

Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society

Volume 46
Number 1 *Ethnocentrism in its Many Guises*

Article 3

2021

Borders and Bridges: Migration, Anthropology, and Human Rights

Christine Kovic
University of Houston, Clear Lake

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/southernanthro_proceedings

Recommended Citation

Kovic, C. (2021). Borders and Bridges: Migration, Anthropology, and Human Rights. *Ethnocentrism and Its Many Guises: Proceedings of the Southern Anthropological Society*, 2017, 46, 11–22.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southern Anthropological Society at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

CHAPTER 2

Borders and Bridges: Migration,
Anthropology, and Human Rights

Christine Kovic

“Los sueños también viajan. . . .”

(“Dreams also travel. . . .”)

Mural in Soup Kitchen in

La Patrona, Veracruz, Mexico

“Ethnocentrism and Its Many Guises,” the theme of the Southern Anthropological Society’s March 2017 conference, emerged from the urgency of the contemporary social and political context. Marjorie Snipes’s poetic and powerful introduction to the conference program affirmed that anthropologists and students of anthropology have an ethical responsibility to stand up for diversity, stand against discrimination, stand with those at risk and suffering threats, and stand out in support of ethical research. The conference took place just two months after the inauguration of Donald Trump, a president who ran on a campaign to build a physical wall at the US–Mexico border, and whose words and actions were openly xenophobic, racist, Islamophobic, and sexist, constantly playing on people’s fear of “others.” At his inauguration, he promised “From this day forward, it’s going to be only America First,” an ethnocentric platform tied to the extraction of wealth from and great violence to other nations. While the United Nations decried one of the largest numbers of displaced people and refugees in the world, President Trump lowered

CHRISTINE KOVIC

the cap of refugees admitted to the United States and excluded refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Yet much of what is taking place under the current administration is not new. Rather, current policies only build on deep-rooted racism, xenophobia, and class inequalities that have been in place for years. As stated in the title of Paul Kramer's op-ed in the *New York Times*, "Trump's Anti-Immigrant Racism Represents an American Tradition." Take, for instance, Trump's promise to build "a great wall" between the United States and Mexico. For two decades, the US has intensified enforcement and militarization at its southern border, not to mention the 700 miles of border fencing that already exist. Upwards of 7,000 migrants have perished in attempts to cross the border or the southern US in dangerous conditions—deaths resulting directly from immigration and enforcement policies. Anthropologists challenge ethnocentrism because it entails much more than offensive words; it is the policies of exclusion that cause suffering and even death. In the case of current immigration and border policy in the United States, some lives are valued more than others, leaving working poor migrants, especially people of color, at risk of injury, assault, or death as they attempt to cross international borders.

This brief essay, drawn from my keynote address at the 2017 conference, focuses on anthropology as a tool for studying borders and bridges. Borders are at once physical boundaries within and between nations and less visible policies that create and sustain inequalities.¹ I point to some of the ways that anthropology can be useful in documenting the exclusion and racism of border policies through two case studies. The first is that of Central Americans attempting to cross Mexico *en route* to the United States, and the second is of Mexican and Central American migrants who perish in attempts to cross South Texas. Both cases illustrate the ways borders—physical and ideological—cause violence to those who are not defined as

legitimate members of the nation. At the same time, migrants themselves, activists, and organizations create multiple bridges across difference in attempts to challenge racism and support immigrant rights. As stated in the epigraph, migrants travel because they dream, and they seek to build lives free of violence.

I was attracted to Anthropology because of its potential to locate the ways policies, regardless of intention, can contribute to suffering. My training as a graduate student at City University of New York (CUNY) prepared me to challenge ethnocentrism and, in particular, to document and challenge exploitation in its multiple forms. When I began graduate school in 1990, I was most fortunate to be surrounded by a group of students and faculty who sought through anthropology to uncover “relationships of power and structures of inequality,” in the words of Leith Mullings, one my first professors in graduate school (2015, 5). We grappled with anthropology’s colonial history and sought out some of the early critiques of this perspective, reading Kathleen Gough, Dell Hymes, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, and Faye Harrison. In a graduate school located in mid-town Manhattan, we constantly connected what we were reading and discussing in the classroom to current events. We protested the US invasion of Iraq in 1991 (later named the First Gulf War), marched in the streets in 1992 demonstrating against the acquittal of officers who had been recorded on videotape beating Rodney King. This was also a time of budget cuts to higher education, with Governor Mario Cuomo proposing cutting the budget of all schools of the City University of New York by ten percent and raising tuition to help pay for the cuts. This sparked a student strike at the CUNY campuses, and the students at the Graduate Center “occupied” the building for ten days in 1991, demanding support for public higher education (McCaffrey, Kovic, and Menzies 2020). All of these events influenced my own relationships to anthropology and my research projects. To quote

CHRISTINE KOVIC

Leith Mullings, we saw that the circumstances surrounding us, “war, violence, racism, and poverty, were not ‘natural’ or given” but “created in a specific political and historic context” (2015, 5).

My own research over the past decade has centered on borders and border crossers, including the human rights of Central American and Mexican migrants at the Texas–Mexico border, in south Texas, and at Mexico’s “vertical border,” which extends from its southern border with Guatemala to the Rio Grande. The US concept of Homeland Security justifies the protection of certain groups of American citizens while excluding anyone defined as being outside the “homeland.” Contemporary security policies are part and parcel of American imperialism—that is, US law has a long history of making distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between those who are deserving of citizenship rights and those who may provide profit through low-paid work precisely because they are viewed as “deportable” and “disposable.” US immigration law is based on exclusion, with historic examples of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924. The Johnson–Reed Immigration Act of 1924 favored certain groups of immigrants as it limited entry of southern and eastern Europeans and large categories of Asians who were deemed undesirable (Molina 2014). Under President Eisenhower, the United States deported more than one million people from the US Southwest to Mexico—some of whom were US citizens—in a 1954 immigration enforcement policy named “Operation Wetback,” a racial slur (Ngai 2014). The 1995 Border Patrol initiative in San Diego, California, “Operation Gatekeeper,” increased enforcement near the urban area, pushing migrants to cross in isolated and dangerous conditions. The title “Gatekeeper” evokes the distinctions made at the border between those who are valued and those who are not allowed to enter.

In the contemporary period, large categories of working poor migrants are largely excluded from entering the United States through legal channels. Central Americans (principally from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) and Mexicans without large bank accounts are largely unable to obtain a visa to legally cross Mexico or to enter the US. These migrants cross Mexico in a dangerous journey in which they risk assault, rape, dismemberment, and death. They cross Mexico's southern and northern borders as well as the entire Mexican nation, a territory that has become a vertical border where they encounter violence at the hands of police, military, migration officials, narco-traffickers, and common criminals. In broad terms, security is defined as freedom from risk and danger; however, recent security policies created in the United States and Mexico produce the risk, danger, and human rights abuses that Central American migrants encounter. Instead of being protected by state agents and security policies, migrants become targets of these forces and are met with violence on their journey.

Migrants who cannot afford to pay *coyotes* (guides) to help them cross Mexico, ride atop the freight train, popularly known as *la bestia* (the beast) and now popularized in films such as *La Jaula de Oro: The Golden Dream*; *Sin Nombre*; *Which Way Home*; and Pedro Ultrera's *La Bestia*. The freight train provides a metaphor for global capitalism. The cargo moves inside cars, protected from the elements and sometimes with private security guards, while migrants ride atop the train, vulnerable to weather, power lines, and falling to the tracks. The working poor cross borders in dangerous conditions, while commodities and capital cross freely. Many Central Americans suffer injury or death on their journey through Mexico. These are not accidents but policy outcomes. To give but one example, in Apizaco, in the state of Tlaxcala in central Mexico, a series of concrete posts

CHRISTINE KOVIC

have been built surrounding the train tracks near a station. When migrants are injured by the posts as they jump from the train—posts deliberately placed—their injuries are not accidents.

Not everyone who crosses Mexico faces the violence of security. Those defined as marginal—those who “look” poor or Central American—are most likely to be stopped by security agents or targeted by organized criminals. This reveals one of the many ways borders create and reinforce inequalities. In Trinitaria, Mexico, the government built a huge security checkpoint in 2015, located just miles from the border with Guatemala. The Trinitaria “super checkpoint” is one of five planned for the southern border region. Every car, bus, motorcycle, and even bicycle must pass through an entire security complex named “Center for Comprehensive Care for Border Transit” (*Centro de Atención Integral al Tránsito Fronteriza* in Spanish). Migrants without visas attempt to avoid these checkpoints, traveling in clandestine conditions and increasing their vulnerability to assault. As a white woman, I pass through every time without revision, no request for a passport, not even a question. Security agents determine who can cross and who will be detained, a determination based on race and class. Indeed, indigenous Mexicans, particularly Mayans from Chiapas, have been detained in northern Mexico and “accused” of being in the country without permission (Lakhani 2016). These cases point both to the ways that racial profiling targets those with darker skin and the marginality of indigenous peoples within Mexico.

Policies also cross borders. Connecting the dots shows the close, but profoundly unequal, relationship between the United States, Mexico, and Central America and the ways US policies lead to the violence of security. So-called free trade policies, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), displaced small-scale rural producers due to the cheap and highly subsidized corn from

the US that flooded Mexico. US support of repressive regimes in Central America, including the military governments of El Salvador and Guatemala during the civil wars of the 1960s–1990s, in which tens of thousands were killed, leaves a long legacy of militarization and violence. In more recent times, the US government, through political pressure and funding, has pushed Mexico to close its southern border to Central Americans. Mexico’s narrowest point, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, just 120 miles at its narrowest point, is much smaller than the US–Mexico border, which spans close to 2,000 miles. In 2015, Mexico deported a record number of Central Americans, and, in 2016, it deported more than the United States, making it appear that the US is outsourcing border enforcement.

Activists and migrants are able to connect the dots of US policies to the violence of security. To give one story from a shelter in southern Mexico: In July 2010, when I was at the shelter Home of Mercy in Arriaga, Chiapas, news arrived that the freight train was preparing to leave, and everyone who was staying rushed to the railroad tracks about a mile away to stake out a place for themselves. When I later walked to the train myself and found the migrants waiting for it to depart, several were eager to talk to me. One man explained why he had left his home country, Honduras, and was now beginning his journey North. He asked if I had heard of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and explained that his family made shoes. With CAFTA, they could no longer compete with cheap imports, and now he was forced to search for work in the North. He presented a concise critique of “free trade” and also contested the label of criminal, insisting that leaving his country to look for work should not be considered a crime. After explaining the reasons he was going North, he paused, smiled, and said, “It’s ok, one day my son will be president of the United States.” Perhaps he was joking, yet his comment was an insistence on inclusion with full rights. If

CHRISTINE KOVIC

migrants see the powerful links between free trade agreements and the displacement of the working poor, those with power and privilege must also make these links. In short, the construction of “illegality” through borders serves as an unrecognized glue that legitimates exploitation.

The violence of security extends to the US–Mexico border and the southern United States. According to official US Border Patrol records, over 7,000 border crossers have perished along the US–Mexico border between 1998 and 2017. This averages more than one death per day. Hundreds die each year from heat exhaustion, drowning in the Rio Grande, car crashes, and other causes. In Texas, the state where I live, migrants die as they cross the US–Mexico border, and they also die in South Texas. In 2012, migrant deaths in Texas surpassed those in the state of Arizona; and, in 2014, deaths in the Rio Grande Valley sector (a region made up of 34 counties as defined by the US Border Patrol) surpassed those for the state of Arizona. Following scholars and activists who point to the structures behind these deaths, I label this violence “death by policy” to underscore the role of US immigration law, intensified enforcement, and neoliberal economic policies in causing these deaths.² Raquel Rubio Goldsmith uses the term “funnel effect” to describe the way increased enforcement channels migrants to dangerous areas where they may suffer injury and death.

This death count is far from complete, as it does not include those recovered on the Mexico side of the border and the many remains that are never recovered in the desert of Arizona and brush of South Texas. In Brooks County, just a four-hour drive from my home in Houston, hundreds of migrants have died in the past five years as they attempted to circumvent a border patrol checkpoint located 70 miles north of the border. This checkpoint and a parallel checkpoint in Sarita (Kenedy County) create what functions as a second

border for anyone who appears “foreign.” At these two checkpoints, one on Highway 281 and another on Highway 77, all northbound vehicles are stopped. Those who look like they do not belong are asked for documents. As a white woman, I never have been asked for any identification, and, most often, I am simply waived through the checkpoint.

Adding to the complexity and tragedy of the loss of life, local and state officials were not carrying out DNA testing—as required by Texas State Law for unidentified remains—in a standardized and coordinated manner to identify the dead. As such, migrants are “the new disappeared,” to use a term from the 1970s and 1980s to name those who disappeared in the Civil Wars and repressive military regimes in Central and South America.³ In June 2014, a group of anthropology students from the University of Indianapolis and Baylor University conducted an exhumation in Sacred Heart Cemetery in Brooks County, Texas. The cemetery is the site of burials of many of the Mexican and Central American migrants who died crossing South Texas, particularly the John and Jane Does or the unidentified migrants who cannot be returned to their families. The forensic anthropologists located 118 sets of human remains, buried haphazardly, without clear records, in biohazard trash bags, grocery bags, milk crates, or wrapped in cloth. A green plastic bag with one set of remains read “Dignity,” a reference to a funeral brand of the Houston-based Service Corporation. The news of the burials made front-page headlines in the US and elsewhere, with Mark Colette’s *Corpus Christi Caller Times* article titled “Mass Graves of Migrants Found in Falfurrias, Texas.” Although the media attention focused on the way the remains were buried, the scandal behind this is the lack of coordinated efforts to identify the dead when they are presumed to be border crossers in South Texas. Yet the burning issue more commonly ignored is the fact that border deaths happen in any

CHRISTINE KOVIC

case. Why should people die? Why do some die as they seek work, join their families, or flee violence in their home countries? Why are those with wealth able to travel freely, while those without must travel at great risk?

Countless acts of bridging, of solidarity with migrants, exist in Mexico, at the border, and in the United States. A network of shelters throughout Mexico and along the border, the vast majority connected to the Catholic Church, provide a relatively safe space for migrants to rest, share a meal, spend the night, and seek medical attention. Shelters, as well as human rights organizations, document abuses against migrants and challenge state officials who are responsible. Family members and migrants themselves organize searches for their loved ones and work to promote migrant rights. One story of a woman in South Texas illustrates the relentless persistence of families in seeking those who have disappeared. In 2014, a Guatemalan woman was traveling with other migrants through the South Texas brush in Brooks County when a Honduran woman in the group fell ill. The group was going to leave her behind, as is a common practice with guides, but the Guatemalan woman stayed with the Honduran and called for help. No one came and the woman's condition worsened. The Guatemalan woman went to seek assistance and got lost in the brush. Eventually, she found the highway, where she was picked up by Border Patrol. She begged them to search for the Honduran woman who had been left behind, but they refused. In just days, the Guatemalan woman was deported back to Guatemala. If she had not waited with the second woman, she likely would have reached her family in Virginia. From Guatemala, she kept calling the South Texas Human Rights Center in Falfurrias, Texas, sending a hand-drawn map to try to help locate the woman. Initially, her hope was that the woman was alive, but in time, she hoped her remains could be

recovered for her family. While some might view her as courageous or a good Samaritan, in the US she is defined as an illegal, a criminal.

Anthropologists have played an important role in writing rights, that is, in documenting human rights abuses in the United States and globally—but also in documenting the ways people organize to resist abuses and to promote human rights broadly. Anthropologists are able to connect the dots, that is, to trace concrete policies behind abuses, from so-called “security” policies, to immigration policies, and economic policies. In listening to the stories of migrants, anthropologists do not have talking points and narrow approaches to changes. Instead, anthropologists place stories within a broader political and economic context, documenting the ways borders produce and re-inforce inequalities, as well as the ways solidarity attempts to build bridges across differences.

Notes

1. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* conceptualizes the border as both a geographic space and a concept to understand identity and inequality.
2. Maria Jiménez (2009) uses the term “death by policy” to describe border deaths, drawing on the work of anthropologist Maurizio Albahari (2006).
3. Lynn Stephen (2008) writes of the “new disappeared, assassinated, and dead” to describe those who have met violence on the US–Mexico border in the contemporary period.

CHRISTINE KOVIC

Bibliography

- Albahari, Mauricio. 2006. *Death and the Modern State: Making Borders and Sovereignty at the Southern Edges of Europe*. San Diego: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California.
- Álvarez, Robert R. Jr. 1995. "The Mexican–U.S. Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 447–470.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands: La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Jiménez, Maria. 2009. *Humanitarian Crisis: Migrant Deaths at the U.S.–Mexico Border*. San Diego and Mexico City: American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego and Imperial Counties and Mexico's National Commission of Human Rights.
- Kramer, Paul. "Trump's Anti-Immigrant Racism Represents an American Tradition." *New York Times*, January 22, 2018.
- Lakhani, Nina. "Mexico Tortures Migrants—and Citizens—in Effort to Slow Central American Surge." *The Guardian*, April 4, 2016.
- McCaffrey, Katherine, Christine Kovic, and Charles Menzies. 2020. "On Strike: Student Activism, CUNY, and Engaged Anthropology." *Transforming Anthropology* 28 (2): 169–182.
- Molina, Natalia. 2014. *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mullings, Leith. 2015. "Anthropology Matters, Presidential Address." *American Anthropologist* 17 (1): 4–16.
- Ngai, Mae M. 2014. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stephen, Lynn. 2008. "Los Nuevos Desaparecidos y Muertos: Immigration, Militarization, Death and Disappearance on Mexico's Borders." In *Security Disarmed: Critical Perspectives on Gender, Race, and Militarization*, edited by Barbara Sutton, Sandra Morgen, and Julie Novkov, 79–100. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.