

Debarchana Baruah

Undocumented Migrants

Border-Crossing, Illness, and Labor

Abstract

Undocumented migrants in the US are often identified as threats to society or reluctantly acknowledged for their labor, essential to the US agricultural farms, construction industries, and food processing and packaging industries. In this essay, I argue for a slight reorientation in the understanding of migrant labor. I start by paring down the undocumented migrants' identity to their bare bodies. I zoom in on the moment of the border crossing, analyzing the immediate consequences of illegality on the migrant body. Migrants from Mexico and Central America regularly cross the US southern border through the Sonoran Desert, experiencing hyperthermia, dehydration, and intense disorientation. Many die in the desert. The few who make it across carry deep physical and emotional scars of the crossing, much beyond the border and into their lives as 'illegals' within the US territory. A second part of the essay will focus on the reconstructive efforts in migrant narratives to acknowledge undocumented migrants beyond their capacity to do the hard labor that citizens refuse to do. It will look at the physical and emotional symptoms (headaches, ulcers, sleep disorders, depression) of working in exploitative conditions, and living a life bereft of opportunities and in constant fear of incarceration and deportation. Juxtaposing the two approaches of disassociating an undocumented migrant's body from their labor and then recognizing their labor in spite of their bodily limitations and disabilities can contribute to a more complex representation of an undocumented migrant's identity.

Keywords: *undocumented migrants, US-Mexico border, undocumented illness, undocumented labor, migrant trail*

The undocumented migrant in the US is the farm hand, the construction worker, the meat packer, the babysitter, the food delivery “boy,” the cleaner, the day laborer. These men, women, and at times children have travelled long and far to escape poverty and violence, and for their chance at survival. They have outsmarted the necropolitical organizations of Mexico—geared to rape, abuse, maim, and erase their existence—and navigated the biopolitical managerial structures in the US designed to keep this transnational working class vulnerable. They arrive in the US to find work and to survive.

This essay looks at undocumented labor, focusing on migrant bodies. It deconstructs how the experiences on the migrant trail and at the border select and prepare workers, who are fit, agile, alert, resilient, and willing to endure great physical and emotional duress. These workers arrive in the US, fully aware that they are undocumented and without rights and still negotiate their severe limitations to work and earn money. Their stay in the US is predicated on their productivity and invisibility. They rely on their bodily reserves to do jobs no citizen is willing to do and carefully manage and circumscribe their everyday lives to avoid being deported.

A primary focus is to highlight reconstructive efforts in migration literature that acknowledge the physical and emotional costs of life as an undocumented worker. Migrants suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders, metabolic disorders, sleep disorders, depression from working in exploitative conditions, and living a life bereft of opportunities and in constant fear of incarceration and deportation. Juxtaposing the two approaches—deconstructing their labor as forged by the violence of immigration and global inequality and then recognizing their labor despite their bodily limitations and disabilities—can contribute to a more complex representation of undocumented migrants and their labor.

Drawing from migration narratives (memoirs, novels, and journalistic accounts) and works undertaken in the academic fields of sociology, anthropology, health and medicine, migration and border studies, the essay discusses the exploitative systems and policies that affect migrants' bodies, their health, and their labor. Even though the focus is limited to the effects of systemic violence, migrants are not to be read as passive receptacles. Migrants actively contest, resist, and circumnavigate skewed immigration and economic policies. Migrants travel to the US with false identification papers or legal documents of someone else living across the border who look like them to get past immigration checks (De León, Gokee and Schubert 2015, 449); Central Americans drop their regional dialects and pick up local lingo as they pass through Mexico to avoid apprehension by Mexican migration authorities (Nazario 2006, 99-100); new migrants are supported by informal networks of friends and family already present in the US to find work and accommodation (Nazario 2006, 15); insured migrants share medicines with their undocumented friends (Villavicencio 2020, 65). While these strategies of survival are important and admirable, they should not distract from the systemic problems that create inhumane conditions for migrant lives.

1. At home

The migrants' story begins at the moment they decide to leave. "Imagine how bad things get to make you leave behind your family, your friends, your lovers, your home, as humble as it might

be [...]” (Urrea 1993, 12). In the case of Mexican migrants, already reeling under conditions of poverty and unemployment, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), established in 1994, serves the final blow. It enforced a free market economy where rural subsistence farmers growing corn (their staple) were pitted against big US agricultural farms. The inequalities were exacerbated by heavy subsidies that the US farms received from their wealthier government, and Mexico was forced to remove tariffs on US imports (Holmes 2013, 25). The rural Mexican farmers simply couldn’t compete, and were displaced at an unprecedented rate, contributing to the “de-peasantization” of the Mexican economy (Gálvez 2018, 15). While migration from Mexico to the US has a long history, within a decade of introducing NAFTA, illegal immigration to the US more than doubled (Elsasser 2018, 116). The stage was set for the large-scale conversion of the locally displaced agricultural worker into a transnational laborer who adopts mobility as a mode of existence to escape the slow violence of poverty and hunger. Migration became the only option. These rural peasants travel “hundreds or thousands of miles across territory utterly unknown to [them]. (Chances are, [they] have never travelled farther than a hundred miles in [their] li[ves])” (Urrea 1993, 12). They travel through climates, terrains, and cultures completely foreign to their native lands. For many this would be the beginning of a series of seasonal transnational border-crossings, for some their first attempt would be their last. Migrants often leave their families behind, promising to return within a couple of years but prolong their stay, unable to meet the expectations that they set out with. Some had decided to migrate, but stringent border control and exorbitant expenses of border-crossing turn them into immigrants. For the sake of this essay, I call these individuals ‘migrants,’ as often the distinction between a migrant and an immigrant is temporal; some may set out as migrants (do trips back and forth to their native countries) and eventually settle in the US, becoming immigrants. ‘Migrant’ is also a more neutral term that keeps the focus on the experience of mobility while the term ‘immigrant’ can potentially be co-opted within a hierarchical rhetoric of US exceptionalism where “migrants inexorably become permanent settlers and the US nation-state assumes the form of a ‘promised land’— a self-appointed refuge of liberty and opportunity” (De Genova 2002, 421). This essay intends to problematize this view of the US as deliverance for the poor migrant workers analyzing how US immigration laws produce vulnerable categories such as the ‘illegal’ im/migrant.

2. On the trail

Mexicans are joined on the migrant trail to the US by other victims of global inequality, narco-violence, and civil war. Central Americans and indigenous peoples traveling north are especially

disadvantaged, as the violence on these trails is often meted out along racialized hierarchies. For them the road to *el norte* involves multiple border-crossings, each border with its own set of necropolitical systems designed to consume or feed off them. The 160-mile stretch from Tapachula to Arriaga in southern Mexico known to migrants as La Arrocera, “is lawless territory” (Martínez 2014, 29). Undocumented migrants rely on their wit and will to survive La Arrocera; they accept rape and robbery as “inevitable tolls of the road” (Martínez 2014, 30). Even though Mexican migrants en route to the US traveling through Mexico are legal citizens, the moment they commit to illegally crossing the border, for example by contacting a human smuggler, they are implicated in the illicit border economy and find themselves outside legal routes and recourse (Coutin 2005, 197). Migrants journey inconspicuously, in the dark, at dawn, avoiding settlements and people; they hike through mountains and jungles to avoid migration authorities and bandits. But there is no bypassing La Arrocera, every migrant traveling from Southern Mexico and Central America has to pass through it to reach the trains that would carry them north.

The route through Mexico alone is over 3,000 miles; the poorest of migrants hops on to running freight trains, headed to the US, to carry them through the bulk of the journey through Mexico. Migrants travel on the roof of a freight train they call *La Bestia* (the beast) for its unrestrained power and its ability to crush and kill. They have to be constantly alert: a moment of exhaustion could lead to a loosened grip and cost them their limbs or lives. Agility is key to survival. Migrants travel light to move quickly. They carry small backpacks filled with little personal belongings to sustain them through this multi-day journey that involves crossing mountains, volcanoes, tunnels, lush greens, and concrete jungles, each with varying climatic conditions that ideally require distinct travel gear. They rely on their bare bodies to endure the heat, the cold, the humidity, the torrential rains, the exhaustion, the hunger, the dehydration, and the sleep deprivation. By now they learn to steel their bodies. Their bodies are also their sole witness: the scars they bear tell the stories of their journey, and if they die on the way their bodies lend themselves to forensic evidence (through dental records for example) that might be used to identify them in the absence of distinct personal belongings and legal documentations of citizenship.

Violence, sexual abuse, and physical discomforts on the migrant trail turn migrant bodies to desensitized objects. Their status as unprotected political entities has a direct correlation to their dehumanization. Women participate in the objectification of their own bodies in order to survive the journey. Within this necroeconomy they see it as a logical transformation of their bodies into a sort of currency: “*cuerpomática*. The body becomes a credit card, [...] which buys

you a little safety, a little bit of cash and the assurance that your travel buddies won't get killed" (Martínez 2014, 73). El Calambres, a twenty-six-year-old bandit from La Arrocera, who is in jail for rape, murder, and robbery (none of which are considered "serious crimes" that amount to long jail terms) explains the logic of "hunting illegals"—"those people aren't going to stick around and cause trouble. [...] [they] are just passing through" (Martínez 2014, 40). Predators know migrants are easy prey without protection and rights: they never report the crimes they suffer for fear of deportation. But "the scars of their journey don't only mark their bodies, they run deeper than that. Living in such fear leaves something inside them, a trace and a swelling that grabs hold of their thoughts and cycles through their heads over and over" (Martínez 2014, 43). These traumas of the migrant trail become a part of migrants' bodies and psycho-scapes that they quietly bear without medical attention and support networks.

3. At the border

Migrants' resilience and capacity to endure deliver them to the US-Mexico border. Descriptions of border towns as being vortices of violence that suck poor migrants abound in literature on migration. Migrants warn each other of the mood in Altar as "caliente," translating to mean both hot and dangerous (Holmes 2013, 11). Tijuana, infamous as Mexico's "cast-off child" (Urrea 1993, 20), teems with predators and signal similar dangers. These places are built on a parasitical economy that feeds on migrants. By the time migrants reach the border, many run out of money and reserve, and end up as beggars on the streets, as drug addicts living in shadowy culverts, or as *ficheras* (waitresses who also chat up their customers and give lap dances) and prostitutes. Many would have disappeared, been kidnapped or murdered on the trail (Distretti 2014). The few determined for the final leg have to rely on a human smuggler—a coyote—to take them across the border. Crossing the border on your own is nearly impossible as the gangs control the routes. "Gangs are so in control now that walkers who want to go alone, without a *pollero* to guide them, must pay a fee just to enter the desert" (Urrea 2004, 60). Coyotes go by many names, *guía*, guide, *pollero*—a frank admission of their role as chicken wranglers; the migrant is the chicken, or rather *pollo*—cooked chicken—a grim reminder of the fate of many migrants in the desert. "In the new organized crime hierarchies of human smuggling, the actual coyotes are middle-management thugs" (Urrea 2004, 60): they work for bosses who pay their "pollero taxes" to bigger criminal organizations such as the Los Zetas to hold onto their turfs along the migrant trail. The criminal organizations enjoy impunity as the Mexican government is complicit in the migrant trade. According to *pollero* and victim testimonies the Mexican authorities are involved in the loot. Eduardo Ortiz, a National

Commission of Human Rights (NCHR) consul, confirms that “there is co-participation” in the exploitation of the migrants (Martínez 2014, 101). Together—the drug cartel men, the local criminals, the coyotes, and the corrupt migration authorities—they seem to form an entire predatory militarized complex that presents itself as a formidable obstacle that migrants have to cross before they reach the actual US-Mexico border.

Border economies thrive on migrant precarity and state impunity. Here the most profitable commodity is the migrant body. When migrants have nothing left to offer, predators look to migrant bodies that can be held for ransom, sold to sex trade, or used as mules in the drug trade. Their bodies are abused and disposed of at will. Those in power turn death into a spectacle of violence for fun, for self-validation, to shock, and to function as warning signs. Power is demonstrated in the capacity to inflict pain and death. In places like Tijuana death is more profitable than life, and the only means of wealth accumulation. These are the modern-day necropolises, where life has been subjugated to the power of death. They are the “*death-worlds* [...] in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (Mbembe 2003, 40). Sayak Valencia comments on the particularities of the necropractices at the US-Mexican border to conceptualize a third world subject—the “endriago” that deals with its own precarity and dispossession by a hyper-masculinist indulgence in extreme violence. It emerges “in a context where life is not worth living, in a situation of hyper-precarity, constant frustration, and grinding poverty irreversible by any other means” (2018, 50-51). Post NAFTA, with the rise in social inequalities the endriago subject recalibrates the price of life vis-à-vis death: it takes to violence and destruction of bodies as an ultimate display of power and an undeniable assertion of itself in the global hyper-consumerist market. It was the spilling of the underworld onto the surface (2018, 126), a revenge of the deprived other (2018, 128). She argues the endriago to be an extension and excess of extreme neoliberalism—they are akin to “businessmen who apply and synthesize the most abhorrent neoliberal demands and logics” (2018, 215). The endriago (some of whom were former peasants) accumulates necropower by devouring vulnerable migrant bodies—easily exploitable commodities that present themselves in these netherworlds without any protection.

4. Border-crossing

Finally, the moment of border-crossing. Even though the actual crossing of the US-Mexico border—*la linea*—takes three to five days, the journey north is temporally and spatially expansive. For many migrants it takes multiple attempts to get to the US-Mexico border (Nazario 2006). Getting to the border itself is a testament to their resilience, but these

experiences are still inadequate to mitigate the unique risks posed at each entry point. Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* (2006) and Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* (2004) carry detailed descriptions of crossing into the US through the Rio Grande and the Sonoran Desert respectively. These spaces, constantly surveilled by the US Border Patrol, reinforce the motif of the 'hunt.' The hunt is justified in the protection of sovereignty and its logic rests on a clear hierarchy between the civilized citizens and the uncivilized alien at the border. Borders are like the colonies or frontiers that Achille Mbembe writes about, "where the controls and the guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the services of 'civilization'" (2003, 24). Or rather the judicial order brings the migrant's dehumanization within accepted legal framework. Mbembe draws on Michel Foucault's theorization (2003) that civilization is constructed on a principle of control over its members (biopower) and defined against those races which it excludes (war). Mbembe focuses on the latter aspect to analyze necropolitics—the murderous politics of modern democratic states that is both profitable (to sustain forms of global exploitation and apartheid) and a necessary condition for their distended existences (by inciting fear and hatred and then justifying arbitrary abridgments of civil liberties). The necropolitical state feeds on mechanisms of othering and selective elimination. It relies on "borderization' [...] processes by which world powers permanently transform certain spaces into impassable places for certain classes of populations [...] where the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable come to be shattered" (Mbembe 2019, 99). Borders are turned into topographies of terror, its securitization supported by organized state violence.

The migrant at the border—identified variously as the undocumented, the unauthorized, the illegal, the alien, the wetback, the tonk—is anything but an equal human being. In border politics, the undocumented migrant is akin to Giorgio Agamben's "homo sacer," a life excluded from (and yet included within) the sovereign sphere, and whose killing is "classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide" (1998, 82). The migrant is reduced to a bare life, an animalistic natural life that is bereft of political rights and value. The illegal border-crossing is held up as a tacit acceptance of the suspension of migrants' political rights and devaluation of their life (life in their native countries was unworthy of living, and in the US their life is unwanted). They are now officially the living dead—biologically living, politically dead. And yet migrants live in a continuous relationship with the sovereign power that bans them; they are constantly exposed to threats, their life defined by surviving death. "In this sense, no life [...] is more political than [theirs]" (Agamben 1998, 183-184). This philosophical idea is perhaps best exemplified in Border Patrol speak, in their casual refusal to distinguish between a living and a dead migrant. To the

Border Patrol all migrants, dead or alive, are “bodies” (Urrea 2004, 16). Even so, the Border Patrol doesn’t want to be held directly responsible for the deaths of migrants; and the US government has devised strategies to take care of their immigration problem, away from public view, by sealing urban entry points and funneling the migrant traffic through more and more remote and hostile geographical territories (Doty 2011, 607-608). Let nature take care of the migrant. This operational logic “was deliberately formulated to maximize the physical risks for Mexican migrant workers, thereby ensuring that hundreds of them would die” (Johnson 2007, 112) and lies at the crux of US’s infamous “prevention through deterrence” policy (PTD). Jason De León writes “nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim” (2015, 30). PTD also filters the best worker, one who has survived the maximized physical risk.

In the Sonoran Desert, where most unauthorized border-crossings into the US take place, migrants are “involved in some form of dying” (Urrea 2004, 15). The desert environment is ferocious and unforgiving. Predators of migrant bodies range from “noxious and spiked” plants—saguars, nopales, chollas, mesquite to “poisonous and alien” wildlife—“the sidewinder, the rattlesnake, the scorpion, the giant centipede, the black widow, the tarantula, the brown recluse, the coral snake, the Gila monster” (Urrea 2004, 6). If the migrant survives these, there is the weather itself—temperatures soar to triple Fahrenheit digits in the day and can have equally precipitous drops at night. Most migrants carry on average eight liters of water (Urrea 2004, 102), and have to exercise extreme self-discipline, rationing their water to small gulps. Their calculation, however, can be completely offset by any unpredictable event or condition of the desert. An encounter with the drug mafia could delay the crossing, a chase by a wetback-hunter (citizen vigilantes) could throw them off course, or they might get lost in the desert, or be intentionally abandoned by their coyotes. Bones pepper the entire region (Urrea 2004, 20) and are a reminder of the precarity of migrant lives. Urrea catalogues the slow dying process in the desert heat (Urrea 2004, 120-129). First comes the “heat stress”—sunburns, swollen fingers, heat rash, dizziness, headache, diarrhea. Then comes “heat fatigue”—organs burn, eyes dry out, the body dehydrates. Then comes “heat syncope,” followed by “heat cramps,” “heat exhaustion,” and finally the “heat stroke.” The desert erases the migrant body—the ultimate toll of unauthorized crossing. Urrea offers the dead consolation: “If you were killed, you have nothing to worry about” and sends the living a forewarning: “once across, you must begin another journey” (1993 18,19)—the search for work.

5. Beyond the border

Reyna Grande, who crossed the US-Mexico border illegally as a child but is now a “naturalized” US citizen, writes: “for us immigrants, the trauma doesn’t end with a successful border-crossing. I believe that for the rest of your life, you carry that border inside of you. It becomes part of your psyche, your being, your identity” (2018, 84). At this point the migrant is a survivor of the migrant trail and a border-crosser—an illegal alien. But “illegal aliens’ have to eat, sleep and find work” (Urrea 1993, 19). The migrant’s life after the event of the illegal border-crossing is strained by a continual looking-over-the-shoulder for fear of being apprehended and deported. The border that Grande mentions that migrants carry with them into their lives in the US is impressed upon them by the multiple encounters with segregationist and gatekeeping mechanisms that confine and restrict migrants. Even as citizens Latinx people face a “third border” in the US, writes Mike Davis: in the suburbs of Los Angeles the blue-collar Latinx communities are separated from the upper-class Anglo communities by barricading streets and charging high entry fees to public parks turning them off-limits to the poor (1999). Borders appear in the form of housing development policies and town planning propositions that keep migrants in ghettos, language borders render them voiceless (Grande 2012, 183), borders crop up arbitrarily as anti-immigration laws that legitimize migrant harassment. The infamous 2010 Arizona Support Our Law and Safe Neighborhoods Act or “the ‘papers please’ law [...] gave law enforcement officials the power to approach anybody they suspected of being in the country illegally and ask for proof of legal documentation” (Villavicencio 2020, 13). These borders make intimidation and control quotidian aspects of migrant lives. Migrants must drive slowly lest they get a ticket, they must not “look” undocumented lest they are stopped by local law enforcement, they must rush home after work lest Immigration and Customs enforcement (ICE) finds them. They live in “clandestinity” (Coutin 2005), simultaneously inside and outside of the nation state. Undocumented migrants are continually displaced, their physical presence subjugated by their political absence. Their illegal status slowly begins to edit their lives, erase their contributions (or denies them a formal acknowledgment of their contributions to society), and forces them into a life of invisibility. The trauma is deepened by institutional reproductions of migrant “illegality” in their everyday lives.

[Coutin] points to a variety of ways that surveillance in the United States has been increasingly displaced in recent years from immigration authorities, to local police, to other officials (e.g., clerks in a variety of bureaucratic capacities related to public education, housing, and welfare benefits), to private citizens—from employer verification the work authorization of migrant workers, to charitable organizations who scrutinize immigration documents as a condition for their social service provisioning, to college admissions and

financial aid officers charged with monitoring the legal statuses of prospective students.
(Coutin 1993, 97 quoted in De Genova 2002, 426)

This dispersal of surveillance authorities intensifies disciplinary encounters. Anyone could threaten an undocumented migrant with exposure or arrest. Anyone could remind them of their unlawful presence. Migrants are now not only hiding from immigration authorities, but also local police and local vigilantes. It leaves them vulnerable to every form of predatory practice and forces them to a life of extreme caution and self-censorship.

The devaluation of migrant life is complicated by the dichotomy “that poor, relatively unskilled, but highly sought after, Third World migrants have at various times been both wanted and unwanted—wanted for their labor but unwanted as human beings” (Doty 2011, 600). In fact, this devaluation—orchestrated through a series of political techniques such as the human hunt, the exposure to violence with impunity, the branding as illegal leading to a kind of political death and permanent threat of expulsion—is convenient. It serves towards a tactical management of the undocumented migrant population, even as migrants cross the border and enter US territories. Their deportability is brandished as a mechanism of control and as a reminder of their constant vulnerability. De Genova clarifies, “it is deportability, and not deportation per se, that has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity” (2002, 438). The threat of expulsion can suspend migrants in a kind of limbo, where they exist in a present that is shadowy and slippery, upon which they have no control over. Their labor (or power through labor) too is circumscribed as temporary and therefore less valuable. A citizen–illegal binary, however, cannot adequately encapsulate this subjugation of labor: history is replete with instances when the US has relied on and imported migrant labor (primarily from Mexico) and later, when the economy depressed, deported en masse these Mexican migrants as well as US citizens of Mexican heritage, phrasing their expulsion as ‘voluntary’ repatriations. There is clearly a racial dimension to the devaluation of labor. Similarly, the various revisions of US immigration laws (through which illegals can be legalized or regularized) show that the illegal status of undocumented migrants is a convenient legal production and can serve a disciplinary function.

Once we recognize that undocumented migrants are constituted in order not to physically exclude them but instead, to socially include them under imposed conditions of enforced and protracted vulnerability, it is not difficult to fathom how migrants’ endurance of many years of “illegality” can serve as a disciplinary apprenticeship in the subordination of their labor.
(De Genova 2002, 438)

What comes out of this disciplinary apparatus is the ‘docile’ undocumented worker, who is extremely vulnerable and whose labor despite her/his illegal status is useful to society and citizenry. The illegal status renders migrant’s labor easily extractable and exploitable. In the Foucauldian framework, race, biopower, and sovereign power collude to produce a “useful delinquency” similar to the “illegal” status of migrant workers, where “the existence of a legal prohibition creates around it a field of illegal practices, which one manages to supervise, while extracting from it an illicit profit through elements, themselves illegal” (Foucault 1977, 280). Illicit profits from undocumented migrants are made by big construction companies, meat packaging companies, agricultural farms and every other industry that employs them for their cheap labor. They are the biggest employers of undocumented laborers and constitute the big lobby groups (exerting enormous influence on the US state legislations) that block undocumented migrants’ path to citizenship. They are invested in migrant illegality as it channels their way the flow of profit and power from the management of this enormous vulnerable and mobile workforce.

In a conversation with Seth Holmes, John Tanaka, president of an agricultural farm in the Skagit Valley, expressed his concerns about labor scarcity (or rather scarcity of cheap labor) in the future as even second-generation migrants, schooled in the US, do not agree to work in the same exploitative conditions as do freshly arrived migrants (2013, 55-56). Tanaka admits that at present they have a comfortable supply of migrant labor, but in the future, they may have to either rely on machines or seek out even poorer migrant communities to extract labor from for similar low wages. Tanaka produces a list of migrant communities that have contributed to their farm thus far, arranged in a hierarchy of destitution: first came the Hispanics from the US, then the Cambodians, the Vietnamese, then the Hispanics from Mexico. The list inadvertently validates the efficacy of the nexus between US biopolitics (politics in the service of the sovereign and citizenry) and neoliberal capitalist economy in finding the next extractable and exploitable labor from around the globe. This foraging of the world’s destitute for profit is not new. Already in the early 20th century Upton Sinclair wrote in *The Jungle* (1906) about a systemic replacing of one exploitable migrant community with another in the stockyards of Chicago. The migrants he wrote about then were East Europeans and Russians, now one Latino community of Mexicans, Central Americans, Latin Americans replaces another. While the US neoliberal economy consolidates, the vulnerabilities of the working class get distributed.

6. At the factories and farms in the US

Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* provides a glimpse into the invisible lives of migrant workers (mostly from Mexico and Central America) absorbed in the US meatpacking industries—one of the largest employers of undocumented migrants.

Some of the most dangerous jobs in meatpacking today are performed by the late-night cleaning crews. A large proportion of these workers are illegal immigrants. They are considered “independent contractors,” employed not by the meatpacking firms but by sanitation companies. They earn hourly wages that are about one-third lower than those of regular production employees. And their work is so hard and so horrendous that words seem inadequate to describe it. [...] “It takes a really dedicated person,” a former member of a cleaning crew told me, “or a really desperate person to get the job done.” (2002, 176-177)

Migrants performing night shifts aptly convey their marginalization and divorcement from the public: their work and the conditions of their work stay conveniently invisible. Their desperation is turned into a commodity, used for profit, used to coerce migrants into doing the most dehumanizing jobs. Another sleight-of-hand is the shifting of accountability to the migrants themselves when they present themselves as ‘independent contractors.’ US Federal laws make it unlawful to hire anyone unauthorized to work in the US and hold the employers responsible for verifying the employee’s documents, except when the person is considered an independent contractor or a temporary domestic worker (Valenzuela 2003, 325). Employers easily prevent penalty for hiring undocumented migrants by accepting documentation presented by the migrants without being accountable for the verification of these papers. Employers also get informed prior to immigration checks, giving them enough time to lay these workers off to avoid trouble. In practice, migrants become solely responsible for their precarious situation; they are contingently employed to do the most dangerous of jobs, without security, without medical benefits, and without traditional worker rights. In addition, they incur the expenses of the fraudulent papers that they must produce to get these temporary non-standardized jobs.

Exploitation is compounded by shifting the migrant’s care labor onto their native countries. Eric Schlosser explains how undocumented migrants from Mexico are encouraged not to report work related injuries and not to seek medical help in the US. They are usually allowed a recuperative trip home to heal and with the promise that they can return to their current job at the slaughterhouse in the US (2002, 175). How migrants make this back-and-forth movement across the border, traveling from the US to Mexico (or any other migrant sending country) and returning to their jobs, is again the migrants’ own business. Similar cross-border mobility is common among seasonal agricultural farm laborers who go home to convalesce after a season of back-breaking work, picking fresh produce in the sun and with routine exposure to pesticides

(Seth Holmes 2013). Undocumented migrants can't afford modern medical treatment in the US and approach local traditional healers for their aches and pains. They return home to heal, to nurture their soul, to share their earnings with friends and family, to oversee the building of their piecemeal retirement home, to participate in community events such as the annual festivals of the local patron saints, and to contribute to their community by participating in corn harvests—things that they are denied in the US. But every border-crossing brings additional physical, emotional, and financial strain. Men, more often than women, resort to such migratory practices and allow themselves temporary relief despite the hardcore immigration policies designed to block this cross-border movement of people. Women usually avoid the risk and stay on in the US for long periods, separated from their families and their children, eventually returning to their native countries when they can no longer work due to sickness, injury, or old age. In all, the practice of shifting the reproductive work and care work to the native countries profits US economy. Migrants are raised, educated, and taken care of in their native countries till they are old enough to cross the border to work in the US. The native countries send healthy workers to the US and receive bodies that are worn out, injured, or old. Migrants typically survive in the US only as long as they are healthy and productive.

The issue of migrant health is a complex one. While “missing fingers, broken bones, deep lacerations, and amputated limbs are difficult to conceal, [...] [they] are greatly outnumbered by less visible, though no less debilitating ailments: torn muscles, slipped disks, pinched nerves” (Schlosser 2002, 175). Injured workers are unproductive and therefore a liability and are quickly replaced by equally desperate migrants. Migrants are often employed to do ‘unskilled’ jobs, which require little training and investment from the industry, contributing to the high turnover rates in these sectors. It hardly costs anything to replace one migrant with another. The migrants, however, suffer from cumulative trauma disorders from these unskilled jobs that require them to do the same repetitive movement over and over again. “Meatpacking workers routinely develop back problems, shoulder problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, and ‘trigger finger’ (a syndrome in which a finger becomes frozen in a curled position)” (Schlosser 2002, 173). Farmworkers picking fruits in fields, bent over all day, suffer from similar cumulative trauma disorders: tendonitis, back aches, and knee aches are common ailments among farm workers. “These pains are examples of structural violence of social hierarchies becoming embodied in the form of suffering and sickness” (Holmes 2013, 89). The violence can be temporally expansive: delayed health effects such as cancers can outlast the period the migrant worker is employed in a dangerous job, and distributed over generations. Exposure to pesticides, and chemical poisoning sometimes result in sterility, still births, birth defects, and cancer among offspring.

7. Undocumented illness

The slow decay of migrant bodies presents itself at differing levels of visibility. The extreme nature of their work wears their bodies out much before their biological age, “their lives had a way of putting twenty years on a face, so that a man of fifty looked like he was seventy” (Viramontes 1996, 111). This is the “allostatic load”—understood biomedically as the accumulation of health risk associated with chronic stress” (Holmes 2013, 101). Then there are the usual stresses from a life lived in poverty—most undocumented migrant households live below official poverty levels and without access to medical care. Poverty-related illnesses are not directly caused by a migrant’s job but brought upon by a migrant’s poor working and living conditions. Poor hygiene—a condition of poverty—can result in urinary tract infections (mostly in women), dermatitis, poor dental health. Poor diet—another condition of poverty—can cause malnutrition, anemia, diabetes, and other cardiovascular diseases. If a migrant worker lives on or near an agricultural farm, exposure to chemicals through contaminated air or water can cause chronic respiratory diseases, headaches, abdominal pain, skin and eye problems, and cancers. These illnesses, even if visibly manifest (central obesity, varicose veins, missing teeth), are not immediately accounted for as occupational health hazards (think of amputations, lacerations, fractures) and therefore remain in the realm of the invisible. Migrants themselves may not report or pay heed to illnesses with symptoms which appear bearable, and seemingly non-obstructive to their work (at the time of presentation). “Symptoms might be ignored by a temporary farm worker, who is fearful of losing his or her job or of being reported to immigration authorities” (Mobed, Gold and Schenker 1992, 369). Migrants frequently move, and are easily replaced, and displaced—all contributing to migrants’ inaccessibility to medical care. Migrant workers’ illnesses often go unreported and untreated because of their immigration, socioeconomic, and migratory status: they might return home when they have acute symptoms (Villarejo 2003, 181), or be replaced at work if the illness affects their productivity (Schlosser 2002, 175); they might simply be on the move searching for new jobs to have long term medical care at one place (Mobed, Gold and Schenker 1992, 369), or avoid medical care altogether because they don’t have the money for treatment or the time (Villarejo 2003, 181). The invisibilization of illness and displacement of care work to the realm of the private (to migrants’ family members), or to the native countries is convenient and profitable for US businesses (they don’t have to pay for insurance coverage and compensation) and encapsulates the US economy’s exploitative relationship to migrant bodies: these bodies are wanted for their labor (when healthy and productive) and unwanted when ill and unproductive.

It is clear that “the most physically able workers in a Mexican village are probably the ones who are most likely to be willing to endure the hardship associated with clandestinely crossing the most highly protected international border in the Western Hemisphere” (Villarejo 2003, 177). Their health at the time of arrival (and disappearance at sickness and old age) contributes to the “healthy worker bias.” But migrant workers steadily lose their health within a few years of living in the US. “There is evidence that the diet of Mexican migrant farm workers deteriorates in the first several years after coming to the United States to work, possibly a factor in the observation of the deterioration of chronic health indicators” (Villarejo 2003, 188). Migrants who earn little and sometimes hourly (often below minimum wage) resort to a nutritionally poor diet that is cheap and takes little time to prepare. Eric Schlosser reports on the hidden labor that migrants are expected to perform even when they are at their homes, and in their free time. Migrant workers sharpen their work tools for their own safety and convenience —“a dull knife can cause pain to extend from the cutting hand all the way down to the spine” (2002, 173). A Guatemalan woman multitasks as she is being interviewed by Schlosser: she simultaneously sharpens her knife and cooks her meal of beans on the side. She has little time to spare for her food and her health.

Migrants’ health is also affected by sufferings that are emotional. Migrants suffer greatly because of the separation from their families. Most migrants journey north to financially take care of a family they have left behind. Increasingly, single mothers from Mexico and Central America take on the onerous task of migrating to the US leaving their children behind with family members. Another instance of separation of productive activities from reproductive activities. These women suffer on an everyday basis, their children constantly on their minds—“they suffered from intrusive thoughts of their children in Mexico, depression, sadness, and loss of appetite during the prolonged period of separation from children” (McGuire and Martin 2007, 184). Possibilities of reunification—either by paying a smuggler to get their children across the border or traveling back home and back—are mired in traumatic anxiety. Their experience of migration to the US “produces a persistent undercurrent of sorrow beneath the hopes they harbor for improving their lives” (McGuire and Martin 2007, 183). Most mothers end up losing their children in one way or another: some children go missing on the migrant trail, some distanced by the separation, some get a chance to reunite but as broken people (Nazario 2006, Grande 2012, Villavicencio 2021). Migration takes a heavy toll.

The sufferings of familial separation are of course felt by each member. Migrant men often resort to alcohol to deal with their loneliness and fractured familial existence, abandoned children suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders. “The

flooding of stress hormones resulting from a traumatic separation from your parents at a young age kills off so many dendrites and neurons in the brain that results in permanent psychological and physical changes,” writes Karla Cornejo Villavicencio who was left behind in Ecuador as a child by her migrant parents (2021, 61). Villavicencio eventually joins her parents in the US at age four but even as an adult she suffers from several psychological illnesses on account of the traumatic separation. PTSD—from family separation, from the experience of border-crossing, from the constant fear of being apprehended by migration authorities—is a common but ‘invisible’ illness that undocumented migrants live with. Migrants learn to distract themselves from their traumatizing thoughts through work: “what makes me happy is working. When I’m not working, I freak out,” reports Julián, an undocumented worker, who hallucinates of being hunted by police dogs and struggles to sleep at night (Villavicencio 2021, 20). Undocumented migrants separated from family, excluded from society, and branded as illegals have only their labor to fall back upon to earn money to survive and to fill their minds with hope for the future. Their work defines their existence. In the US they are not “undocumented people” but “undocumented workers,” useful but replaceable, forgettable—“brown bodies made to labor, faces pixelated” (Villavicencio 2012, 13). The abstraction of their labor from their life devalues migrant bodies and legitimizes their callous exploitation. The true value of migrant labor must weigh in the conditions under which their labor is produced: familial separation, illegality, disciplinary violence, economic exploitation, illness. Reconstructive attempts—that trace the migrants’ stories from their home, on the trail, at the border and beyond, as they navigate the US job market with their illnesses—humanize migrants. These stories add details to their pixelated faces.

Debarchana Baruah is a postdoctoral associate at the American Studies Department, University of Tübingen. She is interested in migration, mobility, memories, health and food, homeownership and homelessness, film and television. Her first book, *21st Century Retro: Mad Men and 1960s America in Film and Television (transcript 2021)*, offers a critical framework to discuss contemporary televisual productions that revisit recent pasts. She is currently working on her second book on food and mobility in the US. Baruah has a doctoral degree in American Studies from the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Heidelberg University and has received her B.A., M.A., and M.Phil. degrees in English Literature from the University of Delhi.

Works cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Coutin, Susan B. "Being En Route." *American Anthropologist* 107.2 (2005): 195-206.
- . *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the US Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.
- Davis, Mike. "Policing the Third Border: In the Suburbs of Los Angeles, Mike Davis and Alessandra Moctezuma Find Whites Erecting a New Border." *Colorlines* 22 November 1999. colorlines.com/article/policing-third-border/. Last visited 02/12/2023.
- De Genova, Nicholas P. "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 419-447.
- De León, Jason. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.
- De León, Jason, Cameron Gokee and Ashley Schubert. "By the Time I Get to Arizona': Citizenship, Materiality, and Contested Identities Along the US-Mexico Border." *Anthropological Quarterly* 88.2 (2015): 445-479.
- Distretti, Emilio. "Enforced Disappearances and Border Deaths Along the Migrant Trail." *Border Deaths: Causes, Dynamics and Consequences of Migration-related Mortality*. Edited by Paolo Cuttitta and Tamara Last. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 117-129.
- Doty, Roxanne Lynn. "Bare Life: Border-Crossing Deaths and Spaces of Moral Alibi." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 599-612.
- Elsasser, Ashley A. "Migration from Mexico to the US: The Impacts of NAFTA on Mexico and the United States and What to Do Going Forward." *International Review of Business and Economics* 2.1 (2018): 115-128.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1977. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Classics, 2020.
- . *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Gálvez, Alyshia. *Eating Nafta: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.
- Grande, Reyna. *The Distance Between US: A Memoir*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2012.

- . "The Parent Who Stays." *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*. Edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen. New York: Abrams Press, 2018.
- Holmes, Seth M. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- Johnson, Kevin R. *Opening the Floodgates: Why America Needs to Rethink its Border and Immigration Laws*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.
- Martínez, Óscar. *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*. London: Verso Books, 2014.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40.
- . *Necropolitics*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.
- McGuire, Sharon and Kate Martin. "Fractured Migrant Families: Paradoxes of Hope and Devastation." *Family and Community Health* 30.3 (2007): 178-188.
- Mobed, Ketty, Ellen Gold and Marc Schenker. "Occupational Health Problems Among Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers." *Western Journal of Medicine* 157 (1992): 367-385.
- Nazario, Sonia. *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother*. 2006. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014.
- Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: What the All-American Meal is Doing to the World*. Penguin, 2002.
- Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. 1906. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- Urrea, Luis Alberto. *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*. New York: Anchor Books, 1993.
- . *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*. 2004. New York: Back Bay Books, 2014.
- Valencia, Sayak. *Gore Capitalism*. Trans. John Pluecker. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2018.
- Valenzuela Jr., Abel. "Day Labor Work." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 307-333.
- Villarejo, Don. "The Health of U.S. Hired Farm Workers." *Annual Review Public Health* 24 (2003): 175-193.
- Villavicencio, Karla Cornejo. *The Undocumented Americans*. London: Swift Press, 2021.
- Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. New York: Plume, 1996.