

Mirrored journeys

Central American and African migrants walking in search of another life

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Abstract

Travelling on foot still constitutes, in the midst of the twenty-first century, a fundamental moment in a great number of current migrants' journeys, both across Africa and Central America, fleeing from miserable living conditions and violence. This article compares an in-depth narrative approach to the issue with the mainstream coverage of the Central American caravan by the end of 2018, in order to reflect on the invisibility and vulnerability of walking migrants. While the caravan empowered and brought migrants the opportunity to struggle for a safe journey, this hypervisibility has not been translated into a better-contextualised account in mainstream media. In contrast, the non-fiction books and series of reportages published by Óscar Martínez, and by Xavier Aldekoa with co-author Ruido Photo, focus on the effects of the European Union's and the United States' externalisation of borders and securitisation policies, which force migrants to walk in order to avoid border surveillance and criminal organizations' attacks, and, in the open desert, to face deportation.

Keywords migration, Central America, Africa, narrative journalism, walking

Introduction

Migration¹ is closely associated with human behaviour from its origins, when it was an ancestral need triggered by prosecutions, famines and conquests. Warner (1997, 95), citing a large collection of examples dating back to the time of Moses, states, “The migration of people is as old as recorded history.” Without other means of transport, the vast majority were compelled to walk – forced by their circumstances. According to Amato (2004, 26), “Since time immemorial walking has been the primary mode of human locomotion” and also one of the first symbolic indicators of class and status.

Even nowadays, in the age of mobility and globalisation, when walking is for most people just a leisure activity (Solnit 2015; Amato 2004, 24), it remains for migrants the only way to achieve their goal of seeking another life. In the midst of the twenty-first century, walking reinforces, to a large extent, Amato’s (2004, 17) observation that “through history, those who had to walk formed the legions of the inferior and less powerful [...] they literally inherited the inferiority of the foot.”

Today, walking migrants form part of an excluded group who cannot submit the credentials to cross borders without being detained. As one of Aldekoa’s (2017) interviewees ask: “You can take a plane and come here easily to take pictures. Why can’t Africans travel like you?”

This article focusses on how walking remains a primary resource for thousands of migrants around the world – particularly for those who try to cross the African continent or for Central Americans who do the same across Mexico. In a type of mirrored journey, they struggle to overcome the multiple challenges they meet on the road as walking becomes both the solution and the source of countless health and safety threats (Díaz de Aguilar 2018; Angulo-Pasel 2018). The paper analyses these issues by comparing the reportages published by two narrative journalists, Salvadorian Óscar Martínez (*The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*) and Xavier Aldekoa, from Spain (*Viaje al corazón del hambre [Trip to the heart of hunger]* and *The Backway*, co-authored with the cooperative of photography Ruido Photo), with the mainstream coverage

of the Central American caravan, at the end of 2018. The aim is two-fold: firstly, to analyse the extent to which the walking migrant's condition and the threads of his forced invisibility are the result of the securitisation and border externalization policies; and secondly, to evaluate how an in-depth narrative coverage of the issue can provide a better understanding of the phenomenon than traditional coverage, as happened in the 2018 caravan; even if the caravan itself underlines the empowerment and activism of the migrants and asylum-seekers.

Migrants' journey: invisibility and vulnerability

For thousands of Central American migrants and refugees, walking represents a clandestine way to progress once in Mexico. Óscar Martínez travelled with them for months and offers a detailed account of a "journey through hell" to reach the US border (Goldman 2013, 13). By seeking alternative paths, migrants can avoid the checkpoints set up along the highway and become invisible to the authorities. Undocumented migrants start their trip in Mexico on minibuses and *combis*². However, this is only the first stage of an endless series of hop-on and hop-off moves designed to help migrants sneak pass the checkpoints – at least five times in 175 miles, until they can board the cargo train La Bestia (Martínez 2013, 107-108).

Clandestine and perilous journeys place migrants in danger of new threats, which is a symptom of their paradoxical invisibility (Angulo-Pasel 2018, 144). These secret routes become the domain of criminals and bandits acting under the cloak of silent impunity for crimes committed against invisible migrants. Invisibility removes migrants' human rights, reducing them to the inferior standing of medieval pilgrims (Amato 2004, 48).

The sense of vulnerability is so high that migrants assume that they can be assaulted at any time with no recourse. The suffering they endure on the trail is not just physical. Migratory walking also has lasting effects (Martínez 2013, 142). The traumatic experiences that they undergo during the approximate month of travel it takes to reach Mexico's northern border run deeper. Even if migrants achieve their goal, this pilgrimage through hell, surrounded by all kind of dangers and uncertainty is – unlike a religious pilgrimage (Solnit 2015, 86-87) – unable to provide relief.

Hidden routes impose harsh environmental conditions. Migrants face inhospitable landscapes in southern Mexico, in a combination of human and natural barriers that oblige migrants to climb over barbed wire fences and cross cattle ranches and rivers. In these conditions, disorientation and despair are frequent, as Martínez, embarked on the journey, notes: “We’ve barely walked a half hour. I can’t stop shaking my head. What we’ve walked is a fraction of what a migrant walks, and we’ve only reached the beginnings of their journey” (2013, 128).

The conditions are no better in the north, having to cross desert regions that can reach 122 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, competing for the hidden routes with criminal organisations, mostly as a collateral effect of the governmental offensive against organised crime, drug-trafficking and migration, setting off an escalation of violence (Rodríguez 2014; De la Torre 2015) and as part of the security strategy designed by the United States (Villafuerte and García 2017). Martínez sketches a lawless scenario in which security forces and the two largest industries of crime, people-smugglers (coyotes) and narcos, are two sides of the same coin. The territoriality that they impose makes the migrant route diabolical, walking across the desert in “bandit territory” (2013, 427-428). More than ever, in these extreme circumstances, walking migrants confront the Earth with their bodies as their only resources (Solnit 2015, 57), revealing the precarious and inferior condition that present-day society imposes on them. Faced with the need to escape from security forces and narcos, migrants are doomed to the hardest landscape – the dunes – and the most exposed paths in their way to move forward. Falling into the hands of security forces can result in deportation, but invading the mafia’s domain can be even worse.

In a successive chain of extortion processes, coyotes drive up the price for their services (Martínez 2013, 674). They themselves are fleeing from violence and subject to tougher immigration and refugee laws. Wasted migrants cannot escape this exploitation business in which they are the weaker and worthier part of a vicious circle. They must pay coyotes large sums of money for each attempt to cross the border, with no guarantees. Among those who try to reach the US border, walking migrant women are a permanent and notorious object of injuries, “an easy target” of abuses, rapes and murders (Martínez 2013, 473).

A woman walking alone on the border between Djibouti and Somalia inspired Xavier Aldekoa (2011, 4-5) to give a face to the famine, drought, and violence in the Horn of Africa in a series of reportages, *Viaje al corazón del hambre*. The first chapter describes a terrible scene in the world's largest refugee camp, Dadaab: the corpse of a little baby on a wooden bench and, on the opposite side of an empty room, his mother and two brothers in silence. This infant's death is the hopeless result of a nearly 30-day journey of walking, fleeing in 2011 from the worse drought in the region in the last 60 years (Aldekoa 2011, 7). Now, as then, entire families of refugees must walk under extreme conditions, facing natural threats and many forms of violence, from military and bandit abuses to rapes or thefts (Aldekoa 2011).

For migrants from West Africa, Agadez in Niger is a reference point to enter the Maghreb to reach Libya or Algeria (De Haas 2006). It is also the place where migrants contact the smugglers who will bring them by overloaded truck or pickup across the Sahara (Díaz de Aguilar 2018, 11). Walking is not expected to be one of the means of transport on the trans-Saharan journey, but it occurs in the most dramatic circumstances and without much chance of success. The Nigerian authorities' increased control, the arrest of drivers and confiscation of transportation vehicles lead to new and longer clandestine routes in order to avoid police control (Aldekoa and Ruido Photo 2017). The trip is not only more expensive but also more dangerous, as a result of the "failed" European Union policies (Anderson 2016, 1055) encouraging – since the early 2000s – national authorities to supervise all trans-Saharan movements as a first step to stop migrants on a journey toward Europe. This "criminalization" of travel to and through the Sahara has led to the development of a human smuggling business, specialized in the clandestine transport of migrants (Brachet 2018). More kilometres of desert and unknown roads increase the possibilities of suffering an accident, an assault or being dropped by the smugglers. With little food and water, which is extremely restricted on board the overcrowded vehicles, migrants' chances of surviving the walk are limited: "If the vehicle is damaged or lost in the immensity of the Sahara and nobody manages to rescue them, all the passengers will die after a few days" (Aldekoa and Ruido Photo 2017). These deaths remain un-

punished and hidden in a desert turned into a cemetery, where sand buries the corpses in a few hours.

The second unexpected trigger that forces trans-Saharan migrants to walk also derives from the EU's border externalisation measures to prohibit forcibly displaced persons from getting to Europe's borders in the first place. These policies involve agreements to turn Europe's neighbour countries into border guards; that is, "to accept deported persons and adopt the same policies of border control" (Akkerman 2018, 2). Algeria, one of the partners, has implemented radical measures, abandoning thousands of migrants in the desert – including many pregnant women and minors. These abandoned migrants are caught by the police in Algeria while attempting to enter the country or while working there (Loprete 2018), and are left without food or water and are expected to walk for miles (IOMc 2018). According to the reports, the number of migrants walking through the desert from Algeria to Niger is on the rise and some 11,276 migrants have made it over the border in the last years (IOMc 2018).

The subversive walking and the paradoxical exposure

A group of approximately 160 persons left San Pedro Sula – the second-largest city in Honduras and one the most violent in the world – on 12 October 2018 to get to the US–Mexico border. By the time they entered Guatemala, the number had exceeded 3,000 members. When the group reached Mexico, according to the UN (2018), it comprised 7,000 people from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Even though the phenomenon of Central American caravans is not new (De la Torre 2015; Rivera 2017), the scope it reached by the end of 2018, coupled with the US anti-immigration crack-down, drove intensive media attention for several weeks.

If Central American migrants try to achieve invisibility to avoid prosecution on a journey across Mexico that takes weeks, a caravan of several thousands of migrants walking together to the US border seems a subversive way to bring to light a hidden reality, similar to the first demonstrations celebrating sexual identity (Solnit 2015, 315-316). Large groups increase migrants' chance of safe passage, and provide a sense of community and solidarity on the journey (Jacobsen 2018).

This hypervisibility serves as a political action; as a way to expose the dangers that migrants face as a collateral effect of the securitisation policies, which have made their journey even more dangerous by putting them in the hands of professional criminal organizations. Among the large-scale exodus-taking happening around the world and similar abuses concerning migrants (UN 2017), the caravan, the larger of its kind, has added another dimension to the phenomenon.

The physical movement of walking together becomes a public expression, a liminal stage to a representational and symbolic world (Solnit 2015, 319-320); a kind of “political pilgrimage” like Gandhi’s, with his famous 200-mile-long Salt March in 1930 (Solnit 2015, 97). As a performative act, the caravan “empowers” its participants. They transcend the role of undocumented migrants and became activists struggling for their right to seek asylum, fleeing the extreme violence in the Northern Triangle (Rivera 2017, 117).

After travelling more than 4,000 km from Central America and covering hundreds of front pages and minutes on TV programs, the caravan of migrants has ceased to interest the media, regardless that the main characters are still awaiting responses to their US asylum claims and new groups are replicating the experience.

Experts assert that calling the “migrant caravan” the exodus “obscures the heart of the matter” and its simplistic coverage hides the reasons behind it (Isaacs 2018; Lovato 2018). In fact, despite the massive media attention, the traditional pattern criticized by many researchers in the mainstream migration coverage (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006; Cisneros 2008; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; Musolff 2011; Binotti, Marco and Lai 2016) has been prevalent, framing the caravan as an “invasion” or “border crisis” and promoting “alarmist narratives” that statistics contradict (Lovato 2018).

The decontextualized reporting of the caravan has contributed to the reinforcement of US President Donald Trump’s discourse, warning about “masses of illegal aliens and giant caravans” or “infiltrated gang members” as a justification for deploying troops on the southern border (Lovato 2018). The attention has not produced better information about the systemic and long-term violence crisis in Central America, or the difficulties faced by asylum-seekers, or the refugee process and the dangers that migrants deal with when travelling across Mexico. Emphasising the threat that their entry

can represent to host societies has harmful consequences in terms of dehumanization and demonstrates a serious violation of the codes of journalistic ethics. In contrast to the negative mainstream media coverage, aimed at an episodic approach to migration, narrative and slow journalism (Neveu 2014; Pauli 2016) provides a more complete and contextualized account (Palau-Sampio 2019) of the reasons and conditions that lead migrants to walk as a last resort.

Conclusion

Crossing unknown territories, trying to avoid police surveillance or the actions of the mafia, abandoned in the middle of nowhere by smugglers that have robbed or deceived them, undocumented migrants, in the twenty-first century, must cover long distances by foot in search of a better life. The works of Martínez and Aldekoa highlight that walking migrants are the living image of today's helpless. Exposed to all kinds of threats, doomed to be invisible, migrants have been deprived of their human rights, while their offenders remain unpunished.

Even if walking involves different moments in the Central American and African migrants' journeys, it is, in both cases, their hardest and most appalling experience, a clear expression of how the body measures itself against the Earth (Solnit 2015, 57). Exhausted migrants must take secret, impassable and dangerous routes with their bodies serving as their only resource, their major asset and a sign of their vulnerability. Fleeing from violence, famine or natural disasters, walking migrants are unable to enjoy the landscape as a *wanderlust* emotion or to connect thinking and footsteps, as vocational travellers do (Solnit 2015).

As the analysed narrative reportages, the extreme situation faced by walking migrants – in both Central America and Africa – is mostly a result of the failed policies on external borders encouraged and implemented by the European Union and the United States. The effort to “fight migration” has fed a criminal industry (Andersson 2016, 1056) that benefits from migrants, returning them to the inferior and vulnerable condition of walkers (Amato 2004). However, walking together can be a performing and empowering act, as the Central American caravan demonstrated, although mainstream media reporting still presents controversial frames.

Like pilgrims, migrants' efforts and suffering is an unavoidable part of a journey that transforms their lives (Solnit 2015, 85; Amato 2004, 57), but contrary to the religious pilgrim, walking becomes a traumatic and involuntary experience that is far from generating spiritual reward. The depicted migrants are forced to walk and by walking, they are dehumanized, deprived of their identities and sense of belonging. No matter whether it is in Africa or Central America, the experiences of walking migrants are reflected in the same mirror.

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Endnotes

- 1 Following the definition provided by the OIM glossary, *migration* is "the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encom-

passing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification” (IOM 2018b).

2 Small passenger vans used in Mexico for transportation.