

The body of migrants as a palimpsest of destiny

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Molano, Alfredo (2005), *Espaldas mojadas. Historias de maquilas, coyotes y aduanas*,
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In this work Colombian sociologist and journalist Alfredo Molano offers an assortment of shocking perspectives on emigration, lasting suffering and passing joys, on life and death; on poverty as well. Men and women speak of themselves with no fear to the gag of censorship. *Espaldas mojadas* (wetbacks) is a book that unveils hazardous and tragic trajectories of migrants whose decisions are often tacit acceptances matured in the somber silence of fate. In this sense, the six veridical narrations we are offered by Alfredo Molano are histories which come from a single one: that of the underdogs. In this arena of history, the body of migrants is at the same time subject and object of all attentions. It is an inside-out *Guide of the Mexican migrant*: there is no talk *on behalf* and *on* the migrants, as they are themselves who tell their adventures; neither is it attempted to distil a translational institutional moral that prepares illegals to be chaste, discreet, resigned, honorable and obedient: *Espaldas mojadas* shows the abysm between the world of hope and the hell of an uncertain life. The sensibility of a sociologist in service of a writer allows us to follow the footsteps of these individuals after being freed from their familial chains, footsteps that are usually lost in ancient memories to come back to a recent past and indicate a hint, a direction. There is neither critical discourse nor critical apparatus to frame these testimonials; there they are, unattached, free from ties to grandiloquent academism that sometimes tends to wither the spontaneity of testimonials; words that come from the heart are very delicate. The sixth book by Molano allows the informants to express in the first person of the singular under the anonymity of confidence, that modesty veil which enables the truth to flower.

Accompanied by María Constanza Ramírez, the author traveled to northern Mexico to coexist with migrants and intermediaries, converse with priests and police officers; he also listened in public squares the advice and fees, guarantees and anecdotes thrown up in the air by coyotes searching for clients. This experience was difficult for the couple because the border is a terrain of games of signs without meanings; the experience was dangerous because as they accumulated turn-downs for questions and silences for inquiries, stares became weapons against them, and no one is bulletproof. Finding informers in Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana and El Paso is looking for trouble. *À bras le corps* migration means living it in the flesh.

Maria Soledad comes from Veracruz, a motherless girl and abandoned by destiny since her most tender age; when her upbringing grandmother died she was taken in by a distant aunt who, with no objections, let her go from the house still nubile to search for a livelihood. A mature man pretended that the girl who cleaned the fridge was his daughter. A housemaid before becoming a lover, and a lover before being an emigrant, Maria Soledad knew the vicissitudes of those who not know who they are; she changed cities and many a times jobs without ever erasing

the stigma of her background. Inherited poverty and precocious abandonment are not things from which it is easy to run away; her body was an offering that her father, in the first place, and then, her brother-in-law, contaminated. A victim of the vileness of her male kinship, she knew the contempt of a hypocritical society that shelters the offenders in the name of an androcentric order.

She worked as a housemaid in a household in Guadalajara where the landlady, a wealthy photographer, *shotted* at her all day long with her camera; she took pictures of her at any time from the morning to the evening, at any distance and from every angle. Nevertheless one day, the landlady took people, who probably were physical anthropologists; without Maria's permission and manipulating her body at will, they took many measurements of her cranium and limbs writing everything down. It was an exhaustive and public review of her body, an algebraic exploration of her bone formation. The little housemaid experienced what a century before criminologists and anthropologists imposed to indigenous people, imprisoned in jails in Puebla and Mexico City and Guadalajara, to verify their inferiority. However, Maria did not have to pay the prices of her background; she said so; she was dismissed.

Then she moved to the maquilas in the north of Mexico. A hard and ingrate job for this uprooted woman with two children; there she found a modern slavery system where each female laborer was invigilated by cameras, installed even in the bathrooms. Dominated by the economic need, by the *standard* in return for a feeble wage, female laborers in maquilas are also dominated by eyes that survey and betray. In this confined universe, the supervisors, or *supers*, —unconditional to the bosses— also engage in informal commerce of petty tolerances in exchange for sexual favors; there is, likewise, supervision and punishment among them, being the rookies those who had to put up the most with the *standard*. The *standard* is the time necessary to carry out a specific operation, a measure calculated by engineers in service of the entrepreneurs. *Standards* are in maquilas, what clock is to time. Reaching and surpassing the standard is not a goal, it is an almost sacred duty, a proof of loyalty to employers and reverence to the job. The use of amphetamines by the female laborers —with the approval of the management, aware of the unions— is the shortest way to surpass the *standard* and earn higher incomes at the end of the week; however, their bodies become tired and age faster. The accidents are frequent in maquilas, nevertheless the medics in public hospitals, in collusion with the managers, make superficial diagnoses without carrying out the corresponding exams so that they return to the factory as soon as possible. Flor, a young lady from Pasimón, Puebla, who went to work in the maquilas of Cuidad Juarez and Tijuana, says she came back to work after being gravely intoxicated by the fumes of melted plastic, she was changed from her post and was imposed an

unreachable *standard* and later forced to quit. The body of the female workers is a machine unremittingly and unrestrictedly used by the manages of the maquilas until it is dirty and unusable; then it is replaced, they substitute it with other and other and other. An illustration of a liquid modernity—to retake the expression by Bauman—the maquilas is an anthropophagous monster.

Flor tells how she noticed the disappearance of her female cousin, also a female laborer in a maquila in Ciudad Juárez, and whose name came to fill the number 175 of the assassinated women in said city. Between sadness and rage, she tells her own *Via Dolorosa* to learn the fate of her relative, the inertia an accomplice of the judicial authority, the hypocrisy of the managers of the maquila, the answer about the death of her cousin from the mouth of a Tarahumara shaman and the absence of serious enquiries to find the criminals, despite her cousin had been seen leaving the canteen of the maquila with an unknown man, whose description was in possession of the police. Too many are the evidences so as not to see a cover-up of the feminicides by the authorities of Ciudad Juárez. At the northern border of Mexico, it seems as though young female immigrants who work in transforming industries lack rights: female laborers are the raw material of maquilas before becoming the raw material of masculine perversions.

María Soledad and Flor reveal too much: strikes organized by the white union with the appeal: “we have to defend the boss to be able to work, we have to defend our jobs”; the help from the female members of “Factor X” and in particular of a nun who bravely fights to defend the rights of the female laborers; thefts over their wages and their failures to have one five-minute break looking for two; the use of a “black base”, computing listing circulated among the maquilas in the region, with the names of the laborers who dare to speak on their inhuman working conditions, those who were fired for having rejected the advances from the supers, those who were discarded because of poor performance and all the victims of accidents. This “black base” not only demonstrates the collusion of entrepreneurs to discipline and punish female workers, but also, more perverse even, prevents youths from finding another job, save as outsourcers (for these maquilas), which pay them half their previous wage.

These new slavery ways make life at the border a living hell for the young female immigrants.

The north however is present in those *no-man's-lands* of the law, a part of the owners of maquilas being Americans, by means of the dollarization of the local economy and also by means of the festive migration of Americans, who temporarily freed from the chains of a puritan society and restrictive laws, turn the streets of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez into obscene saturnalias; their money

and nationality shelter them. La Doña, the nickname of a businesswoman who successfully smuggles people and has constituted a cartel together with other two large coyotes so that they can send *charters* of undocumented people to several cities of the United States, says that the green bills allow for many things. According to her: Mexican authorities and American custom agents “bite”; however, the borders exist for the unprotected, as this Salvadoran fisherman who tells his odyssey to cross, with no money, Mexico and the Sonoran desert. For all the poor migrants the borders are real and cruel.

The Colombian sociologist also tells the story of a young illegal migrant who works from dawn to dusk to earn a miserable salary in the American agricultural fields, forced together with his partners in misfortunes, to live like shadows, always hiding from the police and protecting themselves from an omnipresent racism. When he was 20, drunk with his partners, they had a car crash in which two of them died, as well as three American drunks who crashed into them; in spite of not being driving, the youth was charged with homicide. Paralyzed, with his neck and spine dislocated, he was forced to sign documents in English that sentenced him, for the law is not the same of everyone. Breaking the law is always a crime when there is an American victim; suspicion is proof when the accused is brown- or black-skinned. After months handcuffed to his bed unable to move, the handicapped youth was sent to a prison where inhuman guards totally ignored the rights of those who are not white. One day a sheriff asked him to undergo a surgical operation with which he would obtain a two-year reduction; he accepted. Then he was put on a diet, radiographed and many tests were run on him preparing for a probable death, a priest was even called for him to confess. After the operation he was still hurt in the neck and spine, nevertheless the novelty was that he saw colored lights and images that ceaselessly passed before him. He learnt that just like other Latin American prisoners, he had been utilized to carry out scientific experiments. The American doctors had used his body, deceiving him, opening his skull and making experiments with his brain. After some time, still in complicity with the surgeons of the hospital, the sheriff of Port Allegheny Jail, Pennsylvania, again asked him to undergo a second operation with a reduction of other two years: “No —I replied in anger— I will never be used again”. The immigrant was afraid of suffering the same as his friend Hermenegildo Mejía, a prisoner who said yes to second operation; ever since, he has uncontrollable and sudden convulsions. The immigrant says: “we were chatting calm and just like this he jumped, as he was made of rubber and fell to the floor drooling. They called it the ‘procedure’, and it was almost always applied to poor Latin Americans, those who are imprisoned for having crossed the border several times and are far away

from their lands; they also do it on those who come to work and have a disgrace like mine”. Victim of ignorance, racism, law and doctors, the handicapped young man was moved to several American prisons, in view of avoiding long-lasting relationships with natives or visits from his girlfriend.

To the corrective principles of the confinement, the implacable logic of segregation is added; logic that legitimizes the principles of distinction according to nationality, language and skin color. Actually, prisons are human depositories that work for society to atone for its guilt and purify from its poor. In this respect Loïc Wacquant, in *Prisons of poverty*, thoroughly analyzes the functioning of the American penitentiary logic, showing that the increase of the importance of the penal system responds to a political treatment liberal in nature, of unemployment and misery. As social guarantees are increasingly reduced and systematically sneak the rights of the laborers, the State propitiates the increase of marginalized people, a situation which is responded with more police and military bodies and more jails.

Finally, in *Espaldas mojadas* the gathered testimonials allow us to state that the households, maquilas and prisons are confinement places where experiments are made on the body of those who, there, are confined. Rape, anthropometric measurements of the body of a housemaid, increase of the pace of work of female laborers, cornered to take drugs to reach the *standard*, medical experimentation on poor Latin American inmates. These situations described by those who have lived them in their own flesh shall not be seen as risk inherent to labor migration, but considered as different manifestations of the same capitalist and androcentric logic of disciplining the body of the poor, particularly of the poor woman. This coherent logic pinpoints to maintain and increase social and labor vulnerability of the unqualified and disqualified laborers, so as to obtain from their labor, and more broadly from their bodies, the highest profits. To sum up, immigrants feed a real “economy of the body” of the poor, thus becoming the palimpsest of their destiny.

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