Polyphonic Mapping: October 26, 2020

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Moderation: Eileen Truax

Participants: María Fernanda (from Angola, speaking from Brazil), Saúl Rivera (from México, speaking from the United States), Lorena Zambrano (from Ecuador, speaking from Chile), Yeraldine Cabrera (from Venezuela, speaking from Ecuador).

Text Summary: Carina Trabalón

What is it that gives you hope?

"Seeing empowered women migrants... this gives me faith."
– Lorena

The solidarity between organizations (...) seeing my children, hugging my parents, meeting my nephews."
– Yeraldine

"The world of 'Regularization Now!'... because without documents we have no access to health, justice, housing."
– María Fernanda

"The hope of being able to return, to see my two kids... to be able to see my family, this is what keeps me in the fight."
– Saúl

In this text, we are interested in reflecting on emerging themes found within the accounts expressed at "Polyphonic Mapping Live: Migrant Testimonies During the Pandemic [Mapeo polifónico al aire: Testimonios de migrantes durante la pandemia 26 octubre 2020]" with the intention of illuminating tensions between control and movement across the Americas. This event provides an opportunity to synthesize voices, views, and strategies deployed by migrants that manifest subjectively and collectively many of the dynamics and border conflicts that take place not only in diverse spaces but also in diverse temporalities, allowing us to connect the current COVID situation with structural and historic processes of inequality. In this sense, Polyphonic Mapping is proposed here as a counter-narrative against hegemonic practices, discourses on migrants, and those ways in which mobility processes are being linked with discourses of a "health emergency," which lends itself to further securitize and humanitarianize borders. Considering this, we propose to foreground the practices, conditions, and recurrent disputes of migrants: "through their accounts one observes the daily experience of (im)mobility, confinement, risk of disease, their daily confrontation with bureaucracy, xenophobia, unemployment; and at the same time, how their vital struggle unfolds between solidarity, strength, and hope." Within this vision, we briefly mention three dimensions that mark the transversality of these stories of shared life: first, institutional mechanisms that produce the precarious conditions of life in which many and many find themselves; second, processes of racialization that pierce socially and

institutionally into the everyday lives of migrants; and third, the struggles from which new forms of negotiation and resistance materialize around the control of mobility.

“The dream of being better, of helping family, becomes a nightmare”

One first dimension that emerged from the accounts refers to exposing and making visible of practices and mechanisms of control that actively contribute to the precarity of conditions of life of migrants, both during and after the pandemic. In particular, the case of Yeraldine, a Venezuelan in Ecuador, synthesizes many of the aspects that, under different variants, generally converge at the crossroads between processes of illegalization, capital devaluation, and labor exploitation in the various countries of the Americas. Yeraldine was unable to validate either of her two university degrees because she did not meet certain bureaucratic requirements. As a result, at this moment she is immersed in informal labor networks with a high degree of precarity that reduce her earnings to mere subsistence. She says, “you accept 12- to 14-hour jobs because you have no other option and still you cannot help your family.” In this way, the impossibility of sending remittances, of helping her family in Venezuela, resulting from not being able to capitalize on what represents for her an “the construction of an entire life” (her university degrees), and makes clear the inequality of life conditions that develops between nationals and non-nationals. Furthermore, living without documentation means being exposed to exploitation, “if you don't have papers, you don't have rights,” leading to constant fear and worry. Yeraldine comments: “working in the informal economy is a competition with the police that persecute you because you do not have papers, they can fine you, it’s really bad, if you can’t legalize yourself economically, because you have to pay to be legalized... how am I going to pay a fine of $1,200 dollars if I don’t have papers, and immigration stops you, tickets you, and you have to pay the fine (to prevent any subsequent procedures).”

According to these accounts, circumstances were aggravated by the onset of the pandemic which differentially affected the informal labor market and the situation of migrants. With different nuances according to national and transnational contexts, migrant income was drastically affected in a scenario aggravated by the scarce or total absence of state aid, with enormous difficulties in accessing the health system and, in general, in the procedures to obtain any type of documentation. Thus, the reported circumstances illustrated the ways in which the institutional schemes of illegalization—enhanced by the pandemic situation—contribute directly to deepening the conditions of vulnerability and precarity in which a large part of the migrant population was already living across the various countries of the Americas.

As a migrant... your name gets lost along the road”

A second dimension is linked with the production of racialized categories imposed on migrants according to gender, race, ethnic origin, and nationality. This was present in the different reports in which discrimination and negative social stereotypes constituted common place experiences in all the countries involved. The racialized figures were presented within various frameworks. Lorena, an Ecuadorian in Chile, told us about the recurring violence to which she is subjected based on the conception of the migrant woman as a “prostitute, who comes to steal her husband,” and the different

consequences that this interpellation has, built on the basis of gender, sexuality and certain phenotypic traits, in the development of their daily life, "ten years have passed, and one still experiences it very badly." Likewise, Lorena anguished over how discrimination affects her children, who suffer various forms of rejection and subordination at school. On the other hand, Fernanda, an Angolan in Brazil, told us about the racism experienced by black and migrant women and, in more general terms, about the "suspicion" that weighs on racially marked bodies—of any gender or sexual identification—in her daily commute through the city, "you can't even go to the supermarket, you have security behind you," "if you're black, you're a suspect." Yeraldine also told us about the discrimination she suffers as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. In this case, she emphasized how, from her condition as a migrant, the different stigmatizing views that are built on lesbians and trans people permanently condition her ways of inhabiting the spaces of the city in which she lives. Finally, Saúl, from the Yuvinavi indigenous community in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, now living in the United States, told us about the discrimination and racism experienced by indigenous migrants both within Mexico (internal migration) and in the United States. Saúl considers it very saddening knowing that, in various contexts and circumstances, he finds it necessary to deny his ethnic origins in order to access certain material or symbolic resources and, in turn, realizing that this ethnic denial is still not always an effective strategy due to racism based on skin color or physical features.

"It's worth it to keep fighting"

The third dimension to highlight refers to struggles for freedom of movement and seeks to make visible how migrants organize and negotiate borders despite their conditions, violence, and inequalities that lead to practices of control and forms of stigmatization, subordination, and racialization mentioned above. These struggles, which are of vital importance "to sustain life" in the context of COVID, are inscribed in each of these individual biographies and, at the same time, are an expression of wider family, community, and collective processes, which seek to situate the different migration projects within transnational logics and networks that exceed the spaces of control and the national dynamics that the dominant mobility policies seek to impose.

Thus, various experiences of organization and struggle arise that produce new ways of living as a migrant in different countries. Saúl tells us precisely how the formation of the cultural movement of which he is a part emerges as a concrete way of combating different types of violence and forms of discrimination. The group employs specific labor strategies as a response as an alternative to the denial of their origins and they are committed to the creation of collective networks of dissent and to working for indigenous migrants in the United States. On the other hand, in Brazil there is the group "Diáspora Africana" in which Fernanda participates. Providing free psychological counseling stands out as part of many other activities and actions by this group in coordination with other institutions and organizations of and for migrants in that country. Lastly, Lorena told us about her personal transition towards political activism, "I was a different type of woman, shy and withdrawn," but after an experience of obstetric violence as well as many situations of discrimination and xenophobia, she now believes in the importance of "leaving that bubble," to get out of the idea of "'my country, my rights,' and to

understand other things." Today she is working with several grassroots organizations, many of which are defined by migrant feminism, and she tells how her political participation in the framework of community food distribution, camps, and protests, allowed her to organize and to understand the importance of helping each other "beyond the different collectivities" and the barrier of nationalisms since, as she tells us, "borders are part of our imagination."

These processes of political subjectivation, in which biographies are transformed and bodies themselves are re-signified, represent part of the current struggles that are being waged around control and movement in the Americas. In this context, while it remains clear that violence and restrictions have intensified due to the current situation, we believe that these voices, views, and experiences express above all a denunciation of the structural and historical inequalities that establish and delineate the many diverse forms of control over mobility in our global contemporaneity.