The Insecure Migrant
Honduran Migration to New Orleans
and the Rationalization of Risk

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ABSTRACT: For many Hondurans fleeing poverty, political corruption, violent crime, and climate change-induced disasters and seeking settlement in the United States, insecurity is a lived condition throughout the non-linear migratory journey. Add to that an ever-expanding surveillance infrastructure and thickening of the securitized US–Mexico border, and the very act of leaving arguably becomes political in its assertion of the right to dignified life. In this article I examine how undocumented Honduran migrants living in New Orleans rationalize the levels of risk they have faced during their migration and residency in the city. By focusing on violence—potential and actual—from petty criminals, gangs, traffickers, and law enforcement, I argue for heightened attention to how insecurity is an ongoing, cumulative, and transnational process that migrants face in their search for the good life.

KEYWORDS: crime, Honduras, insecurity, New Orleans, risk, transnational migration, violence

The small group of a dozen or so Catholic parishioners took their seats in the well-lit conference room at Loyola University. On this balmy New Orleans evening in June 2022, the moderator of the teach-in on migration, Christine, opened the session by reading the poem, “Prayer for Those Who Migrate.” The lines “Migrating in hope, in fear, in longing, / for peace, for some security, / For something like a home” jumped out as an elegiac prologue to the account given by Ricardo, an undocumented Honduran migrant who had been deported several times. We listened as he spoke, and his translator Lorena—a Guatemalan married to an undocumented Honduran—peppered her translations with descriptions about the difficult conditions in Honduras. Ricardo finally reunited with his family in New Orleans in 2021, driven primarily by, in his words, “my faith in God who would protect me to get me here” and a promise he made to his daughter that he would be present on her first day of preschool.

For more than an hour, Ricardo recounted his harrowing experiences: initially arriving in New Orleans a couple of years after the widespread devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and working in (re)construction, starting a family, his first ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detainment and follow-up court proceedings in 2017, another sudden detainment and deportation to Honduras with his family left behind, subsequent attempts to make it north only for Mexican authorities to detain and deport him twice, run-ins with cartels and staying in safehouses procured by coyotes, or smugglers, that he had hired and a particularly
harrowing kidnapping in which his already struggling wife had to raise ransom money in New Orleans to wire to the kidnappers to ensure his release. After that trauma, his wife told him that she could not bear living through that experience again and to never tell her if he made the journey once more. He kept that promise when he left Honduras to make the journey one last time in 2021. This time he was able to arrive in New Orleans and attend his daughter’s first day of preschool.

Ricardo’s testimony about migrating and the poem’s themes of fear and hope echo dozens of similar stories that I found in long-term fieldwork I have conducted off and on in New Orleans with undocumented Honduran migrants from 2011 to 2022. Such individuals often narrated stories of migration and settlement in New Orleans through seemingly contradictory pairings, such as productivity and poverty, safety and danger, mobility and stasis (both physical and social) and comfort and struggle. These dichotomies arguably help migrants to rationalize a complex spectrum of risk that they grapple with in facing a precarious life in their home country, dangerous journeys northward and in New Orleans, the potential for victimization by criminals, and the ever-present risk of deportation.

By “rationalization,” I refer to how individuals attempt to make sense of the often-senseless uncertainties and accumulated personal insecurities that accompany their migratory journey and settlement in New Orleans. Such experiences require constant negotiation of risk and opportunity and unending vigilance that is, quite importantly, cumulative, ongoing, tax- ing on the individual, and connected transnationally. As Bram Tucker and Donald R. Nelson (2017) point out, though the concept of risk can be applied to a variety of contexts, including “those characterized by variability, uncertainty, unpredictability, fluctuation, disturbance, disaster, danger, harm, misfortune, worry, anxiety, and fear” (161), anthropology is uniquely positioned to analyze how “individuals and communities perceive and experience risk and generate meaning-rich explanations for changes and misfortunes” (169).

I argue that considering the many dimensions of personal insecurity that individuals face helps us better understand how the cumulative effects of such stressors can build through time and space and inform how we understand the effects of violence and conflict on the lives of vulnerable migrants whose experiences are linked in a transnational chain of insecurity starting from home to (potential) settlement. Such layered stressors reported to me ranged from domestic battery in Honduras to injury to the body from the arduous conditions of travel over land to severe sunburns and back injuries on construction worksites in Mexico and the United States to mental and emotional anguish from witnessing the death of fellow travelers. In an attempt to make sense of that which is often senseless, then, individuals sought to rationalize the choices—limited though they might have been—that they had to make throughout their transnational journey.

This article contributes to a robust body of work that has examined how Central Americans have faced insecurity and risk throughout the migration process, including the analysis of gendered, gang-related, and state-sanctioned violence in migrant home countries (Frank-Vitale 2020; Obinna 2021; Zilberg 2011), the vulnerabilities and insecurities characterizing migrant passage through Mexico and over the border (De León 2015; Díaz de León 2021; Doering-White 2018; Izcara-Palacios 2016; Minian 2020; Vogt 2013), and how diasporic settlement in the United States offers abridged access to work under conditions of labor subordination and illegality (Abrego 2014; Coutin 2007; De Genova 2002; Goldstein and Alonso-Bejarano 2017; Heidbrink 2020).

As I highlight here, within a context of a Honduran state that has in recent decades showcased both neoliberal and authoritarian tendencies (Alvarez 2019; Fasquelle 2011; Frank 2018; Hasemann Lara 2022; Pine 2019) and the United States’ ever-expanding surveillance and thick-
ening of borders far into Mexico to prevent in-migration, movement and settlement necessarily become a means of survival on a wide spectrum of risk and insecurity that Hondurans cope with. As everyday life in Honduras becomes unlivable, in their words, the initial intervention of simply leaving to move toward greater mobility, productivity, and safety is itself central to migrants’ demand not only for a life but a good life, with dignity, economic success, and in the words of the poem, “some security.”

The Context of Insecurity

At its broadest, human security can be thought of as linked to “threats to ‘the survival, daily life, and dignity of human beings and to strengthening the efforts to confront these threats’” (Sen 2000 in Sirkeci 2009: 5). In this regard, migration—in all its stages—is itself an assertion of existence and the right to live peacefully and more self-sufficiently, even as national borders themselves are entrenched and violently enforced. As these systems of securitization are so pervasive as to politicize the very act of leaving, migrants arguably become subversive agents through their very movement.5 In this article I focus primarily on how personal insecurity and threats of violence—whether from petty criminals, gangs, traffickers, or law enforcement—from the clandestine journey northward to settlement in New Orleans structure how undocumented individuals assess ongoing, quotidian equations of risk versus reward. The migrants I spoke with rationalized a range of decisions they had to make under conditions of difficulty, including, for instance, leaving family behind, taking risky jobs in areas of settlement, and at times even engaging in violence themselves for survival.

For the past several decades Global North countries have instituted a set of racialized, neoliberal policies intent on maintaining exploitable pools of labor migrants who originate from the Global South and migrate northward while also securitizing that flow (Besteman 2020). Rooted in histories of colonialism and global capitalist expansion broadly (Besteman 2020: 18), Honduras in particular has been the setting for US military and corporate domination dating back to the late nineteenth century and the rise of the commodity trade, much of which was based in New Orleans (Daser and Fouts 2021; Sluyter et al. 2015). More recent clampdowns on migrants traveling to the United States have led to severe restrictions, segregation, and marginalization via growing technologies of control and surveillance that stretch beyond national borders to huge swaths of space in Mexico and the United States (Besteman 2020; Vogt 2013). This process has transformed Mexico into a “border-zone” in which “migration controls are being outsourced and border clusters are being created” (Popescu 2012 in Campos-Delgado 2017: 1), thus further criminalizing migrants seeking safe passage (Abrego 2019).

Numerous overlapping factors play a role in encouraging northward migration from Honduras and the other Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala and El Salvador, including systemic poverty,6 criminality and state impunity and abandonment (Alvarez 2019; Frank-Vitale 2018), US-led interventions in support of right-wing, neoliberal policies (Pine 2019), land seizures (Shipley 2015), and climate change and its effects on agricultural regions (Del Sarto 2021). The effects of a warming climate will continue to affect migratory choices, as Honduras has been called the “epicenter of climate change in the Western hemisphere” (Besteman 2020: 57).

A close Honduran interlocutor and key gatekeeper in the community in New Orleans, Juan reported anecdotally to me in 2022 that the flow of Central American migrants arriving throughout the 2010s never faltered, even during the difficult years of 2016–2020. The numbers of undocumented migrants in the United States tripled in the period from 1990 to 2015, going from 3.5 million to 12.2 million (Gil-Vasquez 2020: 575–576). In 2014 US Customs and Bor-
der Protection recorded 249,000 individuals from the Northern Triangle plus Nicaragua at the US–Mexico border, which then jumped to 734,000 individuals from those countries in 2021, a nearly 200 percent increase. This represented “44 percent of all encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border, 63 percent of all families, and 80 percent of all unaccompanied minors” (Soto and Selee 2022: para. 1). In much of the 2010s undocumented migration decreased due to increasingly stringent measures from the United States and its allies, yet in the first six months of 2019, the rate of unauthorized migrants moving northward tripled (Del Sarto 2021: 110). During this first half of 2019, 508,000 individuals (many of whom were families with children) applied for asylum in the United States, up from 265,000 per year in the previous five years (Del Sarto 2021: 111). With that said, arriving in the United States does not equal security. In the United States from 2009 to 2016, three million migrants were deported (Khosravi 2018: 40) and hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers remain in limbo.7

The foregoing figures raise the question: if transit conditions have only worsened for migrants, why do so many people continue to leave? The liminal space in which individuals live under contexts of societal violence, moving between shock at seemingly chaotic and random violence and acceptance of such quotidian potentialities is central to what Michael Taussig (1992: 4) terms a “chronic state of emergency.” In many ways, Hondurans have been part of a similar “nervous system” (Taussig 1992), existing within thresholds of shock and survival in the context of criminal gangs and state indifference (Green 1994; Nelson 2019). The potential for leaving and residing in a country where work is possible, then, arguably becomes one means of stepping beyond such thresholds.

Though I have structured the article by starting with leaving to settlement for the smoothness of narrative purposes, I have purposefully interspersed ethnographic vignettes across time and space to highlight how these struggles are endemic, ongoing, and transnationally experienced. Outwardly Ricardo’s migration may seem to be characterized by disparate and linear stages—emigration, transit, and settlement—but his case also shows how the insecurity of the migratory process often entails several starts and stops that are circular and disjointed in nature.

The Northward Journey: “Es Duro Venirse Uno” (“It’s Hard for One to Arrive”)

Natalia was on a bus in Guatemala migrating northward in 2005 when she was robbed. When the men boarded the bus and demanded money, she protested that she didn’t have any. One of the robbers forced his hands into her hair and down her pants to check. “I was shaking so hard, and my heart was beating so fast,” she told me in Spanish, placing her hand over her chest. For Natalia, a Honduran woman then in her forties, the experience of getting to the United States from San Pedro Sula, though fraught with risk and danger, was a story she decidedly wanted to tell. We were nearing the end of her interview in June 2014, when I asked her why she left Honduras. She grabbed my arm, suddenly engaged. Natalia, her elementary-aged daughter, Bethany, and I had been sitting in a McDonald’s on Canal Street, a main artery of New Orleans that cuts through the neighborhood of Mid-City and eventually divides the famed French Quarter from the Central Business District. Located amidst a series of run-down fast-food establishments, this refurbished McDonald’s was bustling with people getting off work, parents with children, and teenagers in school uniforms accessing the free Wi-Fi on their smart phones. Bethany and I had hamburgers while Natalia nursed a cup of coffee and told her story.

Natalia’s story echoed those of many Hondurans who had arrived in the years after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which left 80 percent of the city underwater and the rebuilding city relied
heavily on undocumented workers. Although reconstruction has long ended, the number of Latinx residents in parishes in and around New Orleans has continued to grow year by year since Katrina. Central Americans comprise a large portion of the Latinx population, with Hondurans numbering 32 percent of the Latinx population in New Orleans versus 2 percent of the national Latinx population. In addition to the threat of violence and lack of economic opportunity, witnessing first-hand the material effects of remittances encouraged Natalia, like many other Hondurans of modest means, to save up money to pay a coyote to guide her northward. As in many cases in migration, the actual decision to leave was a mix of socio-economic and highly personal reasons that are “often illegible, complex, and historically culturally specific” (Rosas 2021: 122). They are also a cumulative effect of numerous stressors. Like many others, Natalia utilized a heterogeneous array of transportation such as cars and buses until the final arduous walk over the border, always on foot, and always characterized by severe deprivation.

Many of the migrants I spoke with were working- to middle-class in Honduras and either saved or borrowed money from family already in the United States to hire a coyote, which at that time ranged from $3,000 to $6,000 (Sladkova 2013: 90). Generally, poorer residents are not able to afford assistance in migration, with many attempting the trip on their own. Research on US–Mexico border-crossing migrants found that Hondurans were most likely to travel without a coyote or family and friends (Hagan 2008: 76) and among other Central American groups tend to have a lower socio-economic status and lower age than other nationalities (Sladkova 2013: 95). According to interlocutors I spoke with, traffickers even charge them less than other nationalities like Cubans or Colombians. At the same time, the rates coyotes charge now have increased greatly across the board, from approximately $1,000 in 2006 to $12,000–16,000 per person in 2022 as the journey has become riskier. Part of this danger arises from increased federal investments on both sides of the US–Mexico border into border guards, fence construction, and new forms of aircraft and drone technologies, which has greatly narrowed the geographic passageways to the most dangerous terrain in the desert (Besteman 2020; De León 2015).

As one interviewee, Ariel, described it to me in Spanish, his northward journey in 2009 revealed a complex, transnational industry of smugglers that “look very polite, well dressed in a suit and tie…. They are traffickers of humans and drugs that have controlled all of Mexico. They have a well-organized operation, everything, everything, pure military army! It’s an industry. It looks like an army, because sometimes they wear army uniforms. But they have weapons, and they traffic drugs and people.”

Within the political economy of human smuggling, migrants are the products whose movement is key to transforming into eventual wage-laborers within the borders of the United States. In the words of Indra, a post-Katrina reconstruction worker turned housecleaner in her late twenties in 2014, “We are like... how you say... like merchandise. And we suffer a lot of extortion.” Indra’s evocative phrasing of migrants as “merchandise” reflects how northward-migrating people have been commodified within a larger economy of human smuggling, the drug and arms trade, and the broader political economy that springs up around such trade (Sladkova 2013; Vogt 2013). Indra’s mention of extortion also rang true with many migrants I spoke with in their descriptions of the difficult and insecure conditions of travel. As Ricardo recounted in the teach-in, a northward trip with a coyote in 2017 revealed that cartels had taken over nearly all the routes, with sophisticated systems of distinguishing which cartel each coyote was working with via color-coded wristbands and secret codewords for safe passage.

Illicit Honduran migration through Mexico involves close brushes with violence such as verbal harassment, robbery, rape, and murder; physically arduous conditions; periodic uncertainty, waiting, and boredom; and at times, conversely, a multitude of kind and generous people along the way. Indra’s experience reflected this. She told me this in English:
In Mexico we went in a big truck with like 80 people standing up, no one can pee, no one can eat for 14 hours. Like a can of sardines. Horrible. Passing controls for the police. Nobody can see you. . . . We walk six nights. Six nights! Walk at night, too hot in the day. On the third day, we had no more water. Because we are women the men share the water with us. We found a small pond for cows. There were maggots in it, but we had to drink it. If you don't drink, you die. Splinters in the leg. Horrible. . . . On the last day I was very weak and dizzy, no more energy. Some people wanted to stay in the desert. They couldn't walk anymore, they didn't care. But thank God, I made it.

This evocative retelling echoed across other migrant accounts as well: acute memories of the sensory conditions, interjected tales of acts of kindness by local Mexicans, religious gratitude, and the seeming denouement of the final crossing of the border, always across a river. Except for a few individuals, most migrants were eager to recount their journeys to New Orleans. Having survived the ordeal was something they emphasized. In their telling, these personal crises and dichotomies of suffering and relief, danger and salvation constituted a rationalizing means through which migrants could frame their presence in New Orleans as legitimate.

For some, upon looking back the journey constituted an adventure, harrowing though it might have been. One such example was Ariel, the interlocutor who described his experiences with the smuggling economy in Mexico. A Honduran in his late twenties, Ariel worked as an assistant to Juan, a Honduran car repair shop owner in the New Orleans suburb of Kenner. With an easy smile and friendly demeanor, Ariel and I became friends during my 15-month fieldwork stay in 2013–2014. I often ferried him back and forth to English as a Second Language classes on Sunday mornings during which we would chat about life back in Honduras, his family, and the women in his life. Ariel told me about family turmoil and protracted insecurity in Tegucigalpa and his experiences in subsequently emigrating. Having only arrived in New Orleans in mid-2013 after staying in other parts of the United States, for Ariel leaving Honduras for the United States was a spur-of-the-moment decision in 2009 that upon further investigation, was only a peek into a list of burgeoning challenges in his life. Upon the insecurity that arose after a 2009 US-supported coup that ousted a left-leaning president (Fasquelle 2011; Menjívar and Walsh 2017), many schools and places of work had closed, leaving him jobless and aimless. He had just had a fight with his mother when his aunt, whose husband lived in New Orleans, suggested the possibility of leaving. He agreed as a joke but then his cousin told him the next day to get ready. The compounding effects of poverty and insecurity undergirded this decision. Family strife was simply the tipping point, the eventual effect of cumulative factors.

Ariel told me the story of how he fell in with a large criminal syndicate in Mexico while migrating northward. He befriended a man in Guatemala whom he later learned had worked for the gang when, in Mexico, upon being threatened by kidnappers posing as police officers, his friend was able to defuse the situation with a short conversation. From then on, Ariel began working for the cartel as a cook and later enforcer. He told me he felt coerced into the work and did it to survive and make his way to the United States, stating, “At first, I was scared because they joked a lot, they were joking very ugly with me: they were going to sell my organs and all that. . . . And I wanted to escape from there, to go from there in the night without anyone noticing.” At the same time, Ariel noted that: “God always took care of me. I was with the worst people, but they treated me with respect and affection. I can say that no one ever disrespected me. I never saw anything bad. I did see bad things, but to me, nobody ever acted to want to hurt me or anything. But it was dangerous because they had many enemies. At that time that I was in Mexico, they had other enemies, like other drug cartels.”

At this point he began to witness kidnapping, torture, and murder of migrants who refused to comply or tell the truth, as he stated, about the coyotes that were getting them to the United States.
States. Despite that, he got along well with the boss. He openly acknowledged inflicting violence on others such as covering their mouths or turning the volume up on music so that others would not hear screams while they were physically tortured while stating vehemently that he had never hurt women or children or murdered anyone. He shook his head and softly thanked God that he had arrived in New Orleans safely and left behind violence inflicted upon him and its perpetration by him.

Throughout his interview, Ariel engaged in a process of intellectual and emotional bargaining: he carried a gun but did not use it. He witnessed horrific violence against men, but never rape; it was not allowed within the syndicate, which had military-like rules of order. As he reported to me, he no longer felt afraid like he had in Honduras because he felt that people treated him with respect since he walked around with a bulletproof vest, sported a walkie-talkie, and rode on a motorcycle. But he noted that he was so traumatized by the experience that he woke up with night terrors for a year afterward. Such bargaining is arguably a way of coping with being subject to and actively participating in acts of violence and existing on that threshold of the migratory nervous system. Ariel rationalized his embeddedness within the regional political economy of extortion and human smuggling as an element of making the northward journey successfully. Now he lived, to paraphrase his words, a life of good morals, hard work, and tranquility.

“Es duro venirse uno” (“It’s hard for one to arrive”), Natalia told me as we left the McDonalds that day to an overcast sky and windy street. In other words, the journey northward is difficult, dangerous, and expensive. We walked toward the intersection of North Broad Street and Canal Street. A busy and commercial area, on one corner of the intersection there are small restaurants—Vietnamese and Honduran—located side-by-side while on the opposite corner sits a run-down Family Dollar discount store. Natalia ran a small daycare out of the house she and her husband shared with her sister’s family. She cared for the children of fellow Central Americans who had to work odd hours in construction and hospitality. Because she had to return home to meet some arriving children, we continued our interview while walking. This was when she began telling me about living in Honduras. While living in San Pedro Sula, she was also robbed, twice. As she told these stories, she playfully covered Bethany’s ears while Bethany clung to her. We stopped at a red light, and Natalia recounted her experience of being held up at gunpoint at a similar intersection in Honduras. We walked by some young African American men, they nodded and said “hola” and we did the same back. I waved at the lonchera, or food truck, workers that were permanently parked near the intersection. She stated how it is much safer in New Orleans but then stopped herself and clarified that New Orleans can be dangerous, too. As we passed the Family Dollar, Natalia pointed to a deserted parking lot behind it and matter-of-factly described how she was robbed there early one weekday evening around seven o’clock. Bethany piped up, stating in Spanish, “No, Mama, it was eight o’clock!”

Natalia’s story also highlights how crisis situations are linked in a transnational continuum of insecurity from leaving the crime and impunity of Honduras to New Orleans, a city of bounded opportunity. She told me about initially settling in Arizona until leaving out of fears sparked by the draconian policies of the Maricopa County sheriff at the time, Joe Arpaio. As I found out later speaking with her brother and his wife, the whole family had fled Arizona for Louisiana because of laws such as SB 1070 passed in 2010 that created the most stringent immigration enforcement in the country (Gomberg-Muñoz and Nussbaum-Barberena 2011: 370). Many unauthorized migrants chose to migrate to more permissive states rather than return to their country of origin (Leerkes et al. 2012: 124). As the border has been successfully internalized by increased ICE enforcement and its deputizing of local sheriffs and police departments (Coleman and Stuesse 2016), Natalia’s experience shows how making it to the United States does not guarantee immediate relief. Internal migration—in her case from Arizona to Louisiana—also
constituted a means of mediating multiple insecurities. Natalia’s oscillation between viewing New Orleans as both safe and dangerous points to the bargaining migrants engage in while searching for “tranquility,” in the words of Ariel. In New Orleans, beyond the law enforcement risks, as undocumented migrants many Hondurans are vulnerable also to criminals who racially encode them as “illegal” and therefore a more suitable victim (Daser 2021; Fussell 2011), as the next section explores.

**New Orleans: City of Opportunity, City of Crime**

At the time we spoke in 2014, Karla was a single, thirtysomething Honduran woman who had previously worked in post-Katrina reconstruction and had moved on to housekeeping in a large hotel chain. She lived with her sister and both of their respective children in a house in Mid-City. Active in political organizing for the rights of post-Katrina migrants to stay after playing a key role in rebuilding, she was initially reticent to speak with me. She gradually opened up, however, explaining in an interview in Spanish how dangerous Honduras is, only to then pivot to criminality in New Orleans too:

Karla: Lately in Honduras the police are on the side of criminals and instead of helping the community, well, no one is safe because you do not know what day they will come to the door of your house only to kill your family because they wanted to kill. They do not need a reason for that, they just do it. So, it's a way to frighten people, I think that's why they do it... Yes, every week there is a story in our community about a person affected by the violence of crime there. And the people here say that New Orleans has a lot of crime, but... It has a lot, but not so much compared to our countries. Because the police are not corrupt here, right? They have to investigate crimes. There it is different. But yes, New Orleans is complicated. Every day there are dead.

Author: You mean there are a lot of murders in New Orleans?

Karla: Yes, in New Orleans. It looks a lot like Honduras. Ironically, it is not us Latinos that commit all this crime in New Orleans [laughs]. So, it's not us coming here to do what's done there, here. We have fled crime in Honduras, and we have come to a city where there is a lot of crime [laughs, shaking head].

While Karla started by noting the impunity that Honduran law enforcement could wield against citizens and how it contrasted to the police in New Orleans, she then countered that view by pointing to the “complicated” nature of New Orleans’ violent crime problem and what, in her words, is the ironic nature of fleeing a dangerous place where “her people” are the perpetrators to a place where they are not. While some Latinx are undoubtedly involved in crime, for the most part, as migrants living undocumented within what Ferreti (2017: 91) calls the “quiet anonymity of social marginalization,” they try to avoid attention from law enforcement. Fear of being victims of crime and being treated as criminals by law enforcement shows the status of the migrant “at risk” and the migrant “as risk” (Marrujo 2003: 19), a form of double embodied threat in which migrants are not only made into deportable subjects (De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010) but also “robable” subjects. Similarly, Daniel Goldstein and Carolina Alonso-Bejarano (2017) point out that, “United States immigration law and its enforcement thus produce an ingenious contradiction, in which the very people who are supposed to be the cause of national insecurity are themselves rendered among the most insecure people in national space” (1). The double bind of crime there and crime here that Karla articulated are also linkages in a transnational chain of insecurity that follows and structures migrant experience.
María, a former reconstruction worker and current lonchera vendor, recounted feeling “a part of New Orleans,” in her words, where “God has blessed” her “with family and work.” While pointing out that there are many reasons why people emigrate, she stated, “In our country there is a lot of poverty, a lot of crime. Nobody with money is just going to leave their home, you understand?” Like María here, for many interlocutors, thoughtful reflection on the opportunities found in New Orleans, regardless of the risk in migrating and living and working while informally authorized, often went further into a critique of the structural violence of poverty. As scholars of structural violence have pointed out, inequalities within political and economic systems deprive individuals of the resources that would ensure their health and livelihoods. These structures are in turn reproduced by many of those same individuals, thus helping to maintain systems of dominance (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Farmer 2004; Menjívar and Walsh 2017). María went on to echo such sentiments: “Because there, for a person my age, 30 years old and unemployed—you you are just a machine and that’s it. And then if you have no means to start a business, people—I mean, it’s not an excuse to steal or to kill people for money. But today one of the reasons that crime exists is this: the necessity. Many people act that way because there are so many limitations on what jobs they can do. It’s not like here.”

Like many others, María made socially legible the connections between the multiple factors that led to her out-migration. Without the multiple social, political, and economic practices under capitalism that sustain inequality and force, or “systemic” violence, it is impossible to understand these seemingly arbitrary outbursts of overt, or “subjective,” violence (Žižek 2008: 9–10). The ability to work and the availability of work becomes the key factor in breaking that cycle of systemic violence, while remaining at risk for the subjective violence of crime.

Forms of such subjective violence include theft. Many residents revealed instances of muggings, residential theft, and equipment theft from worksites. Natalia’s earlier recounting of being mugged in New Orleans as almost an afterthought is one such example. How does one explain this seeming contradiction of a dangerous Honduras and safer New Orleans when so many migrants have been victims of crime in New Orleans? Concern with crime is etched into the social fabric of New Orleans. Spanning the gamut from murder to petty thefts, local media outlets cover crime with sensationalist headlines sporting undertones of racial panic. Honduran migrants articulated crime as one of many injustices that they must accept upon a spectrum of risk in a setting in which law enforcement can’t be trusted.

For Honduran migrants, mistrust of the police is further compounded by the fear of law enforcement either working with or complying with ICE. Residents desire the ability to go to the police when they are a victim of crime but are afraid to in case they are asked about their legal status. This is one reason many municipalities in large cities desire “sanctuary city” status, which refers to urban areas where local police do not inquire about an individual’s legal status and do not work with federal law enforcement on those issues (Gomberg-Muñoz and Nussbaum-Barberena 2011: 370). If migrants trust that they will not be asked about their authorization to be in the country, they are more likely to go to the police when they are victims of or witness to a crime. As Alejandra, a young Latinx community organizer told me in 2014, a survey she conducted on behalf of her organization to assess the needs of undocumented Latinx migrants in Mid-City revealed security as the number one issue for the three hundred residents she surveyed, half of whom were Honduran. Migrants that she interviewed reported that police officers were angry when they called or spoke with them in Spanish, that there were not enough Spanish-speaking officers, and that the lack of patrolling officers in majority Latinx neighborhoods decreased feelings of safety.

Worksite dangers and vulnerability to detainment and deportation constitute high-risk conditions that migrants must navigate in New Orleans and often are the grounds upon which such
individuals have mobilized politically for the right to remain (Daser 2021; Fussell 2011). In her conversation with me, Karla explicitly linked the forms of worksite discrimination and dangers from law enforcement. When I asked her why she left Honduras, she replied, “To search for a better future. Over there, there are no opportunities. [pause] Here there are not so many opportunities, either! [laughs] Nor is this country welcoming us. . . . Here we suffer from discrimination, we suffer from many things . . . even from La Migra that chases us everywhere, from the raids they do.”

Like her earlier characterization of New Orleans as also a “dangerous” place to live, here too Karla points to racial discrimination as also affecting the range of opportunities available to Honduran migrants in New Orleans and the raids—often occurring on worksites not to mention Latin American grocers, day labor sites, and apartment complexes—that keep migrants in an ongoing state of insecurity and fear. Discussing the insecurities—personal and economic—in Honduras interestingly led her to qualify New Orleans as another insecure locale, though lesser in scale.

Along with the Trump years and the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent massive layoffs in the tourism and hospitality industries came even more struggles for undocumented migrants who not only lost jobs but also did not have access to multiple forms of state and federal support. The extremely dangerous journey northward and the barriers undocumented migrants face in New Orleans led one long-time political organizer with the Latinx and Vietnamese communities, Ana, to tell friends back in Honduras not to leave, stating to me in 2022: “I don’t think it’s worth it. Of course, it’s hard there. But it’s hard everywhere. The only thing worth coming here is an improved education here for your children. But you’re going to struggle here too, only you’re going to struggle in a foreign land where you don’t speak the language! Enjoy your country. You have to make it better where you are.” She has prioritized helping friends in Honduras start businesses there instead of making the trip to the United States. As Ana’s perspective makes clear, the compounding effects of multiple insecurities has led to doubts about the viability of the highly dangerous migratory path and potential arrival in New Orleans, where an aggressive ICE awaits.

Starting with US federal policy and legislative changes in the 1990s and then increasing after 9/11, internal immigration enforcement has become a quotidian reality. Programs such as §287(g) and Secure Communities have allowed local law enforcement officials to work with ICE in checking the immigrant status of individuals (Coleman and Stuesse 2016: 513; Orrenius and Zavodny 2015: 9–10) and have essentially transformed local police officers into immigration officials and local jails into “an important node in the federal immigration control web” (Coleman and Stuesse 2016: 531). Thus, while the federal government nominally dictates immigration policy, states have increasingly implemented their own statutes and practices to make life for informally authorized persons more difficult (Goldstein and Alonso-Bejarano 2017), with a particular concentration in the US South, including Louisiana (Leerkes et al. 2012). While the Obama administration in the second term (2012–2016) tried to undo many of the practices enacted under Secure Communities (Orrenius and Zavodny 2015: 9–10), my ethnographic findings suggest that throughout the 2010s New Orleans law enforcement has continued to cooperate with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to varying degrees.

Raids, roadblocks, and traffic stops featured in the experiences of Honduran migrants with whom I spoke. Daily alerts sent out by advocacy groups utilizing word-of-mouth to warn against particular intersections or highway passes served to warn migrants about dangerous zones to avoid while driving, an often-necessary act in a city with less than desirable public transportation, and constituting what Indra called, “the Achilles heel” of undocumented Latinxs. Metairie and Kenner, popular suburbs to live in for many migrants and falling within the boundaries
of Jefferson Parish, held the highest number of deportations in the country for several years (Rainey 2017). The degree to which law enforcement in New Orleans city proper (Orleans Parish) works with ICE is more difficult to ascertain, with the Sheriff’s office in recent years blocked from running names through the DHS database for non-criminal offenses due to a Justice Department Consent Decree signed in 2012 (Rainey 2017).

Many migrants described brushes with ICE officers or local law enforcement officers threatening potential ICE involvement. Yet for the most part, migrants were successful at staying in the shadows and making a calculated comparison of safety, thus banking on the idea Ariel stated that, “here if you look for trouble, you can find it, unlike in Honduras where trouble finds you.” For Ariel, New Orleans was a safe space in which he could, literally, walk down the street without fear, stating, “When I first came here and was walking down the street, if a white truck drove by, I would instinctively tense up and feel the need to protect myself. I was scared.” As he explained, gangs drove around in white trucks back in Tegucigalpa, targeting individuals. Ariel often boasted at his lack of fear of ICE and his comfort in driving, even though he did not have a driver’s license. The very ability to be physically mobile in the urban space of New Orleans was, for Ariel and others, a direct contrast to the fear of violent crime in Honduras. The exception in more recent times may be the period of 2016–2020, when individuals reported feeling particularly targeted. In the words of the Guatemalan interpreter, Lorena, it was a “chaotic time” in which: “You could not go to the gas station without being afraid. You could not go to the Latin grocery store without being afraid. You could not go to Wal-Mart without being afraid. You couldn’t do anything. Even at the park . . . afraid of being rounded up like cattle. I imagine this is what the Jews felt like in World War II.”

These accounts illustrate how vulnerabilities exist upon a continuum of risk and insecurity, starting from Honduras and continuing to daily life in New Orleans, whether as potential victims of criminals or subject to the targeting of law enforcement. On the one hand, New Orleans offers a degree of security, comfort, and enjoyment of the fruits of their labor. On the other hand, the racialized ascriptions of “illegality” that increases migrant vulnerability in public spaces make the city a potentially dangerous setting. Interlocutors rationalize such contradictions by downplaying New Orleans’ dangerousness in contrast to the riskiness of life in Honduras. Still, the sharp irony is that the very police force upon which migrants rely when they become victims of a crime are the same people who have the power to aid in initiating a process of deportation by working with ICE. Again, the migrant as risk and migrant at risk intersect at their embodied and racialized presence in New Orleans.

**Conclusion: The Search for Some Security**

While writing this article numerous changes have occurred with US federal migration policy. For instance, the Biden administration lifted the “remain in Mexico” policy that required asylum seekers to stay in Mexico for their hearings in August 2022 only to reverse their own policy in early 2023. My own observation at the immigration court in summer 2022 revealed how the US government is overwhelmingly dismissing deportation cases, in contrast to when I last observed in 2014 and 2016, leading to many shocked and relieved faces among the migrant defendants. Such is the nature of ever-shifting dynamics influencing migration. Changing political regimes, disastrous weather events, worsening food crises, and economic instability undoubtedly influence population flows. And while individual choices, trajectories, and outcomes may differ according to, say, asylum policy or the direction of a hurricane, the undergirding structures remain consistent in maintaining the “unlivability” of Honduras for many
residents. Desired settlement in the United States remains and will remain a favored option for many seeking plentiful work and a more dignified life, even with the highly treacherous path through Mexico and potential targeting by law enforcement in the United States.

Individuals like Ricardo, Ariel, and Karla innovatively traverse crisis-like conditions, across national borders and in multiple social environments. As I have shown, how Honduran migrants negotiate opportunity and risk highlights how cumulative and layered forms of insecurity structure the very acts of leaving, working, and surviving. But such rationalizations also constitute interventions in the search for the good life. For Ricardo, life in New Orleans has included not just the reunification of his immediate family but a relatively settled existence in a single-family home in the Mid-City district of New Orleans that he and his wife bought. As my long-term fieldwork has shown, even under the shadow of potential detainment and deportation, undocumented individuals start businesses, get married (and sometimes divorced), have children and grandchildren, buy houses, and so on.

Back in 2014, I had asked Fernanda, a grandmother and hospitality worker who had lost a son to violence in Honduras but had successfully brought her daughters to the United States, if she was happy in New Orleans. She replied that she was, stating emphatically in Spanish, “No somos ricos, pero se vive más diferente que en Honduras. . . . Es mejor. Al menos aquí nosotros vivimos.” (“We’re not rich, but one can live differently than in Honduras. . . . It’s better. At least we live here.”) A follow-up visit with her and her family in 2022 illustrated that while uncertainties remain, Fernanda has been able to obtain steady work, buy a home in Honduras, and achieve some upward mobility for her family in the United States. For many of the undocumented Honduran migrants living in New Orleans, the aim is not merely to survive in their search for some security, but in the words of Fernanda, also to live.

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NOTES

2. In order to protect the identities of research participants, I have changed names and some personal details.
3. During this period of fieldwork, I conducted more than sixty semi-structured interviews in English and Spanish with migrants, labor lawyers, political organizers, and union officials; hundreds of hours of participant observation on worksites and in migrant homes as well as with federal bureaucracies, with local immigrant rights organizations, at the immigration court, and at wage claim clinics; and archival research.

4. Many thanks to Amelia Frank-Vitale and José Hasemann Lara for clarifying the nature of the Honduran state in personal communication.

5. Gilberto Rosas helpfully brought up the notion of migration as a political assertion of existence while serving as discussant on the “Subjects of Equality and Deservedness B” panel at the Society for Anthropology of North America (SANA) 2015 Annual Conference.

6. Nearly 62 percent of Hondurans, 59.3 percent of Guatemalans, and 29.2 percent of Salvadorans live below the poverty line (World Bank in Del Sarto 2021: 115).


8. Nearly 50 percent of the rebuilding workforce was Latinx, many of whom were undocumented (Fletcher et al. 2006). New Orleans was 4 percent Latinx before Katrina and, according to the 2010 Census Bureau, numbered 20 percent soon afterwards (Negi et al. 2013: 355), with nearly half of those workers in that period from Honduras (Negi et al. 2013: 358).


11. As discussions with fellow researchers studying Honduran migration throughout different geographic regions (Honduras, Mexico, and the United States) has shown, there is a filtering effect at play, with my research participants necessarily being those who “made it” over the border, in contrast to those who are never able to leave, get deported from Mexico or the United States, stay in a transit country, or are even killed.

12. Similarly, many migrants articulated a faith in God as ensuring their safety, a sentiment other researchers have found in the Latinx migratory experience (Campos-Delgado 2017; Hagan 2008).

13. Ariel was a victim of kidnapping. As Izcara-Palacios (2016: 13) points out in his ethnographic analysis of Central American migrants forced into illegal activities by gangs during their migration, since 2007 this type of kidnapping has become much more likely. He points to “post-structural violence” as encompassing both direct and indirect forms of violence because it “strips victims of their innocence, and it is more harmful than the imperceptible forms of violence exposed because it raises to superlative levels the degree of complicity and victim-blaming . . . it leaves an indelible rust in the psyche of the victim” (Izcara-Palacios 2016: 16; translated from Spanish by author). The same appears to be true of Ariel.

14. My interaction with Ariel reflects the potential for transference and counter-transference (Robben 1996). While I tried to stay neutral in my reactions and questions to Ariel on this topic, undoubtedly, I lent sympathy in attempting to make him feel at ease in confiding his experiences as a victimizer (and victim). Significantly, violence possesses “structuring and enframing effects of its own” in which enactors and victims of violence alike create their own teleologies and rationalizations of their situation (Feldman 1991: 226–227), not to mention researchers listening to such accounts of violence.

15. Ninety percent reported that safety was the single biggest issue, though Alejandra did not know if that was in relation to police or criminals. After safety came health, and then education.

16. La Migra generally refers to ICE or Border Patrol.

17. Of course, I was not able to talk to migrants who had been deported and thus were not able to stay in the shadows successfully. For more on Honduran deportees see Frank-Vitale (2018).


REFERENCES


