

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Driven from Home: Taking Stock of Central American Migration

Anita Isaacs 

Department of Political Science, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania, US
Email: aisaacs@haverford.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

From Strangers to Neighbors: Post-disaster Resettlement and Community Building in Honduras. By Ryan Alaniz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. xv + 216. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477314098.

The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America. By Noelle Kateri Brigden. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. Pp. 264. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781501730559.

The Democracy Development Machine: Neoliberalism, Radical Pessimism, and Authoritarian Populism in Mayan Guatemala. By Nicholas Copeland. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. 282. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781501736063.

The Long Honduran Night: Resistance, Terror, and the United States in the Aftermath of the Coup. By Dana Frank. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018. Pp. 344. \$17.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781608469604.

Caravana: Cómo el éxodo Centroamericano salió de la clandestinidad. By Alberto Pradilla. Mexico City: Penguin Random House, 2019. Paperback. Pp. 293. ISBN: 9786073180511.

Sexto Estado de la Región 2021: Versión completa. San José, Costa Rica: Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE); Programa Estado de la Nación (PEN), 2021. PDF. Pp. 476. ISBN: 9789930607138. Datos electrónicos, <https://estadonacion.or.cr/informe/?id=332ae9fc-d7c0-4886-a8cd-b67ea5f0ac38>.

A House of One's Own: The Moral Economy of Post-disaster Aid in El Salvador. By Alicia Sliwinski. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 264. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780773552920.

The armed conflicts that ravaged Central America during the 1980s sparked a mass exodus of refugees. By war's end over a million of the region's citizens had become internally displaced and another two million had fled north, settling in Canada, Mexico, and the United States.¹ Almost three decades have passed since the signing of peace, yet migration

¹ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1.

from the region persists unabated. Crippling poverty, environmental crises, political corruption, and renewed repression, along with epidemic levels of violence, have led to the internal displacement of over half a million Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans and an almost fourfold increase in Central Americans living in the United States, from 1.1 million in 1990 to 3.8 million in 2019—a number equivalent to 8 percent of the total US immigrant population.²

To date, however, research on migration from the region has largely failed to keep pace either with the dramatic rise in numbers or with scholarship in the fields of migration studies and immigration policy. As a result, much of what we know about current migration from the region can be gleaned by extrapolating from scholarly debates on migration trends and US immigration policy, and from regionally focused policy analyses and journalistic accounts.

By tweaking the scope of academic research (especially when grounded in ethnographic fieldwork) on poverty and inequality; drug gang, gender, and LGBTQI violence; environmental degradation and disaster; and democratic erosion in the region, Central Americanists could help fill critical gaps in scholarly understandings of the finer-grained dynamics of migration. Migration researchers know that poverty, violence, and increasingly, climate change constitute the core causes of migration, but Central Americanists could help them assess the relative weight of each and the complex interplay among them. By expanding the scope of fieldwork within poor and marginal communities to investigate how prospective migrants weigh whether to leave or stay, Central Americanists could help shed light on the deliberations that trigger migration and emphasize the need to portray migrants as simultaneously victims of dire circumstances and agents of their own destiny.³ And by clarifying blurry connections between the corrupt and criminal regimes that govern the region and surging rates of migration, political scientists could draw attention to the central role of politics in driving migration.

In different ways and to varying degrees, the seven works reviewed in this essay advance this agenda. They represent a sample of recent scholarship that, directly or indirectly, tackles these core themes. The discussion that follows assesses them on their own terms as works grounded in important intellectual debates and motivated by pressing questions and concerns, while also expanding their intended framings to signal their real (and potential) contributions to research and analysis on migration.

Framing migration

The sixth *Estado de la Región* report, published in late 2021, offers an excellent primer for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand postwar Central American migration. Its panoramic assessment of steadily worsening economic, environmental, political, and social crises, exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and the November 2020 twin hurricanes Eta and Iota, provides the backdrop of a renewed surge in migration. Furthermore, in highlighting the relatively stronger institutional capacities, social safety nets, and democratic fabrics of Costa Rica and Panama, the report illuminates why the

² Erin Babich and Jeanne Batalova, “Central American Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Information Source* (Migration Policy Institute), August 11, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states>; *Understanding and Estimating Displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America*, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre Report, September 2018, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/understanding-and-estimating-displacement-in-the-northern-triangle-of-central-america>.

³ See, for instance, Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell, and Katy Long, “Push-Pull Plus: Reconsidering the Drivers of Migration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 927–944; Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins, “Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 909–926; and Hein de Haas, “A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 8 (2021): 1–35.

citizens of the Northern Triangle and, increasingly, Nicaragua, make up the lion's share of migrants from the region.

The report's twelfth chapter outlines broad trends in regional migration. It documents the staggering growth in the undocumented Central American population residing in the United States, and its shifting demographics as entire families, women, and unaccompanied children are increasingly driven from their homes. It also charts migrant passages along several corridors. The traditionally congested northern corridor that links the Northern Triangle to the United States absorbs 80 percent of all the international migrant traffic, and a secondary southern corridor continues mostly to ferry Nicaraguans into Costa Rica. A broken and restrictive US asylum process along with tighter US border enforcement, including its expansion into the US interior and, more recently, south into Mexico and even Central America, are also reconfiguring regional migration patterns. Mexico has become a country of indefinite transit and even destination, and rising numbers of migrants are resettling in neighboring countries: Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador.⁴

The essay also emphasizes the acute vulnerability of uprooted individuals and communities. The persistent threats that internally displaced activists, members of the LGBTQI community, and victims of criminal organizations confront; the multiple stresses that family members left behind and separated at the border face; the dangers migrants encounter throughout their journey; the everyday abuse and exploitation undocumented immigrants experience, and the traumas that returnees endure all come into view in these pages. While the authors are especially critical of the Trump administration's harsh treatment of unauthorized immigrants, they also call out governments in the region, urging them to collaborate with academics and human rights and humanitarian organizations in implementing the legal and institutional protections the region's growing migrant population desperately require.

Postwar Central American economics, politics, and society

The Democracy Development Machine: Neoliberalism, Radical Pessimism, and Authoritarian Populism in Mayan Guatemala by Nicholas Copeland surveys the bleak Central American landscape from the vantage point of a small town nestled in the Maya-Mam highlands of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in San Pedro in 2004 and during return visits in the decade that followed, the book dissects the origins of neoliberalism, tracks its construction, and accounts for its endurance. Partly captured by the book's title and informed by the concept of assemblage, Copeland portrays neoliberalism in all-encompassing terms as a complex, integrated, finely tuned, and tightly regulated economic and political machine that "extends market logic into all domains of social life" (5). Steered from afar by a mix of actors, including the international financial and development assistance communities, the Guatemalan state, and political and economic elites, the machine churns locally along twin, intersecting tracks. In San Pedro, as in much of rural indigenous Guatemala, development assistance projects and authoritarian populism propel and sustain a neoliberal economic, ideological, political, and social order.

The "war by other means" scenario depicted in anthropological studies of postwar Maya communities resonates with Copeland's discussion of the neoliberal democracy

⁴ Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas and Victoria Rietig, *Migrants Deported from the United States and Mexico to the Northern Triangle: A Statistical and Socioeconomic Profile*, Migration Policy Institute Report, September 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/migrants-deported-united-states-and-mexico-northern-triangle-statistical-and-socioeconomic>.

and development machine that he observes in San Pedro.⁵ The turn to neoliberalism represents an extension of Guatemala's four-decade-long armed conflict, whose toll is often measured in facts and figures: 200,000 dead or disappeared, as many as 1.5 million displaced, 626 documented army massacres, and 440 rural and indigenous villages razed to the ground.⁶ But as scholars emphasize, the war's impacts are far more extensive, enduring, and insidious. Copeland pays particular attention to what he labels "counter-insurgent amnesia." Counterinsurgent violence and indoctrination reinforced by evangelical narratives combine, in his view, to erase local memories of resistance, kill revolutionary ideals, and sanitize military objectives. The Sampedranos the author interviews emerged from the war forcibly transformed into "radical pessimists." Sapped of their imagination and desire to demand radical national political transformation, they conform to the neoliberal order.

Having thus set the stage, Copeland moves into the postwar era. He delivers a scathing critique of development assistance, including the much-lauded "capacity-building" initiatives targeting Guatemala's rural indigenous poor. Quoting at length from his interviews, Copeland acknowledges development assistance's appeal to radically pessimistic and ambitious Sampedranos. Given the absence of alternatives, these projects provide the only possible means of acquiring the skills and credentials needed to escape poverty and, ideally, gain acceptance into a society that has historically marginalized and denigrated indigenous Guatemalans. More important, he observes their pernicious effects. Development assistance doesn't merely fail to dent the inequalities and exclusion that are endemic to neoliberalism but arguably perpetuates and even exacerbates them. Even projects that purport to promote Mayan customs and traditions, he explains, devalue these by accelerating the drift away from communal and collective identities toward "an improvement-oriented market savvy individualism" befitting neoliberalism (85). Rather than repair a communal fabric torn by war, development assistance injects new social fissures, essentially introducing a caste system that elevates villagers who seek and acquire capacity and denigrates those who either opt out or are denied access. Finally, whatever societal acceptance capacity building permits remains, as always, conditional on the conformist, sanctioned behavior captured by Charles Hale's notion of the "*indio permitido*."⁷

Development assistance, capacity seeking, and sanctioned indigenous behavior also shape the contours of what the author defines as a cruel, authoritarian-populist politics.⁸ Even when indigenous mayors are elected, postwar politics in San Pedro bears little resemblance to traditional forms of indigenous self-governance, which prioritize communal needs. Politics devolves into an arena defined by unbridled competition between candidates vying for votes by capitalizing on the radical pessimistic mindset and peddling their "capacity" to obtain development assistance projects. They rarely do. When they occasionally succeed, they deliver what they do not pocket to only a select few followers.

⁵ Carlota McAllister and Diane Nelson, eds., *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-genocide Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). Also, see Marcia Esparza, *Silenced Communities: Legacies of Militarization and Militarism in a Rural Guatemalan Town* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), and Walter E. Little and Timothy J. Smith, eds., *Mayas in Postwar Guatemala: Harvest of Violence Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

⁶ For a more extensive discussion of these themes, see Charles D. Brockett, "Violence, Peacebuilding, and Democratic Struggles in Central America," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 3 (2017): 495–504, <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.126>; and Manolo E. Vela Castañeda, "Ricardo Falla: Genocide, Indigenous People, and the Art of Resistance," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 1 (2019): 262–268, <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.849>.

⁷ Charles R. Hale, *Más Que un Indio (More Than an Indian): Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 2006).

⁸ See Jorge Vargas Cullell, "Elections and the Muddled Present of the Latin American Democracies," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 3 (2019): 784–794, <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.893>.

It's insufficient to improve the lives of their constituents but enough to keep the "democracy development machine" running.

The book ends with an appeal to reorganize and reorient pessimism into a decolonized democracy grounded in indigenous traditions of reciprocity, consensus, and harmony (212). The author believes, or perhaps mostly hopes, that the growing frustration he detects among Sampedranos could provide the spark needed to rekindle the possibility of radically transformative politics.

Sadly, Copeland's conclusion rings more as manifesto than as the likely next phase in the story of San Pedro or Maya Guatemala. Partly this is because the author has delivered such a powerful indictment of the crushing impacts of wartime and peacetime counterinsurgency that neoliberalism feels more like an enduring impasse rather than a temporary setback for indigenous organization.

But it's also because migration blocks the shift from radical pessimism into radical transformation. *The Democracy Development Machine* provides migration scholars with a rich understanding of the tangled array of forces driving migration from the region. It reveals the brutal nexus between poverty, development, and politics. It portrays the residents of San Pedro as victims of a cruel system but also as resilient actors, constantly weighing their options in a determined quest to improve their lives. And it exposes the fierce and unwavering commitment of political and economic elites to an unjust status quo that intensifies poverty while also generating a mixture of conflicting emotions including hope, aspiration, frustration, and despair. But the book stops short of exploring how this mix of conditions in recent years has emptied Guatemalan communities and filled US towns and cities with indigenous Guatemalans, including Sampedranos. Migration may well represent another cruel phase of a triumphant counterinsurgent project: an escape valve that preserves the neoliberal order by channeling popular frustration and aspiration into displacement rather than into grassroots political mobilization in pursuit of radical transformation.⁹

Dana Frank's book *The Long Honduran Night: Resistance, Terror, and the United States in the Aftermath of the Coup*, chronicles the trajectory of democratic regression in Honduras during the eight-year period from the ouster of President Manuel Zelaya in June 2009 through the reelection of Juan Orlando Hernandez in November 2017.

The tale is a contemporary rendition of an age-old story of reformist possibilities yielding authoritarian outcomes in the region. The familiar cast of actors are playing their traditional roles, motivated, according to Frank, by deep-seated aspirations.

First, the country's economic and political elites are behaving as expected. They call on the military to depose Zelaya, ostensibly to restrain his antidemocratic impulses to rewrite the constitution and stand for reelection, but actually to prevent him from retaining power and enacting progressive reforms. In the years that follow they maneuver to advance their interests, jostling for power, eroding freedoms, weakening institutions, and constructing and reconstructing alliances. Initially skeptical of a candidate that is not clearly one of their own, Juan Orlando Hernández assuages their concerns by pushing their economic agenda.

Second, the Honduran opposition mobilizes as best it can. They organize protests, stage strikes, appeal to opposition politicians, and align with an international solidarity movement. But escalating repression targeting domestic activists (the assassination of Berta Cáceres is just one example) and even representatives of the international human rights community manages either to silence activism or to channel it into opposition party politics played according to the rules of an evolving authoritarian context.

⁹ Andrew Selee, "To Solve the Border Crisis, Look Beyond the Border," *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/08/border-crisis-guatemala-migration-honduras-central-latin-america/>.

Third, the United States acts out of habit. It refuses to denounce the coup and provides rather than severs security assistance. It also calls for elections as evidence of the restoration of democratic procedures and settles for fraudulent results, knowing all too well that democratic backsliding is in full swing. US officials may not like what they see: the escalation of repression, the rise in drug trafficking, the surge in gang violence, the wave of unaccompanied children crossing the border in 2014, and the gradual consolidation of political control by a corrupt and criminal leadership. But in Frank's view, they don't care enough to behave any differently, and ultimately, they privilege their geopolitical concerns with preventing the intrusion of foreign actors in the region and protecting economic interests over any purported interest in defending democracy.

The book is written out of anger at the United States for refusing to take a stand that could have helped prevent Honduras' slide into an authoritarian and criminal state. In this respect, it succeeds, showing key moments when the United States could have acted to buttress the opposition or weaken the ruling political clique, and evoking the passions of its readers along the way.

But in other respects, the book falls short of the mark. Frank might have done more to weave the rich details of the Honduran story into social science analysis on democratic regression and competitive authoritarianism. The author's self-casting as a fourth and central protagonist in the struggle for democracy in Honduras also distracts the reader from grappling with the complex political dynamics at play within Honduras and the United States. Finally, by failing to weave migration more centrally into the tale, the book misses an opportunity to address US policymakers in ways that might have gotten their attention, if not at the time the events unfolded, perhaps now as readers reflect on the Honduran tale. Although the odds are admittedly slim, exposing the connections between corrupt and authoritarian regimes and migration may be a more promising strategy for convincing the United States to withdraw support from the increasingly criminal and repressive governments in power in the region.

Internal displacement and resettlement

In *From Strangers to Neighbors: Post-disaster Resettlement and Community Building in Honduras*, Ryan Alaniz draws on fieldwork in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch to advocate for a holistic resettlement strategy that focuses simultaneously on building infrastructure and community. The justification for such an approach stems from the broader context of devastation that confronted Honduras in the wake of the 1998 hurricane. The storm added a layer of economic, psychological, and especially social stress on individuals and communities already reeling from poverty and escalating gang violence. Consequently, unless recovery initiatives tackle these multiple underlying vulnerabilities, they will provide at best temporary fixes that may address the most obvious and immediate needs of the displaced but will transfer old stressors into new settlements. Invoking the example of Campo Cielo, a purely infrastructural post-Mitch reconstruction project overrun by gangs, Alaniz observes, "if residents are afraid and exploited a hurricane proof roof barely matters" (53–54).

But what kind of community-building approach to pursue? The book addresses this question through a comparative analysis of Suyapa and Pino Alto, two of seven post-Mitch resettlement communities established on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa in the mid-2000s. In 2009–2010 and during repeat visits over the next few years, the author observes daily life, administers surveys, and interviews to residents, staff, and sponsors, applying a path-dependent approach to explain, as he puts it, "the markedly different social conditions of two settlements with similar demographics, infrastructure and length of NGO stay. Suyapa sustains a lower crime rate, and maintains higher collective efficacy,

social capital, civic participation, and commitment to a common vision than Pino Alto,” beset by “gang problems, crime and other social ills” (16).

Alaniz attributes these divergent outcomes to the distinctive reconstruction approaches adopted by the sponsoring NGOs in Pino Alto and Suyapa. La Internacional, a veteran disaster relief organization with multiple on-the-ground commitments, adhered to a self-help or partnership model in Pino Alto. Seeking simultaneously to promote a holistic vision of development and community empowerment, La Internacional tasked Pino Alto residents with primary responsibility for formulating and managing educational, health, and income-generating projects. By contrast, La Iglesia, a Catholic organization taking its first and only stab at reconstruction, blended elements of the partnership model with elements of the more traditional, directive technical assistance approach. The hybrid result, a strategy captured by the acronym SAGE, entailed sustained donor engagement, accompaniment, and guidance in fostering the progressive empowerment of Suyapa’s residents.

The argument as presented in the first part of the book is provocative. It runs against the grain of scholarship and praxis that largely supports a partnership approach, and invites replication of the SAGE model in the design of post-disaster reconstruction programs elsewhere in the region and beyond. But the case studies that follow muddy the author’s central claim that community building requires *sustained* sponsor accompaniment and guidance. Alaniz’s descriptions of Suyapa and Pino Alto suggest instead (an equally important takeaway) that the distinctive conceits, demographics, and layouts of the two settlements may have been at least as determinative, if not more so, of their contrasting social health outcomes. For instance, as a first step toward fulfilling their unique vision of creating a quasi-intentional faith-based community, Suyapa’s sponsors enlisted local parishes in handpicking residents who would be dependable, law-abiding, civically minded, and willing to live by catholic values. Additionally, prior to resettlement, the prospective residents of Suyapa were compelled to attend two dozen weekly workshops in which they got to know one another and received instruction on settlement logistics and neighborly behavior. With no similar vision, criteria, or preparation guiding admission to Pino Alto, its more heterogeneous and secular residents arrived as strangers lacking any semblance of social capital. As the author also emphasizes, the two communities were designed and built differently. Suyapa’s smaller scale, integrated grid, central market, and police station fostered greater social interaction and a sense of security that would be harder to achieve in the larger, more sprawling Pino Alto, whose market and police station lay on the outskirts of town.

A House of One’s Own: The Moral Economy of Post-disaster Aid in El Salvador, by Alicia Sliwinski, shifts the setting to post-earthquake El Salvador while maintaining the focus on assessing post-disaster relief and reconstruction assistance. The author arrives in Lamaria, a municipality located some forty kilometers west of San Salvador, in February 2001. Charged with delivering supplies collected by a Montreal-based Salvadoran diaspora committee, she stays on for a month to accompany initial humanitarian relief efforts and returns in October to observe the construction of a small Red Cross-sponsored resettlement community, La Hermandad, and to monitor progress in Los Mangos, a reconstruction project supported by an Italian NGO.

As in the Honduran case, a natural disaster triggers the displacement of villagers already struggling to make ends meet. Too overwhelmed and under-resourced to respond to the crisis, the recently elected leftist coalition surrenders management of the relief operation to local and international charities. Though initially impressed by the outpouring of goodwill and aid, Sliwinski soon sours on the entire operation. Structuring her analysis through a moral economy framework concerned with the production, circulation, and transmission of values (rather than goods or services), she highlights the tensions inherent in construing humanitarian aid as a gift, selflessly bestowed on

beneficiaries who are expected, but at times refuse, to demonstrate a compliant gratitude toward those who distribute food aid or provide temporary shelter.

The same moral economy lens guides the author's assessment of the La Hermandad and Los Mangos resettlements. While neither project is strictly comparable to either Pino Alto or Suyapa, they borrow elements of each. Both aspire to build infrastructure and community, and the Red Cross sponsors apply signature elements of the SAGE approach in fashioning a hybrid technical assistance/mutual self-help project for La Hermandad. But whereas Alaniz advocates for the donor-driven, community-centered reconstruction framework he observes in Suyapa, Sliwinski is harshly critical of the Salvadoran settlements she observes. She rebukes the NGO sponsors for seeking to impose their own, reified vision of community and participation onto project beneficiaries who may not share or even actively reject their ideas. As a result, both projects are more effective in sowing discord and division among residents and between residents and project staff than in fostering neighborliness or social solidarity. Participants denounce Los Mangos's housing-for-work model as communist; La Hermandad staff bicker among themselves and denigrate project participants as *machista*, lazy, and ungrateful; and residents in both settlements complain and spread gossip about their neighbors. Unfortunately, the thin description of Los Mangos and the somewhat scattershot presentation of daily life in La Hermandad make it hard to ascertain where the sponsors went wrong. In the case of the former, the reader is mostly asked to take the author at her word, in the latter left to ponder whether the project was fundamentally ill-conceived or poorly stewarded by its managers.

Practitioners wrestling with the challenges of devising durable solutions to protracted internal displacement will find value in the ethnographic material and divergent perspectives on holistic responses to disaster-induced displacement the two monographs provide.¹⁰ Migration scholars, however, may find the authors' narrow framing and short research horizon frustrating. They might have hoped for an expanded discussion of the interplay between environmentally induced displacement and other core drivers of migration (poverty, violence), and an exploration of the differences and connections between temporary versus protracted displacement, and internal versus international migration.¹¹ Author interviews, for instance, might have probed why residents decided to move to a reconstruction project rather than return to their community of origin, settle elsewhere, or migrate to the United States, availing themselves in the case of Honduras of the temporary protected status extended to victims of Hurricane Mitch. The long lag between research and publication also leaves readers (especially in the case of *A House of One's Own*) in the lurch, curious as to whether these resettlement communities have stood the test of time, and if (any of) their original residents continue to live there or have moved on, relocating within their own countries or migrating internationally.

Migrant crossings

The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America, written by the political scientist Noelle Kateri Brigden, and *Caravana: Cómo el éxodo centroamericano salió de la*

¹⁰ UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, "Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future," 2021, <https://www.internaldisplacement-panel.org>. Also, see World Bank Group, *A Development Approach to Conflict-Induced Internal Displacement*, January 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1596/35505>.

¹¹ Reiko Obokata, Luisa Veronis, and Robert McLeman, "Empirical Research on International Environmental Migration: A Systematic Review," *Population and Environment* 36 (2014): 111–135; Héctor Morales-Muñoz, Jha Srijna, Michelle Bonatti, Henryk Alff, Sabine Kurtenbach, and Stefan Sieber, "Exploring Connections – Environmental Change, Food Security and Violence as Drivers of Migration: A Critical Review of Research," *Sustainability* 12, no. 14 (2020), 10.3390/su12145702.

clandestinidad, by the journalist Alberto Pradilla, are excellent additions to an impressive body of academic studies, autobiographical and journalistic accounts, and films depicting the migrant journey from Central America to the United States.¹² They pair well together, best read as a sequence. *The Migrant Passage* is set during the Obama administration and presents an interpretative framework that helps contextualize Pradilla's portrayal of the Honduran migrant caravan that occurs midway through the Trump administration.

Although the readers never learn the fate of either the residents of San Pedro, Guatemala, or the Honduran and Salvadoran disaster reconstruction settlements, these books write a figurative next chapter in the lives of tens of thousands of individuals like them. In tracking the migrant journey, they shift the gaze, moving on from an exploration of the crushing neoliberal, authoritarian order that expels them to a dissection of the equally cruel system they encounter as they flee. Writing in solidarity with the migrants in whose footsteps they walk (Brigden, 32), Brigden and Padilla denounce a border enforcement regime that fails to achieve its objective of deterring unauthorized migration but succeeds in exacerbating the risks migrants encounter on their journey and the uncertainty that they will ever reach their intended destination.

The Migrant Passage is stunning in its conceptualization, research, analysis, and presentation. Brigden positions herself at the crossroads of international relations and anthropology. Framing the migrant journey as a survival play, she plots the dynamic relationship between a globalized world and migration, probing how state policies and actors shape the terrain and flow of migration and how these are reshaped in turn by migrant travelers. The anthropological dimension is partly reflected in her immersive fieldwork. From 2009 to 2011, and during several return visits to Mexican migration routes between December 2014 and June 2016, the author carried out 281 interviews, organized map-making workshops, volunteered at a migrant shelter, and rode aboard a freight train accompanying irregular migrants. Her analytical lens is also anthropologically informed. Grounding herself in the human experience, the author examines the ways in which migrants interpret, create, and enact social practices, cultural markers, scripts, and performances as they journey northward.

The metaphor of a play provides the scaffolding for the book's main chapters on character and cast, performances, and stages. In each, the author interweaves migrant stories with personal observations, guiding her audience on an intellectual voyage that deserves several readings to best absorb it.

The chapter on character and cast provides a historical overview of how US immigration policy and Mexican politics configure the evolving list of actors who ply the migration route. Organizing the narrative into three distinct periods and drawing on three exemplary migrant stories, the author charts the ways in which the tightening of US borders, deportation of gang members, and Mexican drug wars progressively transformed border crossings. These policies introduced new players (bandits, gangs, Zetas, corrupt officials) and practices (extortion, kidnappings, trafficking, and infighting) that increased the cost and intensified the dangers, risks, and uncertainties of migrant crossings.

The exploration of migrant performances and the stages in which the contemporary migration drama unfolds showcase the author's impressive research skills. The chapter on performance and scripts addresses blending in and standing out, a theme that may be familiar to a more informed audience but that *Migrant Passages* treats in a subtle and sophisticated manner. Migrants navigate a tricky terrain in which their nationality, speech, race, appearance, and gender are all giveaway markers that can determine

¹² See, for instance, Óscar Martínez, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, translated by Daniela Maria Ugaz and John Washington (New York: Verso, 2010); Steven Mayers and Jonathan Freedman, eds., *Solito, Solito: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019); and Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey* (New York: Random House, 2006).

whether or not their journey will be safe and successful. How should they perform these identities? When should they reveal or camouflage them? Should they sometimes pass as someone else? Cognizant of the stakes, they quickly appraise the situation, process clues, gather information, and assess the tradeoffs of performing one of many well-rehearsed scripts or improvising a new one. They must decide whether to sacrifice their anonymity by speaking out or remain hidden and silent, aware that speaking could yield valuable information from a knowledgeable interlocutor but risks betraying their migrant status to Mexican authorities and criminal gangs. Disguising their accent and appearance to pass as a Mexican may shield a Central American migrant from apprehension but could bar them entry into migrant shelters from which Mexican nationals are expressly excluded. Looking poor may make them less attractive to an extortionist gang but reveal their identity to Mexican authorities. And acting feminine could garner invaluable assistance from a protective male but also put them at even greater risk of sexual violence. The challenges they face are compounded by the fact that migrants are never simply performing a monologue. The safety and the success of their journey hinges not just on what they say or do but on their ability to decipher the performances and scripts of fellow migrants and recognize and react to the “counterperformances” of trickster predators.

The author’s discussion of physical, imagined, symbolic, and “mediascape” stages illustrates how migrants navigate treacherous terrain, seeking the information and resilience they need to continue traveling. The maps they draw convey the dangers that lurk along the route as well as the despair and hope that fuel their journey. A dark moon communicates the suffering migrants leave behind; rows of crosses the prospect of dying along the way; biblical scenes and churches the solace their religious faith provides; and dollar signs and a shining sun rising above clouds the yearnings that inspire their passage. Train tracks are simultaneously a site of danger and a compass pointing the way forward. By entering a shelter, migrants shed their anonymity but gain access to an “informational oasis” and fortifying companionship. They gather together, exchanging knowledge, watching films depicting the migrant journeys of others, listening to songs that glorify the journey, and composing and uploading their own musical performances onto social media sites

To the extent that there is any quibble with this excellent book, it is only that the audience would have wished for a different ending. *The Migrant Passage* climaxes in tragedy. For all their resourcefulness and resolve, migrants are outperformed by the state. The immigration enforcement regime writes the last chapter of *Migrant Passage* in the form of an ode to deterrence delivered on a stage littered with images, markers, and symbols: border walls, curtains around detention facilities, and “dead bodies, left to rot in the desert . . . props to demonstrate the risks of the journey to potential trespassers” (195).

Fast forward to October 2018, the setting for journalist Alberto Pradilla’s book *Caravana*. Part reportage, part essay, the book chronicles a migrant journey that splashed onto the screens and pages of print, television, and social media and provided fodder for anti-immigrant diatribes on Trump’s Twitter feed and during mass rallies in the lead-up to US midterm elections. Joining the first of several caravans as it assembles in San Pedro Sula, the author accompanies the voyage during the next month and a half as it successfully winds through Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico before crashing in Tijuana.

As a journalist, the author narrates rather than analyzes. Still, his story frames the caravan and its journeyers within the dual contexts of immigration policy and migration drivers. The decision to join the caravan was partly spontaneous. The very idea came together suddenly, within a week or two following a Facebook posting by a former politician and migration rights activist who, it seems, never imagined a real caravan taking shape in response to his call for a protest march against a corrupt Honduran government and the inhumane treatment of irregular migrants. But the fact that the idea caught on, inspiring tens of thousands to join one of several successive caravans, speaks to the

reconfiguring of the terrain and flow of migration in response to the advent of a new historic phase in immigration enforcement and intensification of the drivers of migration.

The caravan is a product of the Trump era's ushering in of the most anti-immigrant regime since the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Once again, the United States has declared war on the region, this time not against communism or drugs but against immigration. Portrayed as criminals and invaders, immigrants must be kept out by ever more impenetrable walls, imprisoned in cages, detained in internment camps on both sides of the border, and stopped in their tracks by extending the southern enforcement regime south, so that Guatemala joins Mexico as surrogate border cops.

The cruelest-yet enforcement regime also exists in the context of the persistent and intensifying poverty and violence that continues to uproot hundreds of thousands of Central Americans. The author meets mostly Hondurans but also a handful of Guatemalans and the odd Salvadoran. They are men, women, and children; rural farmers and taxi drivers; return migrants and first timers. While each has a personal story, their experiences blend together to convey the overwhelming scale and scope of the hunger and fear that are the currency of everyday life in Central America. Describing why they decided to leave, migrants describe their dire circumstances, communicate their desperation, and convey their aspirations for a better life in the United States.

The book charts the progress of the caravan as it gathers steam, sputters, splinters, yet somehow keeps moving along the migrant trail. The very creation of a caravan represents a new performative expression of Brigden's survival play. It is a human chain, defined by migrant visibility rather than the anonymity, silences, and selective engagement of the travelers portrayed in *The Migrant Passage*. Yet their commonalities outweigh their differences. Neither group sees itself as expressly political, yet both are thrust into the political limelight and shape immigration policy through their determination to make it to the other side. Clandestine travelers and caravanners encounter the same cast of characters along the route, including authorities, criminals, and, in the case of the latter, also activists. Caravan members also create scripts and performances as they gather information from their surroundings and evade and engage with Guatemalan and Mexican authorities. Caravanners and clandestine migrants are similarly fortified by their faith and the prospect of escaping poverty and violence. They also find inspiration and resolve in each other and in lyrics, in this case a collectively rendered chant "we are not criminals." Finally, like *The Migrant Passage*, the caravan journey ends tragically. Having defied the odds to reach Tijuana, caravanners are attacked by anti-immigrant Mexican crowds. They disperse under a hail of rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun-gun shots fired by US border patrol officers.

Final reflections

The books reviewed here deserve to be read by Central American scholars but also by migration scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. While they may not directly answer many of the perplexing questions that researchers in the field are asking, they provide data and yield insights that bolster our understanding of the drivers and patterns of migration.

Especially when read together, these books also reveal a politics of migration that is at once intellectually provocative and relevant to policy. When hundreds of thousands of Central Americans—facing escalating repression, crushed by the democracy development machine, and displaced by environmental crises overlaid on gang violence and poverty—opt to migrate, they are exercising political agency. Whether undertaken clandestinely or via caravan, migration becomes a weapon of the weak, a manifestation of the everyday forms of resistance available to the powerless confronting structural and physical

violence.¹³ Their desperate act of resistance, however, has perverse political and policy consequences. It goads the wrong audience into a response that is doomed to fail. It alarms US (and Mexican) authorities, who respond with an ever crueler and tighter border enforcement regime designed to stop migration in its tracks, accompanied by the occasional overture to Central American governments and business communities to assist in alleviating its root causes. But these policies and pleas fall on deaf ears, because migration from Central America is also a weapon of the strong. Migration is simultaneously the cause and guarantor of an exclusionary and oppressive economic and political status quo that serves the interests of the politically and economically powerful. Radically pessimistic Central Americans are packing up because they have given up on their country. Regional elites and governments are showing them the door.

Anita Isaacs is the Benjamin Collins Professor of Social Sciences and professor of political science at Haverford College. She is also a director of Beyond Borders, an oral history archive of returning Mexican migrants.

¹³ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).