

Borders of Separation:

La Bestia and the Fragmentation of Migrant Families

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Abstract

This paper examines how the US-Mexico border and its enforcement apparatus violently fracture transnational migrant families, using *La Bestia* --the notorious freight train traversing Mexico --, as a central symbol and entry point. Drawing on documentary film, legal scholarship, and migration literature, the paper argues that borders do not simply restrict movement but actively criminalize it, functioning as instruments of "legal violence" that separate families, endanger children, and perpetuate cycles of trauma and precarity. The paper first traces the structural roots of Central American displacement, including US foreign intervention and neoliberal economic reform, before analyzing how policies such as the Migrant Protection Protocols (Remain in Mexico) and Title 42 have institutionalized family separation. It concludes by calling for an immigration framework that recognizes migration as a fundamental right and reimagines borders as sites of connection rather than exclusion.

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“I’ve always dreamed of going to the United States.” Fourteen-year-old Kevin, from Honduras, clung to this hope as he bid farewell to his mother over the

phone, who could only offer prayers for his safety.¹ Like thousands of Central American migrants, Kevin risked his life atop *La Bestia*, the infamous freight train cutting through Mexico, in search of a better future. Kevin's journey, however, is not just about migration—it is about family separation, forced by borders that criminalize movement and fracture relationships. Driven by violence, political instability, and economic devastation—exacerbated by decades of United States intervention—many migrants leave behind children, parents, and partners hoping to reunite or provide for them from afar. Yet, instead of protection, they face "legal violence"—where immigration and criminal law intersect to exclude, exploit, and permanently divide families.² This paper argues that *La Bestia* symbolizes how borders violently disrupt transnational families. It first explores the violence in Central America that drives migration, then examines how migration is criminalized and influences state policies and public perceptions. Finally, it analyzes U.S. migration policies and their impact on family separation, transnational labour, and the long-term effects on children and future generations.

For many Central Americans, migration is not a choice but a necessity. Violence, economic instability, and political crises in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras leave families with no alternative but to flee.³ Gang violence, corruption, and extreme poverty make staying home as dangerous as the journey itself. Much of this instability stems from U.S. intervention, including support for military regimes like those of former Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt in

¹ Rebecca Cammisa, "Which Way Home" (Docurama, 2009), 00:04:53.

² Natalia Buiza, "Crossing Mexico on La Bestia," *Hispanic Research Journal* 19, no. 4 (2018): 415.

³ Buiza, "Crossing Mexico on *La Bestia*," 417.

Guatemala and the Contras in Nicaragua, as well as the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms under structural adjustment programs. These programs fueled civil wars in the 1980s and imposed economic policies that deepened inequality.⁴

In the 1990s and 2000s, U.S. mass deportations further destabilized communities by exporting gang violence back to the region.⁵ As a result, the people living in these regions become migrants, defined as “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons”⁶. These migrants are forcibly displaced, not only by war and persecution but also by systemic conditions that threaten their survival. Lacking asylum protections, they are compelled to continue moving despite mounting legal barriers.⁷ For those who board *La Bestia*, these structural conditions translate into immediate physical danger — extortion, assault, and death. These risks are exacerbated by restrictive policies that offer few legal migration pathways, forcing individuals into life-threatening alternatives⁸. The militarization of the U.S.–Mexico border has significantly increased the social injuries (i.e., bodily harm, exploitation, and

⁴ Thomas C. Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner, *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

⁵ Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner, *Maras*, 2.

⁶ International Organization for Migration, *Migration Factsheet No. 2 – Migrants* (Geneva: IOM, 2023), 1,

https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd12616/files/documents/migration_factsheet_2_migrants.pdf.

⁷ Marja Tiilikainen, Johanna Hiitola, Ahmed Ali Ismail, and Jenni Palander, eds., *Forced Migration and Separated Families: Everyday Insecurities and Transnational Strategies* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 4.

⁸ Ilsup Ahn, Angela Chiu, and William O'Neill, "'And You Welcomed Me?': A Theological Response to the Militarization of the US–Mexico Borders and the Criminalization of Undocumented Migrants," *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 3 (2013): 304.

dehumanization in the form of hyper-criminalization, vigilantism, and human rights abuses) suffered by those crossing without documentation⁹.

Moreover, U.S. government responses to migration often prioritize border enforcement over humanitarian aid. Immigration policy is frequently shaped by fear and stereotype rather than empirical evidence, which helps explain the systematic exclusion of migrants from legal protection. A complex web of laws and enforcement mechanisms has labelled migrants as “criminals,” reinforcing the perception that they pose a threat¹⁰. This process of criminalization is a key feature of legal violence, where immigration laws operate not just as regulatory measures but as mechanisms of exclusion, punishment, and social control. As a result, *La Bestia* has become a symbol of how restrictive border policies do not deter migration but push people toward more perilous journeys. U.S. immigration policies have also made family reunification nearly impossible, severely impacting the family unit in Central America. Strict visa regulations, long asylum wait times, and policies like Remain in Mexico—a Trump-era policy officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which requires non-Mexican asylum seekers to wait in unsafe Mexican border cities while their claims are processed—leaves families in legal limbo¹¹. Even when migrants gain status, family sponsorship can take years, further straining emotional and financial ties.

Family detention centres exemplify how immigration law functions as a form of state-sanctioned violence, holding parents and children in prolonged

⁹ Ahn, Chiu, and O'Neill, "And You Welcomed Me?" 304–305.

¹⁰ Walter A. Ewing, Daniel E. Martínez, and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *The Criminalization of Immigration in the United States* (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, 2015), 1–2.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, "Remain in Mexico": Overview and Resources," February 7, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/07/remain-mexico-overview-and-resources>.

confinement under widely condemned conditions including inadequate medical care, psychological distress, and documented reports of abuse.¹² Despite legal challenges, the practice persists, reflecting an enforcement system prioritizing detention over human rights. The framing of migrants as “illegal” and “criminal” justifies these harsh measures, portraying them as threats to national security rather than individuals fleeing violence and economic devastation. This legal rhetoric dehumanizes migrants, facilitating restrictive policies while minimizing public outrage. Title 42, a public health order invoked during the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplifies this approach, allowing U.S. authorities to expel migrants without providing the opportunity to seek asylum under the justification of disease prevention. Introduced under Trump administration and continued under the Biden administration, Title 42 bypasses due process, forcing families to choose between remaining in unsafe border camps and sending their children alone in search of safety.¹³ Through detention, deportation, and exclusion, these policies deepen family separations and exacerbate the trauma endured by migrants.

The impact of these policies is particularly devastating for children, who face extreme risks when migrating alone. In the documentary *Which Way Home*, Francisco, a nine-year-old boy from Guatemala, suffers a broken arm while crossing the border on *La Bestia*. Abandoned by his coyote (a smuggler paid to guide migrants across borders) and left vulnerable, Francisco's story is a poignant example of how immigration policies not only fail to protect children but actively place them in harm's way. Fortunately, another migrant refused to leave Francisco

¹² American Civil Liberties Union, "Immigrants' Rights and Detention," accessed 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/immigrants-rights/immigrants-rights-and-detention>.

¹³ The Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, "What Is Title 42 and How Does It Impact Children and Families?" 2021, <https://www.theyoungcenter.org/stories/2021/what-is-title-42>.

behind and carried him to safety¹⁴. This act of compassion highlights the stark contrast between the human cost of family separation and the control-oriented approach of border enforcement. Children, whether accompanied or not, bear the heavy consequences of migration policies that prioritize control over protection.

Building on the discussion of *La Bestia*'s symbolism, family separation is a central issue in understanding the broader impact of U.S. immigration policies on transnational families. While many migrants set out together hoping to remain united kidnappings, deportations, and the need to take separate routes often lead to forced separation¹⁵. Parents may endure the treacherous train ride while their children seek asylum through official channels, leaving families in limbo often facing detention, deportation, or indefinite separation. The emotional and psychological toll is immense, as parents and children navigate the uncertainty of reunification amidst increasingly restrictive policies¹⁶. For transnational families (those with members living in different countries) staying connected is fraught with legal and financial obstacles, including high remittance costs and limited visitation rights. Many attempt unauthorized and dangerous crossings to reunite, risking detention or even death.

The scale of this crisis is significant: approximately 5% of those who ride *La Bestia* are unaccompanied children¹⁷. The documentary *Which Way Home* illustrates this harsh reality through the experiences of young migrants like Kevin and Francisco, whose journeys expose the extreme dangers faced by children

¹⁴ Cammisa, *Which Way Home*, 00:18:28.

¹⁵ Mitra Naseh, Yilun Zeng, Eunhee Ahn, Frances Cohen, and Masoud Rfat, "Mental Health Implications of Family Separation Associated with Migration Policies in the United States: A Systematic Review," *Social Science & Medicine* 352 (2024): 116995.

¹⁶ Leisy J. Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Cammisa, *Which Way Home*.

travelling alone. Beyond physical risks, these stories highlight the emotional and psychological toll of separation, with children experiencing abandonment and resentment while parents endure guilt and distress¹⁸. Financial instability and labour market discrimination in the U.S. further prevent parents from sending remittances, exacerbating family strain. Programs like Remain in Mexico and strict asylum laws prolong family separation, contributing to lasting anxiety, depression, and behavioural issues in children, while parents suffer from chronic stress. These cycles of trauma and displacement, sustained by systemic barriers, have generational consequences that deepen the suffering of migrant families.

Borders do not exist passively; they are actively enforced, shaping the fates of those who cross them. For migrants on *La Bestia*, the US-Mexico border is not just a distant line on a map but a looming force that dictates whether they will find safety or be cast into further danger. The journey itself exposes how borders function—not as neutral demarcations, but as instruments of control that criminalize movement, separate families, and perpetuate cycles of violence and precarity. A just immigration system must recognize migration as a fundamental right, not a crime. This means dismantling punitive policies, addressing the economic and political forces driving displacement, and ensuring legal pathways for reunification. Until borders are reimagined as sites of connection rather than exclusion, *La Bestia* will remain a haunting symbol of a system prioritizing enforcement over humanity. True justice demands an immigration framework that protects, rather than punishes the families whose only crime is seeking a future together.

¹⁸ Abrego, *Sacrificing Families*.

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