui companions experience this as "no other option" but to migrate transnationally, while the frame of individual choice in popular, political and public health treatments of immigration serves to deflect responsibility away from political economic structures and US border policy and subtly blame migrants for the danger and death they experience.

Ethnography of health toward social change

Ethnography offers advantages for the study of the health risk of structurally vulnerable populations and for bringing these topics to light for broad audiences. Importantly, ethnography allows for an in-depth analysis of lived experience through long-term participant observation. Reflexive ethnography allows for deep phenomenological analysis of the experience of the research subjects and of the ethnographer her/himself. For example, such a focus on experience in this study brought to the fore such affective realities as pervasive anxiety and fear, embodied phenomena such as tiredness and thirst, and differential positionalities contrasting the ethnographer and the research subjects. Most immigration research has taken a birds-eye view, analyzing economic and social factors directly while assuming the primacy of individual choice, all the while failing to consider the experiences of migrating people on the ground. The present study, in contrast, seeks to confront the gaps and assumptions in the literature by focusing on the lived experience of transnational migration on the ground.

Ethnography allows for the collection of data that one could not have known existed before beginning fieldwork. This differs significantly from most quantitative research in which the investigator must develop the survey instrument and decide when to collect data and from whom before entering the intensive research phase. These qualities of ethnography allow for what Geertz (1973) has called "thick description," the observation and analysis of lived reality in context, including its complexity, subtlety, and contradictions.

Such thick description may carry the possibility of bringing awareness and action from readers and hearers in a different way than that offered by statistics and aggregates. While many policymakers are motivated by statistical evidence, others are moved by narratives that include the human interest of real life (Ponte, 2005). Following the long tradition of public anthropology engaged by such figures as Frans Boas and Margaret Mead, the authors in the 2012 theme issue of Social Science & Medicine entitled "Migration, 'Illegality', and Health" take on the nexus of unauthorized transnational migration, health, and "deservingness" in such a way as to confront

public perceptions and policies. Indeed, narrative ethnography and statistics do different work and may be complementary both in understanding health as well as motivating various publics and decision makers toward acknowledging responsibility and making changes.

Contemporary ethnography holds as a central tenet a simultaneous attention to micro-level lived experience on the ground and macro-level social, historical and political economic forces or structures. Nader (1972) has called the analysis of all levels of a particular phenomenon a "vertical slice". Because of the ability of ethnography to gather and analyze multiple kinds of data from multiple people across diverse times and spaces, this methodology can be ideal for bringing to light connections between everyday life – including individual health – and broad political economic forces. Vertical slice ethnography can be an especially helpful methodology for understanding the effects of upstream factors increasingly understood to be of central importance in health.

Finally, the reflexivity involved in contemporary ethnography allows for an intimate analysis of social position (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By reflexivity, I mean the attention to oneself in the process of research. Ethnographic research, based in participant observation, involves not only attention to the lives of others but also consideration of one's own experiences. This juxtaposition of other and self encourages rigorous attention to social position and its effects on people, their experiences, and their bodies (see also Farquhar, 2002; Gronseth & Davis, 2010; Hastrup, 1995; Okely & Callaway, 1992; Stoller, 1989, 1995; Wacquant, 2006). There were many times in the field notes presented above in which my own experiences differed from those of my Triqui companions. For example, the ethnography describes the ways in which the border crossing was clearly a choice for me, a collecting of information and weighing of options (in some ways, much like the rational actor presumed by many in the push and pull school of immigration studies). However, this was juxtaposed, also early in the ethnography, by the experience of the border crossing by my Triqui companions as anything but chosen. Mine was an experience of choice and theirs was an experience of force and constraint. After the events ethnographically described above, I was fined and released while my Triqui companions were physically deported to Mexico. These divergences relate to differences in legal citizenship as well as class, race, cultural capital, social capital, and other factors determining social position. This reflexive data collection and analysis, then, allows for further elaboration, via contrast, of such concepts as structural vulnerability and the social determinants of health.

Conclusion

It is critically important for anthropologists of health to re-frame suffering, death, and risk to incorporate analyses of social, political, and economic structures. As stated by Quesada et al. (2011), "this is especially important in a society like the United States which individualizes responsibility for survival." In order to ameliorate suffering and death in the borderlands, we must work together to bring to light the legal, political, and economic apparatuses that produce labor migration in the first place. Policies that shore up inequalities, like NAFTA and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), should be renegotiated and health reform legislation must be broadened to include vulnerable populations, such as migrants. US immigration and border policy must be rewritten to decrease danger and death instead of deliberately enacting the opposite. Without this reframing, we will continue to see specific classes of people forced to cross deadly borders while they are subtly deemed responsible for their predicament. When risk is individualized, the solutions imagined and interventions planned focus on changing the choices and behaviors of individuals. However, attempting to intervene on individual behavior in the context of extreme structural inequalities draws attention away from the political economic forces producing mortal danger and death in the first place. Ethnography offers a unique and powerful means to link macro structural forces with the lived realities they produce in such a way as to shed light on the inadequacies of our current frameworks for understanding and responding to a problem. Without reorienting – through ethnography or otherwise – our frameworks of risk and our subsequent interventions toward the structural determinants of health and suffering, we will continue to witness thousands of human beings subjected to and subtly blamed for danger, trauma and death each year in the borderlands.

Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated to the many people who have died in the US–Mexico borderlands each year.

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