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Notes for an Anti-racist Feminism in the Wake of the Migrant Caravans

For Guadalupe and all the girls in Mesoamerica, those who migrate and those who manage to stay

In October 2018, the whole world watched the forced exodus of at least a dozen caravans led by more than twenty thousand migrants, mostly Hondurans, who were fleeing violence and misery, *maras* and *maquilas*, in the place where they were born. Along with Hondurans, the caravans also included Nicaraguans, students and campesinos, who were fleeing political persecution under Daniel Ortega's regime. Additionally, the caravans were composed of Salvadorian, Guatemalan, and Garifuna families, who carried the accumulation of many forced displacements in their bodies.

It was an exodus made up of families; some walked with breastfeeding children. There were even children under the age of fifteen, walking alone, but embraced by the thousands of caravaners who decided to walk en masse out of the shadows, into the full light of day. They walked along the continent's most dangerous highways that the circuits of mining extractivism, the drug industry's distribution routes, and large cities built at the mercy of the *maquiladoras* of large capital.

Between October 2018 and April 2019, the populations of major Mesoamerican cities saw contingents of mothers—with children in their arms, backpacks on their shoulders, and the determination to flee from nightmares featuring a diverse range of actors and story lines—pass through our everyday routines. The women who walked to preserve life explained to us—with their bodies, their walking, their strollers, their concrete but assertive

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words—where and what they were fleeing. Almost all of them agreed that, above all, they were fleeing from labor reform in Honduras, micro-violence of their peers (their husbands or family members), or the violence of gangs, hired killers, and/or police in the places from which they escaped. In a generalized way, they were also running from the unrest and uncertainty caused by the impunity given to those actors by their domestic governments.

The responses among those who listened to and saw the caravaners were varied. Some of us helped with water, food, and shelter. Some walked stretches with them and attempted to share their story by making the reasons for their exodus and their plan—to hand themselves over to the North American *migra* to demand political asylum, refugee status, papers—go viral on social media. Many of us put our bodies on the line and called for everyone to embrace the caravaners' walking. It is important to highlight the fact that people's response, beyond civil society organizations, was that of solidarity, of active and clear support, what we call radical hospitality. It was also that of stupefaction. The families that we saw walking mirrored us in many ways.

Elsewhere (Glockner 2019), I proposed describing the caravans of 2018 as, besides a form of migrant self-defense, an innovative form of transmigration in the region, an exercise of collective self-care, a rebellion against the global government of borders, more specifically against the effects of Plan Frontera Sur (Southern Border Plan, the Mexican version of the global policy that attempts to manage borders through externalization and securization) (Varela Huerta 2018). The newspaper *El Faro* proposed one of the best metaphors for the migrant caravans that attempted to challenge the neoliberalism and violence suffocating Central American when it called this exodus a virtual “refugee camp on the move” (Ramos 2018). We can add to this metaphor: the Central American exodus can be explained as a virtual refugee camp on the move crossing a territory in which governments have declared war on their citizens impoverished by neoliberalism.

These exoduses also received responses of institutional xenophobia, as the police forces of the countries that they passed through (Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States) “hunted” them, detained them without due process, and, ultimately, deported a large number of families. There were also examples of social racism and clear xenophobia, in which communities the region openly opposed the caravans on social media, in local mainstream media, and even with public protests in the places migrants passed through.

Examining these interconnected and complex social processes allows us to explain the motivations behind the exoduses, the conditions in which the caravans traveled across different countries, and the openly counter-insurgent response by the region's governments. These questions build on a

feminist interpretation of contemporary migration and are posed, more than a theoretical challenge, as an openly political challenge to women's movements on the continent.

This effort is based on accompaniment, on what we call an "emergency anthropology" (Re Cruz 2018), or the exercise of "walking by asking questions" with the caravaners. It is an ongoing investigative drift, along with the lives of those families trapped in apparatuses of confinement and waiting in the borderized areas of northern Mexico. We remain in a long distance dialogue with women deported from the United States and women who managed to cross many militarized borders to settle in North American cities, where the children who walked with them already go to school and play in parks in hyper-precarious neighborhoods, where they co-exist with those displaced from many other global wars.

I met all of these women interlocutors in the context of the Central American Caravan or Exodus in October 2018, when, as an activist, a Mexican mother, a professor specializing in migration, and a Mesoamerican feminist, I accompanied the women and their children in the caravan as they defied death and disrupted the grammar of migration. Those women provoked a crisis in the porno-necropolitics of re/presentation of migration and reminded us all of a concrete form of struggle to preserve one's own life and that of one's children against terror and death: migration.

Therefore, in this essay, I ask about the nature of this form of migrant political agency, which is both a novel form of transmigration and forced migration. Drawing on the epistemic proposal of feminist intersectionality (Viveros 2016), I outline some of the questions driving those of us who propose an anti-racist feminism: Are migrant caravans a rebellion against the global government of migration? What political imaginaries are practiced in the act of walking en masse in pursuit of life? What words, concepts, and frameworks are useful for analyzing those processes and understanding their complexity? How are these frameworks overflowed? How can we embrace, along with solidarity toward those who walk, this novel social phenomenon from the perspective of a social anthropology concerned with contemporary social movements?

Connecting Migrant Struggles and Feminisms

There is a subfield of migration literature that combines the sociology of social movements with that of migratory movements. We call that interdisciplinary perspective the "sociology of migrant struggles" (Varela Huerta 2015), a broad and multilingual debate analyzing migrants' collective actions,

their different expressions and modalities, strategies, actors, alliances, and contexts. Yet, not even that theoretical scaffolding was broad enough to build an effective interpretation in times such as these. On the other hand, the humanitarian crisis required of us then and continues requiring epistemological keys to interpret it.

Thus, this essay is an effort in the direction of the epistemological activism in which reality interpellates us. It is a wager that is both political and epistemological (since finding the forms with which to narrate experiences is also political), because the caravan, the women, men, and children who made it up, disturbed the grammar of migration that was in force up until they walked en masse.

By grammar of migration, I am referring to the discourses, but also the practices, used to understand, narrate, and govern the movement of persons today. Without exhausting that grammar, there is a premise (a fantasy shared by different actors) that migration can be governed to make it safe and orderly, so that it obeys the norms imposed by neoliberalism for crossing borders, and so that the people who migrate or are displaced remain in places where they manage to settle in legal ways. Institutions, experts, technicians, and the occasional specialized media outlet call these bids “migration management” (Ghosh 2000). These bids are spiced up with the language of liberal human rights, which, in the last two decades, has augmented the discursive battery with which governments, supranational institutions, and the domestic and multinational business class have “adorned” confinement practices for migrants, the displaced, and refugees in the world (Mezadra and Neilson 2013).

Therefore, to interpret how the caravans or exoduses of Central American families through Mesoamerica defy this grammar of migration, this work shares some initial lines of flight with contemporary feminist struggles, which became the hypotheses for writing this text.

The Migrant Caravans

In October 2018, a caravan of Honduran families self-organized through social media left San Pedro Sula heading toward the Mexico-US border. This caravan had a very concrete goal: cross three countries, without paying *coyotes*, walking together during the day, until they reached the border checkpoints that divide Latin America from the United States, where they would hand themselves over to US border agents to demand political asylum.

They were organized in assemblies by province or country, with the faithful and continuous accompaniment of nuns, anthropologists, and

young lawyers, witnessing the furtive appearance of false prophets, whether journalists, former political officials, priests, or young anti-border activists. As it advanced, the caravan began growing, both in number and in media attention, until it reached over twelve thousand people. Half of them were women and children, struggling to keep up with men who did not wait for them. They slept in city plazas or streets, or along extremely dangerous sections of highway. They endured winter-like temperatures at night and dehydration due to extreme heat during the day. They were interviewed (but also accompanied, embraced) by a parallel army of journalists, in addition to the bureaucrats and migration officials.

This caravan, which later the migrants themselves would call the “Central American Exodus,” took five weeks to cross Mexico, a border country and blockage point that deports nine out of every ten people who attempt to reach the United States from Mesoamerica thanks to the made-in-the-USA policies of “border externalization.” They did this on foot. Walking with backpacks and strollers. Suffering from “preventative” fumigation, hunger, thirst, dehydration, police harassment. But with their walking, they also uncovered a sanctuary country, composed of micro-practices of their peers, towns of impoverished families subsumed in logics of terror by indirect private armies (made up of hired guns and public officials that administer different criminal industries).

In southern Mexico, the caravan was received by municipal bands of Indigenous communities that, besides offering them beans and tortillas, embraced the exodus with music, astonishing the walkers. In the center of the country, the exodus was received in different points along the highway by groups of self-organized citizens that, as in the earthquake of 2017, prepared food, collected warm clothing, and distributed water and medical supplies to the families that walked in the Exodus.

As they approached the north, the United States, the solidarity diminished and xenophobia increased. Passing through small cities and large metropolises, the caravaners managed to reach Tijuana. Until its arrival at the border zone with the United States, the caravan could be understood as a political event. Once it reached the border city, it was confined to waiting and was cornered to the point of suffocation, becoming a humanitarian crisis in which the families tear-gassed by North American agents represent a symptom of contemporary neoliberalism.

Understanding the degree to which a counter-insurgency was in operation against this new form of migrant struggle, which was also an innovative strategy of transmigration, would be the subject of another essay, since there is a constant and complex rearrangement of the regional and domestic

strategies of the involved countries. However, it can be summarized in terms of three types of response: confinement, militarization, and mass deportation of families.

Let's continue focusing on interpreting the exodus as a practice of insurgency that disturbed the grammar of the terror industry in relation to migration. Indeed, it took away a still uncalculated amount of money from the *polleros*, kidnappers, and migration agents who extort the thousands of migrants who, every year, attempt to migrate or return home (to the US) after being deported. The exodus also upset the migration industry, the prison industry, the solidarity industry, migrant hospitality, because it challenged, with its size and by the leading role played by migrants themselves, how the movement of those collectives has been managed in Mexico up until now.

Thus, the exodus of families from Mesoamerica in caravans was an exercise of collective self-care that caused a semantic turn that still has not found precise signs. As all Copernican revolutions, it resists being crystalized into new paradigms. It generates more questions than answers: To what extent is flight of these women from their homes an anti-patriarchal strategy that opens horizons of life for those of us who stay? How do we, as feminist women, embrace those struggles?

My *intuition* is that understanding the Central American exodus as a political event involves comprehending the political power (*potencia*) of the imagination that the caravaners deployed based on three prisms:

- a) *The caravan as a rebellion*. Here, Silvia Federici's (2004) work on heretical rebellions that opposed, to the extent they could, the epochal transition from feudalism to capitalism provides us with many useful clues. It is a matter of struggles of subjects that are not connected ideologically, but whose manifest latent practices, of women and the self-government of their bodies and resources of everyday survival, threatened the old and the new regime (Federici 2004).
- b) *The caravan as a social movement of women preserving life*. The communitarian feminism of Julieta Paredes and Adriana Guzmán (2014) and Gladys Tzul Tzul's (2016) analysis of sustaining life through communitarian fabrics can explain the caravan as a women's struggle for life.
- c) *The caravan as insurgency*, transforming the grammar of the multitude (Virno 2003) to a different rhythm than the trans and postmodern struggles of the post-Marxist disco, insurgencies more at the rhythm of the Pachakuti outlined by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2011). These are struggles for autonomy that ensure survival at the margins of the death logic of neoliberal capitalism.
- d) *The caravan as a strategy of migrant self-defense*, of collective self-care (Glockner 2019), as a new type of migrant struggle. It is a form of recategorizing migrant political agency.

I think that if we put the categories of each prism to work in post-caravan dialogues with those who participated in them, the interpreters of migrations and feminisms will find certainties, echoes, and reflections.

By Way of Conclusion

At the First International Gathering of Women in Struggle, celebrated in Zapatista territory in March 2018 following an intense discussion among the eight thousand women who gathered there from all over the world, an agreement was reached to stay alive and celebrate living. That is why it is important to propose the caravans and exodus of families displaced from Central America by terror, misery, and patriarchal micro-violence as a women's struggle as well as a migrant struggle.

I hope this account from the sidelines—based on following the caravanners' on the ground and from cyberspace merely as a chronicler—brings us closer to a migrant and anti-racist feminism that is only beginning to clearly trace a common agenda. This approach summarizes the knowledges of women's struggles that have preserved, through different practices, the communitarian fabrics that defend not only the lives of Amerindians but also the nature where we inhabit, the Mother Earth.

It is a concrete form of feminism in which the protagonists are women and children who move to leave behind terror and misery. Migration and the forms of collective self-care described above contribute to this approach, with their strategies, struggles, becomings, pains, rage, nightmares, dreams, ways of naming the barbarism and of maintaining hope, mechanisms for preserving life, flights, new repertoires of protests, and new meanings of a global feminist demand: the right to a livable life.

Thus, this is an initial chronicle attempting to weave together a memory of the caravans. It will be the many Guadalupes (the name of the first baby born in the exodus), arriving in universities in Mexico and the United States as organic intellectuals (Levins Morales 2004) who will be able to narrate the genealogies of the struggles of their grandmothers to keep their mothers alive, alive and safe from the maras, the narcos, and the drunken boyfriends who beat them.

May this memory exercise then serve as an epilogue to what we must encourage in universities and the feminisms inhabiting the classroom: the narratives of the daughters of the exodus. So that all of the Guadalupes born in the refugee camps on the move elaborate their undergraduate theses about their mothers' struggles, when, after years, they manage to overcome the violations and the confinement in the cells of "iceboxes" where they were

separated. May it support them when they survive the years that came after the *creíble*, what migrants call the credible fear interview to justify an asylum claim with US judges; the time in shackles that turned them into instruments of condemnation, into literal necropolitical apparatuses sown in communities who then avoided them for fear that they themselves would be detained and deported; the difficult times of afternoon homework, in which mothers could barely help their children because of their monolingualism, which is what happens when you work “without papers” or are made illegal by the state and market in workdays of up to twelve hours for twenty years, during which you communicate with your coworkers in Spanish and therefore do not learn English.

Guadalupe, her friends, her cousins who arrived later with a coyote, or those who were waiting for her on the other side of the wall, will be the ones who tell us, in autobiographical and ethnographic works, what the hell the migrant caravan was about. They will explain the framework in which their mothers, their sisters, their cousins, and they themselves won the right to stay alive and, even if exploited and growing up in the midst of hyperracist societies, were also happy, celebrating life among the diaspora that managed to flee from terror.

These girls—and all those who survive the total *war against migrants* unleashed today by governments and indirect private armies in many countries—will allow us to comprehend that historical moment I propose understanding as a grammatical shift, a moment in which the victims became caravaners and taught many of us women, mothers, daughters, and friends that, in their own way, they practice an emergent, migrant, and anti-racist feminism.

—Translated by Liz Mason-Deese

Note

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