

---

## Understanding Migrant Caravans<sup>1</sup> from the Place of Place Privilege

---

**ABSTRACT** In this essay, I write from a positionality I call “place privilege,” a location I share with people like Donald Trump because we comment from where we were born, raised, and live. I attempt to challenge the limits and also use the privilege of that positionality to offer a rethinking of caravans coming from Central America as coalitions in motion, as calls to an ethical relation, and as weapons of the weak. **KEYWORDS** Migration; Coalition; Ethical relation; Weapons of the weak

---

caravan, *n.* A company of merchants, pilgrims, or others, in the East or northern Africa, travelling together for the sake of security, esp. through the desert. Earliest usage 1596.<sup>2</sup>

The place privilege of any citizen, born, raised, and living in their birthplace—whether anti-immigrant US president or scholar of immigration—means that by virtue of birthright and positionality, we comment from somewhere about people from elsewhere, places we don’t know or understand. This concern resonates with James Clifford’s ruminations on “fieldwork as a special kind of localized *dwelling*,”<sup>3</sup> and it also differs. Donald Trump and I dwell where we have always dwelled, yet the implications of commenting from somewhere about elsewhere bear stark resemblance to more than a century’s worth of commenting about an elsewhere, “a culture,” from within. But time and place are not static, nor were they ever before. The dynamic nature of culture and people is increasingly obvious when viewed from the lens of those who comment on, make policy about, or study migration and migrant communities. Such sensemaking that emerges from places of place privilege comes with incredibly high stakes.

My words are not as toxic as Trump’s, and they are certainly less relevant. But because of the privilege of our shared place, my words and actions are implicated in his, alongside a legacy of US political words, policies, and actions targeted toward Central America. As thousands of Central Americans move en masse

---

*Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, Vol. 8, Number 1, pp. 9–16. ISSN 2333-9489, electronic ISSN 2333-9497. © 2019 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2019.8.1.9>.

toward my border, our border, a border people like me have paid for without our consent, I feel immobilized in my place of place privilege. What can I do? Is the immigration scholar relevant in real time? I don't have answers, but I turn to the page, to mark my moment of immobility, to theorize others' mobility, to implicate myself with Trump, to take seriously my limitations in understanding and intervening. This is the smallest of duties: to try to understand, to intervene—if only at the level of discourse—to resist and reimagine this caravan, its catalysts, its character, and some of its meanings. This task is, in one way, familiar, but for those of us who study “cultures,” as Clifford also reminds us, scholars have often “localized what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins a ‘culture’s’ external relations and displacements.”<sup>4</sup> Clifford's caution may be less true about the broader project of ethnography 25 years later, but the warning about fixed understandings of subjects of study remains. And further, the mandate to investigate the complicated nexus is more urgent than ever before. Toward the end of answering Clifford's mandate and the mandate of the moment, I offer my thoughts on rethinking migrant caravans as coalitions in motion, as calls to ethical relation, and as weapons of the weak. But first, let me write from the place I actually enter the conversation.

#### STORIES FROM PLACE PRIVILEGE

My first major saxophone solo in the Minden High School marching band was for an amped-up and brassy version of Duke Ellington and Juan Tizol's 1936 jazz hit, “Caravan.” Standing at the edge of the football field beside the solo trumpeter, I wailed on the song with my knees bent, back arched, marching band uniform cape flapping behind me. I am sure now that I missed the emotion of the song. Its sounds have been described as exotic, with Middle Eastern-style chords, and in the lyrical version, references to the desert conjure images of that part of the world. At the time, I didn't even know the song had lyrics. As it turns out, the lyrics, which were written by Ellington's manager and the music publisher Irving Mills and added later to the instrumental version, struck me as strange. More than a treacherous travel through a dark desert, the journey seems to be toward falling in love:

Night and stars above that shine so bright  
The mystery of their fading light  
That shines upon our Caravan  
Sleep upon my shoulder as we creep  
Across the sands so I may keep  
The memory of our Caravan

This is so exciting, you are so inviting  
Resting in my arms  
Thrill to the magic, the magic of your charms  
You beside me here beneath the blue  
My dream of love is coming true  
Within our desert Caravan<sup>5</sup>

The lyrics provide no clues about how many are in the caravan or where they're headed, but we know at least two travel together through the desert night. The creeping caravan intoxicates the singer, as does their sleepy companion for whom they express their love. This romanticized view of the desert caravan provides no signals as to the need for security, no concern for danger, no worry at all. It is a magical movement.

Whenever I hear someone speak of a caravan, I always think first of this song—I hear the tune in my head and, for a moment, recapture the thrill of a 15-year-old kid who had hardly left her tiny hometown playing a saxophone solo during a halftime show without any concern for culture or context. I vaguely knew of Ellington from my Big Band-loving grandparents. I had never heard of Tizol. And as far as I can tell from skimming jazz histories, there was little thought or cultural meaning that went into the song's concept or into Mills's lyrics, which, like younger me, lacked concern for place and time.

caravan, *n.* A large covered vehicle for conveying passengers, goods, a sideshow.<sup>6</sup>

The amount of place privilege it takes to glorify collective migration across dangerous terrain and into dark unknown worlds is immense, but in the Western world, the notion of a caravan has often carried a connotation that turns attention from the peril that prompts the need for a caravan like the one traveling from Honduras and on through Mexico as I write these words. Such notions obscure the relationship between a caravan and collective security. In some circles, for instance, the idea of a caravan is synonymous with a privatized adventure. The advent of the combustible engine in the early 20th century prompted wealthy British adventurers to commission the building of vehicles and trailers, known as caravans, fit for living while traveling.<sup>7</sup> Such caravans were meant for comfortable but exciting leisure trips.

Well beyond the jazz hit, the idea of an adventurous life on the road has been the premise of novels, films, and music. For example, Black Sabbath's 1970 song "Planet Caravan" allegedly depicted "floating through the universe with one's lover."<sup>8</sup> The prevalence of these mostly apolitical understandings of caravan

connected with leisure, adventure, and popular culture reflects the predominance of perspectives emerging from place privilege. Clifford is again instructive here as he reminds us that the history of “good travel” is “something men (should) do,” particularly white men from the West.<sup>9</sup> This history is important because it helps to emphasize the difference between “good travel,” and therefore good travelers, and those for whom travel is always bad—women, people of color, indigenous people, the poor, and those displaced by political and economic violence. This distinction, and the popular culture understanding of caravans, contribute to negative and disinterested views of the Central American migrant caravans. In the remaining sections, I actively work against the place-privileged views to challenge such thinking on Central American migrant caravans.

### CARAVAN AS COALITION IN MOTION

In March 2018, a caravan of 1,500–2,000 Central Americans organized by a group called Pueblos Sin Fronteras made their way north. Fleeing violence, poverty, and political unrest, the migrants traveled in bands of 10–15 people for the sake of security.<sup>10</sup> Security in this context means physical security—journeying together to avoid attacks, assaults, and the impacts of the weather. Security also means financial security—the physical safety the caravan provides allows people mobility without the accompaniment of an expensive guide or coyote. This enactment of coalition politics protected many who made the nearly 3,000-mile journey, arriving safely at the Mexico–US border. Coalitions developed between single mothers and groups of brothers, and other configurations of people who have no kin connection but offered each other support and protection. But for many, the most dangerous part of the journey happened upon arrival when Border Patrol broke apart the coalition and individuals reemerged as detainees and deportees, marked at best for expedited removal and at worst for death.<sup>11</sup> Roxsana Hernandez, a 33-year-old, HIV-positive transgender migrant from Honduras, arrived safely at the Mexico–US border in May 2018. Immediately taken into detention, within a month, she died in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody from what can only be described as medical neglect. Once confined as an individual, the coalition no longer has power.

### CARAVAN AS CALL TO ETHICAL RELATION

“Trans people in my neighborhood are killed and chopped into pieces, then dumped inside potato bags,” Hernandez told *BuzzFeed News* before her death.<sup>12</sup>

Anabel Flores left San Pedro Sula with her two sons who were being recruited by gangs. She explained to *The Guardian*, “The situation is really ugly here.” Her son stated, “I’m scared just to go to the store.”<sup>13</sup>

These are the political conditions people flee, and doing so in large, publicly visible groups puts names and faces to what often are secretive, clandestine journeys. Although all migrations may be said to call for an ethical relation from the receiving country, the public and collective migration makes that ask overt. How do those with place privilege answer such an unfamiliar call?

I arrived at the Greyhound bus station shortly before midnight on 5 October 2018 to pick up Cinthia.<sup>14</sup> I had never met her, and I didn’t know if she’d be there; the Greyhound call centers were no help and the website with supposedly up-to-date information had not functioned for hours. I knew her bus was late, and I figured out when I thought she should arrive. She had no cell phone and very little money, and rode the bus alone from Phoenix, AZ, to Austin, TX, for more than 24 hours. If only she had a caravan. I was nervous. My Spanish is bad and on a Tuesday night, I’m usually in bed by 10, and being tired wouldn’t help my language skills. She spoke no English. She had fled San Pedro Sula in July. Gang members threatened her life for being a lesbian. I don’t know a lot about her journey to the United States. She took a bus, she got a visa in Mexico, and she made her way to Tijuana. She arrived and asked for asylum. She ended up in Eloy, AZ, at one of the worst detention centers in the United States.

Cinthia is a friend of a friend’s ex-girlfriend and wanted to get to Austin because she said she had family here. That family couldn’t or wouldn’t sponsor her once ICE decided she had a credible case and could be released to a sponsor. We said we’d do it. We didn’t know what that meant. We didn’t know exactly what we’d signed on for. What we did know about Honduras was, as Suyapa Portillo Villeda writes, that “structural violence, so often directly tied to US geopolitical influence in the region—from conditioned humanitarian aid to economic, technical, and military aid—is deployed on the bodies of LGBTTI people.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, as US Americans, we are already in a relationship with Hondurans, and in relation to this one queer person, perhaps we could fulfill our ethical obligation.

#### **CARAVAN AS WEAPON OF THE WEAK**

Countless news reports recount the same narrative, which can be summarized in a quip by Nikolle Contreras, an asylum-seeker on a spring 2018 caravan from Honduras: “Who wants to leave their country, the comfort of their home, their families?”<sup>16</sup> The answer is implied in the question: no one who has any other

means to survive would leave. Whether that is always true is beside the point; it is undeniable that poverty, violence, food insecurity, and other politically-created conditions compel many. Without other options, a caravan is a mechanism, a weapon for survival.

A week after Cinthia's arrival, a caravan of roughly 160 Hondurans in San Pedro Sula began making its way toward the United States. Cinthia showed me pictures on her phone. "¿Tu amigos o familia?" I asked. "No, pero hay mucha gente," she said smiling. "Si, yo veo."<sup>17</sup> As it made its way north, the group expanded, by some estimates to 7,000 people. US President Trump kicked up a Twitter storm full of false and salacious claims. On 22 October, he tweeted that Mexico hadn't been able to stop the caravan, claiming, "Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in."<sup>18</sup> The claim is both unverifiable and unlikely, but it catalyzed his threat that he would send as many troops as necessary to defend against what he characterizes as this invasion.<sup>19</sup> Trump later upped the ante further, noting that the US military should regard rock throwing as gunfire and that troops should respond in kind.<sup>20</sup> Rock throwing, an example of what James C. Scott has called a weapon of the weak,<sup>21</sup> had not been threatened by any of the migrants who were in southern Mexico at the time of Trump's threat against them. But rock throwing at the US–Mexico border is a familiar rationale for the Border Patrol's use of excessive and even lethal violence against migrants.<sup>22</sup> The rock throwing is a trope, a dog whistle to white nationalists. The "unknown Middle Easterners" are a fantasy, a wink to Trump's anti-Muslim base.<sup>23</sup> In Trump's view, the slow-moving caravan of tired and weary people is itself weaponized, a mortal threat that must be extinguished by any means necessary.

\*\*\*

"If so many go back, there'll be only a few in the caravan. Then what are we going to do if we come across Zetas?" – Joel Eduardo Espinar, Honduran migrant<sup>24</sup>

How do we move beyond the same old song? How do we craft alternative tempos and rhythms, new sounds and improvisations? Migrants traveling toward the United States in caravans is a relatively new phenomenon, and it affords an opportunity to see and hear otherwise. What would it mean to create dissonance with Western ways of understanding caravans and imagine them instead as coalitions in motion, as calls to an ethical relation, and as weapons of the weak? As of this writing, Cinthia awaits her asylum hearing in a couple of months and meanwhile makes her way—making friends, learning English, and counting her own lucky stars. For now, we too share

a place. But only one of us has privilege here. Clifford describes travel as a “translation term” that enables learning “a lot about peoples, cultures, and histories different from your own, enough to begin to know what you’re missing.”<sup>25</sup> We are in translation, but I bear a greater responsibility than Cinthia to learn. The scores and texts that have guided Democrats and Republicans alike, in which all of us in the United States with place privilege are implicated, need new compositions, new translations. ■

---

KARMA R. CHÁVEZ is Associate Professor in the Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. I would like to thank Devika Chawla and Annie Hill for their insights. Correspondence to: Karma R. Chávez, Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 210 W. 24th Street, Mailcode F9200, GWB 2.102, Austin, TX 78712, USA. Email: karma.chavez@utexas.edu.

#### NOTES

1. Recently, there have been calls to stop using the term “migrant caravan,” and to refer to the migrants as asylum-seekers. Several media outlets have already made this move. I disagree with these calls because of their devastating implications for economic migrants and because, ultimately, most of these people will not get asylum. Many of these people are in fact economic migrants who are fleeing because climate change has ruined their lives, they cannot find work, and other reasons that won’t meet the legal definition of a refugee. Separating asylum-seekers from migrants makes a normative judgment on economic migrants, implying that one group is legitimate and the other does not deserve to come to the United States. Though subtle, it is a classic example of divide and conquer politics.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “caravan, (n.),” accessed 8 November 2018, <http://www.oed.com>.

3. James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), 98 original emphasis.

4. Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” 100.

5. Duke Ellington and Juan Tizol, “Caravan,” 1936, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/caravan-lyrics-duke-ellington.html>.

6. *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “caravan, (n.),” accessed 8 November 2018, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/caravan>.

7. Andrew Jenkinson, *Caravans—The Illustrated History, 1919–1959* (Poundbury, UK: Veloce Publishing, 2003).

8. Dragan, “Planet Caravan—The Unorthodox Sabbath Song,” *Kurrent Music*, 19 March 2016, <http://www.kurrentmusic.com/blogviewer.html?blog-guid=55fed568-1451-4731-be73-2aa386281656>.

9. Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” 105.

10. Adolfo Flores, “A Huge Caravan of Central Americans Is Headed for the US and No One in Mexico Dares to Stop Them,” *BuzzFeed News*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/a-huge-caravan-of-central-americans-is-headed-for-the-us>.

11. Adolfo Flores, "A Transgender Woman Who Was Part of the Migrant Caravan Has Died in ICE Custody," *BuzzFeed News*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/a-transgender-woman-who-was-part-of-the-migrant-caravan-has>.
12. Flores, "A Transgender Woman."
13. Anna-Catherine Brigida, "Migrant Caravan Seen as Safer Option for Travelling: 'Going Alone Is Risky,'" *The Guardian*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/01/migrant-caravan-el-salvador-more-visible>.
14. Her name has been changed for privacy and safety.
15. Suyapa Portillo Villeda, "Outing Honduras: A Human Rights Catastrophe in the Making," *The NACLA Report*, 26 October 2012, <https://nacla.org/article/outing-honduras-human-rights-catastrophe-making>.
16. Kirk Semple, "Inside an Immigrant Caravan: Women and Children, Fleeing Violence," *New York Times*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/world/americas/mexico-trump-caravan.html?action=click&module=inline&pgtype=Article>.
17. Translation: "Are they your friends or family?" "No, but there are so many people." "Yes, I see that."
18. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "Sadly, it looks like Mexico's Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan," Twitter, 22 October 2018, 5:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1054351078328885248>.
19. David Jackson, Susan Page, and John Fritze, "Exclusive: President Trump Vows to Send as Many Troops to the Border 'as Necessary' to Stop Caravan," *USA Today*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/22/trump-halt-migrant-caravan-many-troops-necessary/1731717002/>.
20. Courtney Weaver and Katrina Manson, "Trump Suggests US Troops Should Fire on Rock-Throwing Migrants," *Financial Times*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/12ed8f9e-de27-11e8-9fo4-38d397e6661c>.
21. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
22. Astrid Galvan, "Prosecutor: Border Agent Tired of Rock Throwers Killed Teen," *AP News*, 24 October 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/934c5377c2d84e6a95dbbb347eef299e>.
23. Linda Qiu, "Trump's Evidence-Free Claims about the Migrant Caravan," *New York Times*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/us/politics/migrant-caravan-fact-check.html>.
24. Julie Watson, "Heat, Exhaustion, Illness: 1 Day with the Migrant Caravan," *US News and World Report*, 2 November 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/arizona/articles/2018-11-02/1-family-struggle-to-keep-up-with-migrant-caravan>.
25. Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," 110.