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 (IR) scholarship tends to overlook how uncoordinated everyday practice complicates state control of territory in a globalized world. By tracing the co-constitutive relationship between migration policing, national performances and transnational routes, this paper reveals the makeshift nature of identity. In so doing, it argues for the continued inclusion of ethnography as a method for exploring the dynamic relationship between territory, state and nation.
Introduction

The eight-year old Salvadoran boy sauntered through the yard of the migrant shelter, showing off his capacity for Mexican language, using an exaggerated “guey” (a Mexican colloquialism) at the beginning of each sentence and mimicking 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!” He 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. The boy’s performances in the shelter yard garnered him chuckles and smiles from his intended audience. 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 the boy 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 U.S. checkpoint in a car.

---

1 Judith Butler (1990, p.138-139) understands the eruption of laughter as the symptom of a destabilization of identity caused by gender parody. Indeed, laughter at this national parody signals a similar destabilization of identity.
with U.S. citizens posing as his parents; but she worried that the border patrol might wake him. Despite some tutoring he received at the migrant shelter and his father’s fluency in the language, the boy’s English would not have withstood even cursory questioning. Instead, he would have to risk the dangerous desert crossing when they reached the border.

In this paper, I argue that by walking in the shoes of this playful boy, International Relations (IR) theorists could learn a great deal about the “unbundling” of territory and nationality. 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 everyday people living along the route. Information about national membership is coveted by all actors in the migration drama, 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. By parodying nationality, both migrants and citizens rewrite social scripts in the human security drama along the route. In so doing, these everyday people also rewrite the possibilities for the state, undermining its capacity to govern transnational flows.

---

2 John Ruggie (1993) famously argued that the fixed territoriality of the modern state has become “unbundled” by globalization. With their focus on diaspora politics, Fiona Adamson and Madeleine Demetriou (2007) rekindle the call for a research agenda that explores the mismatch between identity, territory and the administrative apparatus of the state. In an important sense, this paper responds to that call.
This analysis points to how neither collective action nor novel technologies are necessary to undermine borders. 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 erodes state capacity to enforce territory. Migration authorities require national and racial profiles to enforce borders. Migrants, however, move by improvising upon the very cultural markers that states use to identify citizens. Over time, migrants’ performances blur both social and territorial boundaries. As citizens interact with migrants and come to share transnational markers, national and racial profiles lose their meaning and their efficacy as state instruments. Indeed, this social ambiguity is a source of resilience for unauthorized migration.

To arrive at this insight, I take the reader on an ethnographic journey, introducing some of the people, places and practices that constitute transnational migration routes. First, I briefly situate the argument in the discipline of IR and anthropological studies of transnationalism, and I describe fieldwork undertaken for this project. Borrowing methods employed in the anthropology of flows and clandestine activity (e.g. Heyman and Smart 1999; Marcus 1995; Nordstrom 2007; van Schendel 2005; Watts 2008) and bringing them into communication with core concepts in IR theory, this paper offers a unique window onto globalization. Second, I introduce the route from Central America through Mexico as a transformative space. State and non-state violence structure this space, accelerating (rather than impeding) the personal, social and political transformations that unfold along it. To expose this process, I examine the national performances of migrants and citizens in greater detail, highlighting the improvised

---

3 Stephen Greenblatt (2005 [1980], p.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.”
nature of transnational practice. 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. Migrants also become unwilling props in the political
theater of borders that leads to an escalation of policing (Andreas 2000). Therefore, I
conclude with a melancholy reflection on the transnational homelessness that
accompanies contemporary migration policing in the Americas.

Transnationalism from Underground: IR Theory Meets Anthropology

Since the 1970s, IR theorists have heralded the impeding reordering of the nation-
state under conditions of complex interdependence and overlapping sovereignties (e.g.
Keohane and Nye 1977; Ruggie 1993). Since that time, the inexorable forces of cultural
and economic globalization have shaken both the territorial and ideational moorings of
the state (Castells 1997; Sassen 2006). Transnational media and sustained migration have
complicated the relationship between territory and cultural identity (Appadurai 1996).
State sovereignty has faced challenges across three dimensions: control, authority and
legitimacy (Litfin 1997). In particular, states have found borders difficult to enforce, and
across the globe, state attempts to impede unauthorized transnational flows of people and
contraband have generated perverse results (Andreas 2000). When IR 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, whether smuggling gangs, terrorist groups, civil society associations, norm
entrepreneurs, or diaspora activists, leverage these resources to challenge state

However, by emphasizing collective resistance to the nation-state, IR has not told the story of the migrants who brave dangerous long-distance odysseys, engaging in social camouflage and other ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985). Even if they never reach their destination, the poorest 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 thereby undermines border control by re-inscribing national ambiguities in transit corridors. Sustained transnational mobility undermines the policing utility of ‘virtual checkpoints’: cultural markers, racial stereotypes and national tells (Migdal 2004, p.6). 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, p. 296); it thereby erodes its own legitimacy with people who legally belong within its territory. In this way, while neither migrants nor transit states intend to challenge sovereignty, their interaction ultimately does exactly that.

While IR theorists have generally privileged dilemmas of ‘transnationalism from above’, anthropologists have turned their gaze almost exclusively on ‘transnationalism from below.’ By emphasizing lived experience, anthropology points to how everyday

---

4 David Spener (2009, p.23), building on the work of Scott (1985), characterizes unauthorized Mexican migration as ‘resistencia hormiga.’
material practice, not only discourse, politics or law, shapes place, identity and common
sense understandings of the world around us. The narrative of ‘transnationalism from
below’ often privileges the agency of migrants in constructing their own space and
reconstituting hybridized identities. However, as Sarah J. Mahler (1998, p.72-72)
perceptively argues, both ‘above’ and ‘below’ perspectives often focus on intentional,
organized action and ignore the “mass action” of unauthorized migration. Furthermore,
the literature on transnationalism also tends to focus on enduring cross-border
*communities* of migrants, spanning home and destination, rather than the continuous
process of making and breaking community that unfolds along the transient and violent
space of the route itself (e.g. Glick Schiller et al 1995; Kyle 2000; Smith and Bakker
2008).\(^5\)

In contrast, the experience of the migrant journey might best be characterized as a
form of transnationalism from below the below; it is transnationalism from underground,
called into existence by the very effort of the state to stop it. As the anthropology of
criminalization has revealed, clandestine activities are never autonomous from the state,
but instead constituted by their very illegality (van Schendel 2005; Heyman and Smart
1999). Migrants often make multiple journeys, not *despite* the state but *because of* it, as
they return from deportations or failed border crossings. Furthermore, both state and non-
state violence structure these practices, rendering trust and community forever ephemeral
along the route. Thus, it should be no surprise that ‘transnationalism from underground’
is an accidental, not purposive, challenge to state sovereignty. By definition, this social

---

\(^5\) Some notable exceptions in the study of Central American journeys include Coutin (2005),
periphery has also begun to map transit as a subject in its own right (e.g. Collyer 2007, 2010;
Collyer et al. 2010; Hess 2010).
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.  

Taking its methodological cue from this anthropological literature, this paper follows an ethnographic journey. Of course, parallel journeys made by participant observers very imperfectly retread the path of migrants, and I did not attempt to follow migrants along the entirety of the route. However, 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 U.S. transit corridor and destinations. 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, smugglers, family members, clergy and others. In addition to formal interviews, I listened to countless real time tactical

---

6 For a more general discussion of the value of immersive experience for understanding power, see the edited volume by Edward Schatz (2009).

7 In this manner, the move to studying the route as a field dovetails with a recent methodological challenge for traditional anthropological conceptions of the relationship between physical space and social boundaries. Ethnographers of yesteryear rooted their methodology in the notion of a physically bounded community; the ability to travel to a new location provided outsiders with analytical leverage to understand a habitus hidden from the locals. However, the advent of ethnographies of globalization calls this notion into question by tracing the social construction of the relationship between place and society (Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

8 I wrote notes during interviews and whenever possible in the course of each day. I then transcribed these handwritten notes on the computer each night. I did not record interviews. Instead, all quotes in the text of this dissertation have been reconstructed from shorthand. The vast majority of interviews and informal conversations were in Spanish, but I also conducted a
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. I visited eleven fieldsites across Mexico. I also accompanied unauthorized migrants on a sixteen-hour segment of their journey atop a freight train.

**Performing Migration: Crossing Social and Territorial Borders**

The long journey across Mexico is dangerous. Migrants face detention and deportation when they encounter migration authorities in the interior of the country, but must they also evade bandits, street gangs, organized kidnappers who demand ransom from U.S.-based family, and corrupt officials. This violence intensified and diversified as the rules, routines and social networks that underlie undocumented migration underwent profound change in the wake of both intensified migration enforcement within Mexico since 2001 and the Mexican drug war since 2006. Nevertheless, Central Americans continue to flee the social disorder, economic malaise and criminal violence of Central America (Archibald 2013; Brigden 2012).

To survive this state and non-state violence, migrants must have an uncanny knack for the national hustle. Performing Mexican requires improvisation, an unsteady alliance between preparation and spontaneity. 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 handful of interviews in English, in some cases alternating between the two languages. In all cases, the preference of the participant determined which language was used.

9 For sustained journalism about this violence, see Sonia Nazario (2005) and Oscar Martínez (2010).

10 For discussion of the relationship between script and creativity in improvisation, see Curtis (1991) and Yanow (2001).
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.11 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, p.73-74). 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. Both accents, grammatical constructions and colloquialisms give them away. Any conversation can expose a foreigner, leaving them vulnerable to deportation or extortion. One man complained that he need 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

11 Cecilia Menjivar (2000, p.72) notes that migrants relay these national scripts home, warning their family members of the tests employed by migration authorities. Unfortunately for migrants, ‘passing’ is not so simple as memorizing a script and reciting the lines.
faces), and folklore (e.g. common historical narratives, events and figures). Some given names, like Kevin or Elmer, 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.

The most visible Central American migrants wear a unisex costume, shaped by the physical demands of the cheapest manner to negotiate routes to the United States: denim pants, dark and dirty clothing, sneakers, baseball caps, and backpacks. The style is comfortable for travel on the freight trains and treks through remote wilderness. As discussed by Jason de Leon (2012, p.490) in his analysis of the material culture of border crossing, U.S. border patrol personnel use style of dress, as well as race, to determine whether an individual is a smuggler, migrant or desert hiker. Both U.S. and Mexican authorities use racial and national profiles to identify migrants (ICE agent, 2/9/10).

Racial stereotypes intersect with nationality, producing constraints and opportunities for migrants, depending on the color of their skin. In Mexico, a country where the ‘mestizo’ of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage represents the dominant racial ideology, profiling renders blacks most vulnerable to identification. It is not unheard of for Mexican citizens of black heritage to be wrongfully deported by Mexican migration authorities. I met one such man 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 (Ixtepec, 11/4/10). He had been travelling to visit family in San Luis Potosi when migration authorities intercepted him. Life along the migratory route as the Mexican citizen child or grandchild of a Central American is a
tenuous existence. Abuse and harassment of citizens are the perils of racial profiling along a long-standing migration route.

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 from Central America rather than returning to South America. This minimizes financial risks for the smugglers transporting them. Therefore, racial stereotypes can be improvised upon, not only by state authorities, but by migrants and smugglers as well.

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. 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 (Ruiz 2001, p.38). 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 U.S. Whatever the preference of kidnappers
might be, any identifiable Central American nationality invites legal, illegal and extralegal violence en route.

For this reason, many migrants purchase local name brands and fashions at their earliest opportunity if they leave the train route behind. The adoption of Mexican or U.S. dress and dialect facilitate 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).12

Indeed, this advice seems prudent if a migrant has the gumption and familiarity with Mexican national customs. People travel in this way, passing as a Mexican belonging to the general 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. One Salvadoran man, interviewed at a midway point along the route, equated

12 This Guatemalan migrant sold fake documents to other migrants attempting to pass, but fake documents do not seem necessary or advisable if someone performs persuasively. After all, many Mexicans do not carry documents in their own country, and failed attempts at passing with fake documents carry prison time. Finally, even with fake documents, migrants must successfully perform as Mexican or have their documents scrutinized too closely.
this 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 (Ixtapan, 2/3/11).

In the relative safety of a diverse and anonymous urban environment, where transience is not necessarily associated with unauthorized migration, this man 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 Union 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.” 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. 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 potential enemies in a transient social field.

Reflecting on her experiences along the route, one woman who had successfully passed undetected through Mexico lamented, “in Mexico, they lack the spirit of humanity.” For this woman and others, the experience of ‘passing’ paradoxically sharpens bitter ethnic divisions between Mexicans and Salvadorans while demonstrating
the arbitrariness of such cultural markers. Migrants subvert language and dress, and learn to be Mexican or American. Migrants also forge transnational networks of friends and multinational families during their journey (in transit, as well as in destinations), feeding a sense of betrayal at their mistreatment en route; they may be the husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, sisters, mothers, daughters and wives of citizens in the countries through which they transit. This \textit{de facto} cultural and social integration brings the injustices of legal exclusion and special vulnerability to criminal victimization into sharp relief. Perhaps for this reason, some Central Americans claim that the trauma and disrespect that they suffer during the journey through Mexico accounts for the historic hostility between these national groups in destination communities in the United States; “Because of the way Mexicans treat Salvadorans during the trip, Salvadorans and Mexicans don’t get along” (returned migrant, El Salvador, 3/1/10). Some Salvadorans lament the ‘Mexicanization’ that migration to the United States has brought to their culture as “worse” than its Americanization. Passage has the power to reshape migrants’ sense of nation, self and others.

\textit{Spies, Smugglers and Wanderers: Playing the Migrant}

Perhaps surprisingly, a variety of people along the route also find it worthwhile to assume the cultural markers associated with Central American migrants. Why would it serve to camouflage oneself as a member of the most vulnerable national groups along the route? Spies for kidnappers, known as ‘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 ‘orejas’ (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.¹³ A Honduran man repeated a common warning about ‘rateros’ (Ixtepec, 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, is sometimes an unpremeditated survival strategy that takes them into the business of spying for kidnappers, other trickery (including but not limited to theft) or profit making from their travel companions (ranging from selling drugs to provisioning coyote services). To decrease opportunities for such role-shifting and enhance security, the migrant shelters generally attempt to segregate Central American migrants, Mexican migrants and non-migrant homeless people. To this end, many shelters limit migrants’ movement in and out of their compounds, accepting and releasing sojourners only during regulated hours and

¹³ Rumors circulate that police are also traveling undercover as migrants to catch kidnappers (e.g. Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/29/11).
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.\textsuperscript{14}

As migrants meander along the route for a long period of time or make repeated attempts to cross the border, anonymity erodes and 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 produces vulnerability to violence under the strategic interaction around these identities.

These wanderers begin to bridge Mexican communities and the transit flow. Their role as potential ‘enganchadores’ (connectors) makes them 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 Honduran migrant explained (Iztepec, 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?

\textsuperscript{14} Exceptions to the rules may be made under extenuating circumstances, i.e. for migrants awaiting asylum claims, denouncing human rights abuses they suffered en route or volunteering a needed craft of 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.
Other 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, Ixtepec, 3/4/11).

Expressions of humility and other rural class-markers, such as simple dress appropriate for outdoor labor or 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. In fact, there are innumerable performances of class-based solidarity, even across national boundaries. As a result, many stories of poor Mexicans sharing their modest wealth with Central Americans and unexpected (even life saving) 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.

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 (Papachristos 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 further complicate traditional Latin American class conventions, an outward expression of the ways that migration has complicated class relations. These cultural transgressions provoke (often unwarranted) fear and unwanted attention from police authorities across the Americas (Zilberg 2010 p.196-199).

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. 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, instantly losing 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 (Zilberg 2010, p.198). Therefore, inflexible rules about whom to trust or distrust and how to perform class can produce disastrous mistakes.

---

15 De Leon (2012, p.487) says that, “Many undocumented migrants assume that the best way to avoid detection is to ‘not look poor’, a strategy that can backfire. I once observed a Mexican immigration official board a bus in Chiapas and single out and remove a group of Central American migrants whose new wardrobes, fresh haircuts, and shiny sneakers caused them to stand out against the rest of the passengers who appeared to be working-class, underdressed Mexicans.” In this case, I believe De Leon’s story provides an example of what might have already become a stale routine. 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.

16 Elana Zilberg (2010, p.198) explains the fallibility of “fashion police” with a compelling anecdote: “The police were often barely literate in the semiotics of youth culture. Take, for example, Weasel’s first attempt to cross back into the United States at the end of 2003 when he was turned back in Mexico because of his clothing…We laughed uproariously when he told me why he was one picked out of everyone on the bus as an undocumented Central American immigrant passing through Mexico. When he asked the federale (officer) who apprehended him, “Why me?” the man explained that it was because he was wearing old-fashioned clothes that no Mexican wore anymore. Weasel was wearing, as he put it, “a very stylish [1970s style] retro shirt,” and as such he was dressed in the height of urban youth fashion.”
As a consequence of their potential security threat to other migrants, as well as the damage to their reputation caused by charges of corruption, many shelters turn known people away if they cannot believably explain their repeated visitation. Many shelters also search for national tells, discriminating in reverse and turning away down-and-out Mexicans. They also watch for the cultural tells associated with gang membership. During a registration process, the shelter staff looks for familiar faces, and recognition might lead to exclusion as a suspected smuggler (e.g. fieldnotes 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.
For these reasons, the fact that smugglers, homeless persons and spies for kidnappers impersonate Central American migrants is an open secret. The possibility that predators might ‘pass’ as vulnerable migrant 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. Thus, 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 uncertainty along the route. This ambiguity also produces anxiety among migrants who must fear false accusations of smuggling or kidnapping, a position far more dangerous than simply being accused of unauthorized entry.

*An Undocumented Mexican in Mexico and his Honduran Guide*

One of the shelters in Coatzacoalcos, Mexico was particularly dilapidated. Morale among the shelter volunteers was low, and one of the staff decried that the very migrants they served were criminals (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 unsettling context, I met a migrant who freely admitted that he was not really a Central American. He 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.

He was from Hermosillo in the state of Sonora, Mexico. I asked when he left home, and he shook his head:

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 he 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 had never protected him from this abuse, and he reasoned that the vast majority of street people share this background of domestic violence and neglect. He 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.

17 I chose to share this man’s story, because among the Mexicans I met passing for Central American along the route, he shared his experiences the most openly and seemingly without reservation.
With a new appreciation of the depth of his homelessness, I rephrased my question; I asked when he left the city of Hermosillo. He 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:

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:

Sometimes the Mexican authorities revise 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.

The Central Americans and transient Mexicans share a vulnerability to harassment and abuse by Mexican authorities, and in response, his travel group pooled their resources. He 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:

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, the Mexican man described the discrimination that he suffered in the shelter system, on the basis of his nationality:

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. The man complained that many potential employers asked him for papers. Unfortunately, he had lost his identification card and lacked the means to replace it: “Now I am undocumented.” I asked him what this meant for his relationship to the Mexican authorities.

Sometimes the authorities accuse me of being a pollero [human smuggler]. In Guanajuato, we were a group, smoking cigarettes and migra 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 the undocumented Mexican man was not the smuggler in the group. The Mexican man’s younger, tattooed Honduran companion 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. The Honduran immediately impressed me with an intimate knowledge its places, grinning broadly as he shared what he supposed were the sorts of criminal secrets that would help a fledgling writer: “That’s good for your book, no?”

But I was more interested in his personal story. He had grown up alone along the tracks, leaving a broken home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras at the age of 11. On that first journey, his best friend had been thrown from the train. After many adventures and four years of living in Mexico, he 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 he 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. The undocumented Mexican man confirmed that they would probably head south together for reasons that remained mysterious, perhaps even to them.

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. Authorities may target them as smugglers. They make enemies by lingering on the route. However, these wanderers sometimes develop social resources that bridge new communities with 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. They may fall in love. They may become fathers of Mexican citizens along the way. 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 the undocumented Mexican’s story 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 Scholssberg (2001, p.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.

Circulating in gossip, advice and entertainment, stories about national performances and the ambiguities that accompany them 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 be wrongly deported. Passing also renders the enforcement of national boundaries problematic, as citizens and migrants come to share a transnational imaginary.

An Autopsy of Performance

I stared, transfixed by the digital photograph of the dead man displayed on the computer in the office of the migrant shelter (fieldnotes, Ixtepec, 11/4/10-11/5/10). 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 blackened 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 Usulutan, El Salvador in 1988, alongside a Six Flags 2010 season “Play Pass” issued in California less than seven months before his demise.

The tattoos branded him as a gang member, but something was wrong with the official documents. They did not belong to him. One of the migrants in the shelter, peering over the shoulder of the office manager at the photos, had 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. That young man only survived a few months longer before disappearing. But the dead man, who lay there on the side of the train tracks, played these parts unknowing.

Later that day, two men arrived, one of them wearing a black vest with the yellow letters AEI scrolled across the back.18 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.19 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 includes most anybody who spends significant time living in the shelter. Several of the dead man’s closest friends could identify the victim only by his nickname and reputation, not his nationality or family names.

The tattoo of a Salvadoran flag on his arm led to his burial in El Salvador, rather than an anonymous grave in Mexico. 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. They redefined their

---

18 AEI stands for Agencia Estatal de Investigaciones, the State Agency for Investigations.
19 In all my interviews, I encountered only one person from Panama.
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 72 migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil and Ecuador, but the nationality of 13 of those migrants could not be identified. Rather than flying home in flag-draped coffins with the bodies of their former travel companions, the remaining 12 were buried in a common grave in Mexico (Soberanes 2012). 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. 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.

Indeed, the process of repatriating the dead mirrors the process of identifying and deporting living migrants. 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 on BBC 2013). They improvise upon the objects intended for other purposes, things that are carried as an expression of faith, that serve as personal mementos, or that facilitate economic exchange; they must transform

20 The fact that postmortem repatriation reconstitutes identity and relationships between governments and society has not gone unnoticed by scholars. For example, Adrian Felix (2011) describes the cultural and institutional transnational practice of the repatriation of deceased Mexican migrants, which involves a collaborative effort between social networks and multiple levels of government.
these artifacts into evidence supporting a performance of national sovereignty: repatriation.

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. Human rights advocates must convince families to collaborate with government bureaucrats and scientists to assign nationality and receive an institutional response (Reineke on BBC 2013). As they establish the nationality of the deceased, the participants in this drama redefine the roles of actors along the route, overcoming the contentious scripts that usually attend these relationships. With each repatriation performance, government officials, human rights advocates and migrant families collectively come to an ephemeral understanding of each other. Even when migrants fail in their quest to arrive safely in the United States, their drama changes the theater of the state. Even when the actors along the route re-assert nationality in the wake of these tragedies, migrants have re-written social scripts.

**Conclusion**

In the migrant shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, a way station where many Central Americans start the train route north, I sat next to a middle-aged man with a faded tattoo above his eyebrow (12/2/10). He said that ‘el norte’ was blowing hard, and with that way

---

21 Robin Reineke (on BBC 2013) explains the process, “Because of the highly decomposed nature of the bodies, the calls I make are never as simple as, “I am sorry to inform you…” Instead, it’s the beginning of a process that could take months. It unfolds as a kind of negotiation between the scientists and the families. Both sides have the same goal- to find the missing person. But for the scientists, the problem is an unidentified dead body, whereas for the families, the problem is a missing living person. These realities pull them in opposite directions.” Neither scientist nor family member intend to renegotiate nationality, but repatriation of the body inevitably requires the imposition of citizenship on the corpse. Reineke is currently writing a doctoral dissertation about this work in cultural anthropology at the University of Arizona.
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 innocently. 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 and many others is neither a ‘migrant’ nor a citizen. He no longer feels Salvadoran, Mexican or American. He is neither victim nor perpetrator. He is simply alone and moving through the world. 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 class of transnational homeless men.

Of course, these violent and transient conditions are not natural. Ironically, this anarchic reality is a product of governance that prioritizes the integrity of borders at the expense of human security within state territory. The internalization of border policing has brought a level of anarchy normally associated with the international realm into the domestic affairs of the Mexican state. This paper has argued that the struggle between the state, criminals and migrants has eroded legitimacy, upended national identities, and deepened social ambiguity along transnational routes. The policing of transnational flows in the interior of states extends and deepens the clandestine contestation that normally occurs at the borderlands. 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. In turn, these
wanderers must redouble their improvisations to survive an uncertain terrain partly of
their own creation and partly the creation of nation-states that seek to exclude them.
Performances along the migrant route blur the defining traits of nations and render
citizenship boundaries difficult to enforce. By revealing this clandestine practice,
ethnography provides a glimpse into how everyday people complicate the territorial and
symbolic sovereignty of the nation-state.
Work Cited


Collyer, Michael, Frank Duvell and Hein de Haas. 2010. ‘Critical Approaches to Transit Migration’ Population, Space and Place.


Martinez, Oscar. 2010. Los Migrantes Que No Importan: En el camino con los centroamericanos indocumentados en Mexico, Icaria, San Salvador.


Ruiz, Olivia. 2003. 'La Migracion Centroamericana en la Frontera Sur: un perfil del Riesgo en la Migracion Indocumentada Internacional' Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD.