

*El camino del horror:*

Central Americans in Transit Through Mexico, Human Rights Violations, and La Casa de la  
Caridad Cristiana

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## ABSTRACT

### *El camino del horror:*

Central Americans in Transit Through Mexico, Human Rights Violations, and la Casa de la Caridad Cristiana

Raquel De González Argüelles Rosel

This research contributes to contemporary anthropological research on human migrations through the analysis of the stage where migrants are neither in their place of origin nor in their final destination, but in a more ambiguous location: that of transit. The actors are undocumented Central American migrants who engage in a migratory process by undertaking a long and dangerous journey throughout the Mexican territory, risking their physical and emotional well being. Many have been victims of human rights violations and accidents - assaults, kidnappings, rape, torture, hunger, mutilation, and death -.

Parallel to the routes taken by migrants there are advocacy centers known as Casas de Migrantes that depend on support from the Catholic Church. The Casas are centers of support and hospitality that provide temporary accommodation, meals, clothing, spiritual support, medical services, and seek to defend and promote human rights. Fieldwork was conducted for a total of four months and a half in the city of San Luis Potosi by volunteering at La Casa de la Caridad Cristiana.

Central American undocumented migrants are an invisible and vulnerable population, victims of all kinds of abuses. Mexico criminalizes Central American migration, thus criminalizing at the same time misery and social neglect, the reality of Central American migrants whose only sin is trying to escape poverty and reach the United States. Ironically this is the same situation of Mexican migrants to the U.S.

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## List of Acronyms

**ALBA**- Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*)

**CCC**- Casa de la Caridad Cristiana

**CAFTA**- Central American Free Trade Agreement

**CIDH**- Inter-American Human Rights Commission (*Comisión Inter.-Americana de los Derechos Humanos*)

**CNDH**- National Commission of Human Rights (*Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*)

**COLSAN**- Colegio de San Luis Potosí

**DPMH** - Pastoral Dimension of Human Mobility (*Dimension Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana*,

**DR- CAFTA**- Dominican Republic- Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement

**FTAA**- Free Trade Area of the Americas

**INEGI**- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía

**INM**- Instituto Nacional de Migración

**IADB**- Inter-American Development Bank

**IMF**- International Monetary Fund

**NAFTA**- North American Free Trade Agreement

**PAN**- National Action Party (*Partido Accion Nacional*)

**PPP**- Puebla Panama Plan

**PRI**- Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*)

**PROCEDE**- Program for Certification of Rights to Ejido Lands, (*Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares*)

**SLP**- San Luis Potosí

**SPP**- Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America

**UNAM**- Universidad Autónoma de México

**UNID**- Universidad Ineteramericana para el Desarrollo

**WTO**- World Trade Organization

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### *1.1 Migration and its Paradoxes*

For not having anything, migrants leave it all;  
they walk searching for life and find death;  
they want to exist and at the same time be invisible;  
they are pushed to deserted zones and nobody takes responsibility;  
they love so much their family that they have to leave them;  
walls to prevent migratory flows are constructed, yet some are let inside when  
needed;  
they are called heroes and are treated as criminals;  
their death is lamented and many of the bodies rest in the desert covered by  
the sand;  
they do not know how to get to the place that they determined as their  
destination and require the services of those who trick them;  
even though they travel by group they are always alone;  
they are sentenced to travel clandestinely and then are lectured for traveling  
clandestinely;  
they need the state's protection and receive the least amount of it;  
food is denied to them even when they are the ones who produce it;  
they are offended and are told that their presence offends;  
they are denied visas while punished for traveling without them;  
they are accused of being aggressors while they get shot in the back;  
they aspire for a better life and they are deep in the swamp where the worst of

the human condition is waiting for them;  
they are not trusted but they are in charge of those we care about the most;  
governments ignore them while depending on their remittances;  
they are paid half the salary of regular workers and it's said that they harm the  
economy of the receiving countries;  
police are supposed to safeguard human beings, but they assault, threaten,  
kidnap, violate, and kill them (Pantoja, 2009), [translation from Spanish  
by the author].

### **1.2 My Research**

Currently Mexico is simultaneously experiencing a triple condition: emigration, immigration and transit. First, emigration occurs mainly to the United States, with whom Mexico shares a border of 3,152 kilometers. Durand and Massey (2007) state that in the last fifteen years, close to 98 per cent of the total population that leaves the country goes to the U.S., while no more than two per cent goes to Canada. In addition, they indicate that no other migratory flow to the U.S., with the exception of the Mexican, has lasted more than a hundred years. Second, Mexico experiences immigration because it hosts Central American workers who have migrated to the south-east of Mexico. Third, Mexico experiences transit migration because individuals from Central and South America travel to the north within the national frontiers of Mexico. Mexico's strategic geographical location allows fluidity from south to north.

My interest is in migrations, more specifically, the migratory flow of Central Americans who move from south to north, or vice versa, within the Mexican territory. This research seeks to contribute to contemporary anthropological research on human

migrations through the analysis of the stage where migrants are neither in their place of origin nor in their final destination, but in a more ambiguous location: that of transit.

The distance between the southern to the northern border is long. It is not a matter of hours but of days, weeks, or even months to travel; along the journey there are risks and dangers as in the case of violence committed by organized crime, corruption and extortion by authority figures such as municipal and federal police, the border patrol, and members of the army. Migrants who take these risks to transit through Mexico are undocumented, which leads them to seek to remain invisible and to be considered risk factors for sectors of the Mexican society and consequently criminalized.

Central Americans' mobility is caused by social and natural catastrophes, such as poverty, persecution, gang-related violence, droughts, or famine. These circumstances push many to embark on the journey of transiting through Mexico and risking their physical and emotional integrity. They may or may not reach their final destination, but even if they do it is not guaranteed that their life is out of danger. The lack of documentation will make them partially invisible because of constant fear of detention and deportation. Also, it will prevent them being granted social rights and services. For these reasons this movement will be conceptualized as forced migration.

Moreover, forced migration from Central America has produced the formation of solidarity and advocacy networks whose main goal is to promote the respect of human rights and social justice. This is the case of the Casa de la Caridad Cristiana (CCC) located in the city of San Luis Potosi. It provides shelter, food, medical services, spiritual and pastoral assistance to migrants in transit through Mexican territory, who may have been victims of the dangers that exist in the journey. Fieldwork for this research was

conducted for a period of four and a half months at the Casa, or CCC (these two terms will be used interchangeably to refer to the same thing).

Throughout this thesis I use the term *migrants* to refer to the Central American individuals in transit to the U.S., and who I met at the CCC. I use this term because they refer to themselves as migrants, the staff of the Casa refer to them as migrants, journal articles and news refer to them as migrants, and generally Mexican civil society refer to them as migrants. I also use the term “undocumented migrants” and “migrants in transit” to refer to the same population.

The guiding research question of this thesis is: What is the role of advocacy networks in the process of transit migration of Central American migrants who may have suffered human rights violations? Other questions of my research include: Why do migrants stay in transit and how do they experience this situation? How does the state react to transit migration? What are the interrelationships of the CCC with other institutions directly concerned with migration, more specifically with the Catholic Church? How are human rights being violated? How is the discourse of human rights being used at the CCC?

The anthropology of migration is an area of research that has been expanding dramatically and to which I desire to contribute with my present work. Besides the documentation of the phenomenon of migration per se, my research investigates the social dimension of contemporary movement patterns. It is crucial to give a voice to individuals involved and to learn from their particularities, not only with the goal of portraying their lives but with advocacy in an attempt for social change towards equality and inclusion.

### 1.3 Description of the CCC

The Casa de la Caridad Cristiana de la Arquidiócesis de San Luis Potosí (CCC) is a sanctuary that provides shelter and welcomes hundreds of migrants who need a place to stay and humanitarian assistance (physical, spiritual, and physiological attention). This is on an everyday basis, 24 hours a day, and 365 day a year. Its goals include:

- 1 To attempt the integral assistance of every single individual, particularly of those who live in conditions of extreme poverty and marginality;
- 2 to defend human beings and their rights as such;
- 3 to organize programs that urge the eradication of poverty and that promote solidarity;
- 4 to train community leaders who promote the achievement of the integral development of individuals and communities; and,
- 5 humanitarian help directed toward migrants (particularly Central Americans from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua), to those who cross the Diocese in conditions of vulnerability and seriously damaged in terms of nutrition and health.

The humanitarian attention and assistance that is conducted by the Pastoral de Migrantes takes very peculiar forms because its clientele is always changing by the transitory population in motion. In such a context the institution is involved in a dynamic manner through diverse actions that are needed to achieve its objective. The community that receives the migrants is constituted by a variety of actors: organisms connected with the church, youth groups, schools, other organizations of civil society, and the discretionary support of state and municipal authorities.

The CCC has approximately 10 paid employees with a salary (the director, driver, person in charge of the entrance, kitchen areas, etc.). However, the majority of people working in the CCC are volunteers; some with fixed schedules and others that go some days to help in different ways. The total is approximately 25 people. Often, the CCC counts on the aid of Jesuit volunteers in different periods of the year.

The first shelter was opened in 1980. It was constructed to lodge up to 35 people in optimal conditions. Yet, since 2002, the numbers of people requiring these services increased significantly. On average the CCC receives 800 to 1000 people each month (CCC, 2009). In the last four-month-period of the year 2009, 65.5 per cent were originally from Honduras, 15.06 per cent from El Salvador, 14.55 per cent from Guatemala, 4.16 per cent from Nicaragua, and the remaining 0.28 per cent are from other places, including Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Colombia (Pastoral, In La Red Seminario de la Arquidiócesis de San Luis Potosi, 2010).

Humanitarian assistance to migrants has been offered for 30 years. The migratory flow has been growing unexpectedly in the last six years, mainly as a result of war and conflicts such as the refugee crisis in the decade of the 1980s and the aftermaths in Central American countries. Also, natural catastrophes, such as hurricane Mitch in Honduras, have increased poverty and thus emigration.

Geographically, the project is developed in the crossing of the ways that mark the migratory route towards the four cardinal points. SLP is in the center of Mexico, thus it can be said to be a forced step for the migratory flows that aim towards the U.S.

The CCC does not encourage or promote migration. Rather the CCC provides shelter to individuals - hungry, half-naked, ill, lacking hope, marked by physical violence

and frustration - who knock on their doors daily. In light of this situation and due to Christian conviction, the organization claims that it cannot remain at the margin.

Not only has the CCC attempted to look after those in need. It also aids in the process of creating awareness of the migrants' family and social reality in the country of origin. By means of presentations and discussions of different subjects, the CCC urges migrants to rethink and reflect about their journey by verifying their initial and achieved goals. On occasions, migrants desist and return to their country of origin.

#### **1.4 Inside the Casa**

The entrance of the Casa has a gate with a bell on the side. About a meter after the gate there is a big wooden door that does not allow one to see inside. After the door there is a small room that looks like an office: it has a desk, a computer, three black chairs, and lockers. This room is where migrants who are arriving have to register themselves and fill out a form that asks them for their name, age, place of origin, occupation, years of education completed, number of children, religion, and if they have been victims of a human rights violation. They are asked to leave their personal belongings in the lockers; they will be returned to them when leaving the house. After this procedure they go inside the house and the person in charge will search their pockets and personal belongings inside of a bathroom, which is immediately in the left side when entering the house. If it is a man, a man will do the checking, if it is a woman, a woman will do it. This is to make sure that they are not bringing in weapons and drugs. If someone is carrying these items they will be confiscated in order to be able to enter the Casa.

While I was in the Casa four men were working in this area. There has to be a person there 24 hours a day, so they rotate shifts. Also, it is important to mention that

depending on the season of the year it may be required for at least two people to be there because there are times when more than 100 individuals stop by on a daily basis.

When one enters the house and turns right there is a small corridor that leads to a room (approximate distance four meters); the room is used mainly as the dining room and meetings. It has four large tables with benches made out of metal. There is also a TV and a DVD player. There are two big refrigerators and a freezer for food storage. If one continues walking straight down the corridor I mentioned, there is a door that leads to two other rooms, the first one is the *ropería*, or the storage room for clothing. And the other room is the women's dormitory. The latter has single and triple beds; it is dark, and seems messy because of all the beds that are inside. It could easily fit 30 individuals. In the *ropería* there is always a volunteer that works there and is in charge of organizing the clothes and giving them away, for free, to the migrants that are arriving. Also, during the winter he or she will be giving out coats, socks, sweaters, as people may need them. The volunteer of this area is not a member of the staff, but a Central American migrant. There are several volunteers of this nature; they are people who are going to stay longer than one to three days in the house and who have shown signs of honesty and willingness to work. When someone is in a difficult situation such as waiting to receive money, medical incapacity, etc. they may talk to the director or a social worker from the Casa and they may be welcomed to stay. Since these volunteers are very likely to leave the house at some point to continue their journey, they are constantly changing.

On the other side of the dining room there is an entrance to another room. The Casa is in the form of a rectangle and has a corridor all around. This other room is the kitchen, which is divided in three. The first room serves to store food, mainly bread. The

house receives incredible amounts of bread from COSTCO and Wal-Mart, most of which is not consumed and is often donated to a church that is beside the house so that it can be delivered to poor people. One will usually see this room full of different kinds of bread, tortillas, pastries, biscuits. There is also a microwave and kitchen utensils. In the second room there are two gas grills used for cooking. There is a third room in the back that is the place where the volunteers cook; the fruits and vegetables are also stored there. The kitchen volunteers are migrants, yet there is a member of the staff that supervises what they cook. The meals that are prepared basically depend on what is available; all is donated. Big grocery stores from SLP regularly donate fruit, vegetables, and as I said tons of bread. What is often missing are items like oil, rice, beans, which are often purchased by the profit made by the *tiendita* inside the Casa.

If one exits this room and continues to the other side of the rectangle, then one arrives at a patio. The closest thing beside the entrance of the kitchen is a pile of dishes, bowls, plates, knives, forks, spoons, glasses. This is because when it is time to eat, people make a line right outside of this entrance that goes into the patio. They grab the dishes, go inside, get their food, and continue walking straight until reaching the dining room, where they sit down and enjoy their meal. Beside this pile of dishes, there is the *tiendita*. It is a structure made of metal that bears the logo of Coca Cola. This company supplied it with the condition that the CCC will only sell their products, and that Coca Cola will deliver the products when needed. It has a door on the side, and from the front it has to be opened because it remains closed like a big metal box. Inside there is a tall chair, behind the refrigerator also from Coca Cola, and some other products are sold, such as cookies, shampoo, lip balm, soap, razors, cigarettes, candy, instant soups, coffee, etc. On the other

side, in front of the door we had products called *Bokado* (snacks), including chips and peanuts. Every Friday the supplier comes to provide more; they included diverse type of chips and peanuts. We also had a CD player and radio. In the front there was a machine to boil water, for the soups and the coffee, and a little box to keep the money. Also in the store we had pamphlets with useful information for migrants. For example, numbers of what to do in case of emergency during their journey, where to report a dead body, what are their rights, the location of other Casas del Migrante. I was in charge of this store for my last two months, opening from 9am to 3pm, and then I would close to go have supper. Then I would reopen until 6 or sometimes 7pm. I enjoyed working in this spot of the house because it was a key place to have contact with the migrants. Almost everyone will come to buy something, or to ask for the price of an item, also to ask for information, tips, or simply to talk to me. I played music that they liked, such as *reggeaton* and *bachata*, popular music genres in Central America. I even burned CDs with this type of music. If I was to play other music styles someone would approach me and ask me if I had *reggeaton* or *bachata*, so I ended up really liking the rhythm, plus I spent close to 10 hours a day for three months hearing it.

I talked to a minimum of 10 individuals a day; it was a strategic place to be. Besides I enjoyed getting to know so many people and hearing their stories. I do not know why but I gained the trust of many. Those who were there a couple of days would come to talk to me as well, of course there were many that would not tell their stories, but the majority did. I guess I was approachable and I had the time and listened when people talked to me, and also they wanted to share their stories with someone. While listening to stories and getting to know many individuals I felt frustration, anger, sadness, and rage

when they told me about the things that happened to them, and knowing how vulnerable they are. In addition to a great disappointment towards the government of the country and the hypocrisy of many Mexicans, authorities and civil society, for asking the U.S. to respect to the human rights of Mexicans when Mexican authorities do not respect Central Americans inside the territory.

On the other side of the *tiendita* one finds the “laundry place”. Here there are five sinks made out of concrete, attached to the wall. Above them there are small mirrors; people use them to shave, do their hair, or for plucking their eyebrows. I was surprised by this last habit; most of the Honduran men I met will pluck their eyebrows with tweezers. Thus, the sinks are not used only to wash clothes but for personal care. The house did not have laundry facilities like washing and drying machines, but the sinks served that purpose. And to dry the clothes they will just hang them on cords that were hung across the patio, in the center of the house. Due to the weather the clothes dry relatively fast. Right in front of the sinks there is a well, a hole in the ground that has water.

If one would continue walking from where the sinks are, right in the corner, there are stairs made out of metal. The men’s dormitories and bathrooms are upstairs. Three big rooms with single, double, and triple beds (around 50). The bathrooms had 15 showers. Downstairs if one turns left, one faces the patio. As I said before the house was in the form of a rectangle, which had rooms around and the center is an open area. This style of construction is characteristic of houses that are located in downtown San Luis. They were constructed when the Spaniards conquered Mexico. The patio is divided in two by a room that has big walls, this room is the office, and the division is used to divide the area of women from the common area. The common area is the area downstairs from

the men's rooms. It has chairs and benches, the clothes were hanging in that area, and this space is used to stage activities since there is enough free space. Also, in the corner of the patio, opposite from the stairs, there is a phone and someone in charge of it. This phone is a line from the house and Central Americans are able to use it for long distance calls, yet it is not free, they have to pay around five pesos for a minute (40 cents).

In the corridor where this phone is, there are four doors before reaching the entrance of the house. The first is the storage room (they have food items, cleaning products). The next one is the room for those who are sick and need to be separated from the rest; it has two beds and a bathroom. The next room is the doctor's office which has a bathroom. Then, there is another bathroom (where the inspections of those who arrive take place). These three bathrooms are also for women, since they do not have a whole area of bathrooms for women as the house has for the men. This is because the majority is men, close to 90 per cent.

In front of the doctor's office there is the entrance to the office, the room that divides the patio into two. Inside there are four desks, a computer, and doors for storage office items. There are also many documents, including all the forms of those who arrived; they are separated in folders monthly. The people who work in the office are the director of the house, the person in charge of the money transfers for the migrants. This is a service provided by the house that serves the migrants who need to have money sent to them. Since they do not have identification or legal documentation they cannot receive money under their name, but they can receive under the name of the person in charge. From Monday to Friday she collects the codes for the wired money and in the afternoons she goes to Western Union to get the money. She comes back to the CCC and delivers the

cash. In the office there is also a social worker in charge of the area of human rights; she has a salary and works part-time. There is a volunteer in charge of social work and human rights who finished her period of volunteering in the house last January 15<sup>th</sup>. Another volunteer from Germany who arrived at the Casa one week before me, and is going to stay there for a year. The majority of the volunteers are channeled to the Casa through the international Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

In the women's area there are two phones on the wall. There is a Central American volunteer working in this area. On this phone one cannot make phone calls, only receive them. The idea is that the other phone could be used to call the person that needed to be contacted and then giving him or her the phone number so that they could call them at the casa and not spend money. The volunteer in charge will answer the phone and with a microphone he will call the name of the person who has a phone call waiting. Beside there were four more phones that could be used with a phone card. Often, we will make a list of those who needed phone calls and someone will go to a store outside to bring the cards. I did this trip countless times.

Inside of the house, more precisely outside of the office there is a big poster board with the daily schedule. It shows the activities that are going to be performed or take place at certain times. For example, 7am Walking up, 8am breakfast, 9am morning prayer, 10am showers are open, 11am cleaning of the floors, 3pm main meal is served, 4:30 television, playing DVD or TV shows, 8pm dinner is served, 9pm bed time. Everyone is asked to participate in the prayers. However, if someone does not wish to do so, it is not an obligation as long as he or she shows respect and remains in silence while others pray.

Inside the office there are monthly schedules hanging on the walls, which focus on the activities, conferences, and planned visits of diverse groups to the house. There is an activity almost every day. On Monday afternoons a man from the Human Rights Commission would come to give a talk to the migrants. On Tuesdays a social worker would give a talk on sexuality and family planning. Wednesdays, girls from a beauty institute would cut the hair of those who wanted to have a hair cut done (these girls did it for free). On Thursdays, the physician from the house would give a talk. On Fridays, students from the Instituto Hispano Inglés (a secondary school) will come to sing, play games and give out food, personal hygiene items, or candy. On Sundays, two nuns would come to pray and perform a mass. Other activities that took place in the house happened only once in a while, the activities just mentioned were regular, took place every week. The other activities were, for example, visits from students of different schools, journalists, talks for the staff, and visits of the priest.

Another important point is the situation of individuals inside the house who are not able to leave the house because once they leave they are not allowed to come back. I talked before about “volunteer migrants” who will stay for long periods inside the house without being able to go out. Yet, the director and other members of the staff invited them once in a while to leave the house to do an activity, for example, going to a park, walking downtown, going to have dinner, etc. I did this a few times: I would ask the director's permission and I would go somewhere in the city with the individual or with a small group. Yet, I was not allowed to go by myself; another member of the staff would come with us. Usually I would ask “my partner” to come with us, a guy with whom I worked in the *tiendita*.

The month of December is time to party, get together, and celebrate. In Mexico the traditional *posadas* take place during this time. They consist of celebrations where people light candles and sing a song that has to do with the Virgin Mary and Joseph asking for a place to stay for her to give birth. The action of asking for a place to stay in Spanish is referred as asking for *posada*. The celebration has piñatas, and food. Different groups went to make *posadas* at the house; groups from schools, universities, organizations, or private organized groups. It was fun for the staff and for the individuals who happened to be passing through the house on those days.

### 1.5 Thesis Organization

In the following chapters I examine the stage of transit in the migratory process of Central Americans who depart from their places of origin - Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua - in an attempt to reach the United States. I also document human rights violations that are taking place throughout the transit country: Mexico; and the advocacy networks that have emerged to help migrants through their route. I focus on the CCC, where I volunteered and conducted fieldwork for this project.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology of my research conducted at the CCC. I describe the field site, research methods, participants, and I included a section on self-reflexivity.

Chapter 3 provides the geopolitical context that is necessary to understand the current situation of Mexico in the context of transit migration and its relationship with Central America. Additionally, the chapter presents background information on Central American migration in Mexico.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to describing the train, referred to by the migrants as *la*

*bestia*. The cargo train is the main means of transportation and the railroads are where violence and abuses are constantly perpetuated. Since the train is a fundamental element in Central American's experiences through Mexico this chapter is necessary to provide the context to understand the stories that follow in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 5 and 6 are dedicated to life stories of a few of the individuals I encountered in the field. Chapter 7 provides a conclusion and analysis of the findings of my ethnographic research.

Last, chapter 8 recapitulates my experience of having gone back to the field. After five months back in Montreal I decided to go back to the place where I originally conducted my original research. Thus, I went back and I dedicated six weeks to volunteering at the CCC. It is crucial to note that the majority of the data that I used throughout my thesis was gathered during my first volunteering experience at the Casa; this includes the life stories, organization of the CCC, the staff, statistics, and interviews. Yet, I did make a few changes and complemented the chapters on the train and the conclusion and analysis after coming back.

## **CHAPTER II: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Upon arriving**

I booked a ticket to fly to Mexico at the end of September 2009. Once in Mexico I decided to take a couple of days off before starting my fieldwork. One evening I joined some of my old friends on a terrace, friends I have known since high school when I was living in SLP. As we were enjoying the good weather and the talk, Alejandro arrived and sat with us for a few moments. He is an old friend of mine and knew everyone else at the table. As the conversation went on, my friends inquired about my reasons for being in San Luis Potosi, so I talked about my plans to do fieldwork for the next coming months. Alejandro was listening carefully, and immediately suggested that I should talk to his mother and that he would arrange a meeting. His mother was the director of the Human Rights Commission of the State of San Luis Potosi for a period of eight years.

As he promised, Alejandro arranged the meeting and the following week the three of us met in a restaurant to have lunch and discuss the matter. After talking for a couple of hours, I became very interested and found myself admiring her work. She talked to me about the Casa de la Caridad Cristiana (CCC), its work, the administration, the connections with the Human Rights Commission, and other matters. When I told her about my interests, she suggested that we could go immediately to the CCC. As we were driving I was intrigued, I did not know what to expect. I did plan ahead of time what I wanted to do, but in reality I had no idea how it was going to be.

We arrived at the place; it looked like a regular house. We rang the door bell and a young man opened the door and asked what we were doing there. Alejandro's mother

said that she worked for the CDHSLP and that she wished to see the director. He let us in; the director was not there but he told us that we could talk to the person in charge of the office. As we walked in everybody stared at us; I remembered that the Casa was crowded with men. We went inside the office, which is in front of the entrance, so I did not get a chance to look around. There we met Jimena, she is a lawyer and was volunteering in the Casa for a period of one year. She received us and briefly talked about the situation at the Casa and the present Central American flow of migrants. Since the director was not there she told me to go back the next day. We left the Casa; I had been introduced to my field site and I was starting to be excited. I thanked Alejandro and his mother for their help. Later she wrote me a letter of recommendation to work at the Casa.

Next day, early in the morning I got ready for my first day of work. I started by meeting the members of the staff, a tour inside the house, learning how it worked, its structure, organization, activities, and schedules. I met Jenny, a German volunteer who arrived one week before me and planned to stay for one whole year. Since both of us were new to the Casa we were learning at the same time. The director of the house made us watch a few documentaries on Central American migration through Mexico, the dangers of the journey, and the role of advocacy networks so that we had a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

At the same time that I was getting to know the Casa and the members of the staff, I started to hear stories from the migrants. It was not hard to approach individuals and to engage in conversations that most likely began with their nationality, experience inside Mexico, the train voyage, and then moved to more personal topics such as their marital status, number of children, life back in their country of origin, and other

anecdotes. During the initial stage of my research I thought that if I had chosen to focus on life story narratives I would have had countless volunteers to participate in my research. However, the limitation of this approach in the context of my research was the fluidity and constant change of the population inside the Casa. The majority of the individuals were stopping for a couple of days to receive help along their journey. Thus, my major concern was that it would have been impossible to learn their stories and get to know them in one or two days. However, after my first month in the Casa I discovered that many migrants get “stuck in transit” and end up spending a great amount of time in SLP without having planned it, or that the transit country became their final destination. Their reasons are diverse as I will explain with greater detail in chapter 7. Therefore, I did hear the life stories of several individuals who were “caught in the middle” for diverse reasons.

I was becoming immersed in the Casa very quickly; it did not take me long to understand its services, organization, and activities. However, the dynamics of the Casa were complex; I do not even know if I could say that I ever became aware of everything happening inside. This will become clearer for the reader as I move forward in this work. The following chapter provides the information of the research design for this project. It also includes the description of the field site, methods of data collection, the collaborators, fieldwork praxis, and self reflexivity.

## 2.2 Field Site

My ethnographic field research project was conducted in a four month and a half period in the capital of the Mexican state San Luis Potosi (SLP), located in the center of

Mexico. Due to the city's geographical location it is not surprising that it has one of the largest numbers of undocumented Central American migrants in transit. SLP's high concentration of Central American migrants made the city an appropriate field site for this project. More specifically the field site was Casa de la Caridad Cristiana de la Arquidiócesis de San Luis Potosí (CCC), an organization that aids migrants who are in transit throughout Mexico.

### 2.3 Fieldwork Procedures

Much of the material that I present here was gathered through participant observation conducted between October 2009 and January 2010 by volunteering at the CCC. I had diverse tasks at the Casa such as data entry, taking declarations of human rights violations, answering the phone, helping in the kitchen, management of the store inside the Casa, and taking injured individuals to the hospital. Also, I participated in activities organized by the CCC; four events at local universities, human rights tutorials for the CCC staff, and assisted with celebrations and gatherings among the members of the staff. In addition, I conducted interviews and gathered life story narratives.

One of the events and presentations I attended was the VII Encuentro de Seminario Permanente de Estudios de la Gran Chichimeca, in the Colegio de San Luis (COLSAN). This is a university located in the capital city of the state of San Luis Potosi that offers graduate programs in social sciences, including anthropology. Pedro Pantoja, director of Saltillo's Casa, opened the seminar with a presentation titled "*Persiganlos y Desaparezcanlos*" (Cross them and Disappear them). It consisted of a message-reflection of Central American migrants and their criminalization in Mexico. I also attended a

workshop at the Universidad Politecnica. Here, individuals were grouped in debate groups concerning different topics with the goal of coming up with ideas for the reformulation of laws to protect human rights and prevent violence. Also, I went to the Universidad Autonoma de San Luis, to listen to a short presentation on the migration phenomenon done by a CCC volunteer. Finally, at the Universidad Ineteramericana para el Desarrollo (UNID) I attended a presentation done by a group of students of the marketing program about the current migration flows from Central America. Two Central Americans originally from Honduras provided their testimonies of their journey inside the Mexican territory.

#### **2.4 Interviews**

I conducted formal audio taped and informal ethnographic interviews. The former were conducted among organization leaders - religious, human rights and members of the staff of the CCC, while the latter among Central American migrants. Both were followed transcription, Spanish to English translation, and editing. Data collection followed ethical standards of consent and protection of confidentiality. Pseudonyms have been used when requested to protect participants.

I prepared the guidelines for the interview's questions. Yet, interviews were not the same for all the interviewed due to the differences between them concerning work experience and educational background. I interviewed doctors, lawyers, psychologists, and social workers at the Casa. Among them I included the following areas for question and discussion:

- 1) Personal information: educational background, occupation, role at the

Casa/organization;

- 2) goals and objectives of the organization;
- 3) funding of the Casa;
- 4) connections of the government, NGOs, and religious institutions with the Casa;
- 5) services provided, what is being done? How? By whom?;
- 6) statistics;
- 7) human rights violations to migrants in transit;
- 8) personal views on of the Casa;
- 9) lived experiences at the Casa.

The migrant population of the CCC has very particular characteristics in the sense that it is in constant flux. Migrants are coming in and out on a daily basis; most of the time they spent one to three days at the Casa. However, in special circumstances individuals might request an extension of the length of their stay; this will become clearer in the following chapters. The mobility within the Casa and the conditions in which many arrive - hungry, tired, injured - made it hard if not impossible to conduct formal interviews among them. However, I was constantly chatting with different people. These everyday conversations with migrants touch upon the following subjects:

- 1) Place of origin;
- 2) family members, civil status, number of children;

- 3) life in their community;
- 4) religious affiliations;
- 5) reasons for leaving;
- 6) existing social connections in the desired final destination;
- 7) knowledge of routes and Casas prior to migration;
- 8) journey through Mexico;
- 9) plans for continuing their journey;
- 10) desired final destination;
- 11) personal anecdotes and life experience.

### **2.5 Life Stories**

As I just mentioned, there were individuals who extended their stay and with whom I had the opportunity to engage in multiple conversations and in some cases constructed solid relationships based on trust and reciprocity. Accordingly, life stories were the result of a process of engagement and establishing rapport throughout my volunteering experience.

Anthropology is an interpretive science that searches for meaning (Geertz 1994). This quest can be conducted through life stories and narratives; personal lived experiences are the key of hermeneutical interpretation and the basis for understanding human actions. In order to comprehend something human, individual, or collective, it is

necessary to narrate a story (Ortega y Gasset, 1914).

Storytelling is non-linear; it is more a set of fragments from narratives that surface at unexpected times and often spontaneous passages are the most intriguing and useful (Marte, 2008). In the process I realized that when listening to stories it is important not just to hear but to grasp how people perceive and speak about their experiences in addition to what they choose to tell and how. I did not attempt to impose a format on these conversations and I let them flow naturally. Neither did I request any kind of writing because I did not want to unveil grammatical and linguistic performance, and for the nebulous suspicion that written documents may have.

Subjectivity is a necessary condition of social knowledge. Narrative expresses important dimensions of the lived experience and configures the social construction of reality. Also, a narrative perspective prioritizes a dialogic self, its relational and communitarian nature, where subjectivity is a social construct, constituted by a communicative discourse. The game of subjectivities is a dialogic process, and a privileged mode of constructing knowledge (Bolívar, 2002).

The information gathered throughout the conversations was translated from Spanish to English and later it was put together in coherent narratives. The choice of methodology was inspired by Latin American biographical research, especially that of Oscar Lewis in Mexico (1959, 1961). Research based on life stories is a complex and reflexive process of text mutation from the field to the reader. I attempted to recreate the texts so that the reader can experience the lives of the individuals in the stories.

Finally, I believe that to account for the reality within processes of human

mobility it is crucial to give voice to the migrants by narrating and writing their stories. In this thesis I present life stories of people I met during my fieldwork at the Casa de la Caridad Cristiana. The goal of this section is to represent their voices not with the end of victimization or compassion, but as an attempt for social change, justice, and inclusion.

### **2.6 Study Participants**

During my fieldwork different individuals collaborated in my project, namely members of the staff at the Casa, religious and human rights advocates. They did so through interviews and informal conversations that provided me with knowledge about the CCC and the situation of Central American migrants in Mexico. Through them I began to understand the dynamics of the Casa.

However, this work is centered on Central American migrants, men, 91 per cent; and women eight per cent, coming from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua who stopped at the CCC to receive help along their journey, many of whom had been victims of human rights violations. In the period of time of this research people from these countries constituted the highest flow of population in the move within Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

The age range of the migrants is between 16 and 50. They belong to low socio-economic classes; their monthly income in their country of origin varies between \$150-300 U.S. for those who work in agriculture, 28 per cent; factories, 21 per cent; construction, 14 per cent; and in the service sector, 12 per cent. On average four individuals depend on the \$150-300 U.S. monthly income. Consequently they cannot

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<sup>1</sup> The statistics were obtained through the data gathered at the CCC during the last trimester of the year 2009

cover basic needs such as clothing, electricity, education, and shelter; food is available but limited most of the time. Around 45 per cent studied to the fifth or sixth grades, 24 per cent between the first and fourth grades of elementary school.

Religious beliefs and faith in God are fundamental components of the identity of Central American migrants. The statistics of the CCC shows that 40 per cent reported to be Catholic, 39 per cent Christian-Evangelic, and 21 per cent Pentecostal.

### 2.7 Reflexivity

When reading the article of “How Native is a ‘native’ anthropologist?” by Kirin Narayan, I reflected on my fieldwork experience. She critiques the dichotomy of native versus indigenous anthropology; I think that it is very relative to say one is doing one or the other. It is extremely hard to be a complete insider or outsider. As mentioned in the article, there are different factors that may set us apart from - or helps us connect with them - those we study, for example language, gender, sexual orientation, and socio economic class.

If I follow the traditional conceptualization of a native anthropologist I cannot conceptualize myself as one. However, a complete outsider I do not think is the case either. First, the location of my fieldwork is Mexico, the country where I was born. More specifically the state of San Luis Potosi; I was not born in this state but I spent 15 years of my life there. My fieldwork was located in the Casa de la Caridad; when I lived in SLP I did not even know of the existence of this place. Furthermore, at the CCC I was not in the Mexico I had previously known, the atmosphere seemed somehow different. Around 90 per cent of the individuals were originally from Central America (Honduras, El

Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua). Only the staff is Mexican, although not necessarily from SLP, with the exception of Jenny, the volunteer from Germany. This was all to say that I was not doing research in a familiar place. This was the first time I had met Central Americans and worked with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. It almost felt like being in a “Central American enclave” within Mexico.

Second, the vast majority of the migrants were heterosexual males between the ages of 16 and 50. I am inside that age, but I am a woman. Often, men who spoke to me for the first time would ask things like where is your husband? He allows you to work here? How many children do you have? Then when I would tell them that I am single and with no children they would inquire about the reasons. After long talks some of them appear to understand my position, but others did not and find it bizarre. They could not conceive why someone will choose not to marry or have children and instead decided to leave the comforts of the so-called First World, to travel to Mexico, and to work among a population under precarious conditions.

Third, what I just discussed leads me to socioeconomic class differences. My informants and almost everyone I met (migrants) are poor. That is the main reason they are trying to reach the U.S.; they want to send money to their family. Most of them did not complete basic education; and had jobs in agriculture, construction, gardening, etc. During their lives in Central America they faced difficulties in meeting their own and their family’s basic needs. Furthermore, most had started having children and getting into common-law or marriage arrangement at early ages (teens); women tended to stay in the house because men often did not allow them to go to work. This is characteristic not just of Central America, but Mexico too. Here I want to note that gender roles may be

connected to socioeconomic class, yet this is moving me away from what I was discussing concerning native anthropology. Coming back to it, what I want to say is that I come from a different socio economic background, which translates not just in having more financial resources, but in differences of education, cultural upbringing, and gender roles.

Fourth, even though the official language in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua is Spanish, and I am originally a Mexican who speaks fluent Spanish, in the beginning of my research I was not able to understand everything. Their accent is considerably different, they use different words, expressions, slang, and speak faster than what I was used to hear. Of course I learned many new words and got used to understanding them but at the start it was not easy; there were individuals who were easier to understand than others. I remember when I worked in the store selling diverse items (sodas, food, cigarettes, soap, etc) I would often give them the wrong item, or I had to ask again and again for what they wanted to purchase. Even in my last days of work, when someone would ask for two cigarettes I would give them one, I made this mistake constantly.

Overall, location, gender, socio economic class, and language could configure me as a non-native anthropologist. However, I felt close to my participants as if I could understand their situation and lives; I attribute this to the fact that I lived in Mexico for a long period of time and because I could say that I understand their situation because in a way it is not totally distant from my own: I migrated from Mexico to Canada and I know what it means to be away from one's loved ones.

Since early on I gained affection and appreciation for the people I was working with, and by the end of fieldwork I felt a close friendship with each of them. I “fell in love” with the Casa and with the people I was working with. Thus, in the process of writing the thesis I experienced challenges in addressing my own emotional and moral encounters with and in the field, a kind of struggle to maintain distinctions between the research project and my personal relationship. Volunteering at the Casa gave me an immense respect for Central American migrants’ strength, survival, and their intelligence and endurance in the face of oppressive circumstances and structural violence. A question that I had constantly in my mind and I still have is, how is the Mexican state and population asking for reforms in the U.S. immigration policies to guarantee the well-being of Mexican migrants when the Mexican territory is a vivid nightmare of violations and abuses against Central Americans?

## CHAPTER III: CONTEXT

The social phenomenon of human migration is not a one-way movement. Rather, it is a process which has history and is localized in multiple geographic spaces. Processes involve continuous changes because society is continuously under construction. The context provided in this chapter attempts to show how the phenomenon of migration has been shaped historically through key events that are crucial to understand the present situation. Social sciences must have an historical component; an event that took place in a specific moment is always connected to what happened in the past; the past is infinite and is our best guide to understand social phenomena (Wallerstein, 2004).

I will start developing the analysis through an historical system frame with units of large scale and length that imply social change that has a systemic character. We are living in a world system, a capitalist world economy. At the moment this world system covers the entire planet, but when it originated, about 500 years ago, it only covered a relatively small segment of the world (Wallerstein, 2004).

The world systems perspective conceives today's capitalism as part of an era of historical transition that will close its vital cycle with a final crisis (Aguirre Rojas, 2001). The present crisis of capitalism creates responses from the periphery, from the marginalized south: massive migration. The migratory flows from the periphery to the centre are unstoppable, and this situation as predicted by Wallerstein, deepens the internal social contradictions in the richest countries, pressuring them to accept in the long run to coexist without impediments.

In what follows I will describe chronologically the events that have been shaping

the present geopolitical, economic, and social relationships between Central America and Mexico. The context that will be provided, considering its regional and socio historic particularities, aims to show the causes of the inevitable and unstoppable flow of migrants in this geographical location. Therefore, the connections between the societies that are involved in the migratory processes and the historical relations between the north and the south must be analyzed.

I am going to start in the decade of the 1990s with the introduction of the Washington Consensus and the neoliberal model in Latin America. Followed by free trade agreements that resulted from the adoption of this model and which are interconnected with each other. This section will end with an analysis of the geopolitical relationships between Central America and Mexico.

The second and last section of this chapter begins with the institutionalization of Central American migration during the refugee crisis in the 1980s. Nonetheless, the section is centered in the current situation of Central American transit migration through the Mexican territory. It includes the risks involved in the journey and the legal context focused on policies of the federal government in relation to transit migration.

It is crucial to mention that I am not pretending to do an in-depth analysis of free trade agreements nor development projects. The goals of the sections below are to begin to understand why Latin American countries are poor and unable to change their situation and to show why migration has increased in the past decades.

### **3.1 Geopolitical Context**

#### **3.1.1 The Neoliberal Model and the Washington Consensus**

Capitalism in Mexico, as part of a world system, faced a serious crisis by the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank through the Washington Consensus, attempted to solve this crisis, by applying a neoliberal economic strategy.

The Washington Consensus was impelled by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and spread among economic elites. The Consensus was designed to put an end to underdevelopment by a series of implementations: fiscal discipline, tax reform, interest rate liberalization, a competitive exchange rate, privatization, deregulation (to abolish trade barriers), secure property rights, redirection of public spending from subsidies, trade liberalization, and increased foreign direct investment. The Consensus was also supposed to fight extreme poverty. These measures have been used in Mexico to try to solve the crisis and to structure economic development (Williamson 2000).

What is a neoliberal model? Said in a simple way, it is based on the theory of free market, free competition between economic agents that manage to develop productive forces and technological innovations and in the long term is the best channel of benefit distribution, yet a perfect market does not exist. Furthermore, at the present stage of globalization where monopolies and big corporations control the worldwide market, inequalities and asymmetries between countries are generated. This is observed in countries like Mexico and Central America that do not have conditions to be competitive.

Neoliberalism was introduced not just to Mexico but to Latin America through the Washington Consensus. In the past twenty years much has been done in order to consolidate this model. For example in the global economy, an international legal regime

was constructed. I am referring to the World Trade Organization (WTO) that via free trade agreements, such as NAFTA and CAFTA, aimed to impose the model.

The levers used to impose this model are financial dependency and the un-payable foreign debt of Latin American countries. (These nations have to do “permanent interest payments”, yet a country may declare a suspension of their previously agreed payments - as happened in the year 1982 in Mexico- then what follows are a series of negotiations.) When a state solicits new credit from the IMF, new agreements and letters of intent need to be signed. The government requesting the credit has to accept new conditions, commitments, and possible policy changes.

### **3.1.2 Free Trade Agreements**

It may be expected that after two decades of attempting to homogenize Latin American political economy, these nations would show significant economic growth and development. Today, many developed countries continue to present the neoliberal model as the only way to development even when reality shows the opposite. In two decades Latin America has experienced negative economic growth, decrease of the GDP, social, political, and economic crisis, increased unemployment, lower salaries, growth of the external debt, increase in forced migration, etc (Barreda Marín, 2001; Martinez,2005; Rocha, 2002; Arroyo, 2005). In this context, free trade agreements have been tools for neoliberalism and can be conceptualized as one of the causes of Latin America’s economic, political, and social decay.

Basically the main goals of free trade agreements are to eliminate barriers that affect or interfere with the market, to establish the conditions for equal competition

between those who signed the treaty, increase investment opportunities, provide adequate protection to intellectual property, establish effective processes for stimulating national production, promote cooperation between partners, and provide solutions to controversies. In theory and without further analysis the goals of free trade agreements seem to have no problems and to encourage integration and cooperation between equal partners. However, in reality this is not the case.

In order to connect free trade agreements with the conditions that make them possible I will show actions that were taken and previous agreements that facilitate the implementation of neoliberal policies. Since the 1980s the IMF promoted free trade policies that opened the door to the massive flow of American agricultural products, which were strongly subsidized and harmed medium, small, and local agriculturists.

On 6th of January of 1992, articles 24, 27 and 130 of the Mexican Constitution were reformulated with respect to agricultural policy and the encouragement of privatization of social property. In the following year privatization continued to be stimulated through a new program called Program for Certification of Rights to Ejido Lands, called PROCEDE (*Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares*). Peasants were granted titles of membership to the program as the only means to occupy their own land. This was conducive to market conditions where the land could be sold, yielded, etc.

In 1992 NAFTA was signed and entered into effect in 1994 almost at the same time that the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was launched. Yet, the FTAA has not been able to consolidate. The latter agreement will be analyzed below. The WTO

emerged in the year 1995. After eight years of commercial agreements and negotiations, the WTO has been aiming to impose an international strategy to codify the rules of a world system of investment, production, and commerce.

In March of 2005, President George Bush secured a new agreement with Canada's Prime Minister and Mexico's President: Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). The SPP implies a coordination strategy and integration of the energy sectors. Also, it deals with biodiversity and natural resource use, and of other non-economic initiatives like the creation of security bodies.

The SPP can be conceptualized as a step to reach a greater strategy; the ladder continues with the Puebla-Panama Plan (PPP), today Plan of Mesoamerican Development as both agreements have similar contents and orientation.

### **3.1.3 NAFTA**

By implementing NAFTA in Mexico, the country was supposed to experience economic growth based on external demands - exports - and with the impulse of foreign investment, the growth would generate employment and poverty would be reduced. Indeed, exports increased and foreign investment was promoted, but the results according to the experts have not been the desired ones because *employment did not increase nor* has the country experienced economic growth. Mexico exports, but all consumer goods are imported. Exportation grows, but not the economy.

NAFTA implies the elimination of barriers in the free trade market. In other words, tariffs are removed for the products made or sold by the US. For example, when Mexico liberalized the corn market, the imports multiplied to such a degree that NAFTA

achieved the opening of a market that has close to 106.7 million consumers (INEGI, 2005). However, for Mexico it was the collapse of the agricultural production of corn, along with the consequent migration of peasants towards urban localities to find new jobs.

NAFTA has been heavily criticized because it seeks the free circulation of merchandise and capital, but not of people. NAFTA does not include the mobility of the labour force. Mexico receives more than 25 million dollars that are sent annually by migrants residing in the US and that remittances are the second contributor to Mexico's economy (Banco de Mexico, 2008).

#### **3.1.4 DR- CAFTA**

In Central America negotiations for CAFTA began in January 2003, and on the following May 28, 2004. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the United States signed the agreement. On August 5, 2004, the Dominican Republic was added to the agreement. The new agreement was titled the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement, or the DR-CAFTA. It has been a complicated and controversial agreement where parties are supposed to be subject to the same set of obligations and commitments. The quest for Central American integration with North America involves regulations concerning the access of goods (agriculture and apparel), exports and imports, government procurement, intellectual property, investment, labor, and environment (Hornbeck, 2005).

Furthermore, DR-CAFTA promised development and improvement in Central America's economy and society. More specifically, diversification of the agricultural

economy, more exports to North America, increase in employment through the establishment of foreign industries and corporations, decreased migration, and decreased inflation. The real situation is that often foreign corporations and industries enter a country displacing local populations from strategic areas, extracting natural resources and energy, and taking the utilities back to the U.S.; not benefiting the host society. New employment may be available during the construction of the factory, but when it is finished the industry brings its own managers and employees, not investing in training programs for the local population. Another problem is that Central America suffers from its weak infrastructure and inability to compete with wealthier nations thereby rendering the international market effectively inaccessible (Jones, 2008).

In terms of intellectual property, DR-CAFTA extended patent restrictions on pharmaceuticals. Local companies have to wait 20 years to produce generic products. Thus, medicines are expensive for those who do not have the means; health care is being commercialized. In the same context, piracy has been criminalized with repressive sanctions against the sellers (six years in prison). The problem here is that there are no alternatives for the population, so how are they going to support themselves without new forms of employments (Jones, 2008)?

### **3.1.5 Plan Puebla Panama/ the Mesoamerican Development Project**

The PPP is a mega project that includes Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Colombia. Also the Mexican states located in the southeast of the country: Puebla, Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. It is a development plan oriented to the

extraction of natural resources and energy from Mesoamerica and the construction of ways of communication to facilitate transnational corporations' exports (Barreda Marín, 2001). The initiatives and objectives of the plan are detailed in table I.

The PPP plans to build a structure of logistic and biological corridors throughout the region. The corridors are planned to link villages and ports in the southeast of Mexico with Central America. The Mexican president Vicente Fox (2000-2006) introduced the plan to the congress, but before him, President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) had been mapping the connective routes. The main goal of the PPP is to construct one of the most dynamic regions of the world (Barreda, 2001).

A “corridor” can be conceptualized as the means for creating circulation; in this case the flow of merchandise, capital, labour force, information, biological species, etc. In order to be able to construct a circulation network and link cities in the region, many infrastructure plans have been developed, namely, the construction of highways, roads, bridges, ports, railroads, airports, electric cables, electricity plants, gas pipes, oil pipes, and telecommunications.

It is interesting to note that:

- Mexico only included the southeast region in the PPP;
- Mesoamerica is a Mayan ethnic cultural space, with a similar colonial past and populated by indigenous groups (Mayas and other groups);
- the Mexican state, Chiapas, links Southeast Mexico and Central America;
- Mesoamerica has a high index of poverty and is an underdeveloped region, and it is where migratory flows commence;

**Table I**

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SCHEME – **Puebla-Panama Plan** - PANAMA: Mesoamerican initiatives and objectives

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The general mission of the **Puebla-Panama Plan** is to harness human and ecological wealth of the Mesoamerican Region within a frame of viable development that respects cultural and ethnic diversity. For this reason, an integral strategy for the region is proposed; one that includes series of Mesoamerican initiatives and projects.

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Initiatives	Objectives
Mesoamerican Initiative of Sustainable Development	To promote the conservation and the sustainable management of natural resources and the participatory mechanisms, especially of local communities in environmental matters.
Mesoamerican Initiative of Human Development	To reduce poverty, to facilitate access to basic social services to vulnerable populations and to contribute to the development of the towns of Mesoamerica.
Mesoamerican Initiative of Prevention and Mitigation of Natural Disasters	To promote the prevention and mitigation of natural disasters and to incorporate the risk factor in the management of the projects of all the sectors.
Mesoamerican Initiative of Tourism Promotion	To promote the development of ecological, cultural, and historical tourism by means of regional actions that emphasize complementariness, economies of scale, and productive linkages of tourism
Mesoamerican Initiative of Facilitation of Commercial Exchange	To incite commercial exchange in the region by means of reduction of the costs of transaction in commerce between countries and promoting the participation of small and medium sized companies in regional exports.
Mesoamerican Initiative of	To promote the physical integration of the region to facilitate the transit of people and

Road Integration	merchandise, so as to reduce the costs of transportation.
Mesoamerican Initiative of Energy Interconnectivity	To unify and interconnect electronic markets with a view to promoting an increase of investments in the sector and a reduction of the price of electricity.
Mesoamerican Initiative of Telecommunication Services	To develop information technology infrastructure in the region.

Plan Puebla-Panamá. Iniciativas Mesoamericanas y Proyectos. Grupo Técnico Interinstitucional para el Plan Puebla-Panamá, BCIE-BID-CEPAL con el apoyo del INCAE. San Salvador, El Salvador. 15 de Junio de 2001.

- Central America can be seen as the back yard of Mexico, a regional space that allows continuity and fluidity;
- Central America is a neighboring market attracting the interest of Mexican commerce and investment;
- Mexico could count on Central America in final negotiations of the FTAA (2006)

The PPP raises at least four questions. First its explicit international character. Second its conceptualization as a geopolitical tool that attempts to link and integrate Central America and Mexico. Third, the possibility that it is also a tool to integrate Central America with the United States, with Mexico being the intermediary. Fourth the PPP is a possible tool for continental geopolitics, promoting integration of Central America with NAFTA (Barreda Marín, 2001 & Rocha, 2006).

In 2008 Mexican President Felipe Calderón suggested that the Plan Puebla-Panama should be abandoned in favor of the new Mesoamerican International and Development Project. The decision was approved on Saturday June 28<sup>th</sup> of 2008 at the 10th Tuxtla Summit, a meeting of the leaders of Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala,

Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia and Costa Rica. The governors of the Mexican states of Puebla, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Tabasco, Guerrero, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Campeche and Chiapas also attended (2008, Calderón).

The new project was supposed to have completed close to 95% of the development and infrastructure projects originally planned for in the Puebla-Panama Plan since its inception in 2001. The remaining plans concentrate on highways and infrastructure, and energy, electrical and information networking. Also, a focus on plans to establish mechanisms for joint purchases of foods and fertilizers, and working together on the issues of biofuels, fuel prices and climate change (2008).

### **3.1.6 FTAA & ALBA**

FTAA was formulated in the decade of the 1990s by George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. The 34 countries from the Americas were included; Cuba was the only one to be excluded. FTAA promised prosperity through economic integration and free trade. In other words, its goal was to achieve the liberalization of goods and services from Latin America, facilitate foreign investment, and the free flow of capital (Martinez 2005). As mentioned above, in 1990 the Washington Consensus recommended stimulating commerce and increasing foreign investment in a framework of a complete liberalization of Latin American's economies, in other words free trade and pure neoliberalism. Then, when NAFTA was implemented in 1994, the negotiations for the FTAA started.

Bill Clinton hosted the first Summit of the Americas in Miami. The 34 presidents of the Americas were invited, except Fidel Castro. Following that, there were six Summits of the Americas in total. The third was hosted in Quebec, 2001. Since then, a

third of the Latin American nations that initially agreed to be members of FTAA changed their position. The hidden agenda of FTAA was coming to light: the desire of economic domination by the U.S. through controlling natural resources and creating an open market for its own products was impossible to hide (Martinez, 2005).

The fifth Summit that took place in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 ended the FTAA negotiations. The US diplomatic failure was in part due to organizations and civil society groups that opposed the agreement; the greatest opposition came from the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*, or ALBA) comprising Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela.

ALBA is an agreement created to oppose FTAA and is for Latin American integration. Its goals are that members can trade and support one another in ways that are conducive to development, solidarity, and regional integration without hidden agendas. For example, one of the projects of ALBA is “Operation Miracle”, a humanitarian program that was launched in the summer of 2004. It consisted of restoring the vision of patients from third world countries by providing free eye operations. Today around one million patients have had surgery and are able to see (Tejeda, 2008).

The ambitions of the FTAA in terms of controlling the region are pronounced. I will not go into an in-depth analysis of the treaty, but I will highlight three domains (Martinez, 2005). First, in relation to investment, a series of international treaties were to be implemented, limiting the obligation of national governments to take action in their own economy, environment, and investors’ activities. Transnational corporations would

have the means to use trade agreements and the threat of capital flight to force host nations to lower standards of labour, environment, and health. In addition, to attract investors, governments were urged to decrease the salaries of the labour force to the minimum possible.

Second, in the context of debt and finances, the IMF and the World Bank would continue to apply their structural adjustment programs to the indebted nations to guarantee their payment of interest on loans impossible to pay. States would have to cut off their social and economic programs, and instead pay their debts. Also, they were to limit the role of the national government in the regulation of the flow of speculative capital in their countries.

Third, in agriculture, foreign industries sought to have greater market presence than local producers, not only for traditional crops, but for genetically altered crops which results in local farmer's dependence on seeds and pesticides. Then, Latin American countries undergo, in their own national markets, competition with North American imports. In addition to the technological and productivity differences, North America has their governments' agricultural financial assistance.

### **3.1.7 The Relationship between Mexico and Central America**

According to Rocha (2006), Mexico can be conceptualized as a "sub-hegemonic" country. The characteristics of a sub-hegemonic power are first its capacity for regional hegemony. Second, it can generate and initiate processes of regional integration, or create macro-systems within a region. Third, its peripheral neighboring countries are where its natural action materializes.

The U.S. can be said to be the core and the catalyst of “integration” processes of North America. Also, it is determinant in the sub-hegemon’s role. Mexico plays a relatively dependent role in this region and is relatively conditioned by the U.S. However, in relation to its neighbors, Central America and the Caribbean, Mexico can be seen as a sub-hegemon.

Mexico may be a link that mediates and bridges regional integration processes between Latin and North America. It builds its regional hegemony by establishing geopolitical and geo-economic relationships and development cooperation. Accordingly, the idea of creating a free trade area was born in Mexico. I am referring to the PPP, the mega project designed to promote regional transformation, modernization, and development of Mesoamerica.

Mexico’s interest in Central America’s development is more oriented to political and geopolitical matters, rather than commerce and economy. This becomes more evident by looking at the numbers of Mexican exports to Central America, accounting for 1.1% of the total of Mexico’s exports, while imports from Central America are 0.2% of the total of Mexico’s imports (see table II).

### *3.2 Central American Migration and Mexico*

In Central America internal migrations to work in agriculture have been taking place for centuries, but international migrations can be said to have been institutionalized with the refugee crisis that resulted from civil wars and revolutionary moments (Garcia 2006). Armed and political conflicts provoked significant migratory fluxes and generated thousands of refugees. Large numbers of the displaced population were constituted by

**TABLE II**

**Comparative Chart Mexico and Central America 2002**

	Mexico	Mexico Southeast	Central America	Central America in relation to Mexico
Territory (Km)	1,967,183	503,200	522,760	26.57%
Population millions	98.9	28	36.257	36.66%
GDP \$US, millions	872,100	n.d.	142,995	16.39%
GDP per Capita US\$	8,820	2,336	4,611	52.27%
Imports \$US Millions	173,480	n.d	23,519	13.55%
Exports \$US, millions	164,370	13,500	12,842	7.81%

**Realización:** GIIPRAL – GRUPO de INVESTIGACIÓN sobre INTEGRACIÓN POLÍTICA REGIONAL en AMÉRICA LATINA; constituido por el Dr. Alberto Rocha Valencia y los Egresados de la Lic. En Estudios Internacionales: Daniel Morales y Aldo Ponce.

**Fuentes:** El estado del mundo, anuario económico geopolítico mundial 2002. Akal Ediciones, Madrid, 2001.

low-income families. The political and armed conflicts of Central America during the 1970s and 1980s caused many to migrate and seek refuge in other countries. Some moved to less affected neighboring Central American countries, but others decided to move north. A number of people went to the nearest country: Mexico, while those who seek refuge in the U.S. and Canada traveled by land through Mexico attempting to reach

their final destination (Garcia 2006). In this context, Mexico is geographically bridging North and Central America.

Each country has its own particularities and history concerning migratory flows, for example, in the 1970s and 1980s El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala had higher migratory flows than Costa Rica and Honduras. Also, the former nations were zones with more social, economic, and political conflicts than the latter. But, their particular situation changes and by no means remains static. In 2009 emigration from Honduras might be the greatest in number followed by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

Receiving nations have different policies in regards to who can enter and stay in their territory, often favoring some while excluding others, which has provoked an increase in undocumented immigrants. This situation has created a floating and undocumented population with no protection. Due to the undocumented nature of individuals it is hard to have exact statistics; they are most often based on official deportations and detentions, thus excluding thousands of unreported cases.

Prior to the arrival of Central Americans to Mexico during the period that can be referred to as the refugee crisis (1970s and 80s), the Mexican Constitution did not offer guarantees to refugees. Yet, the crisis pressured the government via religious bodies, news media, and NGOs to redefine its policies to grant asylum to individuals in need. However, after a period of relatively flexible policies for asylum seekers, Mexico's internal protectionist model operated by reinforcing its policies for detention and deportation of undocumented individuals, in addition to the pressure of its neighbor, the U.S. sought to decrease the number of migrants adopting the logic that if migrants were

to be deported from Mexico, at the stage of transit, they would be less likely to reach their final destination (Garcia 2006).

According to Statistics Canada, during the 1980s Canada accepted close to 77 percent of the total of Central American migrants in search of protection. By the year 2001 (2001 Census of Canada) around 70,000 Central Americans were residing in the country, yet the numbers have not increased significantly in the past years because Canada has changed its policies. Today in 2009, priority is given to high-skilled and educated workers, and the majority of Central American migrants do not fit this qualification (Olmos, 2003).

After the refugee crisis of the 1980s Central America's economy was not re-activated. At the same time societies were experiencing unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, misery, natural disasters, etc. The social, political, and economic crisis and the lack of opportunities for the population have been pushing many individuals and families to abandon their place of origin.

Moving forward to the present century, it is hard if not impossible to give exact numbers of Central Americans who enter Mexico. The statistics have variations depending on the source (see table III). In 2006 the National Commission of Human Rights (CNDH) reported that more than 300,000 people entered Mexico, of which 240,000 were sent back. Scholars specializing in the subject claim that the numbers are higher than 400,000 individuals per year (Farah, 2006:7). According to the INM, between 2001 and 2005, 934,051 individuals from Central America who were in transit to the U.S. were detained, but the numbers of those who were able to reach the U.S. are unknown

(2007:3).

**TABLE III**

**Flow of foreigners that entered Mexico's southern frontier by land 2004**

Description	2004	%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,829,703</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Documented Flow</b>	<b>1,429,468</b>	<b>78.1</b>
Local Visitors	1,234,248	67.5
Tourists	86,967	4.8
Agricultural Workers	41,894	2.3
Visitors	40,296	2.2
Transmigrants	23,798	1.3
Others	2,265	0.1
<b>Undocumented Flow</b>	<b>400,235</b>	<b>21.9</b>
Central Americans detained by the INM of Mexico	204,113	11.1
Central Americans detained by the Us border patrol	54,626	3.0
Local undocumented border crossing Ciudad Hidalgo/ Tecun- Uman and Talismán/ El Carmen	79,996	4.4
Local undocumented border crossing in the rest of the border Mexico- Guatemala	61,500	3.4

Chart elaborated by the Centro de estudios Migratorios del INM and Publisher in Propuesta de Política Migratoria Integral en la Frontera Sur, Secretaria de Gobernación- Instituto Nacional de Migración, México, December 2005, p.35

### **3.2.1 Risks of Central American immigration**

In the beginning of 2007, the president of the CNDH declared:

“... Irregular migrants are victims of international human trafficking and abuses committed by other bands that smuggle migrants; the consequence is that migrants appear as criminals for the authorities and civil society of the receiving country. In this way, migrants are forced into a situation of secrecy of which diverse actors, such as industrialists, authorities, landlords, lenders of services and even other migrants take advantage to exploit them. In this sense, vulnerability is a characteristic of the migrants, because due to their irregular situation and for the fear of being deported to their countries, they cannot go to the authorities to demand the protection of their rights” (2007).

The above statement and the present situation demonstrate that The Propuesta de Política Migratoria Integral en la Frontera Sur, published in the year 2005 by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), an agency that belongs to the Secretaría de Gobernación and is a member of the Gabinete de Seguridad Nacional (National Security Department) has not been successful. Its main objectives are:

1. Facilitation of the documented migratory flows that have as temporary or definitive destination the southern border states;
2. Protection of the rights of migrants who penetrate the southern border of Mexico;
3. Contribution to the security of the southern border of Mexico; and,
4. Update of the management of the flows and the migratory legislation, considering the

particularities of the phenomenon in the context of the southern border (INM, 2005)

Central American immigration has been neglected and in the absence of legal protection creates a vulnerable group. Central American migrants are subject to constant abuses and violations of human rights perpetuated by official authorities and by others who take advantage of their situation. This is aggravated by the hardening of Mexican immigration policies has resulted from U.S.'s pressure to stop the flows in the southern borders of Mexico before they reach the north.

Mexico stopped being a protective and labour destination to become the place of transit to hope, work, and well-being in the U.S. Present and historical conditions of the region have configured an enormous mass of migration in transit, the majority terrestrial and transitory (Arámbula Reyes & Santos Villareal, 2007).

The risks and dangers of transiting Mexico are: not knowing the routes; fraud by *coyotes* and *polleros* that do not offer what they promised and often abandon migrants in the middle of the road; detention, extortion and deportation by authorities; hunger, thirst, attacks by wild animals; the mistreatment and the precarious conditions and overcrowding of migratory stations; sexual abuses, kidnappings, and other human rights violations done by the authorities, thieves, foreign and local gangs; mafias of prostitution and human trafficking that operate in border cities (Arámbula Reyes & Santos Villareal 2007).

As a result of the dangers and constant human rights violations many organizations and individuals have shown their solidarity and have been attempting to help throughout the Mexican territory. Civil organizations, religious congregations,

priests and parishes are among those who have organized advocacy and support networks are now being threatened and harassed by migration authorities and the Federal Investigation Agency. This is the case of the priests Heyman Vázquez in Arriaga, Chiapas; José Alejandro Solalinde Guerra, from the dioceses of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, and coordinator of the Actividades Pastorales de la Movilidad Humana in the south of Mexico; Pedro Pantoja the director of the Casa from Saltillo, and the civil population from La Patrona, Veracruz who at the sound of the train run to the railroads to offer food, water, and medicines to those traveling aboard.

### **3.2.2 Federal Government Policy**

The growth of Central American flows, its consequences, and the number of complaints that have been registered with the CNDH have forced the federal government to stop ignoring the situation. Therefore, President Calderon included in The Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, or National Development Plan, 2007-2012, a series of objectives in relation to Central American migrations. The main goal is to encourage the social and economic development of the most marginalized zones of the country and at the same time to guarantee the protection to the migrant's rights, following five strategies:

1. Respect and protect migrants' rights in Mexico and re-order the southern border by facilitating the documentation of emigrants and reducing illegal incentives by promoting temporary work;
2. Encourage countries in Central America and Mexico to channel greater investment to the zones where the migrant working forces come from;
3. Promote capital intensive investment in the sending regions. Take advantage of

bilateral cooperation and regional mechanisms to impel the development of the less advantaged zones in Central America and Mexico;

4. Contribute to generating development opportunities in the Mesoamerican region through programs such as the PPP to generate employment that provides Central Americans with the option of staying in their country; and,
5. Improve the quality of the services in the area of migration by strengthening the inter-institutional coordination through the Instituto Nacional de Migracion, infrastructure modernization, and improvement of the conditions of the migratory stations combating corruption. (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, 2007-20012)

Even though the federal government has recognized the dimensions of the problem it is not easy to solve it, either by creating employment in the sending nations, by combating organized crime and gangs. National debates raise the question of treating migration as a national security issue instead of a social phenomenon in a globalizing world. Yet, neither real solutions nor alternatives are offered in the origin nations (Arámbula Reyes & Santos Villareal 2007).

However, the situation for Central Americans remains precarious and certain facts demonstrate the complexity of the subject of Central American migration. For example, as stated by Arámbula Reyes and Santos Villareal et al. on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2007, in the Nicaragua, diplomatic representatives from Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua denounced to the Mexican commission of Foreign Affairs of the Congress that many Mexican consular employees working in Central America are practicing an “unwritten law”. Accordingly, when Central American citizens request a

permit to enter legally to Mexico, they are asked to show their valid American visa in order to obtain “without impediment” the permit to enter Mexico. This is justified by claiming that Mexico won’t be used as a bridge to the U.S. This practice is violating human rights and is discriminatory. It is nowhere written in an official document (Román, 2007).

On the other hand, inside Mexico a tremendous achievement was accomplished when the House of Representatives (*Camara de Diputados*) on its legislation LX, the 26 of April of 2007 approved a reform to the General Law of Population that abolished high penalties for foreigners that enter the Mexican territory without migratory documents. This is helping in the process of preventing the criminalization of poverty and undocumented migration, and contributing in the fight to stop human right violations.

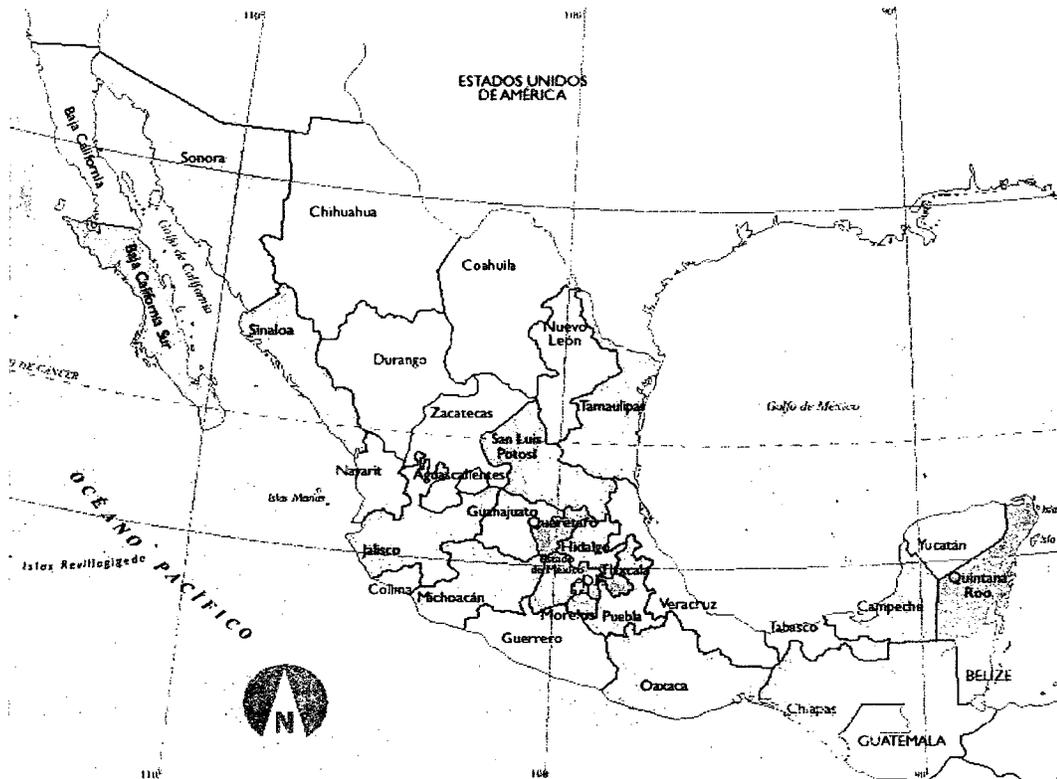
## CHAPTER 4: LA BESTIA DE LOS MIGRANTES: THE TRAIN

“A strenuous honking announces the arrival of *La Bestia*: the call for those who are ready and willing to travel aboard. It is dark, migrants are awakened, trying to forget the accumulated fatigue, placing their backpacks on their shoulders, and carrying bottles of water walk again to the start of another deadly voyage... When the train starts to move those who did not know the “rules” of *La Bestia* may have been mutilated. If one places one’s foot on the part joining the wagons, the “*muelas*” will mash their feet or whatever is placed in that space... *La Bestia* is the first cousin of the Rio Bravo; they share the same blood: Central American’s” (Martínez, 2010).

Mexico occupies an area of 1 964 375 km<sup>2</sup> (see map I). Mexico’s neighboring countries are the United States in the north and Guatemala and Belize in the south. The northern border, from the city of Tijuana to the mouth of the Rio Bravo in the Gulf of Mexico, is 3,152 kilometers long. Mexico’s northern border states are Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. The border line with Guatemala is 956 km long; with Belize it is 193 km long. The border states of the south-east of the country are: Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo (INEGI, 2010).

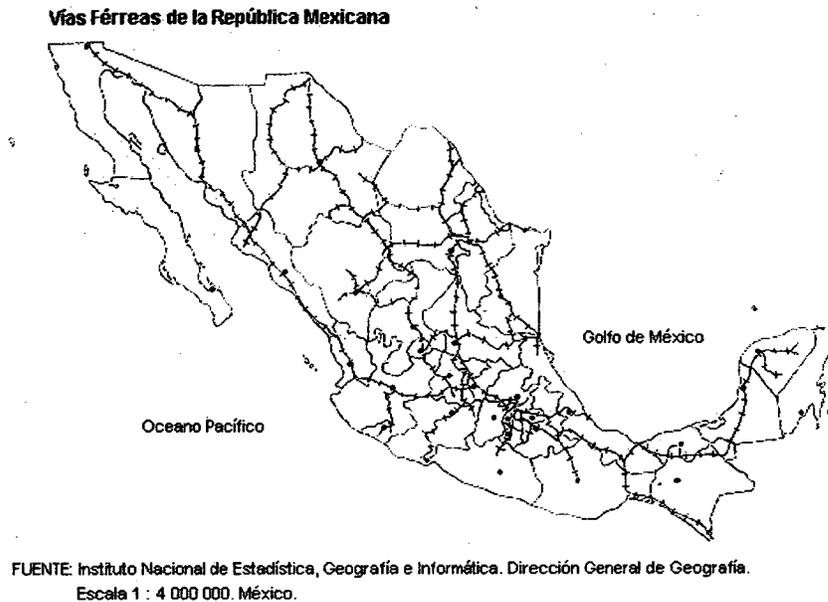
Central American migrants enter Mexico through Mexico’s southern states, usually Chiapas or Tabasco. They continue their way to Oaxaca and Veracruz, then Hidalgo, Puebla, and Estado de Mexico until reaching the center of the country. Once in the states located in the center, Guanajuato, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, they continue to the northern states where different routes can be taken to try to enter to the U.S.

## Map I: Mexico



One of the main modes of transport used in the journey is the cargo train, which is a crucial element within this particular transit migratory process. The railways within Mexico (map II) are extensive and cover almost the entire country; consisting of more than 26,000 kilometers (Programa Nacional de Infraestructura, 2006). The Mexican railways were one of the main economic developments during the leadership of the president Porfirio Díaz between 1877 and 1911. Prior this period the train ran from Mexico City to Veracruz; this railroad inaugurated in 1873. Then, Diaz rapidly commenced the construction of railroads that went to the U.S. The concessions were in the hands of North American and United Kingdom investors. In 1909 the railroads were nationalized, and by 1911 the country had 20.000 kilometers of railroads (Casasola, 1971).

## Map II. Railways in Mexico



### 4.1 Routes

If one crosses Mexico in a straight line the distance is approximately 5,000 kilometers. However, the migrant's journey becomes longer because the cargo trains zigzag throughout the Mexican territory and do not have fixed schedules or frequency. There are different railway routes that can be taken. Other modes of transportation including mini vans, buses, light trucks, and travel by foot may also be used in the voyage.

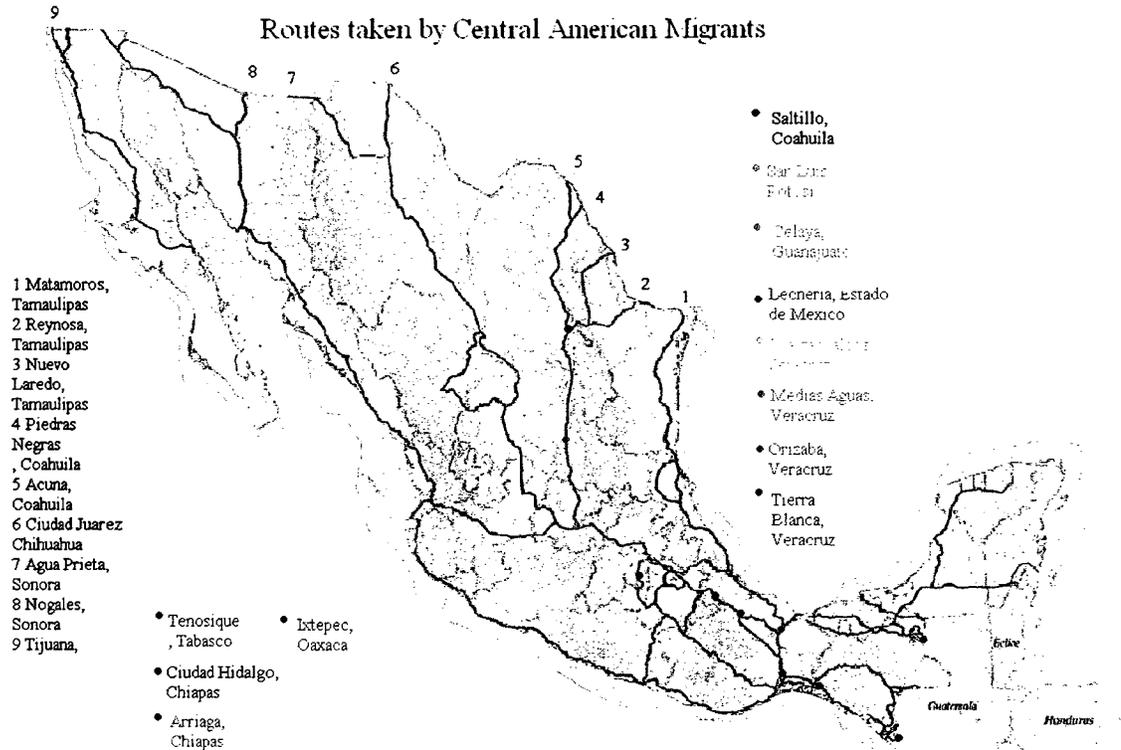
While I was working at the CCC I often inquired about the routes taken by migrants. Those who use the train as their only means of transportation will at least need to change trains at least eight times. They will sleep in the fields near the railroads waiting for *La Bestia* to arrive. Usually they enter through the southeast states, either

from the municipality of Ciudad Hidalgo in Chiapas or Tenosique in Tabasco. Many take the first train in the city of Arriaga, Chiapas. I learned that in October 2005 Hurricane Stan whipped the south east of Mexico destroying bridges and railways. Since then they have not been repaired, thus migrants must travel by foot or in minibuses for almost 280 kilometers until arriving at Arriaga (see Map III).

From Arriaga they may continue by train to Ixtepec, in the state of Oaxaca, then moving on to the next state, Veracruz. Within Veracruz, they go to the municipalities of Medias Aguas, Tierra Blanca, and Orizaba, then to the Estado de Mexico to a place called Lecheria, then, Celaya in Guanajuato, after San Luis Potosi, and then Saltillo. Another option is to avoid Oaxaca and travel from Chiapas or Tabasco to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz and through this state as the first route (see Map III).

Once in Saltillo the railways continue in a different direction to the north. There are different geographical locations for crossing the U.S. frontier. First, within the north-west states of Mexico: the cities of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo in the state of Tamaulipas; Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña in Coahuila (see Map III). These states, in addition to a portion of the border of the state of Chihuahua, are separated from the American state of Texas by the Rio Bravo, which is 3,034 km long.

### Map III



The next states located in the northwest are Chihuahua, Sonora, and Baja California. At the CCC I did not hear of anyone who was planning to cross the border anywhere near Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. This city is known because of the violence and conflicts between drug cartels that take place every day. Since the establishment of the *maquiladora* industry in the 1970s, this city has turned into a highly conflictive zone. Yet, it is possible to arrive by train in that area. In order to arrive in the U.S. through the other two states, migrants have to cross the desert; these are popular routes too, yet further from the northeast states when one is in the central states. However, some try to cross in the localities of Agua Prieta and Nogales in Sonora, and Tijuana in Baja California. By no means am I implying that these are the only routes, but these are the ones I learned about.

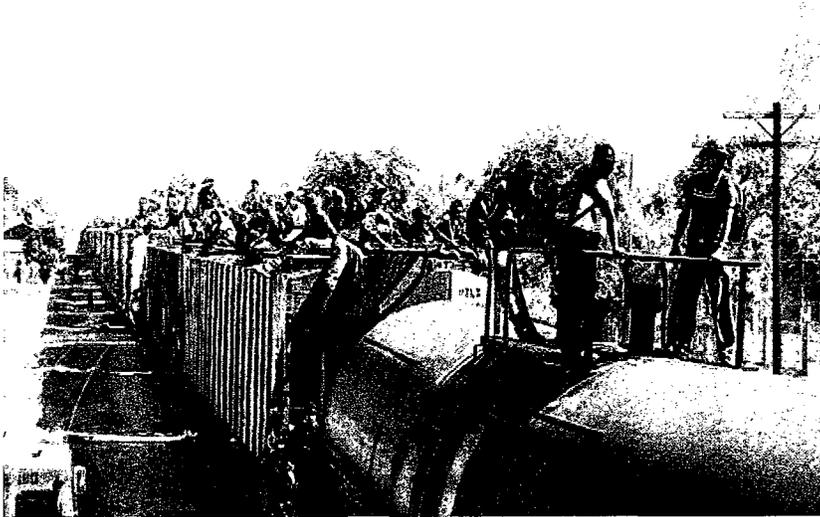
## 4.2 Railroads

The journey through Mexico is complicated and long, some describe it as *el camino del horror* ("the highway of horror). The railroads give the impression of being abandoned; they look like solitary spaces with few houses around, almost a desert. In the words of a Salvadorian migrant "it is the best way to travel because nobody is watching". Often the wagons are closed, so people have to travel in the top of the wagon (see Illustration 1). Others travel hanging from the sides, and often use a rope to tie themselves to the train so that if they fall asleep they won't fall off.

To catch the trains there are different options; one can jump on one while it is not moving or when it is running but has not reached considerable speed. In the case of the trains from Ixtepec and Medias Aguas migrants can jump on while they are not moving. This is not the case in other places, like in Lecheria, Tenosique, Orizaba, and SLP, where they have to jump on the train while it is moving. This is not because the train does not make a stop in these stations, it does stop. However, during the stop in these locations there are individuals and security guards who will prevent anyone from jumping on the train. Óscar Martínez (2010) published an article titled *La Bestia*, in a well-known Mexican political magazine. He inquires why migrants are not being allowed to get on the train while it is not in motion; they will try to get on the train either way, so if they were allowed, accidents could be prevented. This is a question that none of the seven managers of the railroad companies in Mexico have agreed to answer; they have been refusing interviews and to talk about the matter (Martínez, 2010, Rodriguez Garcia 2010).

## Illustration 1

### Migrants on the top of a wagon



It is hard to jump on the train when it is moving as one needs to be fast and know where to put his or her feet, otherwise an accident may happen. Mutilations and deaths take place every day. I met people who had lost fingers, hands, and parts of their legs in their attempts to jump on the train. Others were seriously harmed for having had to jump or having fallen in the field. Some decide to jump because they sense dangers on the train (an unforeseen stop of the train in a solitary place, the presence of kidnappers, fights...), while others fall off because they fall asleep, or were simply trying to get off the train and were not careful enough or lost concentration due to fatigue or panic.

Pedro Pantoja claimed that the thousands of kilometers of rails are Central Americans' cemetery and there are no exact statistics of how many have died on the railroads (2010). A migrant told me that once when he was on the train, next to him there

was a young woman; he did not remember her name nor where she got on the train. He only remembers that she was not even in her 20's and that she had a baby in her arms. She did not see a thing. She was exhausted, since she positioned herself standing in the wagon; the fatigue and the hunger debilitated her arms and, without her noticing, her baby fell down and dropped through her legs to the rails. Suddenly she woke up and she screamed painfully. Desperate, crying, she jumped (2010).

In addition, the National Institute of Migration (INM) executes migration raids to capture undocumented migrants and deport them. Often, raids take place in the middle of the night in random places along the railroads. These raids have been heavily criticized by migrant advocates (Martínez, 2010). Alejandro Solalinde, director of the Casa from Ixtepec and human rights advocate, has fought for the elimination of these operatives because migrants, desperately trying to escape, will jump from the train, push each other, run in the dark and may be mutilated or die. Solalinde was successful to end the migration raids in the Pacific-South region of Mexico, where he is fighting for migrant's human rights, yet in the center and in the north they still are taking place.

Not all migrants have accidents like the ones just mentioned above, but still it is by no means a pleasant trip. People have to travel on top of the wagons, which are made of metal. Depending on the geographical location it can get really cold, even in some places in the south. Although Mexico is known because of its warm weather this is not necessarily true. Temperatures may be as cold as -5 especially in the high mountains, jungles, and in the winter season in the northern states. It is very likely that migrants are not wearing adequate clothing. On the other hand, the opposite is also a problem; the sun might be burning them depending on the geographical area and season.

The other important thing is that they are hungry and thirsty. When traveling this way form, one is not able to carry a lot of things; only a backpack or a light bag. Some bring nothing but what they have inside their pockets. Others, in the course of their journey lose their belongings often through theft.

#### 4.3 Actors encountered through the journey

Migrants know that that are not traveling alone; among them there are others who are ready to attack and rob them during the journey. Some of whom are:

- *Garroteros*. One would think that if people take the train in this way it is going to be free, but it is not. The *garroteros* are individuals who are in the train and charge around 200 pesos (18 Canadian dollars) to those who want to travel on the train or to avoid being thrown out. The *garroteros* may belong to gangs that extort migrants. One time, volunteers from the CCC and I went to the railroads of SLP because we wanted to take pictures. We got there and immediately four men came out of nowhere and questioned us, "why are you here?" We said that we were going to take some pictures of the railroads. They did not seem to understand why and looked at us with suspicion but they did not bother us more, they just kept watching us from a distance;
- *coyotes, polleros* or smugglers; "smuggling of migrants" means the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of

the illegal entry of a person into a state of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident<sup>2</sup>;

- *enganchadores*, they are the individuals who work for the *coyotes*, *polleros* or smugglers to find and “hook up” migrants who need their services;
- thieves;
- the police, “thieves with permits”;
- railroad employees;
- la *migra*, or migration authorities, “dream killers”;
- the army;
- members of drug cartels, responsible for kidnapping migrants;
- local and foreign gangs.

#### 4.4 La Patrona: Hope along the way

During my first week at the CCC I watched a documentary of testimonies of Central American migrants called *De Nadie* (2005). Through the film I became familiar with "The Ladies of La Patrona". After, I asked migrants about it and they confirmed the story. La Patrona is a pueblo located in the state of Veracruz. This location is known by migrants who travel on the trains because people from this town provide them with food, water, clothing, and medicines. The majority is women; they are known as "The Ladies of La Patrona". On an everyday basis they prepare food and put it in containers, fill plastic bottles with water and throw them to the migrants who are traveling in the wagons. These women are poor, thus they cannot give to everyone but they give out what

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<sup>2</sup> Definition according to the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000)

they are able to. In the documentary, one woman is asked why they do it, and she responded,

“Because I have a son and I don't want my child to emigrate in the future. On the train, there are children and one of those could've been mine...My son asks me: "Why do you cry?" I cry because I have you and I don't want you to suffer like they do. It feels really bad (she is crying)...You don't suffer, you have everything. You have food, a roof, a mother, a father. They don't have anything. They leave their country and suffer a lot and that makes me so angry...Like I tell my son: "I don't want you to be like them someday." Because I always fear that...We will continue our work as long as God allows us to do so” (2005).

Like the Casas, La Patrona can be conceptualized as part of the advocacy networks within Mexico. Out of solidarity they are aiding those in need. This situation shows how, alongside the de-humanized violence perpetuated against migrants in transit, there are also those who are trying to help and offer hope.

#### **4.5 Kidnappings**

The CNDH elaborated a report concerning migrants' kidnappings in Mexico. The information is based on victims' testimonies that were gathered in shelters, or Casas, migratory stations, places of high concentration of migrants in transit, and by data collected by the Pastoral Dimension of Human Mobility of the Mexican Episcopate. The CNDH, the shelters and Casas work in conjunction in a collaborative mechanism known as the Network of National Documentation of Aggression Against Migrants, which keeps record of the aggressions perpetuated against Central American migrants in transit

through Mexico.

The information in this report covers the period of September 2008 to February 2009. It includes 9,758 victims. Yet, this research provides the minimum number of victims because of the many unreported cases that may have taken place in that period of time. Also, the statistics vary according to the source; Solalinde claims that close to 100,000 are kidnapped each year. This number is 10 times higher than the number given by the CNDH.

The report shows 198 kidnappings. The kidnapers asked for \$1,500 to \$5,000 U.S. The CNDH calculates that the kidnapping industry's gains were approximately \$25 million U.S. Extreme violence was perpetuated by the kidnapers including torture, rape, and murder. Nine of every 10 victims were threatened with death. The victims provided the stories of their captivity in *casas de seguridad*, together with estimations of the number of people that were kidnapped at the same time as themselves. Sixty seven per cent of the victims were from Honduras; 18 per cent from El Salvador; 13 per cent from Guatemala, and the rest, from Nicaragua. The migrant's shelters within Mexico estimate that 60 per cent of the migrants who cross the country are kidnapped. This is a multi million dollar business considering that Mexico is one of the major migratory corridors of the world (Perez, 2009).

Members of gangs and drug cartels pretend to be migrants. Many at some point were, but have since been recruited by drug cartels and moved from being victims to being part of organized crime. They are dangerous because they speak the same language as the migrants and can easily trick them since they are originally from Honduras,

Guatemala, El Salvador, or Nicaragua. They gain the migrant's trust to find out if they have family in the U.S. or elsewhere who are helping them with cash. Those migrants who mention having family helping them with money become *confirmados*. The next step is to tell their accomplices who are in the train's wagons who are the *confirmados*. This is done by giving descriptions of the clothing the migrant is wearing and how they look.

I started to learn the process of kidnappings and other details during my third week at the Casa when I met Giovanni, a 22 year-old Honduran. He arrived and reported that he had been kidnapped; I was in charge of taking his statement. We spent close to three hours as he narrated in great detail his three- month captivity. Giovanni told me that to identify members of gangs or cartels one must pay attention and observe. According to him, one must be suspicious of those who are better dressed than the majority, who carry a suitcase or big bag, smoke weed, have a crucifix around their neck, and who are constantly offering to take one to the U.S. and who say that one can pay them once there.

He said that he would recommend taking the train during the day, preferably early in the morning. And that if the train seems to be slowing its pace and stopping in a random location the best option is to get off the train and leave as fast as possible. This is because the train's driver may be working in conjunction with the kidnappers. The former stops the train and the latter arrive in different vans carrying guns and force the *confirmados* and others to get into the vehicles; from there they are taken to the *casas de seguridad* where they are kept for an indeterminate time. The information that I first learned through Giovanni was later corroborated by other victims of kidnapping, journalistic sources, and the report of the CNDH.

Furthermore, criminals may bribe the train's driver, who will slow the pace or stop in unusual places, so that they can jump on and assault or kidnap the migrants. Jose, 27 years old, originally from El Salvador, whom I met on my first and second trip to Mexico, told me his experience. He was in a wagon with 17 other migrants. They had rocks in their hands and two of them had knives. They were ready to use them if someone tried to rob or attack them. Jose told me that he did not feel right having to use violence, but it was a matter of survival: "you either kill or you die".

The drug cartel, which is responsible for the kidnappings, has expanded its illicit business in collusion with authorities of all levels including government employees and servants from the National Institute of Migration (INM) and the direct participation of elements of diverse police bodies. This has been publicly denounced by organizations such as Border with Justice (*Frontera con Justicia*), and Humanity without Frontiers Belen (*Humanidad sin Fronteras Belen*) (Perez, 2010). According to Alberto Brunori, the representative for Mexico at the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, migration is a lucrative market in Mexico. It is managed by organized crime involved in contraband, human and drug trafficking, in collaboration with the local, municipal, federal, and state authorities (Perez, 2010).

Raul Vera Lopez, bishop of Saltillo's Dioceses, stated that the increase in kidnappings is proof of the inefficiency of the Mexican president's "war" against the drug cartels and shows how Mexico is close to being considered a "failed" state. Today, kidnapping is one of the most lucrative businesses in the country and one of the most violent. It is growing because of the involvement of government and other officials authorities (Perez, 2009). According to Solalinde, the Mexican government has not taken

any concrete actions against the drug cartels for the committed kidnappings because of its contempt towards Central Americans and to help the U.S. in its attempt to stop migratory flows north (2009).

## CHAPTER 5: THE NOMADS WITHOUT RIGHTS: NARRATIVES OF JOURNEYS

### 5.1 Lupita

In my second week in the Casa I met Lupita. She is from El Salvador, the 27 years-old single mother of a four year old boy. In El Salvador she had owned a beauty salon, but was forced to close it when she could no longer afford to pay the rent. What I mean by the rent is that even though she owned the place, she had to pay a monthly fee to a local gang in exchange for leaving her alone. Later, I heard of this practice not just from her, but from other Salvadorians as well. If one refuses to pay there will be consequences: property damage, beatings, even murder. She explained to me that with the amount of money she earned in the beauty salon she could only pay the rent and food. Yet, she had other expenses and was constantly battling to find ways to get extra cash. She was supporting her child and her mother.

During the summer of 2009, tired of being late on her payments and fearing for her family and herself, she knew she had to do something. She overheard her neighbors saying that they were going to leave soon for the United States, so she thought that it was just what she needed: *irse para arriba*. Somehow she managed to convince the two men to allow her to travel with them.

Often, men do not want to travel with women. I had many conversations about the subject while I was in the field. Men would tell me that the dangers and risks involved in the journey through Mexico increase when a woman is in the group. First, one has to be fast and strong to be able to run and jump on the train while it is in motion, a false step and one can be badly injured, mutilated, or even die. This is not to say that women are

unable to do it because certainly there are women who make it, yet men have more physical strength for doing so. Traveling with women is likely to slow the pace of the whole group. Second, gangs seem interested in kidnapping groups of migrants who have women. Often those who are going to be kidnapped are carefully selected throughout the journey; I will elaborate on this process later in the work. Then, it is very likely that women will be sexually abused and that the men who are their companions who try to protect them will get badly beaten or killed. In my conversations in the Casa I noticed how men were very protective towards women, and often showed the stereotypical Latin American machismo of their societies

The group left. On the border of Honduras and Guatemala they paid to get a visa and cross the country in *combies* or light trucks. They switched vehicles three times until reaching Tecun Uman, a border city located 15 minutes from Mexican territory. There, they decided to have a good night's sleep in a cheap hotel before entering on *the camino del horror*: Mexico.

They were able to arrive in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz without problem; they were just hungry and tired. They were sleeping near the railroads of this city, which is known by migrants as being one of the hot spots for kidnappings. They were waiting among other groups of migrants for the next train so that they could jump on and get to the next town. Suddenly, at around 2am they saw lights approaching rapidly towards them. Three white Fords appeared from the darkness. It was too late to try to escape. Lupita and her companions were half asleep. Men with their faces covered and guns in their hands ordered them to get into the vehicles. They were unable to see the road because the back of the vans was covered with a plastic tarpaulin. In less than an hour they stopped.

They were forced to get down and enter a house. The majority of the people who were kidnapped were men; there were only three women. The latter were separated from the rest and taken up stairs into a dark room. The windows of the house were covered with dark curtains. Lupita never knew what happened with the two guys with whom she traveled. Nor did she know what happened to the other two women who were taken upstairs.

Different men entered her room constantly; she identified them as xxx (the name of the drug cartel). She was asked to give her family's phone number. The men said they would ask for money and then she would be free, or so they said. For the first couple of weeks she refused to give a phone number; she was constantly raped, each night by different men. In the encounters she did not fight nor resist because it would have been in vain and more painful; she would have been beaten as well.

It took a while before Lupita told me the whole story; these are delicate matters that are not easily revealed. We became friends and I gained her trust. However, she never went into great detail of her experience, nor did I ask her to relate to me what had happened.

After two weeks of being in the house with almost no clothes and trapped in a room she decided to give her mother's phone number to the members of the gang. She did so, but the rapes did not stop. There was one man that would enter her room every night around the same time to be with her; he would bring her food and soft drinks. Lupita told me that he was in his early 20s and that he was gentle regardless of the situation. Besides the sex, they had long conversations. He told her how he did not enjoy

his job and that so much violence was driving him crazy, he just wanted to be out of there but he could not. He did not have a choice, he was bound to the gang and if he left he would be chased and probably murdered.

Meanwhile, Lupita's mother was contacted. She was asked to make a deposit in a bank account. The amount they were asking was \$1,500 American dollars. It took Lupita's mother and sister a week to gather the money; they desperately asked relatives and friends to lend them what they could. They also sold a television and other electronic devices. They made the deposit but Lupita was still in the *casa de seguridad* and no one notified her that the ransom had been paid. By then, she had become familiar with the faces of her captors especially of those with whom she had intercourse several times.

One day, early in morning when it was still dark Lupita heard someone entering her room; she kept praying everyday for a miracle, her mind, body, and soul could not take it anymore she felt self disgust as if she was dirty. Beside her, close to her face there he was, he placed his hand over her mouth and spoke softly in her ear - you should keep going, everyone is sleeping I will take you downstairs and open the door for you. Then you will run fast and don't look back. She was confused, but hurried to the door. She was not wearing a lot of clothes and did not even have shoes. When they were by the main door he noticed her shivering and put his jacket on her and told her to go. She never saw his face due to the darkness, but she recognized the voice.

She ran in the empty streets of the village; she assumed that it was Coatzacoalcos. The *casa de seguridad* is located right in the heart of the city, or that is what she remembers. She did not realize for how long she had been running until she was

outside of a church. It was still early so it was closed. She decided that her best option was to wait for it to open; she was barefoot and her feet were hurting, she was not going to be able to go away further. The church was located on one side of a square plaza. She sat on one of the many benches on the plaza and witnessed the city slowly waking up: newspaper boys, sellers, shoe-cleaners, cafes opening, students with uniforms and backpacks, more and more people passing by. She got distracted by the whole scenario, together with the sunshine, the trees, and the fresh air she was finally able to breathe; she almost forgot what she just went through. Suddenly, she saw the doors of the church opening. She rushed in, not realizing how she looked. She had not taken a shower in a while and people were staring at her.

She entered the church. She crossed herself in front of the altar and looked around. She saw a man standing near the altar, it looked like he was a priest. When he saw her from a distance he walked towards her saying, "what happened to you my child?" Then, she could not longer contain herself and burst into tears. He took her to a room in the back of the church where she told her story. The priest let her use the washroom and gave her food and a pair of shoes.

She did not know exactly what to do, all she knew was that she had to go north. Lupita spent the night in the church with the priest's permission. The next day the priest gave her \$400 pesos (30 Canadian dollars), told her how to get to the bus station, and gave her his blessing.

She arrived at the bus station; she was praying not to be asked for identification. Also, she did not know where to go. She was looking at the destinations and saw that she

could go to San Luis Potosi for \$250 pesos; the bus was leaving in 20 minutes. She bought her ticket and boarded the bus without any problems. Once in SLP's bus station she took a taxi and told the driver she wanted to go to the Casa del Migrante. Taxi drivers from the bus station know the location of the Casa because often individuals request this destination and have no idea of the address. Also, I heard a few times that taxi drivers take advantage of migrants' situation and charge them more than the regular price.

Lupita arrived safely at the Casa; she stayed for a week, replenishing her energies, contacted her mother to tell her that she was safe, and continued her way up north. She traveled by train to city X with a group of migrants whom she had met in the Casa of SLP. They did not have major problems, besides the usual payment to the *garroteros* for jumping on the train. Once in city X they went to the Casa del Migrante. After a couple of days hanging out in the Casa, Lupita felt that someone was watching her. She turned and recognized one of her aggressors. She knew that if she did not leave the Casa she was safe; it was crowded with other migrants and the staff, yet she was terrified. Later, that same day, when she was walking she felt someone grab her forcefully by her arm and said "Don't you dare open your mouth or you will die".

She went to bed that night and thought about what to do. The next day she spoke with one of the members of the staff and explained the situation. Obviously she told the member of the staff to be discreet because of the dangers of dealing with a member of a national drug cartel and the complex life-threat situation. After giving it some thought the member of the staff urged her to return to SLP's Casa. He would make the arrangements in order for her to be re-admitted. He paid her bus ticket and there she was back in SLP.

I met her the second time that she was at the Casa. She did not seem sad or depressed; on the contrary, she was constantly joking. Once she told me that the past is in the past and that she could not do anything to change it; she had a goal and regardless of the misfortunes she was well on her way and was not going to give up.

She left the Casa for the second time in mid October. I received several text messages from her saying that she was fine; the last one near the Christmas holidays, still in Mexico. Today I do not know where she is.

### **5.2 Karla Patricia**

Karla Patricia is a young beautiful 19 year-old woman from Honduras. She arrived at the CCC in November 2009. When I met her she told me about her life back in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. She initiated a relationship in her early teens; her boyfriend was the same age as her. She got pregnant and since they were in love they did not think twice about moving in together. They did not have enough money to have their own place so she went to live with him and her mother-in-law; they lived in a one- room windowless apartment jammed with furniture. She had her baby, a boy, and for more than two years they were happy. She would stay at home to take care of the boy and help her mother-in-law with the household chores. Her boyfriend worked in construction and every now and then he would have extra jobs as a painter. Although he did not make much money, he was able to provide for the rent and two meals a day.

The problems started when Karla Patricia's mother-in-law talked behind her back to her son and said she was lazy and did not help her. She would say "she doesn't respect me... that lazy brat acts like a princess." Karla Patricia was not feeling comfortable

anymore in their living arrangement. She told me that she did try to help with the house work and that the problem was that her mother-in-law did not like her. One of the reasons was that Karla Patricia would leave the house to go visit her mother and sister, which her mother-in-law apparently did not approve of. In addition, her mother-in-law spread rumors among the neighbors about Karla Patricia, saying that besides not being helpful she had a lover. Consequently, the couple had many problems. Her boyfriend refused to accept that his mother was lying and instead blamed his wife. Karla Patricia did not want to be in that situation so she decided to leave with her child.

She moved back to her parents' place, a small two-room apartment, with one bathroom, and a kitchen. Besides her parents, Karla Patricia's younger sister and her daughter lived there too. Karla Patricia often talked about her sister. She loved to go to dances and go out and play with boys. She was always getting into trouble with her parents. Even Karla Patricia scolded her constantly, but she never behaved. Neither of them finished high school because their parents forced them to help in the house and work. They did not encourage education because they thought it was just a waste of time. Karla Patricia said a few times that she dreams about being fluent in English; she regrets that she did not try to find a course while she was in Tegucigalpa.

Karla Patricia stayed in the CCC for a month and a half. Since she did not have a plan, nor a family member or friend who could send her money, she asked for permission to stay longer. After a couple of weeks of talking, hanging out, dancing and laughing in the CCC, I gained her trust and friendship so she told me more things about her situation.

First, she told me that her father had a drinking problem and, ever since she could

remember, and he was constantly beating the three of them (mother, sister, and herself). He would go out with different women and sometimes disappear for many days. He stopped bringing the little amount of money that he used to bring home because he was spending everything on alcohol and women. Karla Patricia's mother was the one working; she washed and ironed clothes for others, and baked cakes and cookies to sell with the help of her daughters.

Karla Patricia was afraid of her father because he had injured her a few times. He was more violent towards Karla Patricia's sister because of her "bad behavior" and Karla Patricia often intervened in the fights otherwise he would have badly harmed her sister. However, Karla Patricia loved him for the simple fact of being his daughter; she referred to him as her *papi*.

One day, when Karla Patricia was living back in her parents' home something happened that pushed her to leave Honduras. Her father arrived drunk as usual and angered. He started complaining and yelling about her having come back and for not being able to keep her family together. Then, he grabbed her by the neck forcefully. Her mother appeared and pushed him to prevent him from strangling his daughter. He started kicking his wife, he was uncontrollable... they were screaming so loud that the neighbors came by. Two men grabbed him and took him outside until he was calmed.

Karla Patricia had the marks of her father's hand on her neck and was very scared. She decided that it was time to leave, not just her parents place but from her country. She moved to a girlfriend's place, thought about her situation and realized that besides wanting to be away from her father, she needed to find a way to support her son and give

him a better life than the one she had. In relation to her father she did not want to go to the police; her friends urged her to go and make a formal declaration of the incident but she did not want to. Even I asked her why she did not go to the police, she answered that, after all, she loves her *papi* and she would not be able to do anything against him because deep inside his heart he loves her.

Prior to leaving for the United States she went to the doctor to get a contraception vaccine good for three months. This practice is common among women who are going in transit through Mexico because they know that they might be raped or may have to use their body in exchange for protection or other favors.

She left with a group of six male companions and took the first train in Tenosique, Tabasco, a city near the border of Guatemala and Mexico. They continued on their way by taking the train. After passing Tapachula there was no train, so they walked up the mountains and through the fields. After one day and one night of walking, 12 men assaulted them, “They beat us, stole what we had, and scared my companions, who ran to the forest. I was left alone with the 12 men. They raped me, one by one. I was completely humiliated, feeling dirt all over my body, full of rage, when the last man tried to rape me I stood up in pain and violently kicked him between the legs and pushed him away. Desperate I ran, and ran. I did not even remember where, or for how long.... I wanted to be free of my pain; to forget what had just happened.”

In the CCC she was unable to sleep through the night; she would be waking up constantly and dreaming about the gang rape. Yet, she said “I am going to continue to the US because the hunger of my child is more important and I am here already”. She left her

son with her parents.

When she left the Casa she was going to Reynosa, a city on the north-east border of Mexico close to McAllen. She told me she had a girlfriend who was working there who would join her before crossing the border. After less than a week she phoned the Casa to notify us that she was in Reynosa. During the summer of 2010 she contacted me and told me that she is in Houston working and sending money to her daughter.

### *5.3 Francisco, Rigoberto, and Luis*

In November I met Francisco at the Casa. He is from Honduras. He is 33 years old, married, and has three children. His plans were to go to the U.S. for a couple of years, work, save money and return to his family with financial capital to start his own business. Back in Honduras he was a fireman. When I met him, he was attempting for the second time to go to the U.S. The first time was a couple of months before we met. He is originally from Choloma, a municipality with a population of 139,100, in the Honduran department of Cortés (XVI Censo Nacional de Población y V de Habitación Honduras 2001). Many transnational companies settle in this city because it is a tax-free area.

Francisco left with two fellow travelers: Armando, 19 years old and Luis 22 years old. They knew each other because Francisco and one of Rigoberto's brothers used to work in the same place. Rigoberto and Luis are cousins. Rigoberto's older brother has been in Houston, Texas, for the past few years. He works in construction from Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm, and earns around \$800 U.S. per week. Luis also has relatives who are already in the U.S. and have similar jobs.

Francisco planned his voyage in advance. Unlike the other two who had not

planned with the same anticipation to leave Honduras. Francisco had saved money to pay for a *coyote*. When they heard that Francisco was leaving, they decided to join him. So, they contacted their family members who are in the U.S. to ask if they could help them with cash to make their way. They agreed to send them money once they were closer to the U.S. border to pay for a *coyote*, but they would have to cross Mexico as they could. By no means is success guaranteed, but when one does not know the way there is a better chance to go through the border with an experienced individual.

The group traveled in mini vans and light trucks until reaching Arriaga in the southern state of Chiapas (see map). Then, they took the first train to the city of Ixtepec in the neighboring state of Oaxaca. There, they went to the Casa del Migrante where Francisco and his traveling companions separated. Rigoberto and Luis stayed in the Casa while Francisco continued on his journey. He took the train to the Mexican state of Veracruz passing by Medias Aguas, then Tierra Blanca, and finally he stopped in Orizaba. After this point he did not use the train anymore. He was picked up by a smuggler who was going to take him to the US. He was lucky to have enough money to pay a smuggler to guide him from that location. Oaxaca is in the south of Mexico; usually migrants require the services of smugglers when they are closer to the northern border, otherwise the price increases. Anyway, he crossed successfully through Mexico and managed to arrive in Houston, Texas where American migration authorities caught him, put him in prison for two weeks and then deported him back to Honduras.

Meanwhile, Rigoberto and Luis stayed in Ixtepec's Casa for a couple of weeks and helped as volunteers there. Then, they took a bus to Oaxaca, the state capital, Oaxaca, and stayed another two weeks in the Casa. Rigoberto told me that this city was his

favorite place in Mexico; his cousin and he had a chance to visit Oaxaca's downtown. The State Capital, declared a Cultural Heritage site by UNESCO, owes its fame to the beauty and harmony of its architecture, the richness of its cultural traditions, the wide variety of its local foods, and its climate, spring-like throughout the year.

Rigoberto told me that besides liking the city, they had absolutely no intentions of traveling on the train again. So they decided to call Rigoberto 's brother who lives in Houston, to ask him for money to travel by bus. He sympathized with them because he knew through first hand experience what the train was like, yet he did not have money at that moment so he told them that if they could wait he would send them cash. It took him a month to send them 3,000 pesos (\$243 Canadian).

Once they had the money, they left for Mexico City by bus. When they were in the bus station deciding what bus to take next, two police men approached them and started questioning them. Once Rigoberto and Luis spoke, their accent revealed that they were not locals. The police said that they were going to be deported; Luis tried to negotiate with them. After arguing they managed to be left alone in exchange for the cash; the police ended up taking Rigoberto 's wallet where he had part of the total amount of money, 1,000 pesos, and his ID. However, Luis had the rest inside his shoe, so they were still able to buy bus tickets to SLP. When they arrived at the bus station they took a taxi to the CCC and spent their last hundred pesos.

By this time, Francisco was back in Honduras. He rested for a few days and decided to leave and try again. This time he arrived in Oaxaca traveling the same way as before, *combies*, light trucks, and train. However, once in Oaxaca, the capital, he took a

bus to Mexico City and then another one to San Luis Potosi. It is risky to travel by regular buses because there are random check points on the highways where migration authorities, police, or the military stop the buses and ask for the IDs of the passengers. Usually if one takes the bus at night or during the weekend this risk diminishes. Francisco had a safe ride.

He arrived at the CCC and spent three or four days there. When he arrived he asked a member of the staff if she knew Luis and Rigoberto, thinking that they may have stopped in that Casa. When she heard the name Rigoberto she called me because she thought that I knew where he was. Francisco asked me for his cell phone number, so I sent a text message to Rigoberto to ask him if he knew Francisco and if it was fine if I gave him his number. Rigoberto was happy to hear that his friend was in the CCC, I gave his number to Francisco, and the next day Rigoberto came to the CCC to meet his friend.

Francisco asked for Luis and Rigoberto told him that he was in Houston already. When they had arrived in SLP, Luis and Rigoberto contacted the individuals who had promised to help them once they were closer to the northern border. The following week Luis left the Casa because a *coyote* was sent to pick him up in SLP; they were successful and today Luis is working in Houston. However, Rigoberto did not have the same luck and was still in SLP. He stayed in the Casa for almost two months and then left to work in a factory in the same city. His story will be told in the next chapter.

Before leaving the Casa, Francisco gave me a letter and told me that I should use it in my thesis (Illustration 2). He was picked up by a *coyote*, managed to get into the United States, but once there Francisco was detained by migration authorities and for a

second time deported back to Honduras. Today he is back with his family in Choloma and for the moment does not have plans to try again.

## Illustration 2

*What is a migrant?*

The migrant is a person like you who lives in a house like yours. A person who has feelings, rights, and is a human being like you. **That is a migrant.** A ordinary human being like you, is the least and the most lucky individual from all humans because he or she has seen the dark side of life, because he has undergone hunger, he has felt cold, he has felt fatigue, he has felt scorn, he has felt discrimination, he has felt the power of corruption, has felt pain mainly for leaving his family, his children, wife, husband, parents, brothers, sisters, other relatives, friends, and his or her hometown. Because he or she knows that God said oh, children! Remember that I love you not as one loves oneself, but more than that. My love was such that I died to save you from death. When someone loves like this is when one meets God. **That is a migrant.** He or she is an ordinary person because he or she is satisfied if you give them a cup of hot coffee to warm up their tired and swollen muscles and bones. **That is a migrant.** A person who is satisfied with just a smile, with a shake of hands, or simply if you see him or her as a brother or sister, **that is a migrant.** A son of God, your brother, a person who deserves affection and respect because his or her only crime is to look for the well-being of their family: **that is a migrant.** A person with moral values, culture, education, but mainly with the strong belief that God see us as all equal, and that your God is the same as mine and the others, **that is a migrant.** And he is the luckiest individual because he or she knows that his or her family is waiting, remembering, and loving them. He or she knows the real value of

life. He or she encounters people who appreciate him or her, gives them food, shelter, dress, and treats him or her with respect. **That is a migrant.** A lucky person because of living unforgettable experiences, and having a place to stay: La Casa de la Caridad Cristiana. In the name of my companions and in my own with great and sincere gratefulness I say thanks and hope that God will always bless everyone from the house. Thank you very much, if the migrant is not your brother, then God is not your father. As a memory for all... Francisco Paredes Paz. Choloma, Cortes, Honduras [translated from Spanish to English by the author].

#### 5.4 Leo

When I was in charge of the store inside the Casa I met a boy, named Leo; he is 16 years old, originally from Honduras. We spent a lot of time hanging out because he would not leave the store while I was there. First, because I had a CD player and I would play music all day long, and then because I think he enjoyed my company. And I enjoyed his. We joked and laugh, he would ask me about my life in Canada and beg me to bring him back with me. He also told me about his life back in Honduras and why he was forced to leave his home.

His father left for the US when Leo was 13 years old and no one ever heard from him again. Leo was left with his mother and five siblings. Leo is the oldest. When his father was around Leo learned to work in carpentry and in the fields because he would go to work with his father. In addition he was going to school because his parents believed that it was important to go for at least a few years to not be illiterate, like them. So Leo learned to write and read. Yet, after his father emigrated, Leo dropped out of

school to work full time because, being the eldest son, he had more responsibility towards his family. At the time Leo's brothers were eleven-years-old and nine- years-old; both worked part time as auto repair helpers at a garage after going to school. The rest of the family consisted of three girls, eight months, three and six years- old.

Leo's mother used to take care of the kids and the household, but after her husband left, she began to work by washing other people's clothes. She was expecting that her husband would reach the U.S., find a job, and send money home; that was the plan. One year, then two years went by. They did not hear a word from him.

Their economic situation became more and more difficult. Leo's mother was pushed to work in a factory. She was working twelve hours a day six, days a week; she would leave her home at 5:30 am and come back at around supper time. Her sons were working, and the daughters stayed at home. Luckily they had an aunt, the mother's sister, who is married but has no children, and lives near by so she would look after the girls for most the day.

Leo's mother developed bronchitis, and since she never took proper care of herself, her condition got worse and worse. She did not have the time or the money to go to the doctor and buy medications, so she relied on home remedies and herbs to feel better. After almost a year while working at the factory she felt sick, she was constantly coughing and having trouble breathing. One day she was just unable to go to work; in addition she had high fever. Everyone in the household was worried and did not know what to do. After a couple of days she died.

The family was devastated. Leo, then 16 years, old was left with the responsibility

of looking after his five siblings. He was not even earning sufficient money to pay the rent. Desperate, he realized that if he wanted to help his brothers and sisters he had to leave and pray to have better luck than his father. He also hoped that he could find out what happened to him. Right before Leo's departure everyone moved to their aunt's place because there was no way they could continue paying the rent. His brothers began to work, now full time, while his sisters stayed home with their aunt. Leo promised that as soon as he reaches the U.S. he will send them money.

He had no more than 1,000 Honduran Lempira (\$50 Canadian) in his pocket. He left with a group of eight men whom he barely knew; they reached Guatemala's border with Mexico in a truck owned by one of the men. Then they entered Mexican territory on foot, walked for almost two day and two nights, and then continued by train. Somewhere along the way the group separated; Leo was alone in the wagon of a train. There he met Diego, a 27 year-old male from Nicaragua; he is five foot tall, tan, green eyes, and slim. They continued the journey together, jumping on the trains, sharing the little food they could get, running away from suspicious people... until they reached the city of SLP and went to the Casa. I met Diego too and we became friends.

Meanwhile, Leo spent close to three weeks in the Casa. He did not have money or a plan; all he knew was that he needed to get to the U.S. A few days before he left, he told me that everything was settled and that he will be leaving soon, yet he did not give me great details of what was he going to do. One day I was arriving at the Casa early in the morning and Leo was standing close to the door and seemed ready to leave. He did not have anything with him. He was wearing a jacket, a gift given by Mauricio, a 19 year-old Honduran who used to hang out often with Leo and me in the store. Leo and I

hugged; I told him "*cuidate chaparro*" and kissed him on the cheek.

One day, a couple of weeks after he left, not having heard anything from him, Diego came by to the store and asked me to sit with him on a bench in the patio. There, he told me that Leo left with a group and that they were able to cross the border. They were resting near the city of Corpus Christi where Leo seems to have fallen sleep when the border patrol came by; everyone else ran somewhere and was able to escape, but not Leo. I do not know what happened after; but since he is under age he might have been taken to a special center until he reaches the legal age to be deported.

## **CHAPTER 6: CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS IN SAN LUIS POTOSI**

During my fieldwork I heard and witnessed different stories of individuals who were “in transit”. This chapter includes the narratives of eight individuals divided in three sections. The first section, “caught in the middle”, tells the stories of Juanito, Rigoberto, and Hugo. The duration of their stay “in transit” lasted more than they had thought due to unforeseen circumstances. The second section narrates the stories of Daniel, Manuel, and Gerardo who left their hometown imagining that they will go to the U.S. Yet, their destination changed as they stayed in the city of San Luis Potosi and after a few months, they returned to their country of origin. In the third and final section I tell the stories of Ricardo and Lucio for whom the transit country, Mexico, became the final destination.

### **6.1 “Caught in the Middle”**

#### **6.1.1 Juanito**

The first in-depth conversation I had with a migrant inside the Casa was with a 39 year-old male from Honduras, Juanito. When I met him he had a bandage covering his right hand up to his elbow and he seemed in pain. As soon as we started talking he told me the story of his accident. He left his hometown and traveled through Mexico; he did not go into great detail about his trip but he did say that nothing major happened to him. He took the train at the beginning of his trip, but as soon as he entered the state of Chiapas he traveled by bus. He saved some money in order to have a “more pleasant” trip and avoid the train as much as he could. In less than a week he arrived at the city of SLP. He had planned to stop in this city, work for a short period of time, save more money and

continue his way to the US. He had an address and the name of the owner of a factory of alfalfa located in the outskirts of the city; he knew that this person hired workers without documents. Juanito's cousin gave him the information. Apparently the cousin had worked there for a few months and at the time was residing in the US. So, Juanito went in person to the place; he did not have any other option. He arrived at the place and he got a job almost immediately. The pay was not as he expected, but he said to himself that it was just going to be temporary and that as soon as he had some savings he would leave. He was a machine operator.

One day, as usual, he was doing his repetitive work and suddenly he felt dizzy, saw blood, and the last he remembers he was lying down on the floor with other workers standing around him. He remembered his boss entering the room and with the help of others took Juanito into a truck and wrapped his arm with a towel. Juanito felt pain, but did not know what had just happened. At the same time he was relieved because he thought his boss was going to help him. After 20 minutes, they parked outside of a house. Juanito looked outside the window and he did not see a hospital or something that looked like health facilities; he started to worry. His boss got out of the car, and helped Juanito out. Then he told Juanito to hold on to the entrance bars of the house as he rang the door bell. Then, he quickly jumped into the car and left. Someone opened the door and when he saw Juanito bleeding and unable to stay on his feet, he called for help inside the Casa. Juanito's boss knew of the existence of the CCC and since he did not want to hold any responsibilities nor trouble with the authorities for hiring undocumented people, he decided to get rid of the problem.

Juanito was taken to the Central Hospital; it is a public health facility. The

problem is that he did not have documents and had entered the country "illegally." However, if one arrives at a hospital badly injured or bleeding they will take you in and the paper work and payment will be dealt with afterwards. He stayed only a couple of days and then was taken to the Casa to recover from the loss of three middle fingers of his right hand; the CCC was responsible for the payment.

For the following weeks he had to see the doctor from the CCC every day so that he or she would clean his hand and put a new bandage. I say he or she because the first two months that I was in the Casa there were two doctors. In the morning one of the doctors was Andrea, a 25 year old medical student was completing a year of social service that she had to do in order to validate her medical license in Mexico. Her shift finished at 3:00 pm. The other doctor, Gerardo, is a general physician in his early thirties, married, and has three kids. His family would often come to the CCC close to the end of his shift and they would all leave together. Sometime in November Andrea left because she completed her year of service. Then, the doctor, Gerardo, switched his schedule to 8am to 3pm, leaving no one for the rest of the day, yet he was available and could be contacted in case of an emergency. During his hours of operation he would announce that if someone needed to be checked or was not feeling good it was the time to go and see him at his office.

While the accident was still recent, Juanito was not feeling well and seemed depressed. However, he would constantly talk about God by thanking him for having taken away just three fingers and not his complete hand. Slowly, as the days went by he was feeling better. Through constant practice he learned to write with his left hand during his stay at the Casa. When he had the bandage removed, he exercised and strengthened

his hand.

Juanito knew how to find his former boss, so he gave the address to a member of the staff of the Casa and they went to talk to him. At the beginning the man agreed to pay the hospital expenses, yet he claimed that he had no money at the moment and that he would go to the CCC to compensate Juanito. The days went by, and finally this man came to the CCC to talk to Juanito and gave him \$1,500 pesos (\$130 Canadian). This quantity of money was by no means enough, and he said he would give Juanito more when he had. Even when he was being pressured by the CCC, he could not be sued because of Juanito's lack of documentation to be in the country. This man was taking advantage of the situation. The worst part was that when he entered the CCC he was observing and chatting with people around to find potential workers for his alfalfa factory.

Juanito was considerably better, but stayed in the Casa for a long period of time. He was waiting to get prosthesis for his lost fingers, but the wait was in vain. Meanwhile, he worked as a volunteer. His first job was answering the phones, and then he was in charge of the men's bathrooms and dormitories. When I left for Canada, he was still there. I know he left right after me but I do not have knowledge of where he is right now.

### **6.1.2 Rigoberto**

I noticed him the first day I went to the Casa; he is 19 years old and originally from Honduras. He lived in La Ceiba, a port-city in the northern coast and the third largest city in the country. He used to go to school, but dropped out in the last year of high school because he did not have money to continue paying the fees and books. He

used to go to the gym: one could tell because of his toned body and the way he walks. In his spare time he enjoyed going to dances in his neighborhood. Also, he spoke enthusiastically about the carnival of his city. It is an annual celebration during the end of May that brings thousands of tourists to the week-long festivities, namely all night-parties along the beach and main avenue, where people sell drinks, food, and souvenirs, that culminate with a parade.

Rigoberto has a twin brother; they are the youngest, then a sister in the middle, and an older brother, Roberto, whom I mentioned in the last section is in the U.S. Rigoberto's plan is to join him and do the same thing as his older brother: work in construction. Rigoberto's sister is married and lives with her husband in a nearby village in Honduras. He and his twin brother were living with their mother and step-father. Rigoberto was constantly talking about his mother and how much he missed her; back in Honduras he was very close to her; they even went to the dances and carnivals together. He was also close to his twin brother; this is the first time in their lives that they have been apart. Rigoberto would tell me that he wanted to be in the U.S. so that he could work and save money to build a house for his mother and he wanted to buy a motorcycle and clothes for his twin brother. He wanted his twin brother to look good and to have a vehicle, so that he did not have to walk everywhere or take the bus.

He once told me, "I am going to the United States, I'm going to stay three years...maybe even five, I'm only 19.... being there is a dream. One wakes up when one is caught by migration and deported back to Honduras. That's why it's called the American dream..."

Rigoberto told me that as much as he loved his country, he was tired of the violence perpetuated by street gangs. Rigoberto was born in the outskirts of the capital of Honduras where he and his family spent most of their lives. They were forced to relocate because Rigoberto's life was in danger. I know this story because one sunny day at the Casa he was wearing a grey sleeveless shirt and I noticed he had an unusual scar on his shoulder, I inquired as to the cause and he told me it was the scar of a bullet wound.

Back then, when he lived in Tegucigalpa, he met a girl and they went out a on a couple of dates. He thought that she was single, but later he found out that she had been dating a tough member of a gang. Rigoberto never knew if she was still with him or if they were not together anymore, but that does not really matter because in this context Honduran men may be possessive and do not want to see their ex-girlfriends with others, as the girl may be perceived as their "property". Rigoberto, being cautious and wanting to avoid "unnecessary" problems, stopped his flirting. However, it was too late because someone had already seen them together and the gossip started. On day Rigoberto was walking home and a group of individuals surrounded him; they threatened him and told him that he had to stay away from the girl otherwise there would be consequences.

He contacted one of his cousins who belonged to another gang to ask for protection. His cousin advised him to be careful because he had messed with the wrong person and that probably it was not going to be easy to be left alone. Yet, the cousin told him not to worry, that he will think of something. As the days went by the members of the gang were watching Rigoberto closely; he was not afraid but did not desire to fight. For a while nothing happened because Rigoberto's cousin had arranged somehow to settle the quarrel.

Rigoberto happened to go to a bar the same night as the gang and the girl. He tried to avoid them, but tension could be felt in the atmosphere. As Rigoberto was playing pool the girl passed by and smiled and winked at him, he could not help looking at her for a moment. Right after, the girl's boyfriend, completely drunk, came by and said "this is it" and shot Rigoberto in the shoulder. The gang left the bar leaving Rigoberto bleeding; he was taken to the hospital thereafter. The bullet did not go too deep so there were no further complications. However, when Rigoberto's mother found out she suggested that they should move somewhere else. The family thought about it; they did not want to leave because they had lived their entire life there, but they wanted to be safe. Also, they did not own anything that tied them to the place. Their house was rented, everyone from the family was working in informal jobs, and they did not have many personal belongings and furniture.

Around the same time Rigoberto's older brother left for the United States, and his sister got into a common-law arrangement with a man and decided to stay in Tegucigalpa. Thus, the ones who ended up relocating were the mother, her husband, and the twin brothers. They rented a two-bedroom apartment, a 10 minute walk from the beach, and found jobs in the informal sector. Rigoberto and his twin worked in construction, painting, and cleaning.

After a couple of years Rigoberto realized that if he wanted to find a better paid job he would have to leave. He was earning only enough to help his mother with the household expenses and a small amount for his personal use. He could have stayed and continue to live like that, but he was more ambitious; he wanted to own land, build a house, and buy a car. Thus, when an opportunity presented itself he left with Francisco

and Luis, as detailed in the last chapter.

Once in the CCC Rigoberto volunteered at the kitchen by helping in the preparation of the three meals that were served every day. We became good friends and had long conversations; when I was working at the store he would come to have a soda, smoke cigarettes, and chat. He was waiting for his brother to send for him, in other words, a *coyote* was supposed to be sent by his brother to pick him up in San Luis and then bring him all the way to Houston. Yet, his brother had not enough money for doing so.

In October Rigoberto told me that he was leaving in a couple of weeks. Two weeks passed and he was still there, so I asked him what he was doing still at the Casa. He told me that his mother got sick and needed money to pay for the doctor and the medicines, thus Armando's brother sent her the money that was going to be used to pay the *coyote*, and told Rigoberto to wait two more weeks. Thus, he waited patiently and again he did not leave. I asked him again and he told me that this time his brother crashed a van that belonged to his boss and that now he had to pay for it.

After almost two months of being at the CCC, Rigoberto felt that he needed to leave and look for a job because he realized that he might have to wait for a while until his brother saved enough cash to help him. Somehow he managed to find a job in a tortilla factory; Alejandro, a 28 years-old Honduran who was in a similar situation as Rigoberto, helped him to get this job as he had been working there for some time.

The factory is a two-story stone and cement house that has a high iron gate that is locked day and night, a garage that fits two cars and a few flowering plants. The first

floor is for working; it has all the machines and storage rooms. Also, there is a bathroom and a kitchen. In the second floor there are three rooms and a bathroom. The owner of the factory lives in one of the rooms while the other two are for the workers. Alejandro and Rigoberto were sharing a room and the other room was occupied by a young couple.

The factory produced different kinds of tortillas, flour and corn, of different sizes. The employees are in charge of making, packing, and distributing the final product to different grocery stores. The tortillas have to be fresh and either delivered or picked up on a daily basis, thus the owner wakes up the workers at 4:00 am to make sure the work gets done. The schedule of Rigoberto and Alejandro was Monday to Friday 4:00 am to 5:00 pm, Saturday 6:00 am to 2:00 pm, and Sundays off. They were paid on Saturdays 800 pesos a week, around \$ 60 Canadian. However, on multiple occasions the owner did not pay them the full amount and told them that he did not have more and to wait for the following week. During their working days they were given one meal consisting of three egg tacos or a sandwich, and a soda; which is by no means enough considering the long hours of work. The owner took advantage of their situation; he knew that they had no options since they did not have legal documents to be in the country. Also, it is hard to find an “under the table” job where one has a bedroom to sleep. Thus, the owner knew that he could exploit them and if they complained, which the workers did, he threatened them by saying that he needed people who worked in those conditions and if they did not like it they were free to leave anytime.

I remained in contact with Rigoberto while he was working at the factory and noticed how he lost weight. Thus, I bought him food or took him to dinner on multiple occasions. When I was coming back to Montreal he was still working at the factory, in

fact today he is still working at the factory and waiting patiently for his brother to send for him. While Alejandro, after two years of being in SLP, left for the U.S. Later I found out that he did not make it and was deported to Honduras.

### **6.1.3 Hugo**

When I met Hugo, Honduran, 27 years-old, he was recovering from an incident in Mexico's southern territory that left him with two scars on his head done with a machete, and a third one caused by a bullet that went through his ribs. Hugo has been coming and going to the U.S. and Honduras since he was 12 years-old. He stated that without a doubt he prefers his country of origin, yet he cannot earn the same amount of money as in the U.S.

Today his ex-wife and two children, a boy and a girl, live in the U.S. When the couple was married and had only one child, the mother and her offspring resided in Honduras while Hugo was constantly on the move. Thus, he knew well the roads and the journey through Mexico. One day he decided to take his family, including his mother-in-law, to the U.S. thinking that they would have a better life and more opportunities.

They were successful and established themselves in Los Angeles, California. Almost immediately he made his wife pregnant again so that the child would be an American citizen, thus easier for his wife to get a green card. In L.A. Hugo worked in the kitchens of various restaurants. He would talk proudly about his experience of having worked as the cook's assistant in a restaurant owned by a celebrity.

Hugo is a Christian and used to attend the church several times a week. He started becoming devoted to God when he engaged in the process of migration. Then, in his late

teens and while in the U.S. he met a group of Christians and decided to be part of them. He was also interested in music, more specifically in composing and singing songs which lyrics were about God and migration. He recorded a demo with his own songs. While in the CCC, he sang his songs a few times; he made up the lyrics but with the melody of well-known songs.

When Hugo was in the Casa he was coming from Honduras, where he spent four months, and was on his way to go see his family and back to work in a L.A. restaurant. However, he was attacked in Tenocique by a group of bandits. Now he needs expensive surgery because the injuries on his head damaged the nerves of his right arm, thus he experiences difficulties with the regular movement of his arm.

Hugo talked about his boy. He told me that he felt ashamed because each month his son wires him his savings. Hugo's mother-in law gives the boy 10 to 20 dollars weekly. So, he saves it and sends it to his dad. While I was at the Casa, Hugo's family did not know about his accident; he did not tell anyone. He used to speak constantly by phone with his son and his son inquires about what is taking him so long to get to the U.S. Hugo replied that he will be there soon, just he needs to work a little longer to save up some money for the road. If he does not have surgery soon he might lose his arm and will not be able to work as he once did.

## **6.2 Return migration**

### **6.2.1 Daniel, Manuel, and Gerardo**

Daniel, a 22 year-old Honduran, stayed in the city of SLP for close to eight months. He stayed in the Casa for three months, where he volunteered in different areas.

He was of great help, friendly, and fun; everyone at the Casa liked him. When I met Daniel he was no longer staying at the Casa, but occasionally he would come to visit.

Since I was working in a "forced stop" inside the CCC, the *tiendita*, I became friends with Daniel. Every time he would go and chat with me for significant periods of time. One time I complained that my car was dirty and he offered to wash it. I agreed and paid him for his service. Since he did such an amazing job I asked him to do it several times. After he told me that once a week he worked by washing the three cars of a family that he met and that they were very pleased with his work.

During the week he was working in a warehouse located outside the southern area of the city. In that area there are many warehouses, a big food market, fruits and vegetables, and slaughter houses. Many of the grocery stores go to this market to buy their supplies since they sell in big quantities. I heard that this place is ideal to find jobs that do not require any kind of documents.

He was living in a one-and-a-half apartment not too far from the Casa. He was able to pay the rent, 500 pesos monthly (\$37 Canadian), and to buy food with his salary. Yet, he was not able to save to send money to his family. He used to live with his mother, and had a two year old child with an ex-girlfriend.

Daniel dropped out of school when starting high school; he could not afford it. He was an only child and was living with his mother in a small rented apartment. She was working very hard as a waitress. He was working too but he had not a fixed employment, he would often wash cars and work sporadically in construction. His relationship with his mother was not good because he used to go out with his friends and arrive late at night,

often drunk. Then, he got a woman pregnant and did not take responsibility, meaning marrying her. Daniel's mother did not like that behavior and scolded him constantly. Also, since he was not making enough money he did not support his child.

He was tired of his situation and decided to go to the U.S. as an adventure. Daniel left without telling anyone and with little money in his pocket. Luckily, he did not have any major accident on the road. He stopped in different Casas along the way until reaching SLP. He traveled with groups of individuals whom he met on the way until reaching SLP's Casa.

Daniel did not have a plan and it was his first time out of his country. In the CCC he felt comfortable, he made friends, so he stayed and contributed by helping in whatever he could. As the time went by he knew he had to leave, one cannot stay in the Casa for too long. Also, since migrants are not allowed to leave the Casa, after three months he probably was feeling the urge of going to the streets. In other words, when a migrant enters the Casa he or she agrees that when leaving there is no option of coming back.

He worked in the warehouse until the beginning of December then he told me that he was lonely, missed his hometown and wanted to spend Christmas and New Years Eve with his family and friends. He wanted to reconcile with his mother, see his daughter, and party with his friends. Daniel planned to go back, spend the holidays there, rest, and come back.

The individuals who are in Daniel's situation of wanting to go back to their country of origin have the option of turning themselves in to migration authorities. This can be done either by presenting oneself at the migratory station, or through the CCC.

Everyday inside the Casa someone from the staff will be in charge of making a list with the names of those who want to turn themselves in. Then, when there were many on the list, the Casa's driver would take them to the migratory station where they will be kept for an indeterminate time.

How it works is that the authorities provide the means of transportation to take them back to their country of origin. They use buses, but they have to wait until there are enough people to fill a bus. That is why they never know how long they will be in the station. Meanwhile they wait in the migratory station, where the conditions are poor, and migrants may be mistreated; there have been many complaints.

When the bus finally leaves SLP, it goes to Mexico City which is a five hour drive. There, they go to another migratory station, again for an indeterminate time until taking another bus and then continue on the way to Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

The same day that Daniel turned himself in Manuel, a 16 year-old, Honduran, and Gerardo, 21 year-old, Honduran, did the same thing. Manuel had been in the Casa for almost four months helping in diverse tasks. He did not have a plan or money, thus he decided to return to his family as he was tired of being in limbo.

Gerardo's situation was similar to Daniel's; he spent a couple of months at the CCC before going to work outside. I met him when he was no longer living at the Casa and we became good friends. Gerardo did not want to leave, but complained that he was lonely after seven months of living alone in a foreign country, of having to be careful every time he saw police officers for fear of being deported, and of not making enough

money to send to his family. He did not attempt to go to the U.S. because he did not know anyone there; he left Honduras impulsively tired of never having enough money to cover basic needs.

Daniel, Manuel, and Gerardo left. It was sad to say good bye, especially because they had been around for a long period of time. They promised that they would call once they were home. Two weeks went by and Daniel was the first to call, he arrived safe. Then we heard from Manuel, he also arrived in Honduras and was looking for a job. Later we heard that he had trouble finding a job due to his age. We never heard anything from Gerardo.

### **6.3 The original transit country becomes the final destination**

#### **6.3.1 Ricardo**

Ricardo is originally from El Salvador, he is 23 years old. He had been in the city of San Luis Potosi for almost three years. He arrived at the CCC and volunteered for a couple of months. Today he is a permanent resident of Mexico and is attending university.

His family lives in San Salvador, the capital. Ricardo told me that he likes his hometown but did not want to go back due to the violence and gang-related problems that take place in this country. From our conversations I could see how violence seems to be normalized among El Salvador's society. He told me stories of extortions, thefts, beatings, and killings. His brother and one of his uncles were killed in a gang-related fight. Also, he and his family had to pay the members of the local gang a quota for having a house and an established business since they had a couple of food stores. Whenever the

amount was not paid on time, they were threatened. Ricardo was tired of the situation; he did not feel safe and wanted a better life. He was able to complete high school in El Salvador, but did not continue his education there because he needed to work and help with household expenses. He never had money for himself.

One day Ricardo decided to emigrate north. He has relatives living in New Jersey. He has not seen them in more than 10 years. However, Ricardo's mother contacted them and they said that they would be more than happy to help them if he managed to get there. Thus, he left with the support of his family and knowing that if he had a problem along the way he could contact his parents and they would help him with money. They did not have a lot, but in case of an emergency they would make a sacrifice.

Ricardo traveled by train and did not have further complications en route to SLP. As mentioned earlier, he went to the Casa and volunteered. There, he met a man who was a benefactor from the CCC; they became good friends and he offered Ricardo a place to live and a job. When Ricardo showed that he was trustworthy and hard-working, this man and his wife offered to sponsor him to stay in Mexico legally. He agreed and commenced his application process for permanent residence; he was accepted shortly and enrolled in a public university in the program of civil engineering.

When I met him he still volunteered at the Casa during his free time. Ricardo seems to be happy with his new life and did not think about trying to go to the U.S. During December he was planning to go to El Salvador for a couple of weeks to visit his family. Since he had legal status he would not have problems to leave and re-enter Mexico.

### 6.3.2 Lucio

Lucio is 19 years-old and originally from Guatemala. He arrived at the Casa when he was 16 years-old. Today he is studying the last year of high school and if he stays one more year in Mexico he will acquire Mexican citizenship.

He comes from a rural area of Guatemala and a big family consisting of both parents and eight siblings. His father, his five brothers, and he worked in agriculture, while his mother and the two sisters in the household. Near their house there is a primary and secondary school. Lucio and two of his brothers were able to complete both degrees but as the rest of the siblings did not finish.

When a cousin left for the U.S., Lucio could not get out of his mind the idea of following his cousin's path. After a couple of months when he heard that his cousin arrived in Texas he was encouraged to go. He packed a small bag with a few things that he owned and left without telling his parents because he thought that they may have prevented him from leaving.

His journey started in Tenosique, Tabasco and ended in SLP. He traveled by foot and by train. On the train he learned about the existence of the Casas del Migrante throughout the Mexican territory, thus he stopped in a couple of them to eat and rest.

Once in the CCC he contacted his parents to tell them that he was fine. They were worried and urged him to call them once in a while to know that everything was all right. At this point he was tired of the road, of being hungry and having to sleep in the bush or in the train, his departure was postponed. Meanwhile he was helping at the Casa until one day when he was adopted by a married couple. His new mother used to volunteer

occasionally at the Casa. That is how she met Lucio. The couple has three sons of their own, all of them older than Lucio.

I met him because he works part time at the CCC. He is agreeable and funny. I have great memories of time that we spent together in the *tiendita* and hanging out outside of the Casa. I am still in contact with him by Messenger Service Network. He likes SLP and loves his adoptive family, but he still thinks about what motivated him in the first place to leave Guatemala. Lucio wanted to go to the U.S. to work and send money to his parents and siblings. He still thinks that one day he will try to go to the U.S. to be able to send money to his family in Guatemala.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The following chapter is the final analysis of the research. It is divided in three sections. First, transit migration, where I discuss existing theory of transit migration and the situation of transit within Mexico and how migrants experience this process. The second section examines anthropology of human rights, the discourse of human rights inside the Casa, and a possible explanation of why violations are taking place. In addition, I included the theoretical perspective of a scholar who, after specializing on Latin American social conflicts and on “the excluded” or “the victims”, provides a possible solution: *liberation ethics*. It is crucial to mention that I am not implying that the Casa is involved in processes of liberalization or mobilization of the migrant population who have been victims of human rights violations. Rather, this section aims to show a perspective to conceptualize human rights abuses and structural violence.

The third section, advocacy networks, focuses in the role and connection of religion and the Catholic Church with the *Casas de migrantes*. Interestingly, priests in Mexico are the main advocates for migrant’s rights, thus it is important to analyze the role of the Church.

### 7.1 Transit Migration

#### **7.1.1 Existing theory of transit migration**

One of the features of the study of population movements has been the use of categorizations and binary opposing pairs. However, this approach may lead to epistemological difficulties because of the blurring edges, overlapping of categories, and shifting in different contexts. This is the case of traditional understandings of migrations

that focus on time and space, location and direction, the causes, and in the role of the state, which result on dichotomies of migrants and movements (de Haas: 2008).

First, the focus on time and space may produce categories such as permanent as opposed to temporary, and internal as opposed to international. However, temporal or permanent migration does not account for the constant flows of population moving back and forth between two or more localities, nor with the fact that not all of those who move are migrants, as is the case of tourists and international students, while migrants that move within a country might decide to move abroad, or vice versa.

Second, if the focus is on location and direction, migration may be categorized with the opposing pairs of immigration or emigration, origin or destination, and home or host societies. The main problem with these categories is that migration is conceptualized as a one-way movement between two places, thus it does not account for other destinations that may be reached in the process.

Third, the focus on causes can produce the dichotomy of voluntary versus forced migration. This classification may lead us to the debate of whether people are refugees or economic migrants. Also, it is crucial to mention that there can be multiple causes and these may change over time.

Fourth, by focusing on the state, the risk is that we fall into the dichotomy of legal and illegal. These categories are extremely fluid because someone who has no legal documents to be in a certain country might obtain legal documentation; also the law is different between nation states and is the object of reform.

Overall, research on migration tends to examine it as a two stage process. The first stage being the country of origin and the reasons for leaving and second the country

of settlement and the experience of integration or exclusion. There is less empirical information and research on the stage where migrants are neither in their place of origin nor in their final destination (Haas 2008; Duvell 2008; Papadopoulou 2008), but in a more ambiguous location: that of transit. “Transit” accounts for the period of time after leaving the country of origin and before reaching the final destination, or the stage between emigration and settlement (Papadopoulou 2005).

Even when a growing number of people on the move find themselves in transit, no single definition of “transit migration” seems to exist. De Haas (2008) conceptualizes the term as the “waiting room”. Cassarino & Fargues (2006) defines it as migrants staying on a temporary basis in a country with a view to reaching another country, whether they eventually reach it or not.

The concept of transit migration is relatively new and entered into discourse in the early 1990s. Transit migration is often at the center of political discussions within the European Union’s migration control. This can be attributed to the fact that almost all neighboring countries of the E.U. are or have been identified with transit migration. Thus, there has been research done on transit migrations in this area of the world (Haas: 2008). For example among Iranians (Kaytaz 2006), Iraqis (Danis et al. 2006), and West Africans (Brewer and Yükseder 2006) in Turkey (Yaghmaian 2005, Icduygu 2005), Kurds in Greece (Papadopoulou), Somalis and Sudanese in Egypt (Roman 2005), Chinese in Russia (Ghelbras 2001), and transit migrants in Morocco (Haas 2005).

Chavez (1992) states that transit is a liminal state that positions migrants simultaneously outside (in transition, not yet arrived), yet inside (traveling through), national spaces. In transit, migrants are absent yet there. Thus, transit redefines the

country that is being used by migrants as their route to possibly reach a final destination.

Furthermore, transit migration is associated with undocumented immigration, and transit couriers are often seen as “problem countries” that fail in the proper controlling of their borders (Zvizdovica 2001:1). The United Nations Economic Commission of Europe (UNECE) defines transit migration as “migration in one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination, by means that are partially, if not fully, illegal”.

### **7.1.2 Why do migrants leave their country?**

As mentioned before, those who are forced to leave Central America and embark on the journey through the Mexican territory have been suffering the aftermaths of repression, wars, counter-insurgency, structural poverty, or environmental disasters. These countries are not meeting the basic needs of subsistence nor are they providing good living conditions to large segments of their population. Likewise, many do not have access to electricity, water, education, proper nutrition, employment, and housing facilities. According to the World Fact Book of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 30.7 per cent of the total population of El Salvador lives below the poverty line, 48 per cent in Nicaragua, 56.2 per cent in Guatemala, and 59 per cent in Honduras (2010).

The statistics gathered by the Casa de Belén in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch show that it has produced a significant increase in numbers of migrants from the most affected countries: Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Pantoja, 2010). Mitch is ranked number two in the top seven most deadly hurricanes ever witnessed in the Western Hemisphere. More than three million people either lost their homes or were severely affected. The estimated total damage of the affected region from the storm was

more than \$5 billion U.S. (National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service, 2009).

When migrants leave their place of origin they may have a plan to reach a specific destination. This was the case of Francisco who planned his voyage in advance by saving money and seeking information concerning the routes to take and the places where he could stay: the Casas. Others, like Rigoberto and Luis who decided “last minute” to embark on the journey to the U.S. may not have a plan. The findings of this research show that in many cases a specific personal event forces the individual to leave his or her country of origin, as was the case for Karla Patricia father’s violence and Leo mother’s death.

### **7.1.3 Why do they stay in transit?**

The experience from Central American migrants in transit through Mexico is similar to African and Asian migrants who are trying to reach countries within the E.U. in the sense that during the stage of transit some find themselves “stuck” in the transit country for long periods of time. Many may be trying to gain time or money until the opportunities allow them to continue the process of migration. Or it may have happened that the “original transit country” becomes the final destination, or the other way around (De Haas 2008; Papadopoulou 2005, 2008).

The findings of my research show that Central American migrants stay in transit for a number of reasons, including

- 1 Waiting to get money transferred to pay the *coyote*, smuggler, or guide to cross the country and border;
- 2 Not having enough money or family/ friends to help them;

- 3 Waiting for someone to help them cross/ pick them up;
- 4 Medical conditions such as injuries or mutilations on road, thus waiting to heal to continue;
- 5 Finding a job in the transit country and staying for an indeterminate time; and/or,
- 6 Not wanting to risk the dangers of the road, especially those involving the train.

#### **7.1.4 How do they experience this situation?**

##### **Vulnerability and Invisibility**

Undocumented Central American migrants are a vulnerable and invisible population living on the margins, with no rights, no obligations, and no legal protection. As such, they risk deportation at all times, exploitation of those who decide to take advantage of their situation, injury, and death (Bibler, 2005, Papadopoulou, 2005; Messer, 1995). Those who decide to stay and work in the transit country become a source of cheap labor due to their legal vulnerability (Calavita, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Furthermore, financial institutions take advantage of migrants' needs to transfer money, either receiving or sending, in the sense that the commissions charged are considerably higher than normal.

In the year 2009 the CNDH published a report concerning kidnappings of migrants. The findings of the CNDH report show that undocumented migrants from different nationalities are highly vulnerable because they use high risk means of transportation, such as cargo trains and double bottom trucks. They take solitary roads without knowing the routes to prevent being caught by authorities. Usually they do not have knowledge of their rights or opt for not exercising them if it implies being visible. They are far from their place of origin and do not know where to go in case of emergency

or do not have knowledge of the laws of the country. As they travel a hidden route, migrants may disappear.

Their undocumented nature makes them victims of corrupt authority figures and of organized crime. Their desire to cross the country to reach the U.S. makes them vulnerable to false promises and offers to bring them to their destination. Migrants tend to be poor and traveling with no money, although some do receive money transfers from their families along their journey. Some may be detected and suffer from thefts. Furthermore, in order not to be deported they usually do not denounce their aggressors.

The perpetrators of these abuses have been reported to be federal, local, and municipal police bodies, especially those in charge of public security. The reported abuses are beatings, humiliations, extortions, and death threats. In addition, gangs and organized crime are to blame for the kidnappings that are taking place. However, it has been reported that authorities and criminal organizations may be working in conjunction (CNDH Report).

Women are particularly vulnerable because when kidnapped they suffer sexual abuse. On occasions, women are forced into prostitution or are trafficked for sexual ends. In addition to physical harm there is serious psychological damage as well. In this same report aggressions to pregnant women and children were documented.

### **Criminalization**

In addition, sectors of Mexican civil society, the media, and government criminalize migrants in transit and claim that they are murderers, delinquents, rapists, or degenerates. Criminalization of Central Americans has been increasing as a result of the murder that took place on September 30, 2009, of a Mexican woman in the city of

Saltillo, supposedly by a Honduran migrant, after the media and the local government requested that Congress restrict and control the Casas. Members of the Congress from the National Action Party (PAN) claimed that the Casas evade the law because they provide shelter to criminals, furthermore, stating that “Central American criminals” can enjoy temporary “impunity and tranquility” (Zamorano, 2009).

After this incident, the Casa in the city of Saltillo has been harassed by society and mass media. In addition, Central Americans have suffered constant xenophobic attacks. For example, in early October of 2009 a man went to the doors of the Casa and broke bottles of glass threatening to hurt migrants, calling them murderers (Rosales, 2010). Then, on the 4th of October of the same year a woman denounced a Mexican family that was providing shelter to three Honduran migrants. She said that they were criminals and demanded that the National Migration Institute deport them (Zamorano 2009).

Criminalization is a crucial component for their invisibility. From the beginning of the development of capitalism the individual is used as an exploitation tool of the system. For the system to work, migrants and other vulnerable populations need be exploited, thus they are not considered human beings and criminalized. It is necessary to maintain a functioning system, from departure to arrival, a corrupt system, a capitalist system with its globalizing condition. This takes place in other parts of the world; what we see in Mexico in the deserts, bodies, we see on the beaches that separate Africa and Europe; there are no exact numbers of how many have died and we will never know (COLSAN Seminary, 2009).

## **Returning**

The stage of transiting through Mexico also includes the movement from north to south, or returning to the place of origin. Here it is crucial to make that the Casas do not encourage migration. Rather they are shelters that help in the advocacy of human rights by providing temporary shelter to those in need. In addition, the notion of return is always presented as an option. In other words, the personnel of the Casa provide information about the option of returning to the country of origin. When I was working at the CCC, every day someone from the staff would announce on a loudspeaker that those who wanted to return to their country of origin had the option to do so. As discussed in the previous chapter, the process to do this consists of notifying a member of the CCC that one wants to return. Then her or his name will be written on a list. When the list contains at least ten people the driver from the CCC will take the migrants to the migratory station of the city of SLP. Once in the station there are buses that leave periodically; first to Mexico City's migratory station and then to the different countries within Central America. Thus, the process of returning can be done by turning oneself over to the authorities.

The National Institute of Migration (INM) is in charge of the 48 migratory stations located within Mexico. There have been many complaints due to the deplorable conditions of the stations where migrants are kept while they await transport back to their place of origin. The secretary, José Jacques y Medina, of the Commission of Population, Border, and Migration of the Congress stated that the confinement centers in the migratory stations are a national shame. He said that is inconceivable that with the more than three million pesos that the INM receives per year, the infrastructure of the

stations is in poor condition. The majority do not have medical services, have very few beds, and do not provide enough food for the detained. In addition, the employees are not qualified and the migrants are often mistreated. Furthermore, migrants remain in migratory stations for days or weeks without justification where they often become victims of further humiliations and thefts (Gómez, 2009).

I encountered individuals at the CCC who were in the process of returning to their country of origin but refused to do it via the INM. Many wanted to avoid being at the stations due to their precarious conditions and because it often takes longer to arrive at their country of residence via the INM. Furthermore, I heard rumors that in eastern states of the country there have been cases where migration authorities work in conjunction with organized crime. What happens in these cases is that when the migrant turn him or herself in to return to Central America, the individual would not be returned but would instead be kidnapped.

#### **7.1.5 How does the state react to transit migration?**

The reactions of the Mexican state towards Central American undocumented transit migration are in the form of:

- 1 Implementation of policies;
- 2 reformulation of laws; and
- 3 increases in border control and security.

Transit migration is in part a consequence of restrictive migration policies and the “containment” trend in the neighboring states: the more restrictive the classic destination countries, the more likely are migrants to “get stuck” in the buffer zone (Papadopoulou, 2005:4). The phenomenon of massive influxes creates numerous internal political and

policy problems for the transit country and external pressure from the West for border control.

The U.S. may be pressuring Mexico to prevent Central Americans from crossing successfully to prevent higher rates of immigration into the U.S. In the last two decades the U.S. and Mexico have hardened their migration policies. The terrorist attack of September 11<sup>th</sup> followed with more restrictions over immigration. Mexico has been attempting to decrease Central American undocumented migration by strengthening the security forces of the state, including the Mexican federal army, state and federal police, and migration officers of the southern border. At the same time it is becoming more and more difficult to cross the northern border of Mexico because of increased surveillance due to militarization and the Mexican drug cartels war (Santos Ramírez, 2009).

It is important to mention the debates about the relationship between human rights and democracy that initiated at the beginning of 2005 (Velasco Yáñez, 2005). When George Bush took over the presidency of the U.S. for second time, he presented a speech defending freedom and democracy. He referenced "the clash of civilizations" and "the end of history". Thus, his discourse is probably based on Samuel Huntington's publications ("The Clash of Civilizations?" article published on the newspaper Foreign Affairs in 1993. After, in 1996, he published a book titled "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order") and Francis Fukuyama (his article published in 1989 "The End of History?" and his work "The End of History and the Last Man", 1992).

Bush's discourse is often conceptualized as "the war against terrorism". Journalist Thierry Meyssan, president of the Network Voltaire and of the French section of the Réseau Voltaire, offers other explanation and calls it the "apocalyptic theory of Bush"

(Velasco Yáñez, 2005). It refers to the confrontation between the western and eastern worlds, situation that generates racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and human rights violations<sup>3</sup>.

I am referring to the above because the discourses just mentioned have had practical consequences for the organisms that are in charge to defend human rights. For example, right after September 11<sup>th</sup> the president of Mexico closed (temporarily) the Sub-secretariat of Human Rights, and even though fighting for the respect of human rights is an expression of democracy, paradoxically many human rights' defenders have been spotted as terrorists (Velasco Yáñez, 2005).

Furthermore, according to Carlos M. Fazio, professor in the Faculty of Social and Political Science of the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) and columnist of known Mexican newspapers and magazines, states that Mexico's militarization, "understood as a progressive installation of a fascist order, may be the seed of military and economic hegemony that the U.S. seeks to plant in Mexico" (2008:12). The U.S. has configured strategic plans in the Latin American region, as NAFTA, and Puebla Panama Plan, which came about from commercial strategies of resource and labour exploitation of Latin American countries for the establishment of American military bases. For Fazio (2008) "Latin America is the laboratory of the neoliberal project, built upon death, murder, and torture of thousands of South and Central Americans".

While both frontiers are trying to block migration flows, the economic recession in Central America is forcing many to leave their place of origin to search for ways to

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<sup>3</sup> Thierry Meyssan "Plan para extender la hegemonía estadounidense. La guerra de las civilizaciones", <http://www.voltairenet.org/article123077.html>

make a living and in many cases support a family. Close to 189 million Latin Americans live in poverty, this number representing 34 per cent of the total population of 550 million (2009, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean CEPAL).

Violence, kidnappings, rapes, and other human rights violations pose challenges to the nations. For the host country and the region tolerating this situation, it raises moral and ethical issues about the provision of effective protection to displaced persons in accordance with international human rights standards, and the regulation of irregular migration flows (Papadopoulou, 2005: 14). In this case it seems that more action has been taken by NGOs, and religious bodies than the government. This is observed via the Casas del Migrante throughout the Mexican territory that are connected to religious institutions, the role of the church will be analyzed below. The CNDH has raised before the Senate of the Republic the issue that undocumented migrants are often victims of diverse crimes in Mexico and that they need to have access to the legal system.

Mexico's repression against Central American migrants done by the different authorities, the unwillingness of taking action against the assaults committed by organized crime, and the consequent violations of human rights may be an attempt to stop the flow. However, flows cannot be completely eradicated; they may be paralyzed due to the high risks on the physical integrity of the individuals who decide to cross Mexico. If this situation goes on and Mexico decides to close its borders by intensifying raids or by other means, then we could witness the extinction of human rights and a worse social crisis of Central American society (Santos Ramírez, 2009).

## 7.2 Anthropology and Human Rights

### **7.2.1 Human Rights in Anthropology**

The migratory social phenomenon opens immense horizons for knowledge and research since it can be approached from different angles. One way to approach the particular case of Central American transit migration in Mexico is through human rights. According to Goodale "anthropology has a key role to play in wider debates over human rights, and anthropologists of human rights should consider how their research contributes to these debates" (2006:27).

The empirically driven models of society that result from blending theory and practice by anthropologists can be of aid in law and policy-making. In other words, the findings of critical studies of human rights epistemology, if translated into practice would help into bringing social change. As Wilson put it, "anthropologists' studies of human rights processes can, in a number of ways provide the missing link of critical feedback on human rights policies...how human rights are implemented" (2006:81). Anthropologists and human rights practitioners may engage in a continuous dialogue to seek policy change, so that the findings of anthropologists could have a broader impact (Wilson, 2006).

Messer (1993) who does research related to human rights believes that anthropologists must use their knowledge to reinforce projects for social change, to help prevent further encroachments against particular marginalized populations. In the words of Goodale, "this cannot be separated from theory and the structure power-knowledge nexus, anthropologists have an ethical duty first to address this contingency as a theoretical problem and second to act on - or against - its practice by putting

anthropological knowledge to good use” (2006:3).

Goodale proposes what he calls “ethical theory as social practice” in which the anthropologist engages ethnographically with social actors and process through which human rights enter situated normativities. The anthropologist also participates in processes of co-theorizing with interlocutors in their struggle to come to terms of agreement on meanings of human rights (2006). Shannon Speed (2008), author of *Rights in Rebellion* (2008), the result of nine years of “activist research” in Chiapas among the Zapatistas, raises questions about the epistemological and ethical validity of any anthropological engagement with human rights that is too detached from the practical concerns of social actors themselves. The social actors are in life threatening situations, so for them human rights can never be only a topic of discussion or analysis. Her approach is what she names “critically engaged activist research” involving research and advocacy. She argues that an anthropologist may apply a number of critical modes to expose the power imbalances and hidden agendas within human rights regimes, insights that may be constructed as irrelevant, arrogant, and ethically dubious by social actors for whom such theoretical advances are of limited use in even the best of circumstances.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of migration can be used to unmask the neoliberal system and its contradictions by showing the different manifestations of violence against marginalized populations. A system that exploits not only the migrant, but peasants, indigenous people, labour worker, domestic workers, *maquiladora* workers, and other subaltern populations.

### **7.2.2 Human Rights Discourse at the Casas**

In addition to providing shelter, food, clothing, medical and spiritual support for Central American migrants, the CCC works in the process of enhancing migrants' knowledge and participation in denouncing and protecting their rights as human beings. In such a process, the members of the staff from the CCC use human rights discourse through different strategies. For example, every week an employee from the CNDH goes to the CCC and gives a talk to the migrants about their rights. Also, pamphlets and comic books are available and distributed.

Furthermore, the staff of the Casa receives training in human rights matters through workshops and group meetings. While I volunteered at the CCC we, employees and volunteers, participated in three.

In the first one, during the end of October 2009 a lawyer, Alfredo, who works at the Casa from Tapachula, located in the southern region of Mexico, came to the CCC to give a human rights workshop for the work team. This workshop was given because those who work at the Casas must have knowledge of matters of human rights so that they can provide information and advice, and help in the processes of social awareness and implementation of concrete actions.

Alfredo talked about human rights from a legal perspective and used a holistic approach to conceptualize human rights as a violation in a specific fundamental right that impacts other realms that include other rights; thus, one violation cannot be isolated. Rights are connected; if one is violated, consequently other rights are violated directly or indirectly. Moreover, the lawyer provided information on the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the articles in the Mexican constitution that protect human

rights, other documents where we can find human rights, what is possible to do in case of a violation and how and what legal authorities are entitled to do and not do.

The channels that can be used to report a case of a violation of human rights in Mexico are jurisdictional, non-jurisdictional, and through the CNDH. However, other means may be used in conjunction with the legal means because the official authorities seem to be ignoring the abuses committed to Central Americans. For example, social protest through the media, make reports and send them to international organizations, and use the right to appeal for legal protection of fundamental rights embedded in the Mexican Constitution.

Finally, Alfredo claimed that a key concept is solidarity; bonds of solidarity and knowledge must be constructed among those who advocate for human rights and the victims of violations. One of the tasks of the Casas is to prescribe the human rights discourse to the migrants so that they start questioning their rights basically because they are the only ones who can change their reality.

The speaker of the second group meeting was Pedro Pantoja, Catholic priest and social activist who for the last 45 years has been fighting for the most vulnerable groups in Mexico, such as Mexican migrants working in the U.S., wage labour workers, and Central American migrants in transit through Mexico. Now, he is the director of the Casa Belén Posada del Migrante of the city of Saltillo, Coahuila. Today, the priest lives harassed, his telephones are tapped; he had to accept a series of precautionary measures that the CNDH requested of the federal government, considering his life to be in danger. His “mistake” had been to publicly denounce the participation of authorities and specific drug cartels in the income-producing business of kidnapping migrants (Pérez, 2010).

Pantoja went to the city of San Luis Potosi to give a talk in a Seminar at a university, but one day before he went to the CCC where the second meeting took place. Overall, he talked about our duties as human rights advocates and said that to move migrants away from victimization into social subjectivity we have to make them visible. In his own words, “we want them to be protagonists and to push them to defend their own human rights because the best defender is the victim” (2010).

The third meeting was directed by the priest Margarito Sanchez Grimaldo, the director of CARITAS San Luis Potosi. He talked about the relationship of CARITAS with the Casa; thanks to the former the project of the latter has been able to materialize. CARITAS is a global movement working in solidarity for a fairer world and is the biggest network of Catholic charities in the world devoted to reducing poverty and campaigning for social justice. It provides assistance to the poor, the vulnerable and the excluded on behalf of a billion Catholics around the world. As it works on humanitarian emergencies, is assisting Central American migrants in transit through the CCC

The work of Sanchez Grimaldo is fundamental. Thanks to him the Casa is able to run; he mediates the relationships with other institutions, e.g. the government, and religious bodies. In addition, he manage to obtain donations, in the form of cash, clothing, and food, to keep the Casa functioning. Since the Casa is founded through charity, it is a significant labour to search for those who may be interested to contribute for this social cause.

### 7.2.3 Liberation Ethics

Guillermo Michel<sup>4</sup> writes that we are witnessing a “values crisis” that is threatening human coexistence. Structural violence and injustice produce more violence, thus creating further injustices. It is necessary to be conscious and critical to perceive the proliferation of organized crime, exploitation of men, women, and children, illegal actions taken by armies, and other repressive forces (Michel 2003).

According to Michel, these social phenomena incarnated in our living world, allows claiming that institutional violence constitutes an undeclared war against the poor. Against those who survive in extreme violence. The ends are similar to those of any war: the extermination of the enemy. As in every political regime, violence is at the same time masked and manifested through laws, agreements, or arbitrary rules which practices “casually” harm the poor (Michel 2003).

The right of having a life of dignity - meaning having adequate food, shelter, a job, a fair salary, access to education - is systematically violated by those with economic and political power. Thus, thousands are condemned and are victims of a system based on discrimination (racial, sexual, and social), individualism, divestment, and exploitation. The victims are the poor, women, children, and elderly; in other words the “weaker” are those who are more likely to succumb. Victims of hunger and treatable diseases are pushed to work in denigrated jobs or even to die. It is a fundamental ethical problem that arises from the omnipresent institutional violence where the victims turn into beings

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<sup>4</sup> Guillermo Michel was a researcher and a professor at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco; he licensed in philosophy, did a masters in social anthropology and a doctorate in philosophy. He is the author of several works on existential hermeneutics, education, and Zapatismo.

without voice, face, weight, and value (Sánchez Vázquez, 1998).

Violence against the vulnerable is never recognized as such. Most of the time the persistent everyday violations of economic, politic, social, and cultural rights is attributed to external forces (economic and extra-economic) or to the people's idiosyncrasy (Michel, 2003).

Throughout history, intellectuals and social reformers, such as Levinas, have striven for the humanization of human beings. However, as Michel states, this is almost an impossible matter due to the de-humanizing structure of society where violence, injustice, oppression, and exploitation prevail (2003).

Enrique Dussel approaches ethics from what he conceptualizes as "the community of the victims". As just mentioned the victims, or the excluded, those who have no voice, no face and are only visible when a natural catastrophe takes place or when they decide to manifest themselves through liberation movements (Michel, 2003). In his work, *Ethics of Liberation* (1998) Dussel reflects on the history of human rights abuses in Latin America. The ethics of liberation are based on a critical ethics that begins with acknowledging the existence of oppressive structures and the other as being oppressed.

In the attempt for social transformation, first one needs to accept that no system, product of social activity, is perfect or without faults. In other words, someone will always be affected in one way or another. Since victims are a product of the system, eventually societies may raise demands for change. This takes place when the victim realizes his or her oppression [collectively], because it is impossible for victims to take action until they recognize their own condition (2006:503). When a community of victims recognizes its exclusion, the process of liberation starts. Even when the system

may not be taking their struggle or demands seriously, their visibility reveals the illegitimate nature of the system; illegitimate because it is depriving the fundamentals of human life to some of its members. Hence, social movements are vivid examples of this principle, “liberation in its most pragmatic form” (2006:504).

In this sense it is our ethical duty as human beings to act to transform oppressive and de-humanizing social structures in order to prevent institutional and structural violence. Therefore, as stated by Michel, ethics - as primary philosophy and existential ground of our lives - must be considered as theory and practice, “as a theoretical reflection that results in action” (2003: 65).

The system is also in charge of alienating the “masses” by fictitious modes of entertainment so that they forget the other, or those referred above as the victims. Their extreme misery follow structural factors, Dussel claims that they can be transformed with a “possible/feasible utopia” conceptualized by the “community of the victims”. For it to be possible it needs to be mediated by concrete programs and projects of action. These can be materialized by a detailed and careful analysis of the objective and real circumstances. Yet, Dussel acknowledges that full responsibility cannot be dropped at the feet of the victims. They are the “cannon fodder” for the dominant ideology.

According to Paulo Freire (1972), consciousness may lead us to take a utopian position at the face of the world. Such position turns the consciousness into a “utopian factor”.

“Utopia is not idealism but the dialecticalization of the acts of denouncing the dehumanized and announcing the humanized structures. For this reason utopia is also a historic commitment, also only utopians can be preachers and carriers of

hope. The only ones that can be prophetic are those who announce and denounce, who are permanently compromised with a radical transformation process so that women and men can be better. Reactionaries, the oppressors cannot be utopian. They cannot be prophetic, thus cannot have hope. Consciousness is evidently linked to utopia, it implies utopia. The more conscious we are, the more able we are to announce and denounce. This is due to the sole commitment of transformation that we assume. If we stop being utopian we become a bureaucracy. It is evident and impressive, but never the oppressors will be able to provoke the liberation of consciousness. “Who am I going to de-mythologize if I am oppressing?” (1972:38-39).

Thus, ethics is not restricted to perceive reality from the poor and to take sides for the victims of the uneven system, but forces us morally to become “utopian factors” and prophetic. It forces us to become those who announce and denounce processes that are leading human beings to their own destruction and death.

Suggesting that the political and politics have to move away from the manipulation of international financial centers that dictate economic, social, and cultural politics may sound naïve. Yet, according to Dussel (1998, 2006) ethics is one of our last resource to prevent the destruction of humanity. The lack of ethics in the world seems as a global phenomenon, where the urge for profit is more important than human beings. Thus, exclusion, economic deprivation, political, cultural and libidinal differences prevail in addition to the sustainability of the planet that is constantly threaten. These place the materiality of human life into question, which is an ethical problem that it is impossible

to ignore (2006:501).

### **7.3 Advocacy Networks**

#### **7.3.1 The Casas throughout Mexico**

Since the early 1980's the persistent situation of violence to Central American migrant populations throughout Mexico has pushed religious bodies to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need. The shelters, or Casas, are coordinated by the Pastoral Dimension of Human Mobility (*Dimension Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana, DPMH*) of the Mexican Episcopal Conference. There are approximately 35 to 47 Casas that operate throughout the country. I do not give an exact number because shelters are constantly opened and closed due to violence, infiltrations of criminals, and other conflicts alike.

The Casas are in charge of promoting and defending human rights of the migrant population from the DPMH's ecclesiastic, social, juridical, and political perspective; constituting a pastoral network of shelters for migrants that parallels the routes taken by Central Americans.

Next I will show the connection of the CCC with the Catholic Church. For doing so, first I will provide a brief context of religion in Mexico. Then, I explain how the CCC works through its connections with other institutions, how sectors of the Church through *Cáritas* provides social welfare to the oppressed. *Cáritas* depends on The Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. The CCC depends on *Cáritas*.

#### **7.3.2 Religion in Mexico**

Until the 1970's the Mexican state experienced a secularization process. This process was consolidated in the period of the Reform with President Benito Juarez during

1855. In other words, the state and the ecclesiastical institutions remain separated.

Afterwards, the post-revolutionary state incarnated in the political party then in power - Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI) - was debilitated. According to Román, political leaders from the PRI mobilized religious institutions as a means of legitimization (2005).

In 1992 several articles of the Constitution were reformed, of particular interest is the third article which relates to education. More specifically, the section on the relationship of education to religion and the public displays of religion was reformed. The Constitution officially allowed practice of religious instruction in private schools and the practice of religious manifestations outside religious temples, which unofficially had long been taking place. This change brought up an opening in the matter of religion and the return of the Catholic Church to public debates of the country, therefore institutionalizing the power of the Catholic Church within Mexican society (Román, 2005).

Subsequently, in 2000 with the political “alternation”- change of political party in power, PRI to National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, PAN) - politicians carried out public displays of religious faith. There were events such as the canonization of the Indian Juan Diego, who discovered the Virgin’s Guadalupe cloak, whose pro-European image was represented in thousands of souvenirs such as t-shirts, caps, and other items. It was done with papal blessing. This event was heavily criticized by the Zapatistas with the argument that Juan Diego had not been canonized because he was indigenous. Since the process of canonization was done by those who opposed indigenous and ethnic rights, it had other ends. In addition, before one of Mexico’s ex-Presidents was elected candidate of the PAN, he carried a banner with the Virgin

Guadalupe during his campaign. He claimed to be the continuation of Priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, well-known Independence fighter and traditional symbol of Mexican society (Maza, 2002).

In this period, the PAN, a political party with ingrained Catholic influence since its creation, displaced the PRI. At the same time the Puebla Panama Plan was being announced. The unfinished projects that were left by ex-president Vicente Fox to his successor, the current president, consisted of a series of structural reforms expected by the Washington Consensus. Particularly in relation to the appropriation of fundamental energy sectors of the economy by transnational monopolies (Maza, 2002; Román, 2005).

The reactivation of the church in the political and cultural spheres of Mexico became obvious through diverse instances. For example, when the Church intervened to mediate the Zapatistas' conflicts, in the visits of Pope John Paul II to Mexico, with the re-establishment of religion within programs of education, and the granting of juridical persona in the Mexican Constitution to the church. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of new religions dissenting from Catholicism. Overall, these and other events ceased the secularization process that was once started.

The Catholic Church is a flexible institution that manages to adjust itself to diverse historical contexts and has the capacity to survive regardless of adverse junctures (Gómez Granados, 2005; Blancarte 1995). It can be said that three events were crucial in the process of situating and re-inserting the Church in the Mexican state. First, the disintegration of the socialist system in the Soviet Union; second, the delimitation of state's institutions, and third the five visits of Pope John Paul II to Mexico in the years 1979, 1990, 1993, 1999, and 2002. Through these visits the Church's power was

manifested along with its significant number of believers (Alemán, 2002; Gómez Granados, 2006).

Religions are capable of mobilizing entire populations in part because they provide support, individual identity, spirituality, and sense of community, which secular society has not been able to provide. The notion of personhood is very limited in secularism, but religion uses this notion as a strategy to attract followers. Also, the process of the transformation of the Church, according to specific historical circumstances, has allowed it to move from the private to the public sphere. Religion's influence in society and politics has not and it does not seem to decrease on the contrary, it is increasing in certain countries, such as Mexico (Casanova, 1994).

### **7.3.3 Religion and Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People**

*"I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35)*

The Pontifical Councils of the Catholic Church are not static discourses rather they provide different solutions according to concrete historical conditions (Gómez Granados, 2006). This is the case of the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People that relates to the phenomenon of human mobility that is taking place in multiple regions around the globe.

The goal of the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People is the assistance of emigrants' rights in situations of emergency, which will take place within the parishes led by the chaplains or in organizations dependent on them. The term *emigrant* refers to migrants, refugees, seamen and fishermen, airport workers and air travelers, nomads, pilgrims, tourists of various sorts, students studying outside their own country, road-transport workers, technicians and workers in projects or research at the international

level who need to move from one place to the another (Pontifical Councils, 2010).

The Church believes that it has to demonstrate solidarity with migrants because "in their variety of languages, races, cultures and customs, reminds the Church of its condition as a pilgrim people from all parts of the earth towards the definitive homeland" (John Paul II, 2.2.1999)." Furthermore, 13.2 in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that every human being can "leave any country, including his own and return". Thus, the Church defends the right to migrate, yet the Church does not promote its exercise (Benedict XVI, 2010).

#### **7.3.4 SLP**

In 1854, under Pope Pius IX, the Diocese of San Luis Potosí was created. It included the whole state. Afterwards in 1961 the Diocese of Ciudad Valles was added and in 1997 the Diocese of Matehuala. Today the three dioceses make up the Archdiocese of San Luis Potosí. An archbishop is in charge of an archdiocese while there is a bishop for each diocese (iglesiapotosina.org, 2010).

There are a set of organisms and people who collaborate with the bishop of a diocese for the operation of the church on its administrative, pastoral and judicial areas. The Social Pastoral Care is the organism that is in charge of taking into practice the Church's doctrine. A priest, appointed by the Bishop, is in charge of the Social Pastoral Care. Also, the priest is the director of Cáritas (Ibid. 2010). In SLP this priest is Margarito Sanchez Grimaldo.

#### **7.3.5 Caritas**

*"Poverty and social injustice are the real weapons of massive destruction"*  
*Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga, President of Caritas Internationalis*

Cáritas is an international organization and a global movement for social change that provides assistance to the poor, the vulnerable and the excluded on behalf of the Catholic population of the globe. Cáritas works in humanitarian emergencies, human development, and campaigning against injustice, exclusion, and poverty (Caritas Internationalis, 2010).

The Mexican Episcopate works together with Cáritas, as both have similar goals. These are helping human beings, justice, promoting charity, and respect through programs of service and assistance projects. Likewise, both provide immediate assistance in the forms of food, shelter, clothes, legal and psychological advice (Episcopal Commission of the Episcopal Pastoral Care, *Comisión Episcopal para La Pastoral*, 2010).

Cáritas SLP has different projects to help different populations in need. First, the *Botica del Pobre*, which is a drugstore that sells medicines for cheaper prices than the regular prices offered everywhere else. Second, the *Comedor La Esperanza* that serves a free meal at 2pm from Monday to Saturday. Third, the *Bazar*; it is a store that sells second hand clothes at low prices. Fourth, *Centro de Acopio Permanente*, or collection center of food. Fifth, the *Casa de la Caridad Cristiana* for migrants in transit.

### 7.3.6 CCC

The CCC was created due to the situation of human rights abuses and structural violence that is taking place in Mexico against Central American migrants. Also, the sectors of the Catholic Church that support this cause have opened a space of critique for Casa advocacy for migrants. Accordingly, advocates and priests who are involved at the Casas denounce and critique the abuses perpetuated to migrants. It is crucial to mention

that the situation of each specific Casa within the national network differs in terms of levels of involvement in advocacy. Some, directly and publicly critiquing the complicity of the Mexican government and specific individuals in the civil service who aggravate abuses to migrants, for example, as stated in previous chapters, the Padre Pantoja and the Padre Solalinde are constantly denouncing the situation without censure; reasons why they live harassed and threaten. However, this is not the situation in all the Casas.

The CCC, as a project of Caritas and the Social Pastoral Care, takes the option for the poor or "the community of victims" (Dussel 1998, 2006). Furthermore, the means, actions, and ends of the CCC are oriented to protect the life of human beings from an ecclesiastical perspective. As mentioned earlier, the Casa does not encourage migration, but promotes the respect of human rights by providing temporal accommodation and other services to those in need. In this context, the activities done at the Casa can be conceptualized as "ethical actions".

According to Dussel for an action to be ethical it must consider three aspects: the defense of life, social consensus, and feasibility. First, the goal of the organization that is taking particular actions has to be inclined to defend the lives of vulnerable populations; in this case undocumented migrants. Second, the victims' point of view has to be taken into consideration and they need to recognize their own condition. In other words, ethical decisions are being taken from the perspective and for the necessities of the individuals who reach the door of the CCC. Finally, human ethical actions must be feasible. Dussel states that "feasibility implies determining in a material fashion what is economically, politically, technically, and psychologically possible; it is useless to suggest something that we know in advance will not work" (2006:502). For this reason the limitations at the

Casa have to be acknowledged and help according to the available resources. Also, the fact that the majority, if not all, of the migrants are undocumented adds an obstacle to the actions that can be taken to help them. As it is the case of the difficulties encountered if presenting a claim before a court.

## CHAPTER 8: COMING BACK TO THE FIELD

On May 8<sup>th</sup> of 2010 I went back to the CCC. Besides the fact that I missed my job, the atmosphere, the music, the *tiendita*, the members of the staff, and the migrants I also felt as if my 3-month original fieldwork was not long enough to understand the dynamics at the Casa and the complex phenomenon of undocumented transit migration. Therefore, I decided that I needed to go back.

I arrived in Mexico on a Saturday night. The next day I rushed to the CCC; it was as if I never left. I had great memories of the place and knowledge of its modes of operation; immediately I started to work. I dedicated six weeks in total to volunteer at the Casa, and now that I am back in Montreal I would have loved to be there for longer, just as on my first trip. It seems that as if there is never enough time.

When I left Montreal to go to the CCC for a second time I was almost finished writing the first draft of this thesis. As mentioned earlier the thesis is based on the information gathered during my first voyage. However, after coming back and re-reading my original draft, I did a few changes and added minor details. Additionally I was able to do a more in-depth analysis.

After coming back to Montreal, both times, I found myself with a great amount of information. Also, I was realizing how the subject of my research can be approached from different angles and disciplines. I believe that the continuity of working on the same subject and setting provided me with directions for future research and made me realize that I would need to stay a longer period of time in the field.

Even though I did not include data of my second trip for analysis I decide to write this section: *Coming back to the field*, where I will briefly recapitulate my experience.

First, I talk about how the Casa changed in the four-month period that I was absent and the differences between my original and second "fieldworks". The second section describes external factors in Mexico that influence the dynamics inside of the Casa. Then, I dedicated a section to describe the situation of migrants who once arrived at the Casa, but are now "caught in the middle" or "stuck in transit" living and working in the city of SLP. I conclude with a personal reflection concerning my whole experience.

### 8.1 The CCC

One of the differences between my original period of fieldwork with this second period of volunteering was that the latter seemed to be more *passionate*. In other words, I seemed to be more involved in doing my job and I became closer to the people I was working with. This was probably due to the background and accumulated knowledge that I had of the subject in terms of practice and theory. In addition, I did not go there thinking of gathering data for my thesis, but more with a goal of actively volunteering and helping in whatever I could. Of course, at the end of my experience, even though I was not purposely searching for information or interviewing, I gained more knowledge about what concerns the migration of Central Americans. More specifically I believe that now I am able to better understand the social, political, and economic dimensions of the phenomenon of human mobility than when I first went. What helped me in the process of expanding my knowledge were daily conversations with individuals who related to me their life stories; more specifically their life in their place of origin, family life, what they do to earn a living, anecdotes, love relationships, hobbies, and their experiences in Mexico. In addition, when being at the office of the Casa I had multiple conversations with different members of the staff that expanded my understanding and perception of

migrations at a time of extreme violence, corruption, and political instability. Due to the variety of backgrounds among the members of the staff, in terms of education, place of origin and socio-economic background, I was able to observe and hear different perceptions and conceptualizations of the same phenomenon. Interestingly regardless of these differences, everyone is working towards the same end, that is, helping those in need.

I met people whom I previously knew. However, a few staff members had been replaced; the CCC went through employee changes while I was absent. Also, I met Central Americans whom I had met on my first trip, those whom I described in my thesis as “stuck in transit”. In most cases these friendships, among staff members and migrants, had solidified and grown incredibly. In addition, I met new people: migrants and the new members of the Casa’s team.

While I was there, in my third week, two new male Mexican volunteers arrived. Their goal is to help with creating a plan for improving the CCC's organization and in the context of logistics. They came from a well-known university located in one of the largest cities in Mexico and were planning to stay at the Casa for eight weeks. In addition a group of seminarians arrived at the CCC; they were going to be there for a period of four weeks. Their work was concerned with the spirituality at the CCC. Accordingly, their activities included organizing daily group prayers among the migrants, leading the prayers before the meals, speaking individually with those that wished to do so, and in general they helped in the diverse areas within the Casa.

## 8.2 Mexico

It is crucial to mention that external matters are provoking changes inside of the

CCC. Nothing is static or unchanging, as is the case of the events taking place inside Mexico and at the borders. I noticed that the process of crossing the border is becoming harder, due to militarization, drug cartels' new "fees" to cross the Rio Bravo, and more violence in general. How did I become aware of this apart from the news? At the Casa I witnessed more and more re-entries; on many occasions I met the same migrant or group of migrants twice. In other words, they arrived at the Casa from the south of Mexico, left from the Casa *para arriba* (to the north), and then they came back. This is more common with people who do not have the services of a coyote, who previously arranges to pay the bribes and "fees" to authorities, drug cartels, and/or mafias. So, those who travel by themselves on the train and attempt to cross the northern border without help have a lot less chance to successfully reach their desired destination: the U.S.

On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, 11 civil organizations, which advocate for migrants, presented a report to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (CIDH) in Washington D.C. It documents the situation of migrants in transit. The report describes the situation as a "humanitarian tragedy"; in less than six months, 10 thousand kidnappings in Mexico were officially registered (Rodriguez Garcia 2010). Pantoja stated that "no one wants to believe, or some partially believe, that we are in the context of a holocaust, a genocide, an aberration against migrants, who today, as never before, are in a state of vulnerability and abandonment as security bodies are at the service of organized crime" (ibid. 2010).

On April 28<sup>th</sup> of 2010 Amnesty International published a document titled *Invisible Victims* (*Victimas Invisibles*). The document urges Mexican authorities to start and coordinate a plan together with state governments, to guarantee the respect and protection

of the rights of undocumented migrants (Rodriguez Garcia 2010).

Adding to the human rights violations, recent natural disasters are complicating the migrants' journey. Hurricane Alex, the first tropical cyclone of the year in the Atlantic reached Mexico on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010 brought intense rain. Due to the rain and flooding many trains suspended their service; this was in the southern, central, and northern regions of the country. In addition, the level of the Rio Bravo is considerably higher, which is more dangerous for those who plan to cross it. The CCC and other Casas within Mexico allowed people to prolong their stay because if there are no trains and it's constantly raining, how are the migrants going to leave? (CCC July 5, 2010).

Then, on July 4<sup>th</sup> the rains caused a train to derail near Escobedo, a village located between the states of SLP and Guanajuato. The eleven wagons that derailed caused not only an ecological disaster because combustibles and oil were spilled, but deaths and injuries of the migrants who were traveling aboard. Those who were able to do so escaped the place, for fear of deportation, and hurried to the CCC or to the Casa in the city of Guadalajara. The CCC received injured individuals and during those days the phone did not stop ringing; family members where anguished trying to find out if migrants were alive. Also, the Casa was full of reporters who wanted to take pictures and interview the victims. Therefore, due to both events, the bad weather and the train accident, the CCC had approximately 80 people who were not able to leave for almost two weeks (CCC: June 10, 2010).

### **8.3 Stuck in transit**

I met a few Central Americans who have been in SLP for longer periods than they planned; they are aware of the situation at the border. In addition, they do not have

enough money and do not want to take the risks of being kidnapped, deported, or abused. Thus, they found jobs at SLP and have no plans to try to go to the U.S. any time soon. When an undocumented individual has been longer than a year in Mexico without documents, they can go to a Migratory Station and apply for a permit to be legally allowed to stay; this permit is known as the FM3. The requirements for the FM3 are a birth certificate, two letters of recommendations from Mexican citizens, and a fee of two thousands pesos, or \$148 Canadian. I know five individuals who are in this situation, they been long enough in Mexico to request the permit and wish to do so. Two of them are in the process of getting their permit. Both want to be able to travel freely inside Mexico, and if money allows it, they will go back home to visit their families in Honduras during Christmas and New Years Eve. Then, they plan to re-enter Mexico by bus and avoid the train and the dangers of undocumented migration.

The five cases I know of are all males originally from Honduras; four of them in their early 20s and one is 15 years old. They left their place of origin thinking that their relatives, who reside in the U.S., will help them to cross by paying for the coyote. However, for various reasons when they reached SLP their relatives changed their minds, so without financial resources they were unable to continue their journey. They do work in SLP, but with the money they make it is hard if not impossible to save for paying themselves for a coyote as the money they earn is destined to daily expenses like rent and food. Their average salary is 60 dollars per week.

#### **8.4 Concluding Remarks**

Through the analysis and writing of my thesis I tried to be objective when describing the phenomenon of transit migration throughout Mexico. However, the

dimension of human rights violations and the fact that I have been dealing with human beings has been a real challenge and an extraordinary experience. I became attached to the place, to the people, and established long-life relationships. This explains my urge to go back to the CCC.

I must emphasize that the life stories that I included in my thesis are just a few of the countless heartbreaking and disturbing stories that we hear at this place; they are everyday life at the Casa. During this second voyage I heard the continuation of a few stories of individuals who I met on my first trip, often not with fortunate endings.

On a personal level I have been going through a process of learning how to share and to think more in the sense of a group and less in the sense of an individual. For these reasons, I cannot help but feel guilty about leaving the Casa. I will end this work by confessing the one thing I was never good at when working at the CCC, which was saying good bye to those who leave. In these moments I often had in my mind what Pantoja tells the migrants who depart, "hunger is stronger than fear".

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