TRANSIT MIGRATION, BORDERS, AND ACTIVISM:
THE CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES AND TEMPORALITIES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Transforming Intractable Conflicts:
Restructuring and Reframing 2016

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Introduction

This paper is a mash-up of sorts. It combines the work of Jared Van Ramshorst (who is in southern Mexico, working on his project) and my own arm-chair scholarship on Europe’s migrant situation (Winders). It is inspired by calls both to link critical engagements across places, in a counter-topography of sorts, and to displace our research by placing it in conversation with other contexts (e.g., Katz 2001). In other words, it’s an effort to ask what we learn about conflicts and collaborations associated with international migration when we look across two key points in the geography of global migration.

Let me introduce our work. I’ll start with Jared’s. In Summer 2014, unprecedented numbers of men, women, and children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras arrived along the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas. While many were apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, others voluntarily turned themselves over to authorities, as they sought refuge from civil unrest, gang violence, and economic disparities across Central America. Very soon, the migrant swell had become a humanitarian crisis at the border, exposing a federal inability to respond to the sudden influx and restoring debates over immigration, refugee status, and human rights in the U.S (Shear and Peters 2014; Government Accountability Office 2015). Long before these migrants reached the U.S.-Mexico border, however, they travelled thousands of miles across jungles, deserts, and sprawling urban centers in Mexico, frequently seeking refuge in migrant shelters scattered along the way (Corchado 2014; Villegas and Archibald 2014). These journeys took weeks, months, and in some cases, years, with migrants encountering incredible dangers along the way – human trafficking, dehydration, robbery, and sometimes death.

Fast-forward to Summer 2015, and a humanitarian border crisis was again in the news – this time, in Europe, when large numbers of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East
crossed the Mediterranean or traveled overland to reach the EU, creating Europe’s worst migrant crisis since World War II. By October 2015, more than 760,000 had crossed the Mediterranean into Greece and Italy, with 1 million migrants arriving by the end of the year. As word of successful arrivals in Europe spread throughout refugee camps and across the Middle East, growing numbers of migrants pondered the trip from a growing number of places: Eritrea, where the path to refuge sometimes goes through “torture houses” in the Sinai Peninsula, Nigeria, and even Haiti. Early 2016 numbers were even higher, until the EU-Turkey deal in March, in which Turkey agreed to house migrants in its own territory. At that point, large numbers of African migrants began trying to reach Italy, again changing this migration. Much like Central Americans travelling to the U.S., many migrants heading to Europe experienced lengthy and hazardous journeys, spending extended periods of time in transit while risking starvation, drowning, and kidnapping. For women, the threat of sexual violence is ever present, and for children, the fear and reality of being separated from their families loom large.

These situations in North America and Europe draw attention to a key, but understudied, aspect of migration: the increasingly dangerous and fragmented migration journeys around the world, or transit migrations. Whether traveling across the Mediterranean to reach the EU or overland from Central America to the U.S., transit migration involves difficult, often prolonged, trips between origin and destination, with stops of varied lengths along the way (Collyer 2010; Schapendonk 2012). Migrants interviewed in a refugee camp in France, in 2015, for example, reported spending more than six months in transit, were not at their desired destinations, and were indefinitely delayed in camps (Davies and Isakjee 2015). For a growing number of people, migration is increasingly complicated, dangerous, and prolonged. An act which previously took one to two days now stretches into months, if not years, for some.
While such spatially and temporally stretched journeys have been the norm for refugees and asylum-seekers in the Global South (where 86% of refugees reside), the increasing frequency of transit migrations across the migrant spectrum problematizes how we think about international migration itself. Perhaps most relevant for this gathering, the growing number of migrants involved in lengthy journeys across multiple borders, through smuggling or trafficking routes, and along dangerous paths raise new questions about the conflicts and collaborations that transit migration precipitates. What happens when the normative experience of refugees and internally displaced persons in the Global South becomes the normative experience for many migrants in the Global North? How does, and how should, this convergence change the way we think about international migration?

This paper just dips its toe into this broad question, in an effort to detail some of the conflicts associated with transit migration as well as the key actors and activism involved in this unfolding saga. This comparison, we hope, highlights both the similarities between transit migration in North America and Europe and the distinct challenges each situation has generated.

**Transit Migration in North America: Changing Geographies and Temporalities**

In recent years, the geography of migration from Latin America to the U.S. has shifted dramatically (Passel et al. 2012). While rates of migration from Mexico have fallen to historic lows, undocumented migration from Central America has risen to record highs (Warren and Warren 2013). In 2014, for the first time in over 20 years, Central American migrants traveling undocumented to the U.S. drastically outnumbered those from Mexico and now outpace any other region in the world (Massey et al. 2014; U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2014). Scholars contend that the area extending from Central America to the U.S. represents a continuous
“migration region,” where migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras increasingly take passage through Mexico to reach the U.S. (Jonas and Rodríguez 2014).

As U.S. government agencies continue to militarize the U.S.-Mexico border, in an effort to curtail these migrations, Mexico, too, has fortified its national borders, often with U.S. support. Under pressure from the U.S., Mexico has initiated Programa Frontera Sur, a border strategy aimed at preventing Central American migration by increasing its security presence and deportations along Mexico’s border with Guatemala and Belize (Boggs 2015). Under these conditions, migrants have turned to clandestine, often dangerous, means of travel to reach the U.S. interior, while they are in Mexico (Coutin 2005; Kovic 2008), and large portions of Mexico and its borders have become areas where migrants regularly confront human smuggling, extortion, and robbery (Ogren 2007; Nevins 2008), as well as gendered forms of violence, such as rape and sexual assault (Kovic 2008). Migration is now an incredibly fractured process in which migrants travel through multiple countries to reach their destinations, confronting violence and insecurity along the way.

In response to these new hazards, migrants increasingly turn for respite and safety along their journeys to shelters, which are scattered throughout Mexico and the U.S. (Lakhani 2014). While some migrants stay for days and weeks, others remain in shelters for months and even years, as they recover from injuries, gather finances, and prepare for the remainder of their trips (Vogt 2012; 2013). Mexican cities such as Ciudad Hidalgo and Nuevo Laredo have become transit migration hubs, where informal economies surrounding migration, including smuggling, develop alongside shelters and outreach organizations. Once a source of migration, Mexico has become a country of transit and in some cases, a migrant destination, as some Central Americans seek ways
to stay in Mexico (Rietig and Dominguez Villegas 2014). In this region, extended time in transit and increasingly dangerous conditions are new norms.

In the context of this transit migration, a number of key actors and social movements have emerged, as Jared is examining in Tapachula, Mexico, and the Rio Grande Valley, south Texas. First, while national governments have long played key roles in international migration, transit migration in North America has spurred new government agencies and linkages between international organizations. Chief among these are new connections between governments in North and Central America, evidenced by Programa Frontera Sur. Following Summer 2014, Mexico, alongside El Salvador, Guatemala, and the U.S., announced a comprehensive border strategy intended to address migration flows from Central America. As of 2014, the U.S. had dispatched over $10 million of border security equipment to Mexico’s southern boundary, including biometric scanners, mobile kiosks, and other surveillance equipment (Wilson and Valenzuela 2014). This program also created new government agencies, such as Mexico’s Coordinating Mechanism for Comprehensive Attention to Migration at the Southern Border (Coordinación para la Atención Integral de la Migración en la Frontera Sur), while expanding the powers of its Ministry of the Interior to regulate mobility and points of entry. In the process, large swaths of Mexico’s interior have also become sites of detention for Central Americans, and the border, especially Mexico’s border with Guatemala, has thickened.

Second, as transit migration has grown in North America, critical infrastructures have developed alongside it, providing services to transit migrants. From migrant shelters in Tijuana to policy institutes in New York City, transit migrations have altered the institutional landscape of international migration. Many of the key actors behind these projects are religious organizations. For example, the Scalabrini International Migration Network, founded by Catholic missionaries,
runs a vast network of migrant shelters along commonly travelled pathways from Guatemala City to Tapachula, Mexico, and Nuevo Laredo on the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition to free lodging, shelters provide meals, access to phones, and legal services to migrants. Secular organizations have also emerged as pivotal groups. While thousands of migrants made their way from Central America to the U.S., non-profits such as the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice network, a consortium of community-based organizations throughout south Texas, coordinated relief efforts with U.S. government agencies. These efforts have culminated into a much wider movement, as the consortium continues to advocate for immigration reforms, health care, and other aspects of migrant rights. Transit migration has also been drawn into social movements, particularly in the U.S. Most recently, for example, Black Lives Matter has joined immigrant rights organizations pledging to end deportations and immigration raids and drawing attention to political issues around migration.

**Transit Migration in Europe**

Now for the arm-chair scholarship. The politics surrounding Europe’s “migration crisis” differ in key ways from that in North America. Donald Trump has worked hard to criminalize the figure of the immigrant (Mexican, not Central American), but migration from Central America has not been tightly linked to questions of national security and terrorism in the way that the migrant situation in Europe has. Through a series of high-profile attacks, conflicting reports about “fake” refugees, and an overall conflation of refugees fleeing predominantly Muslim countries and “terrorists,” questions about Europe’s migration situation have become questions about Europe’s borders, religious “tolerance,” and forms of difference that challenge understandings of nation, community, and region.
How has this crisis played out? First, as was the case in North America, Europe’s “migrant crisis” is not simply about migrant sufferings. It is also deeply geopolitical, with arrangements designed to thicken key borders by opening others. In February 2016, the EU approved a 3 billion euro fund for Turkey (plus an easier path to EU membership) if it agreed to keep 2 million refugees within its borders. Under this arrangement, Turkey became the thickened border of the EU.\textsuperscript{v} Turkey’s recent unrest, of course, has called this agreement into question, in the process placing migrants in Turkey in an even more precarious situation and leading to new refugee outflows from Turkey.\textsuperscript{vi}

Such geopolitical negotiations over who polices which borders and in return for what aren’t exclusive to Europe. In addition to the \textit{Programa Frontera Sur} already described, the U.S. has turned to investment ($750 billion in 2016) through the Alliance for Prosperity for the Northern Triangle. This plan is spearheaded by the U.S., El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and the Inter-American Development Bank. It involves efforts to stimulate economic growth, reduce inequalities, increase education opportunities, and target human trafficking, all to reduce the flow of Central Americans into the U.S.\textsuperscript{vii} Among other things, the Alliance links security, migration, and development, with the goal of making the borders between the U.S. and Central America \textit{effective} by making Central Americans less tempted to cross them. Across Europe and Australia, we see similar trends: Spain working with west African nations, Italy with Libya, even under Kaddafi, to stem the flow of migrants by trying to keep them at home.\textsuperscript{viii}

A key difference between European and North American transit migrations, however, involves their visualizations and overall visibility. Central American migration to the U.S., despite profoundly changing the demographics of immigration, has been largely invisible, eclipsed in public discourse by the far right’s focus on the criminalized Mexican immigrant or dangerous
Muslim. In Europe, however, we see just the opposite. Here, I want to highlight two visualizations. The first is the image that came to embody this situation for many western viewers – that of Alan Kurdi, a small Syrian boy who drowned while his family tried to reach a Greek island 2.5 miles away in a boat carrying twice its capacity and whose body washed onto the shores of a Turkish beach in September 2015. The images of his body, face down in the sand, and of a Turkish police officer carrying it away from the waves painfully showed the human costs of these migrations – in the same way that the image of a young Syrian boy, dazed in the back of an ambulance, more recently made the human costs of the wider conflict visible and visceral to many western viewers. As the image of Alan Kurdi went viral, it transformed Europe’s “refugee crisis” from something abstract and quantifiable to something deeply troubling and embodied for those who saw the picture. Donations to migrant charities went up, and world leaders commented on the child’s death. His image, like those of other children impacted by this migration, peppered media coverage – children who lost their parents in the woods of Macedonia, children running with their parents or waiting with family members on boats or trains. We don’t see similar images for the Central American migrant situation, even though large numbers of unaccompanied minors are involved.

The second visualization pulls back from that small body on the shore to focus on the growing number of people missing in this migration – the Missing Migrant Project.\textsuperscript{ix} A project of the International Organization of Migration, the Missing Migrant Project works to make the realities of what they describe as “Europe’s migration emergency” visible – the routes taken, the fatalities, the missing, the daily incidents and accidents, and those still displaced – in maps, graphics, text, and tables. A year ago, I spent a lot of time on this site, examining its ever-growing body counts. When I looked at the site more recently, it had been re-scaled to address the global crisis of missing migrants, including those from Central America. This re-scaling is interesting,
and promising, since it offers its own counter-topography that links Europe, Central America, northern Africa, and other parts of a global map of suffering and loss. If the viral circulation of the image of Alan’s body worked to humanize the dangers migrants face in their efforts to reach Europe, the Missing Migrant Project tries to show the enormity of those dangers and their cumulative effect – a body count on the home page that updates daily.

So where does this brief comparison leave us? Mainly with more questions. First, we can, and should, ask, How and which local, regional, and global histories and narratives are mobilized to explain what is happening in Europe or North America and to justify responses? Across Europe, we see calls, especially from former political leaders, for countries to remember their own pasts – 700,000 displaced during the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1993, more than one million displaced from Eastern Europe in 1989, and so on. In more intimate settings, like a small German town of 102 asked to house 750 asylum seekers, some residents call on their own local and national pasts, especially World War II, to make sense of the sea change that this new arrival could cause. These lenses through which people in host communities interpret what they see matter for how this migration plays out. Jared is examining similar narratives in migrant shelters in Mexico, and I look forward to seeing what he finds.

Second, as geographers like Mat Coleman (2009) have argued, contemporary policings of international borders in the name of national security produce human insecurities of all sorts. In both Europe and North America, sovereignty is constituted less, as Vaughan-Williams (2010) suggests in a discussion of British border politics, by “the ability to decide over life and death” and more “by the ability to ‘make live and let die’” (p. 1078). These questions about who is ‘let to die’ – whether in a desert or on the sea – are not just academic. They are, or at least should be, bound up with who we think we are – however we define that ‘we’ – and whether ‘we’ feel it is
OK to live in a world where some are both bereft of the law and subject to it through a ban – and here is the link to Black Lives Matter in a North American context.

For the study of international migration more generally, transit migration changes not only the nature of our object of analysis (migration) but also where we look – not settlement experiences or outcomes but the act of transit itself, not sending communities or transnational connections between sending and receiving sites, but the extended, sometimes indefinite, journey. In the process, both the content and the politics of our findings change, in ways we are just now acknowledging, making wider conversations about collaboration and conflict, especially across borders, even more pertinent.
References


