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"A Mass Exodus in Rebellion" – The Migrant Caravans: A View from the Eyes of Honduran Journalist Inmer Gerardo Chévez

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Abstract *This article analyzes the migrant caravans as a strategy of resistance to the war against migrants in transit to the United States, exacerbated during the pandemic. This is the edited transcript of an interview conducted with Honduran journalist Inmer Gerardo Chevez, correspondent of Radio Progreso. Having travelled the Central American and Mexican routes accompanying on foot the transit of thousands of migrants since 2018, Chevez is a notable eyewitness and expert* in situ *of the Caravans. The interview confirms that the caravan has become one of the premier forms in which Latin American migrants, including agricultural workers, struggle and their spatial dispute with the heterogeneous border control regime of the Americas are materialized. The text also reflects on the role that photography and critical journalism can play in the face of the contemporary anti-migrant policy turn. We conclude with an interpretation of the effects that the militarized violence against Latin American migrants in transit to the United States is having across the region.*

Keywords migrant caravans; photography; investigative journalism; violence; farmworkers; borders; migrant struggle

The first migrant caravan of 2021 left Honduras for the United States during the first fortnight of January.[1] In spite of the restrictions on mobility imposed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the caravanners advanced steadily until they were stopped by Guatemalan state forces on January 17. On that day,

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roughly 50 kilometers from the Honduras-Guatemala border, in the town of Vado Hondo (in the Department of Chiquimula), hundreds of soldiers and police brutally repressed the members of the caravan, and at that exact moment and from a precise angle of vision, Guatemalan photojournalist Sandra Sebastián captured the melee (see Figure 1). Every photograph pauses movement and fixes time and space, creating the impression of verisimilitude from the restlessness of real life. In Sebastián's shot, nonetheless, the larger force of the bodies in collision and combat produced a tumult that extended beyond the frame of the image. Those bodies belonged to thousands of migrants –women and men, youth and children – who had only just begun their struggle to cross multiple borders, and were fighting to continue en route, refusing to surrender against the disproportionate force and organized violence of the state. Sebastián's photograph could not be clearer: while these migrants carried small backpacks and wore masks and handkerchiefs to protect themselves from the virus, the state forces wore combat boots and protective helmets, wielded shields and truncheons, and deployed teargas. The combat was radically unequal: hundreds of migrants, who had the power and momentum of their bodies as their sole weapon to sustain their movement and preserve their lives, confronted military and police who had been mobilized into an armed human wall to unceremoniously deploy the state's "legitimate" violence against them. The absence of sound also characterizes every photograph. Yet, this overflowing whirlpool of bodies in combat also seemed to produce a sound: one could almost hear the roar of the migrant struggle erupting out of this picture, their cry of rejection against the oppression of militarized borders in a time of pandemic.

In a single frame, replete with chaotic movement and the echoes of resistance, Sandra Sebastián captured how the Guatemalan state, with ominous violence and without hesitation, attacked a specific target: the bodies of impoverished migrants – most of them coming from Honduras, but also from South American, Caribbean, African, and Asian countries – whose sole "offense" had been to intrude upon a "national" territory where they were deemed not to belong, in search of a safe place to live a dignified life. For its potency and precision, Sebastián's photograph instantly became iconic and circulated in major newspapers across Latin America, the United States, and Europe.[2] At a historic moment when media and political attention was mainly focused on the global health crisis, her photo drew attention to one of the most important phenomena of contemporary Latin American migration dynamics: the migrant caravans.

[2] Sebastián's photo accompanies, for instance, Sandra Cuffe's note for the *Los Angeles Times*, Diana Fuente's article for *Radio France International* and Jesús Cordero's article for *La Noticia* (see Cuffe, 2021; Fuentes 2021; and Cordero, 2021).

Figure 1. Guatemalan security forces prevent the passage of the Caravana Migrante 2021 in Vado Hondo, Guatemala, January 17, 2021 (source: Picture Alliance/Associated Press – Sandra Sebastian).

Since 2018, the migratory corridor connecting Central America with Mexico and the United States has become a space of contestation configured between state hostility and violence, on the one hand, and the solidarity and mutual aid of hundreds and even thousands of migrants transiting in groups and who have formed themselves into hyper-visible caravans, on the other.[3] The great majority of migrants who have mobilized in caravans originate from Central America, one of the most important global regions expelling migrants on a massive scale (IOM, 2021). Deep poverty, inequality, marginalization, and state and criminalized violence have been longstanding triggers of Central American migration to the U.S. (González, 2022). Moreover, climate change has accelerated the social crises provoked by natural disasters as well as more long-term environmental devastation, particularly in rural areas, increasing the propensity of agricultural workers and destitute peasants to migrate. This is because Central American countries encompass the so-called Dry Corridor, a trans-border region characterized by aggravated climatic and ecological devastation arising mainly from the conjuncture of the El Niño phenomenon

[3] Extensive testimony and research have been produced relating to the Migrant Caravans, including caravaners' written testimony (e.g., Oviedo, 2020), and studies by researchers in Mexico and Central America (e.g., Frank-Vitale, 2019; Gandini et al., 2020; Glockner, 2019; Hernández-Hernández, 2019; Varela & McLean, 2021; Neira, 2019; Paris Pombo & Montes, 2020; Varela, 2020).

and the onslaught of an extractive economy, especially regional mining mega-projects (WFP, 2021; Álvarez et al., 2015). The Dry Corridor now faces rising aridity and severe hydro-climatic events directly impacting subsistence agriculture, increasing food insecurity, and expanding impoverishment among rural populations (Gotlieb & Girón, 2020). Because more than half of the 10 million people living across this corridor are engaged in agriculture, they are increasingly being forced to abandon their land and migrate internally or abroad (FAO, 2021). Consequently, on a sustained average, an estimated 380,000 Central Americans, including a very high proportion of agricultural workers and peasants, have made their way to the U.S. every year for several years (WFP, 2021). Inevitably, they also comprise a significant proportion of the massive caravans.

Between 6,000 to 9,000 migrants took part in the first caravan of 2021, making it one of the largest caravans to date (El Faro, 2021). Notably, in contrast to the 2018 and 2019 caravans, this mass mobilization occurred during the pandemic, during which Guatemala declared a state of exception in its seven departments, closed and militarized its borders, and repressed, gassed and beat migrants on the pretext of containing the virus (Cuffe, 2021). If this caravan failed to reach Mexican territory, it was due to state-sponsored violence deliberately used along the land border to contain this mass formation of migrant mobility. In fact, just a few days after the combat in Vado Hondo, the governments of the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala agreed to prohibit the passage of any other caravan through their territories, purportedly due to the risk of the pandemic (AFP, 2021). Mexico warned that it would not allow “the irregular entry of caravans of migrants” and sent 500 troops, including military and police, to guard its border with Guatemala (Deutsche Welle, 2021). Furthermore, following the repression in Vado Hondo, in a clear demonstration of how U.S. remote control operates against illegalized migrant mobilities across the region, Michael G. Kozak, the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs of the U.S. State Department, praised the Guatemalan government on Twitter for “fulfilling its responsibilities by responding appropriately and legally to the recent migrant caravan” (De Ros, 2021).

Photographs have the power to illustrate the cruelty and barbarism that the violence of war leaves on human lives. Susan Sontag suggests that a photograph “is like a quotation, a maxim or a proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall” (2003, p. 20). In an era of overflowing conflicts and an overload of dispersed and heterogeneous information, an image often serves as the most probable way to crystalize and apprehend violent events, to confront them, to recall them and to make them real, particularly for those of us who are not in the place where those events happen, encountering them only from a great and attenuating distance (Sontag,

2003, pp. 19-20).[4] Despite the indisputable if equivocal role of photography, it can of course never document the totality of complex and violent realities; it only offers particular frames through which to see such realities. Therefore, everything else that inevitably remains outside the shock produced by any photographic frame remains, on the other hand, to be captured by those who narrate, contextualize, historicize, problematize and record in words what exceeds and escapes any single image (Sontag, 2003, pp. 17-21).

Sandra Sebastián's photograph supplies a maxim, in Sontag's terms: an aphoristic expression of a general or fundamental truth. In a single shot, she captured the war declared against impoverished migrants in transit from south to north through the Americas to reach the U.S. But, beyond the shock of the image of brutal and one-sided combat in Vado Hondo, what are the other sorts of stories and contexts that inevitably precede, exceed, and ensue from the moment captured by this photograph? How might we hope to apprehend all the complexity not captured in this image? What does this warlike scene reveal about the current moment in Latin America, and indeed the wider world?

The migrant caravans, we contend, represent one of the premier forms of migrant struggle against the heterogeneous border control regime that violently traverses the Americas. The caravans enact through human mobility a literal physical movement that is simultaneously a kind of collective social movement and also, not infrequently, the articulation, however subtle or understated, of a political protest and a social critique with profound ramifications. First and foremost, by organizing a collective form of self-protection through the caravans, migrants and refugees engage in a form of mutual aid that mobilizes the force of their numbers to appropriate space and thereby transform it through the larger production of a mobile and ephemeral space, and thus realize a kind of pragmatic politics of migrant and refugee solidarity. Inasmuch as the migrants' mass mobilizations occupy public space, they also disrupt and commonly defy the authority of the state powers that ordinarily presume to control such spaces, above all the borders and boundaries that are deployed to demarcate and define such spaces as state spaces and ostensibly sovereign territories. In these ways, "unauthorized" (illegalized) migratory movements – and the migrant caravans in a particularly potent way – embody and enact a politics of incorrigibility (De Genova, 2010, 2017).

With the intention of exploring the more complex contexts of the migrant caravans so stunningly captured in Sebastián's photo, two months after the combat in Vado Hondo, on March 26, 2021, we interviewed by videocall Inmer Gerardo Chévez, a Honduran journalist who has reported for 20 years for Radio

[4] In her 1973 essay "On Photography," Susan Sontag made a rather more damning critique of the fragmentary and episodic character of all photography: "the act of photographing... is a way of encouraging, at least tacitly, often explicitly, the continuation of whatever is going on. To take a photograph is to have an interest in things as they are, in an immutable status quo" (Sontag, 2006, p. 28).

Progreso, a Jesuit radio station located in El Progreso, Honduras.[5] "The voice that is with you" – the radio station's motto – expresses their mission to accompany and illuminate the struggles of the most unprotected social sectors and to denounce social injustices (Radio Progreso, 2021). It is no coincidence, then, that Chévez covered the events surrounding the migrant caravans of 2018 and 2019, and that he broadcasted live the brutal combat between migrants and the police and military in Vado Hondo, in January 2021. We met Inmer Gerardo during the online *Conversatorio*, "Caravans and Other Migrant Struggles in Mesoamerica," organized by the transnational digital research project *(Im)Mobility in the Americas and COVID-19*,[6] which took place on January 28, 2021, and was dedicated to expanding an understanding of the events in Vado Hondo. Having accompanied migrants on foot along the Central American and Mexican routes, this Honduran journalist is a remarkable witness to the social realities that thousands endure across Central America. Still more specifically, because of the powerful combination of his analytical and political acuity with his deep compassion and sensitivity, Chévez holds a rare expertise into the lived dynamics of the migrant caravans. The text below is an edited transcript of our conversation with this witness to contemporary militarized violence against migrants in transit across Latin America en route to the United States. With this testimonial, we aim to amplify the type of narrative that helps provide a more in-depth appreciation of the sociopolitical context that always eludes any photograph.

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Nicholas De Genova: Why did you start researching and reporting on the topic of migration?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: Migration has marked my life. I myself am a migrant. I was born in the municipality of Aguaqueterique, in the department of La Paz, Honduras. At the age of 13, I migrated to El Progreso, a city in the north of my country. Not only have I been an internal migrant, I also tried to reach the United States: I was 16 years old when I left for Mexico. It was 2003. At that time migrating was not as dangerous as it is now. People already talked about kidnappings and organized crime, but violence against migrants was not as exacerbated as it currently is. Those who paid the *coyote* got through and

[5] Chévez's reports may be located on Radio Progreso's website, in the "Migrant Caravans" section: https://radioprogresohn.net/caravana-de-migrantes-2021/.
[6] The full session is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUHbjrlHcc8. For more information on the project, see https://www.inmovilidadamericas.org.

those who travelled on their own got through. There were problems en route, but the migrant crossing was relatively calm. Today it is the opposite.

As a teenager, I heard that everyone was going to the U.S. to make dollars. At that age, I also wanted to make dollars. Besides, I had cousins, neighbors, and relatives who had migrated and lived in New York and Miami. One day I got my strength up, made up my mind, and left. That's exactly how people migrate: at the least expected moment, they make the final decision. I left Honduras with two other friends. On the way through Guatemala, the group grew and there were 10 of us on the road. That's how we Central Americans migrate: we leave in small groups that grow along the way as a strategy for protection en route. Entering Mexico was not difficult, the complicated part came later. In Chiapas, we took the "Train of Death" to move northwards.[7] While we were on our way, Mexican thieves climbed up onto the train cars. They tried to rob us, but since we were a group of 10, they gave up. At the same time, we could hear that on another distant car a fight between some other migrants and other assailants was taking place. Suddenly, we all saw how one of our fellow migrants was thrown into the void, we also heard how his body, in seconds, fell to the rails, and we immediately felt, with the abrupt swaying movement of the train, that it had passed over him. That experience was extremely hard and filled us with fear. We were teenagers, only 13, 14, 15 and 16 years old: we were alone facing all that brutality.

After everything we experienced on the train, we saw more deaths. We were frightened, but at the same time I could feel in my skin the solidarity of my fellow migrants and the care among us on the journey. This is the experience of those who migrate by land: they move between fear, death, and solidarity. That's how we made it to Tijuana. Once there, and about to cross the border and enter the U.S., I asked myself where I would be more useful, whether outside or inside my country, whether living as an undocumented migrant in some big city in the U.S. or fighting to transform the conditions in my country. It was at that very moment when I turned around and returned to Honduras. Since then, I have borne witness to the enormous vulnerability and violence that migrants face. Because of what I experienced firsthand and all that I have seen, I have focused my journalistic work on investigating and reporting on migration.

Soledad Álvarez Velasco: How would you explain the incessant contemporary Central American migration?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: Apart from poverty, urban gangs, and the onslaught of natural events, people are leaving Central America, especially Honduras,

[7] The Train of Death is also known as *La Bestia* ("The Beast"), and refers to a freight train that starts its route in Chiapas carrying, in extremely dangerous conditions, thousands of undocumented migrants as they transit through Mexican territory.

because of rural territorial displacement caused by the impact of extractive projects. Mining, hydroelectric dams, or deforestation are examples of such projects, which are implemented without any prior consultation in Honduran rural localities and slowly but surely affect the environment and the lives of the population. From my work as a journalist in the communities where these extractive projects are located, I know what people are asking: What will happen to our river now that a hydroelectric dam will be built? What will happen to our land that is being contaminated? What will happen to our hills that are the source of water for our communities, while the mining companies exploit them to extract gold and silver?

People in Honduran communities ask themselves these questions and begin to organize and oppose extractive projects. But do you know what ends up happening? The extractive companies, whether national, international or mixed capital, and the Honduran state institutions, begin to divide the communities as part of a strategy to placate community opposition and effectively implement these projects. They do not always succeed in dividing the communities and then the strategy becomes more complex, as the extractive companies and the state as a whole criminalize community defenders, threaten them with death, and even rape them. If the opposition persists, then they assassinate the community leaders. This systemic violence is what ends up forcing people to migrate from their communities. This is how these extractive projects gain ground, while people are displaced from their own land, particularly peasants and agricultural workers. They are forced to migrate to the interior or to the cities, but Honduras is a very small country and violence is everywhere: there is no escape. For example, if you go from Colón to Tegucigalpa, in such a small country, the reality does not change, and the threat persists. In addition, 95% of the murders in the country go unpunished; only 5% have been investigated. These are official statistics. You can’t go to the police because in Honduras there are strong links between the police, the *gatilleros* (hired killers), and organized crime. You can’t trust anyone here. That’s why when people say they leave Honduras because they have a death threat, that’s totally true, that’s our reality. Added to that is poverty: out of every 10 Hondurans, seven live below the poverty line, and of those seven, four live in abject misery, surviving on 24 lempiras or one dollar a day. It's impossible! Such is the situation of violence, poverty, hopelessness, and despair that people have no choice but to migrate, to escape from here. In fact, that’s the only way out: to leave and look for a safe and livable place.

Nicholas De Genova: What is the history of the migrant caravans?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: Forms of collective migration existed before. For example, the Caravan of Migrant Mothers, who have been searching for their missing children for more than 15 years, or the Migrant *Viacrucis* [Stations of the Cross], which have been leaving for Mexico for more than a decade during Holy Week. The caravans of 2018 and 2019 were also a form of collective

migration that arises from that imminent need of Central Americans, particularly Hondurans, to leave their countries of origin to save their lives. At the same time, it is a form of migration to protect themselves from the increased state and criminalized violence present throughout the land routes that run across Guatemala and Mexico, to reach the U.S. In the beginning, the migrant caravans seemed to be something that did not make sense and it was not well understood how it was possible for people to self-convene through social networks to head out on the *caminata del migrante* (migrant's walk). That was how it was called the first time. But when the first caravan left Honduras, in October 2018, and those hundreds of people multiplied to thousands – I am talking about 5,000 or 6,000 caravan participants en route – then we understood that migrating in caravans has power and is in itself an undeniable force.

Soledad Álvarez Velasco: How would you define the migrant caravans?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: The term "caravan" seems to me a bit weak for conveying all that these migrant movements imply. To me, more than a "caravan," this is a mass exodus of human beings in rebellion, fleeing marginalization and violence in their own land. In Honduras, the number of people leaving the country unrecorded has fluctuated between 400 and 500 people a day. This steady number of people leave in silence, anonymously. At midnight or early morning, they get on buses to reach Guatemala and then continue to Mexico, alone to face the harsh violence en route. Those people who leave alone and in complete silence are the most screwed and the most impoverished. The caravans are therefore a rebellion of those people, who are telling us, 'I no longer want to leave home in anonymity or in silence, nor do I want to go into debt paying *coyotes*: I want to leave visibly and protected as part of a collectivity.' This mass exodus in rebellion has a particular feature: it has a woman's face. For hundreds of single women, often very young, with two, three, and even four or five children, are among the most frequent participants in the caravans. In Honduras, a woman is murdered every 14 hours. Many of the women who travel in caravans are fleeing not only from misery, but also from a man who mistreats them, threatens them and their children with death. That is why these collective rebellions with such a large presence of women are a strategy for saving their own lives.

Nicholas De Genova: How have the caravans been organized?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: Self-organization and self-generated calls to join through social networks have characterized the migrant caravans since 2018. Migrants create WhatsApp or Facebook groups and begin to give their opinions on when they should leave, from where, what route to follow, and in this way, they organize themselves. Little by little, they spread the word through social media groups, even via Twitter. When I have searched for "*caravana migrante*" in any of these networks, I got dozens of opinions, responses, and replies to the

call within a minute. And, from the multiple interviews I have done with migrants who have left, I can tell you that their decision occurs within a few days, even just a few hours, before the caravans depart. Even when they have already left, there are people who join later, en route. The political discourses or biased press that try to say that the caravans have been organized by members of organized crime, or that they have received resources from political parties or organizations, simply do not know anything about this reality: they underestimate it and above all they do not understand the power of migrant self-organization and this self-generated power of calling forth others to join up. Impoverished and very humble people, some who are emigrating for the first time or others who have been deported from the U.S., Mexico or Guatemala, gather and travel by caravan, on foot or hitchhiking. There are children, adolescents, families, single women, and especially single mothers with their children. Few of the people who move in the caravan have any resources. Only in very rare cases do migrants who are guided by *coyotes* take part in the caravans. The vast majority are self-organized migrants and hence this is a self-organized mobilization. In fact, those migrants who have previous experience become leaders and guides, for they have accumulated knowledge and a better understanding of the route and the dangers. While on the road, people take care of each other, share food, places to rest, and care for the children. They also have discussions, and sing together in joy, as part of the experience and expression of a collective hope.

There are also conflicts within the caravan, as is to be expected. There are people who take advantage of others, and there are also infiltrators from the Honduran, Guatemalan and Mexican governments. When reporting on the road, I have been able to confirm that military and police camouflage themselves as migrants and infiltrate these massive formations of migration, not only to understand the dynamics of the caravans, but also to provoke disturbances or internal conflicts, in order to disrupt and disarm them. When the latest caravan left in January 2021, I remember that I saw, for instance, two strange men at the Grand Terminal in San Pedro Sula. I saw them again in Vado Hondo. They looked like two migrants who were part of the caravan, but when the fighting broke out, I recognized one of them who was no longer on the side of the migrants, but coordinating a platoon of military carrying out the repression. He was en route with the migrants and was an infiltrator. In live transmissions, I pointed him out publicly. The presence of government infiltrators only seeks to undermine and disarticulate the organization of the caravans.

I think that the caravans of 2018 and 2019 were better organized than those of 2020 and 2021. For the organization of those first mass caravans, there were even assemblies convened to make collective decisions upon diverse topics, such as which routes to take. The pandemic prevented migrants from coming together in assemblies to organize the two most recent caravans [October 2020 and January 2021] and above all has allowed the strengthening of police and military repression on the journey. The events in Vado Hondo are a clear

example of this, yet they are not the only ones. In October 2020, when the pandemic was already underway, a migrant caravan reached Tecún Umán, the border town between Guatemala and Mexico. They could not advance further: 90% were stopped by thousands of [Mexican] National Guard troops, which the government of Mexican President Manuel López Obrador had sent to contain the caravan en route. As caravans have become more visible as such a powerful form of collective migration, the governments of the region have increased border control and violence against them, something which has directly affected their organization and mobility northwards.

Soledad Álvarez Velasco: How have the Honduran, Guatemalan, Mexican and U.S. governments responded to the caravans?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: When the caravans first burst upon the scene in 2018, Mexican President López Obrador initially gave a welcoming response and provided an opening, supposedly granting humanitarian visas to the migrants who arrived on Mexican territory or managed to reach Tijuana. Some crossed into the U.S. and others stayed on the other side of the wall. However, this first reception was temporary and took a clear turn towards violence and repression. The anti-immigrant and racist discourse of Donald Trump, who stigmatized the caravans as "invasions" of impoverished migrants, triggered this turn.

The geopolitical weight of the U.S. was not long in coming and Trump threatened López Obrador to cease any sovereign effort of sustaining a welcoming and open migratory policy, demanding reinforcement of border control, at the risk of jeopardizing Mexico's economic interests. The Mexican president had no choice but to surrender to U.S. demands and Trump's "green wall," materialized in thousands of helmets and guns, was extended to Mexico's southern border. This wall, nevertheless, has expanded further south to the point that it currently starts in Guatemala. Based on my journalistic work, I can assert with total clarity that Honduran, Guatemalan and Mexican police and military are organized and coordinated, being charged with repressing and dismantling the caravans along the way. What happened in January 2021 in Vado Hondo is a sharp example of this. The Honduran and Guatemalan police and military played a very important role in this event. In Honduras itself, roadside operations were mounted to repeatedly stop people until they reached the border with Guatemala. This tactic has a purpose: to tire out and wear down the caravanners. When they eventually arrive in Guatemala, they are more exhausted, and it is easier for the police and the military to dismantle the caravans. Added to this, there are infiltrators, and of course the brutal force of military and police repression at the border is also doing its part. This is why I do not think it will be as easy for new caravans to organize and leave from Central American countries to the U.S. after traversing Mexico, as they did in 2018, unless they are more numerous than they already were, and this means that more than 9,000 caravaners must gather and travel together.

After what we witnessed in Vado Hondo, it is evident that Trump’s anti-immigrant hostility spread throughout the region and the U.S. southern border now starts in Guatemala and runs through all of Mexico’s territory. Migrants in the region are criminalized, the militarized response and the war scenario is testimony of this, and all of this has been initiated and organized by the U.S. That is why I am very skeptical that Joe Biden’s arrival will change anything about this violent reality. There is a lot of speculation among migrants, but also a lot of misinformation that puts the migrant population at risk. Word has spread that Biden will open the U.S. borders and that is why many people are leaving Honduras, not in caravans, but in smaller groups, in drips and drabs. Biden will continue to do the same, perhaps with some cosmetic measures. Those extended green walls stretching south that Trump reinforced remain intact, however, because as part of their cooperation with the U.S., Mexico and Guatemala do not want to let migrants get through.

Nicholas De Genova: How has it been for you to work as a journalist covering the migrant caravans?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: As part of my journalistic work, I have taken part in the caravans because that is how I get to know the stories of ordinary people. My commitment, and that of Radio Progreso, is with the impoverished, the most vulnerable sectors, such as our migrants. I collect and show their stories. In the mainstream media or in the government’s discourse, they only talk about cold numbers: they only say there are 6,000 migrants in the caravan, for instance, and that’s it. Behind the surface, in each one of those numbers, there are stories of pain and suffering, there are lives and hopes. I cover stories of daily life and struggle and make them visible so that another face of migration may be known, another reality that oftentimes is not seen, and therefore not understood. For example, a few days ago I interviewed a 38-year-old mother. She looked like a 50-year-old woman because of her harsh life. She was a single mother with four children with whom she lives on the bank of one of San Pedro Sula’s rivers, through which the city’s sewage flows. Like her, 110,000 other people live in similar houses, made out of pieces of sheet metal and cardboard, without any basic services. She worked as a recycler of rubbish and every day collected plastic and metal cans. With the rest of recyclers, she used to leave her house at 6:00 in the morning and return home at 6:00 in the evening. In 12 hours of daily work, walking along the riverbank, she managed to catch the few objects she could, to then sell them to other recyclers. With this job, she earned between three and five dollars a day, an amount which is in no way enough for five people to survive on. Her children used to go to school, but with the pandemic they had to stay at home and took classes over the internet. To sustain their remote learning, she had to buy a more high-powered charger for her cell phone, which cost her 200 lempiras, or 8 dollars. In other words, she had to work two full days so that her children could have online classes. Can you imagine how hard life is for this woman? While I was

doing the report, I asked her if she wanted to migrate. She replied, 'I can't take it anymore, we have no hope here. I don't care if I suffer here, on the road, or in the U.S., I just want to leave.' She told me that she hoped that in the remainder of 2021 another caravan would depart so she could join it and leave. Those are the kind of stories I register and make visible. My work radically differs from mainstream media. Although I also report the voice of the military or migration authorities, many journalists are close to the military and migration authorities, and completely distant from the migrants. My position is the complete opposite: my main interest is to give voice to those people who struggle, survive, and who in this case come out to join the caravans.

Soledad Álvarez Velasco: What has been the most challenging part of this work? Have you ever felt threatened?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: What is very difficult for me is the human pain. It is very painful to see mothers alone walking with their children for 12 or 16 hours without eating; children crying because they can no longer stand the sun, their hunger, or the physical effort of being in transit. It is easy to criticize, but no one knows everyone's story. Mothers would rather take their children with them than leave them in Honduras. When you walk alongside them on the road, you can come to understand the care and love of these mothers; despite their tiredness, they carry their children in their arms and on their chests. When I look at this, I ask myself, 'is there a safer and more tender place than a mom's arms?' There is not. So that's how they go, trying to make their way. Repression by the military and police in Guatemala and Mexico then follows, and that is what the caravanners must confront. And thus opens another very hard side of this whole story: the injustice provoked by the deployment of excessive state force. Witnessing this sort of repression, I have realized how migrants are brutally mistreated. The state's armed forces treat them worse than any criminal or drug trafficker. In fact, migrants use the exact same routes to cross borders in caravans that traffickers use to transport drugs. Yet, I have never seen state forces in the region deploying as many police or military personnel or as much repressive violence against drug traffickers as they have done against migrants, including young people, single mothers, and small children. In the combat in Vado Hondo, for instance, the violence was excessive. I saw it and recorded it: soldiers beating from behind a mother who was alone with her young daughter and her six-month-old baby. This migrant woman, like a sea lion, grabbed her daughters and protected them, while she cried out loud from the pain, rage, and impotence left by the injustice of such unbridled state violence. What I saw was an inexcusable scene of warfare. Because of this, I put aside my microphone and said to the soldier, 'Don't you feel remorse for hitting a mother who is with her children?' I strongly rebuked him and told him, 'If you are going to hit her, you will have to hit me first, because you have no right to mistreat her.' All this is simply to tell you that more than direct threats against me, there are risks and threats along the entire route for the

entire migrant population and therefore also for those of us who accompany them, due to the excessive state violence. In the same combat in Vado Hondo, soldiers dressed as civilians began to throw stones. Though I managed to run, a stone landed between the cameraman and me. That stone did not fall on anyone's head because we ran and hid, but those stones could have easily killed us. The dangers that the military and police pose to the lives of migrants and journalists are a constant on the roads just as the heartbreaking suffering caused by this violence.

Nicholas De Genova: Which migrant caravan stories stay with you?

Inmer Gerardo Chévez: The stories of suffering and human misery have greatly impacted on me personally. Seeing the impact of state violence and the suffering of children and their mothers fills me with rage, because it is a clear sign of injustice. I have a nine-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter, so I see my children in these caravans. The stories that impress me the most are those of the mothers who do everything to protect their children en route, no matter what kind of danger they must confront. After reporting on the caravans, I spend a month or two with nightmares and this causes me a lot of emotional distress.

I consider myself a witness to the migrant struggle, to that rebellion, but also to that brutal violence. All the voices of migrants and their stories stay with me, as well as their immeasurable strength. They migrate because they have no other option, and the treatment they receive en route is a disgrace to their dignity, inhumane. Guatemala and Mexico are countries that expel huge numbers of migrants. They are countries with a double standard: they ask for respect for their own citizens who migrate, but openly violate migrants from other places. We ask for respect, for humane treatment, at least in the neighboring countries of the region. The U.S. has its own independent immigration policy, which it will not change and which it has been exporting. The problem is in our countries, which do nothing to ensure a dignified and fair treatment for the migrant population. In Honduras, the political class is corrupt, violent, and has led the country to an acute impoverishment that does not provide any real options for its citizens to live. As long as the structural conditions are not changed, this will not stop; people will continue to leave, and the violence will only escalate. The panorama is very harsh. As the caravans are dismantled by the brutal violence, people begin to return home. People return without money. Many people are left penniless in the streets, begging. There is a state of total abandonment. While they migrate in the caravans, they protect themselves collectively, but they return home alone, unprotected. Now, this arrival is only temporary. In Honduras, people only have two options: you stay and die, or you leave and save your life. That's how it is. So, people leave again. Perhaps they no longer do it in caravans, because of everything I have explained, but with other strategies: in drips and drabs, in silence and anonymity. Whether they migrate by trickles or in mass caravans,

these are forced migrations; people are forced to escape because their lives are in danger and this is not mere verbiage, it is a reality. That is why people prefer to cross borders to fight for their lives.

* * *

After the first caravan of 2021 was brutally broken up in Guatemala, as we were editing this interview and as Inmer Gerardo Chévez warned us, mass departures of migrants from Honduras as well as migration by "trickles" to the U.S., to use his expression, have multiplied by the thousands. The accumulating longer-term environmental devastation caused by rampant extractivist enterprises as well as climate change and increasing natural disaster events likewise continues to undermine the prospects for sustaining life in the countryside, forcing destitute peasants and agricultural workers to migrate. The lethal convergence of these economic, social, environmental, public health, and political crises has devastated the lives of the most vulnerable populations in the Americas and has predictably multiplied migration to the world's largest migratory destination: the United States.

In April 2021, the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol conducted nearly 178,000 apprehensions at the southern border of the U.S. (US Customs & Border Protection, 2021), almost 60% more than in 2019 (Kanno-Youngs, 2021a). In fact, the numbers recorded in 2021 are the highest since March 2001 (Castronuovo, 2021). These numbers include not only Honduran migrants, but hundreds of thousands of people, adults and minors, coming mostly from other Central American countries, but also from Mexico, South America, the Caribbean, as well as Africa and Asia (Jordan, 2021). Given that migrants are sometimes apprehended more than once, but these repeated attempts by the same individuals are not evident in the gross numbers of arrests recorded by border authorities, apprehension data is never a straightforward indicator of actual migratory crossings. Nonetheless, these data do provide a rough indicator of the ebb and flow of border crossings. Due to this massive upsurge in the arrival of migrants, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris visited Guatemala and Mexico between June 6 and 8, 2021. The objective of her first international trip was to launch a bilateral effort purportedly to address the root causes of mass migration to the U.S., particularly from Central America (Kanno-Youngs, 2021b). Faced with the complexity of a reality either completely unknown to her or that she simply disregarded and denied, the only response she managed to give was a blunt warning addressed to potential Central American migrants, such as those who have mobilized in the caravans depicted by Inmer Gerardo Chévez; she proclaimed bluntly:

> I want to be clear with the people of this region who are thinking of making that dangerous journey to the border between Mexico and the United States: Do not

> come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border, and I believe that if you come to our border, you will be turned back. (BBC News, 2021)

The gaps between being targeted with militarized repression in a protracted war against migrants (like so many of those who have traveled to the United States, either in caravans, small handfuls, or solo), those bearing witness *in situ* (such as Sandra Sebastián and Inmer Gerardo Chévez), and those seeking or subjected to news and images of that scene of border violence, as captured by journalists and photojournalists (such as ourselves and probably the great majority of readers of this text), expose the uneven and heterogeneous positions of greater or lesser privilege we occupy in an obscenely unequal and hierarchical world. Reflecting on the role of war photographs, Susan Sontag did not fail to note the uncomfortable privilege of "being a spectator of the calamities taking place in another country" (2003, p. 17). With acuity, she recognized, "war tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins" (2003, p. 9), and she wondered – and demanded of us as spectators – how we can bear to see those images of pain, tearing, dismemberment, and ruin without discomfort, without condolence, without reacting viscerally, without politicizing. To observe war from a distance is to have the privilege of being situated in a place where one can elude the death and ruin that has been wreaked upon others (Sontag, 2003, p. 37).

These glaring inequalities of wealth and power become still more acute and take on altogether more sinister dimensions when the war makers themselves enter the frame. The privilege granted by governmental power allows Kamala Harris to make an utterly preposterous exhortation: do not come. How, in the name of their safety, can she warn migrants not to come to the United States when it was precisely the imperialist interests and the interventionist policy of the state she serves that instigated and sustained the Central American civil wars of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, which ruined people's lives and prospects and triggered the contemporary era of migratory exodus? How does she presume to advise Honduran migrants not to come when the most recent coup d'état in Honduras was sponsored and superintended by the Obama administration, for which today's President Biden served as Vice President? How can she pretend to prevent people from leaving a devastated country like Honduras, where U.S.-owned extractive companies have dispossessed people of land and forced peasants and agricultural workers to migrate? How can she avert people from traveling through dangerous routes that have arisen as a result of the U.S. outsourcing its border control policy across the region? How does she purport to advise all the prospective migrants whose illegalized labor is required as an exploitable and supremely disposable (deportable) source of value to sustain the growth of the U.S. economy, the largest economy in the world, simply not to come?

Only the myopia of power prevents those who govern from seeing the havoc wrought by the violence of their systems. When that violence is naturalized as

the mere maintenance of territorial sovereignty by upholding borders and immigration regimes, its damaging effects are still further normalized – at least until the regime of border control is confronted by the raw power and incorrigible force of the autonomy and subjectivity of mass human mobility (De Genova 2010). Migrants, of course, have no need of being counselled by those in power whether to put their lives at risk by undertaking perilous border-crossing journeys. For decades, their communities and networks have collectively accumulated migratory knowledge in practice, en route, through the exercise of their freedom of movement, in ways that have informed their complex decisions about whether, when, where, and how to leave their countries and embark on risky journeys to reach the U.S. as a vital strategy for pursuing their aspirations for life, and sometimes for outright survival. Migrants have no need of the sanctimonious and presumptuous advice of someone who occupies a privileged position of power, precisely because they are already intimately acquainted with the examples of others like themselves who have occupied a position of precarity and danger and sometimes a place of death. With the smug condescension of governmental rationality, the myopia of power seldom even contemplates the possibility of migrants' capacities for self-organization, collective protection, and struggle, until such times as that capacity is amplified and multiplied on the scale of the caravans, whereby migrants confront and survive the radical asymmetry of border enforcement regimes that increasingly adopt and deploy the tactics of warfare.

The violence against migrants and refugees across Central America and other parts of the continent has nonetheless been instigated and substantially orchestrated by the U.S. border control regime. Although implemented with varying intensity and deploying heterogenous mechanisms across the Americas, this border violence of migration governance has increasingly ruined migrants' bodies and lives, resulted in the disappearance and death of migrants en route, and torn apart families and communities. Mexican, Central and South American, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants in transit will not heed the self-serving warnings of the voice of power that cynically disregards or dissimulates its own past and present responsibilities for the social and political conditions that foster ever more migration as a strategy of desertion and escape. Migrants and refugees will disobey and defy the prohibitions of power and its ever more violent threats of recrimination, as they have done for decades. This "massive exodus of human beings in rebellion fleeing marginalization and violence in their own land," as Inmer Gerardo Chévez so succinctly puts it, will not cease, and therefore cannot stop crossing borders and subverting border control and immigration regimes. They will not stop because their recalcitrant and illegalized movement is commonly an existential battle for their lives. As comparatively privileged spectators, observing such struggles at a safe distance from these scenes of warlike violence and rebellious defiance, we are summoned to not only sympathize with the border struggles of migrants and refugees, but also to be profoundly and permanently unsettled by these events, and to remain estranged from the reassuring comforts and

safety of our presumptive sedentarism. In other words, we are obliged to respond to the urgent demands of the migrants’ mass exodus and to politicize the exercise of their freedom of movement as rebellion. These migrant struggles thus reveal fundamental truths about what it means for us collectively to envision how to live livable lives in a global historical present that unceasingly threatens to violently foreclose the future for the vast majority of humankind. With Chévez, then, we may discern in the migrant caravans “an undeniable force” – one that that aspires to remake the conditions of possibility for forging another way of life simply by making a way in the world to move through and against a cruel and vicious obstacle course and forward toward an alternative and more viable horizon.

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