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SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

by

MAEVE HIGGINS

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in International Migration Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of
New York

2021

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in International Migration Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

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MAEVE HIGGINS

Advisor: Dr. Jamie Longazel

This is a long-form essay exploring the politics and power at play along the U.S.-Mexico border. My objective with this piece was to better understand how and why this increasingly militarized border has grown in the past decades, as well as who is profiting and who is suffering because of this growth. To do this I relied on academic theorists, journalism and on-the-ground research. I discovered that the year I visited The Border Security Expo was also the year that Customs and Border Patrol saw their biggest ever budget, and I gained insight into what they spent this budget on. I learned that there is a long and contested history in the region over who gets to call the land their own and who gets to cross the border freely, in history and in the present the border is racialized and violent and has attracted a large number of profiteers, making it something of a border industrial complex. I include my own perspective as a European immigrant with a vastly different immigration experience than those making the trip across the Southern Border and query just whose lives matter in the United States.

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THE ALAMO

I remember The Alamo, of course I do. I remember the evening I stood in the grounds beside the biggest bowl of queso I'd ever seen while a man, his face reddened with emotion and alcohol, stood on a makeshift stage and auctioned off a home-made gun. That was the president of the Border Patrol Foundation, waving his weapon gently overhead as those in the crowd nodded their heads slightly to make their bids known, and the sun dipped low behind the old chapel. My heart quickened at the sight of the rifle, as it does every time, I see a gun. I was there for the 2020 Border Security Expo, to better understand where the border was headed, and this was the social event of the weekend. I had been to the Mexican border before and spoken to and written about immigrants who live there or crossed it at some stage in their lives. It was easy to find migrants to talk to about the border, and even easier to understand why they need to cross it. It was more difficult to understand and get access to the powerful forces that built and enforced this border. When I heard that there would be a whole convention center full of every player in the deadly game of exclusion and enforcement, milling around a selection of border paraphernalia for sale, I just had to be there!

I was nervous about the trip. As a naturally conflict adverse person about to spend three days with a large group of people ideologically opposed to myself, it would be fair to assume that the potential conflict was the cause of my jitters. But I was delighted by the opportunity to understand Customs and Border Patrol and their associated industries. I was nervous, because the Expo began on March 11th and the coronavirus' inexorable march was already underway. The United States did not yet understand the threat and was weeks away from lock down. On March

9th President Trump stated the flu was more deadly than coronavirus and that nothing was shut down. “Think about that!” he Tweeted.

I am thinking about that *now*, as I write this thirteen months later with 554,000 people in America already dead, killed by the coronavirus. (NYT, 2021) Back in early March 2020, New Yorkers were still going about their regular daily lives. I had wavered. *Should I get on an airplane? Should I go to a conference with hundreds of other people in an enclosed space?* I hoped my decision would be made for me and waited for the cancellation announcement, but it never came. So, I flew to Texas and found myself squeezing through dozens of suited men with buzz cuts clapping each other on the back. And now, on the second night of the Expo, here I was trying to stand extremely still, worried any accidental movement may be interpreted as my bidding on a homemade rifle at The Alamo. In all my years of living in the US, guns are something I’ve not been able to get used to. Every time I see a police officer my eyes are drawn to their gun and I feel a trill in my chest. Aside from their primary function as killing instruments, I suppose that’s their main purpose: to instill fear. At the 2020 Border Security Expo in San Antonio, I saw all kinds of guns, from machine guns and battle rifles lined up for sale to the personalized pistols sitting snug on the hips of the Texas Rangers guarding the entrance just outside. The Rangers patrolled the perimeter of The Alamo every night, not just this one; ‘The 5th Annual Night at the Alamo’ held “to pay tribute to Border Patrol Agents who have gone above and beyond the call of duty.” The tequila flowed. Another gun sold. A small girl took the mic and sang ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ in a huge voice, the crowd to roaring lustily when finished, some wiping away tears.

The little girl was Lauren Dominguez, daughter of a Border Patrol agent who was killed on July 19, 2012. Border Patrol Agent James R. Dominguez succumbed to injuries received when he was struck by a passing vehicle along Highway 90 near Cline, Texas. Seven out of ten Border Patrol officer deaths are caused by accidents such as car collisions, falls from boats, slips down cliffs, helicopters crashed, heat stroke, heart attack. Others have been killed deliberately by people they're trying to apprehend. Since March 1st, 2003, when the current iteration of the country's border security agency, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) came into being, 71 border patrol agents have lost their lives. (CBP, 2021)

As you'd expect at an event honoring lost comrades, there was much emphasis on the valor and the sacrifice it took to work in such a job. They were mourning their own, and I felt a heavy sadness learning of these workers who had been killed while on and off duty. Later, I was amazed to learn that being a Border Patrol agent is not even close to the top 25 most dangerous jobs in America. You're far more likely to be killed logging or collecting trash. I also learned, from an extensive investigation for *Politico*, that Border Patrol is one of the nation's deadliest law enforcement agencies over that same period, involved in shooting more people to death themselves—at least 46 people—since 2004 than perhaps any other such agency. (M.Graff, 2014)

In the same years, the number of people who have died in CPB custody is far higher. In 2019 alone at least 17 people, including children, died in detention after seeking asylum from CBP. (Southern Border Communities Coalition, 2019) Migrants and sometimes citizens have also been killed outside of detention centers, shot by Border Patrol agents, driven off the road and

killed in car wrecks, or they have died of dehydration in the desert where Border Patrol agents slashed water bottles left out for them. Many thousands of migrants have also been rescued from the desert and the rivers by Border Patrol. In truth I don't know how many deaths the Border Patrol are directly responsible for, or which deaths they could be morally culpable for, considering for the most part they are simply enacting policies created by our own representatives in government. Besides, I had not come to San Antonio to play morbid numbers games in my own head.

I was there to look for answers to questions that have dogged me now for a decade, since I became an immigrant myself. It didn't take me long to figure out how much easier my path to America was compared to literally most people in the world's would be. I'm white and young and European, working in an industry that is catered to by the US immigration system. I met other immigrants with very different stories of very different welcomes, and I made a podcast and wrote about the general experience of trying to get into the fortress that is The U.S. The counter-intuitive part, for me at least, is that while America is the only destination available to so many seeking asylum, my case couldn't be more different. I'm free to move around the world but America was happy to accept me almost *because I didn't need to be here*. Meanwhile, people die trying to get here and those of us inside the borders barely give it a passing thought. If there is a concern about migrants, it's not about their humanity or their welfare, it's about what they might take from us. Despite all of the evidence and history that points in the direction of America needing migrants.

OPEN BORDERS

I'm not objective, just as CBP are not, just as nobody is. I hope that having a point of view does not mean I cannot be fair. My point of view is evolving but fundamentally this: migration is a human right. 'Open borders' is consistently used by right wing Americans as a frightening threat, one that only a lunatic progressive would even consider. At a rally in the run-up to the November 2018 midterm elections, which the then President Trump declared that Democrats "want to open America's borders and turn our country into a friendly sanctuary for murderous thugs from other countries who will kill us all." (NYT, 2018) 'Open borders' joins a lexicon that includes terms like 'illegal aliens' and 'hordes' and 'caravans' to describe migrants and how they travel. The Chicano performance artist, writer, activist, and educator Guillermo Gómez-Peña sees this lexicon as part of what he calls 'border hysteria' stating that: "The master narrative of US national security (as written by the neocons in collaboration with the mainstream media) reads: "Muslim radicals are out to get 'us'; 'illegal aliens' are out to take 'our' jobs. We, victims of the wrath of history, are merely innocent bystanders. Our only crime is our belief in freedom and democracy." This strategic deployment of the rhetoric of victimization and of heroism and of moral panic clearly justifies both the tightening of our borders and the militarization of our international policies. " (Gómez-Peña, 2008)

In "Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders," Joseph Carens argued that "citizenship in Western liberal democracies is the modern equivalent of feudal privilege—an inherited status that greatly enhances one's life chances. Like feudal birthright privileges, restrictive citizenship is hard to justify when one thinks about it closely" (J.Carens, 1987) Be that as it may, I am more

interested in interrogating the *opposite* of open borders, because that is increasingly the lived reality for most people alive today. This despite the fact that borders and nation states, along with all of the laws and violence that hold them together and apart, are relatively new compared to the timeline of humanity. I used to take them for granted, figuring that of course a country has borders, how could it be otherwise? Scholars from the growing field of border studies remind me just how new and how artificial borders are, and specifically in the case of the scholars Michael Baud and Willem Van Schendel, how political borders are.

“National borders are political constructs, imagined projections of territorial power. Although they appear on maps in deceptively precise forms, they reflect, at least initially, merely the mental images of politicians, lawyers, and intellectuals. Their practical consequences are often quite different. No matter how clearly borders are drawn on official maps, how many customs officials are appointed, or how many watchtowers are built, people will ignore borders whenever it suits them. In doing so, they challenge the political status quo of which borders are the ultimate symbol.” (Schendel, 1997)

My former position that borders are an inevitable and ever-present fact of life now seems poorly thought through, if not willfully ignorant. It makes little sense to me, a person born in Ireland, an island divided by a chaotic border that caused a bloody war, to uncritically take borders to be something as natural as geology. Ireland was divided in two following the Irish War of Independence in 1921, leaving six counties in the North as part of Britain and making the rest a Republic. To this day, that partition has deep scars that threaten to tear open and bleed again. Borders are man-made, with all the inherent flaws that inevitably entails, even calling borders ‘man-made’ is obscuring the fact that not just any ‘man’ or person makes them, rather those in

power do.

CLOSED BORDERS

The Southern Border here in the US, the 2,000-mile line separating this nation from Mexico, is the one I was struggling to comprehend in San Antonio. The Night at the Alamo was held in conjunction with the Border Security Expo, a two-day event that “offers federal, state, local, and international law enforcement from across the country and around the globe the education, solutions, and connections to make critical decisions needed to provide border security from every kind of threat imaginable.” Basically, it was a CBP conference and an industry and weapons fair under one hugely high roof at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, in a year that saw CBP receive its biggest budget to date, Border Patrol is the CBP’s federal law enforcement arm within the Department of Homeland Security. I wanted to understand Border Patrol, to explore what motivates them, and to see what their parent agency, CBP, planned to do with their gargantuan budget. The focus was on how best to spend the ever-increasing budgets of the Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which had discretionary spending allocations that totaled \$27 billion. (Department of Homeland Security, 2019) Together, that was up 20 percent on the previous year’s budgets; and for decades now, under Democrats and Republicans alike, the border security industry has generally received more and more money each year.

Despite the looming pandemic, my flight to San Antonio was full and when I landed, I couldn’t find a taxi, so I ordered a Lyft. The driver told me it was his first week driving for Lyft and I told him it was my first time in San Antonio, and we agreed it would probably take longer than

necessary to get to my hotel. He turned out to be a Kurdish journalist who had claimed asylum in the US having filmed some atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein. He raised three daughters in Texas and each one of them was a medical professional. I asked him if he felt that the risks he took in his life had been worth it, in firstly being a journalist under the Saddam Hussein regime, and secondly fleeing to the US. On the first point he said he had no regrets and believes to this day in the power of journalism to expose the truth. In fact, he was considering taking media classes now that his last child was through college, though he laughed a little at the idea in the telling. On the question of leaving, it seemed he had little choice. He said something I've heard again and again from every kind of migrant, that his own life had been ruptured, and never recovered its past quality, but that his children benefitted in ways that he was seeing only now, 16 years later.

I had secured a room in an old, worn out hotel, with saloon doors and a kind of faded glamor I quite enjoyed, at least until I felt how grimy and thin the carpet was under my bare feet. I put socks on with my nightdress and opened the window onto an alleyway. The night air was clean and cool, but I was awoken by screams in the dark. A very drunk man was swaying up the alleyway screeching 'We WON, you mother FUCKERS.' It was just after 4am, and I couldn't get back to sleep afterwards. What could he possibly have won, I wondered?

Later that morning, I walked to the conference center and checked in beneath a huge banner urging 'ALL DOMAIN SITUATIONAL AWARENESS'. That phrase 'situational awareness' was repeated again and again throughout the event, a motif suggesting that threats could be anywhere and everywhere. I sanitized my hands and found a seat in the back, with a space on

either side, as the Chief of Border Patrol Rodney Scott spoke about the past year's victories and defeats. He mentioned a consistent problem for Border Patrol: hiring. It's difficult to convince people to take these jobs, seen as dangerous, in remote areas. The immigration scholar Mae Ngai has written about the formation of Border Patrol in 1924, when Congress first approved funding for the agency following the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924. Those Acts imposed numerical limitations on migrants and the U.S. Border Patrol was officially established for the purpose of securing the borders between inspection stations and preventing people from entering 'illegally'.

Ngai writes the earliest ranks were made up of 'former cowboys, skilled workers and small ranchers' – many had military experience and 'not a few were associated with the Ku Klux Klan'. (Ngai, 2004) They did not have uniforms until 1928, and 'a lack of professionalism plagued the force.' Recent reporting on PBS found that among CBP's most successful recruiting partners is the Professional Bull Riders (PBR) organization, which recently renewed its contract with the government to promote U.S. Border Patrol to its fans. "We have an exceptional base for them to recruit from," said Sean Gleason, the organization's CEO. "It's a lot about values ... cowboy values." (Wei, 2020) These values were not defined, but I take them to mean a kind of independent spiritedness, a Wild West attitude. But do those lone-ranger values work in an armed force that has grown increasingly powerful in the past twenty years?

After a huge, sustained influx of money following the 9/11 attacks, Border Patrol more than doubled in size from 9,200 agents in 2001 to 21,000 during President Obama's first term. Speaking to Politico, Richard Skinner, the DHS inspector general at that time, recalled "If President Bush asked for 100 agents, Congress would add 200. You have to remember how scared everyone was. The mentality was we need more boots on the ground." This reference to

‘boots on the ground’ is one you’ll hear often when it comes to the Border Patrol, President Obama used it too, in a 2013 speech about immigration. “We put more boots on the ground on the southern border than at any time in our history.” That’s a military phrase, which might make you forget that Border Patrol is not a military organization. The merchandise for sale was sometimes branded as ‘battle ready’ and ‘war ready.’

While some CBP agents and Border Patrol agents have a background in military service, many people at the Expo were now high level CBP officials or people from industries that sell to them. Often these roles are interchangeable, with the same men moving from private industry to public service and back again. Jayson Ahern is one example—he’s been CBP’s acting Commissioner and is now a principal at The Chertoff Group, a global security company. Between 2003 and 2017, at least four CBP commissioners and three DHS secretaries went onto homeland security corporations or consulting companies after leaving government. Jayson Ahern is just one example: he was CBP’s acting commissioner for almost a year before he retired; now he’s a principal at the Chertoff Group, a global risk management company, for which he advises clients on “border security management.” Given the agencies’ supportive unions, this corporatist alliance of business and workers seems to have effective control over this vast government apparatus. A report from the Transnational Institute shows that between 2008 and 2020, CBP and ICE issued 105,997 contracts worth \$55.1 billion to private corporations, stating: “The industry is now deeply embedded in US government bodies and decision-making, with close financial ties to strategic politicians.” (Buxton, 2021)

And the industry's revolving door of personnel and policy-making keeps spinning. In the 2020 electoral cycle, the same companies that bet on Biden also donated heavily to both Republican and Democratic members of chief legislative committees that oversee and fund border security: the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, and the House Homeland Security Committee. The Transnational Institute also points out that some border security companies historically prefer one political party to another. Detention-related companies, in particular CoreCivic, G4S, and GEO Group, strongly favor Republicans, as do the military contractors Elbit Systems and General Atomics; auditing and IT companies with significant border security business, such as Deloitte, IBM, and Palantir, overwhelmingly back Democrats. Lobbying on homeland security—which includes greater border militarization and involves many of the border security corporations—has increased significantly over the last two decades. In total, from 2002 to 2019, there were nearly 20,000 reported lobbying visits related to homeland security.

The report's authors continue:

Biden is opposed to the wall-building of Trump, but has along with many Democrats voiced public support for a more hidden “virtual wall” and “smart borders,” deploying surveillance technologies that will be both more lucrative for the industry and more hidden in terms of the abuses they perpetrate.

It's those hidden parts that are important to uncover. Other policy moves by Democratic administrations have helped lead us to where we are today. While President Clinton was signing the NAFTA trade deal with one hand, enabling the free movement of goods, information, and, of course, capital, his other hand was clamping down on the free movement of informal labor,

playing to nativist and restrictionist sentiment. Under his watch, the Democrats, including then Senator Biden, approved the 1994 Prevention Through Deterrence strategy and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Arguably, the Democrats' neoliberal compromises of those years fueled some of the resentments in formerly Democratic-voting, blue-collar, pro-union communities, helping to pave the way for Trump's America First combination of trade protectionism and even harder-line immigration policy. Certainly, Clinton's choices sped the pace of both border militarization and deportations. Continuing that approach, twenty years later, Obama became the first president to deport nearly three million people.

Although there is a long and bipartisan history in this country of forcing unwanted migrants out of sight and out of mind, this is not to say that Democrats and Republicans are interchangeable when it comes to immigration policies. Demonstrably, they are not, particularly over the past four years as Stephen Miller, the architect of the most virulently xenophobic immigration policies in decades, held sway. As we're seeing, a great part of the Biden administration's task is to undo these very policies—and the latest wrangling over the wall at the southern border is a good example of the political parties' respective approaches.

In their 2019 book *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration*, authors Michael Shear and Julie Davis reported on the bizarre and disturbing impulses that drove the Trump administration's approach: "Privately, the president had often talked about fortifying a border wall with a water-filled trench, stocked with snakes or alligators, prompting aides to seek a cost estimate. He wanted the wall electrified, with spikes on top that could pierce human flesh." For all that—and the billions of dollars he siphoned away from the Pentagon under the pretense of a national emergency—his "big, beautiful wall" expanded hardly at all. All the same, this year's

DHS budget stipulates spending of \$2 billion for the “Construction of approximately 82 miles of new border wall system. Funding supports real estate and environmental planning, land acquisition, wall system design, construction, and construction oversight.”

Significantly, President Biden has not committed to dismantling the physical barriers that have been built in recent years—650 miles of which he voted for back in 2006. Biden is adamant that his administration will shift resources to technological measures—cameras, sensors, X-ray scanners, and the like. The question really is, will this type of wall, compared with Trump’s, make a difference not only in preventing people from attempting to cross the border, but also in preventing them from taking ever more dangerous risks in the attempt?

These questions were on the minds of the men at the Border Security Expo too. I say ‘men’ because they really are almost all men, a fact I noted when I went to use the restroom and walked by a line of men waiting to use theirs. The last time I noted such a gender disparity was when I went to a reading in a bookshop, but the line then was all women. I imagined mentioning that to the men standing there patiently, “You see, it was my girlfriend’s YA novel, about unrequited love!” Only 5% of Border Patrol agents are female, historically the lowest ratio of any federal law enforcement agency. (Ripley, 2017)

MEN AND MACHINES

The ties between masculinity and militarism are no coincidence, rather they are interwoven scripts according to researcher Dr. Sarah Steele, who states that the militarization of the border “becomes a normalized function of white masculinity. Militarism, as Enloe (2000, 2007) details,

not only prioritizes masculine values, but also injects cultural and racial beliefs into military regimes. What she suggests is that masculinity is made synonymous with white manhood, which is a version of manhood that dominates military and state institutions (Enloe, 2000, pp. 23, 26). Integrally, then, race, immigration, and crime are interwoven through discussions of foreign men threatening America through trafficking in weapons, drugs, and even people.” (Steele, 2010/11)

The point of borders is to keep people out, but the people inside the U.S., myself included, are quite literally heavily invested in this border with Mexico. It costs us so much money, billions a year, and we pay it almost without question. The following year would see public discussions about defunding the police, but I have yet to hear a sustained and serious discussion about our incredibly militarized border security industry. I do not blame any American who did not know about the massive financial commitment the country has at the border, but now I knew. I saw it with my own eyes, so what would I do about it? Nobody was holding me hostage in this country, I chose to be there. When I chose to move here, I believed I was choosing freedom, opportunity and ambition. For me, that’s largely the truth of how my American life played out, but it’s not the whole truth. How free am I when others aren’t free at all? What cost do those opportunities create, for me and for other people? How worthwhile is my ambition when it reflects values that are not at all mine?

I distracted myself from the snack table by idling past the items at the silent auction. The auction was held to raise funds for the Border Patrol Foundation that night at The Alamo and included a large, framed portrait of Justice Brett Kavanaugh and his family during his swearing in ceremony, with text quoting him during his hearing. “I like beer. Sometimes I had too many

beers. I liked beer and I still like beer.” If only I’d not spent all my money on the homemade rifle!

The pressure to grow CBP in the post-9/11 era resulted in fewer screening for new hires.

Increasing corruption has been the result. Border Patrol accidentally hired members of cartels, and agents were regularly caught smuggling both drugs and people. The entire CBP saw 2,170 arrests for misconduct—such as domestic violence or DUIs—from 2005 to 2012. (DHS, 2013)

That is nearly one CBP officer or agent arrested for misconduct every day for seven years. There was violence, too: Border Patrol were singled out for an internal investigation following many years of excessive force complaints. Not much came of it. One of the senior CBD internal affairs investigators, the now retired James Wong, told *Politico*. “Not a single Border Patrol agent for the last eight years has been disciplined for excessive use of force. With a workforce that large, that’s amazing,” Wong said. “You go pull the stats on any medium-size municipal police force, pull the stats on the NYPD. At any given time, they’ll have all sorts of excessive force investigations.”

In March of 2016 the National Border Patrol Council, the official organization representing 16,500 Border Patrol Agents, endorsed the then presidential candidate, Donald Trump. The first week he took office in January 2017, President Trump signed an Executive Order for 5,000 new Border Patrol Agents, along with more border wall between Mexico and the U.S., the latter a campaign promise that the President remains intent on delivering. Back on stage in Texas, I listened as Chief Scott lamented that the Border Patrol can’t recruit directly at universities because of potential protests that he feared might overrun local police departments.

ENEMIES NEEDED

Protestors play what I suspect is an outsized role in the mind of Border Patrol. During the event at The Alamo, the host, a former Fox News host named Bill McCuddy, referred to the protestors outside, a peaceful bunch of about thirty people holding up signs, ringed by police and Texas Rangers. During the auction their chants floated in on the breeze and he quipped, “Is that one of the protestors making a bid? Who would protest outside a room where everyone is packing?” to some laughter. He followed up quickly with, “Excuse me, they have every right to do that.”

On my way into the Alamo event, I had peeked out from beneath my pink cowgirl hat and recognized some of the protestors from earlier that day. They made up a group of around twenty people, walking round in a circle on the sidewalk outside. There was an elderly indigenous man wearing a sign saying, ‘We did not cross the border, the border crossed us,’ and he did not seem threatening to me. Younger people held banners saying, ‘Stop Racist Laws,’ and shouted, ‘Chinga La Migra,’ (Spanish for ‘Fuck Border Patrol’) at the uniformed officers who walked past and held their middle fingers up as a couple of suited men recorded them on their phones. It was hot out, even at 5pm. ‘Well done, you guys!’ I said as I walked by. They looked confused, perhaps because I was wearing a blazer and a lanyard at the time, but I meant it. I had a stabbing feeling of sadness, struck by how puny this show of resistance was against the might inside.

The exhibit hall of the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center is over 500,000 square feet and within it stood hundreds of stands selling thousands of products designed to stop people in their

tracks. Drones, cameras, firearms, walls, vehicles, sensors, cameras, dog kennels; everything was on show, everything was for sale. There were large IT security companies *Unisys* and smaller start-ups like *Dedrone* alongside household names like *AT&T* (“Our first name has always been American”) and *Reebok* (“tactical footwear”).

It is certainly the case that powerful drug cartels have operated along the border for many years, and drug seizures by Border Patrol were up in 2018^[ix] but the business that most concerned Border Patrol at this conference was what they termed ‘people smuggling’. A transnational criminal organization is a vague term, one which I understood to mean the network of people across South America and Mexico who charge migrants money in exchange for any range of services. That could be ferrying them across a river in Honduras, driving them right into the inland US, or paying the right Mexican cartel member to let the migrants pass safely. I wanted to know how the Border Patrol are tackling these much-touted ‘transnational criminal organizations’ or ‘TCOs’.

Manuel Padilla Jr said this: “There are upticks in Caribbean nationals and even certain African nations that are not unlike the Central Americans who continue to be lured by a very widening net cast by these criminals in the same way they profit from other illegal endeavors.” The narrative was firmly on these ill-defined but supposedly multi-faceted TCOs that Border Patrol speaks about as all-powerful, despite their own opposing and ever-increasing power in the form of money and men. I also had a difficult time understanding why, for example, a Cameroonian migrant’s decision to move to the U.S. could be lain at the feet of a TCO. It would make more sense to hear the reasons given by the many of would-be migrants at the Southern Border who

have traveled from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. They are often forced to migrate by poverty or violence rooted in climate events like droughts or in long-running civil conflicts. The irony is that the U.S. contributed to all of these push factors, supporting state violence across South America throughout the 1960s and historically emitting more carbon than any other nation. Despite this, the focus remained on TCOs, although it remained unclear how CBP are actually tackling TCOs, I was left feeling that the insistence on looking only at the method by which some migrants make their way to the border, with no attempt to understand those migrants as individuals with agency, and individuals within larger systems, is purposefully obtuse.

At that time, the U.S. seemed deeply invested in rounding up migrants and further endangering them in detention or sending them back to Mexico with any due process for their asylum cases. Since the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or the “Remain in Mexico” program, went into effect in January 2019, more than 60,000 asylum seekers from a variety of countries were sent back to Mexico to await court dates in the US. Wealthier people among them could afford to stay in hotels and remain relatively safe, but many had fled poverty and could not afford a hotel. So, they simply gave up and turn back, or set up make-shift camps in Mexican border towns where they were dependent on volunteers for basic supplies and regularly under threat of extortion, kidnapping and physical and sexual violence.

The organization *Human Rights First* published a summary of more than one thousand cases of murder, torture, rape and kidnapping against migrants sent back to Mexico under MPP. (Human Rights First, 2020) Despite this, on March 11th, coincidentally the first day of the Border

Security Expo, the Supreme Court upheld the policy. The news filtered through and was met with muted jubilation by the conference goers. Chief Rodney Scott said MPP ‘restores the integrity to immigration.’ Sending migrants away, no matter how horrifying the consequences for both the migrant’s lives and this country’s moral compass, certainly makes Border Patrol’s job a lot easier.

I’d like to understand what Border Patrol believes constitutes effective policing of the borders. Despite extraordinary new measures at deterring migrants, including separating families, limiting entries at official ports and turning some people back to wait in Mexico throughout their immigration cases, 2019 saw an uptick in people crossing the border without authorization. (NYT, 2019) Where there were once mainly single men crossing from Mexico, now there were families and unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, as well as Cameroonians, Cubans and even Syrians who had made the arduous journey up through Mexico to get to the border. The combination of inhumane US policy and increasing push factors from sending countries resulted in chaos at the border, and an ill-suited Border Patrol tasked with humanitarian work.

I first heard about the Border Security Expo from Marianne Madoré, a sociology researcher and one of the authors of an ethnographic study of the 2019 Border Security Expo. (Rodrigo, 2021) That year, with more families and children than ever arriving at the border, and the separation of families and deaths of children in their custody making headlines and causing outrage amongst the public, Border Patrol were on their heels, struggling with this new reality. They spoke on panels about rescuing migrants and providing diapers and baby formula.

The only time I eat in bed is when I'm in hotels. It feels like a treat that way, whereas if I started doing it at home it would feel like a defeat. That night I tucked under the sheets with all of the pillows propping me up like a Victorian invalid, one that is somehow strong enough to eat beef jerky, and read that paper again. Do you ever have a moment when you find yourself surprised at how content you are? Those moments tickle me because they are so unpredictable, I try to note them when they happen because when you string them together they really do lead me to a far more honest version of myself than my conscious mind will allow. I noticed how perfectly happy I was, alone in a lumpy bed in a Texas hotel eating shreds of dried beef and reading an academic paper. The researchers conclusions were fascinating to me: "First, a humanitarian framework enables DHS (Department of Homeland Security) to elide responsibility in their direct role in pushing migrants to their death through PTD (prevention through deterrence) by arguing their need to intervene to save migrants from their own ill informed decision to cross the border." The work helped me to understand a little more about some of the strange contradictions I'd witnessed that day. Border Patrol were feared and hated by many migrants. They were also often the first people migrants needing asylum had to find and make their claim to. They could snatch your child away forever, or they could quench your thirst and lead you to the promised land, the USA. The organization was plagued by corruption, but here in San Antonio at this conference they were held up as heroes; the thin green line between innocent American citizens and the monstrous transnational criminal gangs gnawing at the borders.

There are countless facts being ignored by the US when it comes to so-called 'illegals'. San Antonio was once part of Mexico but was wrested away by violence and the colonial mindset of

the burgeoning United States. The only reason a person becomes ‘illegal’ is by another person making a law saying so, and over the years a variety of people have made a variety of laws going back and forth between the two states proving that that illegality is produced, usually in a way that suits capitalism very well. Again and again, when the US needs workers, they find a way to get them from Mexico. Kitty Calavita writes extensively about immigrant integration in France and Spain, and how on the one hand, Italian and Spanish immigration laws emphasize immigrant integration, but on the other hand, both countries treat immigrants strictly as workers, with their legal status dependent on work permits and contracts with employers. And here in the U.S., with 11 million undocumented immigrants, many of whom work and pay tax but do not vote or qualify for any other State benefits, we see how the U.S. benefits by not allowing these migrants to integrate.

MORAL ALIBI

Clearly, the US economy has always needed immigrant labor and, notwithstanding various periods of economic downturn, will continue to do so. As Cornelius (2005, page 792) notes, this tends to lock “in the current policy mix, under which unauthorized immigrants bear most of the costs and risks of “control” while benefits flow impressively to employers and consumers.” In fact, many unauthorized immigrants bear the ultimate cost in terms of their being sacrificed without consequence. Prevention through deterrence functions simultaneously as evidence that the United States is serious about controlling its borders and as assurance that some will survive and make it to the agricultural fields, the meat-packing factories, and the restaurants of El Norte.

There's the inescapable fact that most migrants at the Southern Border are brown and black, not white, and they are attempting to access a country founded on white supremacist activities like enslavement and genocide. Or the fact that building a wall in one crossing area will only push people into another crossing area where they are more likely to die, and the fact that we are all just here in human bodies vulnerable to the sun and the heat. The truth of this would seem morally unacceptable to most but can be rationalized away by blaming the inhospitable landscape by using some mental gymnastics to obtain what Roxanne Doty calls a 'moral alibi.' (Doty, 2011) She argues that the policy or 'prevention through deterrence' renders unauthorized migrants as 'bare life', individuals whose deaths are deemed of little consequence. Geographic space has been an essential aspect of this policy, both for its presumed (though not realized) deterrent power and in the fact that it provides a moral alibi that enables policy makers to deny responsibility for the deaths.

I couldn't sleep, despite knowing I was not about to solve any of that by lying awake in the dark. Those night-time thoughts burned off with the mist along the San Antonio river the next morning as I walked over the bridge to the second day of the conference. During a plenary panel about biometrics, I checked the news on my phone and saw that the death toll from coronavirus in Italy was rising. I drank coffee and fretted about who else may have touched the cup. Sitting and listening, I tried hard to keep the finely spun web connecting policies to realities, almost invisible at the best of times, from vanishing. The speakers discussed "expediting the workflow, opening the aperture on how funding decisions are made and how the private sector can partner with the operator in shaping efforts to improve biometrics for all". I continued to zone out. Then one of the panelists mentioned "juvenile alien fingerprints" and how these fingerprints were not ideal

for identification purposes. “DNA testing would be preferable,” he said, in case the adult traveling with the juvenile was not in fact related to them. I was back in the room, riveted.

Here was a man calling real life babies and children ‘juvenile aliens.’ You know, the juvenile aliens with burgeoning personalities and adoring Grandads and vulnerable little shoulders you could scarcely imagine bearing the weight of being alone in a fenced in camp in a foreign country. Here was a calm and professional trio of men discussing how best to use DNA samples from these children, without mentioning the most urgent need for matching families up was actually because they had tricked or forced those very families into separating. This separation was possibly carried out by the very agents sitting in the room.

Had I stood up at that moment and said ‘Sir, you’re speaking openly about more efficient ways to get DNA from babies you’ve stolen!’ I would have seemed insane, even though that was exactly what was happening, as hundreds of people listened, nodding. I wonder if those same people would intervene if they saw a stranger take a baby from her mother on the street.

I met some lovely people at The Alamo. I sat down to eat at a picnic table of retired agents and their wives and friends, introducing myself as I did. They showed me the best way to roll up tacos and told me stories of Marfa, Texas before it was a conflicted art spot, back when it was literally a two horse town. They looked out for me, a stranger at their table, and made sure my cup was full. I asked them about the significance of The Alamo, and they gave me a potted history. As with any battle ground, there are different sides to the story. Theirs was that in 1836 the Texans who were holding out there against the Mexicans, whose territory they had captured

earlier that year, were then treated horrifically by Mexico. They were massacred by the Mexican General, the notorious Santa Anna. Thinking about it, one woman looked troubled and urged me to understand how awful it had been, as if remembering it herself.

In context, the battle was one of many in a war that ended with the U.S. annexing 55% of Mexico's territory and militarily occupying the remaining country between 1846 to 1848. The future president Ulysses S. Grant, who fought in the war, later called it "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation." He compared American aggression to that of the European monarchies, who continued their colonial rampaging for decades to come.

The Alamo is an historic site of struggle between Mexico and America, but it was originally in Mexico. Much of history omits that. In these older folks' minds there was no question of the significance of the grounds we were sitting in, as the evening drew in and the low floral centerpieces, (sponsored by Mantech: Securing The Future), released their lovely honey scent, we talked about it. 'You think of this as a place where there was huge brutality, by Mexicans? That's what it means when you say *remember the Alamo*?' I asked one of my lunchmates, and they nodded yes.

Today, the violence between Mexico and the U.S is even more one-sided, and is not usually carried out in full view, but rather deliberately obscured. The chaos and fear caused by the coronavirus has proved an ideal smokescreen for increasingly draconian treatment, including a March 20th order encouraging the immediate deportation of non-citizens arriving overland without valid documents. This came from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

and cited an obscure quarantine law from 1944 to justify the move on public health grounds. (CDC, 2020) Tens of thousands of people, including children as young as ten travelling alone, have been deported since then. Despite complaints from the United Nations Refugee Agency, on May 19th DHS effectively ended asylum indefinitely, with a review every 30 days, and will continue to use this pandemic to further the Trump administration's agenda, which is to reduce all immigration by half.

In 2021, President Biden began to undo some of the most violent anti-immigrant policies of his predecessor, including lifting the travel ban on 13 Muslim-majority countries and African countries and reviewing with a view to ending that 'Migrant Protection Protocol'. He also created a task force to reunite families separated at the U.S.-Mexico border and sent a comprehensive immigration reform bill to lawmakers. Significantly, President Biden halted construction of Trump's notorious border wall. I wondered if this was a signal that he was ready to consider taming the massive militarized machine that is the border security industry or if he like Democratic presidents before him, would quietly continue to expand it. The border security industry contributed three times more to Biden's Presidential campaign than they did to Trump's re-election campaign, and that is worrying. The Democrats consistently opt for a 'smart wall' using technology to police the border, but both parties have expanded the physical fence too.

MADE TO DIE

On March 7th a young Guatemalan woman fell backwards from the top of an 18-foot-high span of steel mesh fencing and onto American ground in El Paso, Texas. Border Patrol agents called

an ambulance and she was rushed to hospital, but on Thursday March 12th, after a number of surgeries, she succumbed to her injuries. It feels wrong to only describe the nature of her death, but I do not know much about her life. I know she was 30 weeks pregnant and despite delivery by C-section, the baby did not survive. I know that she worked as a social worker and was a former beauty queen, that she and her partner were hoping to support their family by moving to the US. I know her name was Miriam Estefany Girón Luna and her partner was reportedly deported to Guatemala shortly after her body was repatriated.

Two phrases that appear in the work of anthropologist and social theorist Nicholas De Genova floated through my mind repeatedly during my time at the Border Security Expo. One was “killing from a distance”; the other was “made to die.” People trying to cross the desert or the river have been driven to do so, and if they die—which they do at a rate calculated by De Genova of almost one person every day between 2000 and 2016—he explains it this way in a 2018 lecture at The University of Houston:

Rising numbers of border deaths are no mere coincidence or accident of geography, but rather a predictable result of US immigration law-making, as well as a systemic feature of the routine functioning of the increasing physical fortification of the border and the increasing militarization of border enforcement tactics and technologies. (Genova, 2018)

Speaking to *The Washington Post*, Tekandi Paniagua, a Guatemalan consular official based in Texas, said the fact that the couple was attempting to get into the United States by climbing the

fence was an indication of shifting migration dynamics at the border. “A year ago, during the height of the family migration surge, the couple probably would have tried to turn themselves in to seek asylum,” he said. “This is a very worrisome trend, people are taking more and more risks, and they’re losing their lives.” (Miroff, 2020) The fence Ms. Girón Luna fell from was there to prevent migrants, and it did exactly that. Her life was not passively lost, she was ‘made to die’ by US policies; she would not have been killed without those policies, or without the smiling man showcasing examples of bollards of various heights and finishes, one of them slapping a post and exclaiming, “This one is impossible to grip!” that very day in an air-conditioned hall at the Border Security Expo.

I left before the official end of the Expo because I had gathered enough information to understand. I understood in a newer, deeper way how little a life matters to a border. I understood that today, borders and the people who believe in them and enforce them, are winning. But borders are not sustainable because the human instinct is to move when you need to, and this century that need will only grow. I did not stay for the shooting competition that Friday. I flew back to New York and booked another flight the next day, back to Ireland where I grew up. The Irish government cancelled all official celebrations of St. Patrick’s Day on March 17th, and that to me was like them shining a big green shamrock in the sky to signal us all home. I did not yet know that my adopted city would become the epicenter of the virus, and that the US would suffer more deaths per capita than any other country. I did not know that the virus would disproportionately kill black and brown people, but only because I did yet know that what the virus would do was magnify what was already there. I had to go to the very edge of this country I loved and deliberately made my life in to learn what was already there: a disregard for how

precious and important each person is, a profit-making exercise for a small number of people at the expense of millions of us. What was there was State violence against anyone the State did not want; this was heavily cloaked in laws and policies but still visible, dressed in neat uniforms with gold buttons and dark suits with muted ties.

One last thing; I was not serious when I said I bought the rifle and when I said I was wearing a pink cowgirl hat. The rest, I'm afraid, is true.

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