Techniques of the Self in the Face of Precarity

Abstract: Drawing on Foucault’s notion of the ‘techniques of the self,’ this chapter illustrates various techniques migrants employ to overcome the paralysing effect of precarity, shaped in the context of the United States biopolitics of citizenship, on their mobility. On the basis of migrants’ narratives, the chapter discusses such techniques of the self as spirituality, self-concealment, ‘passing as Mexicans’, outmanoeuvring the enemy, the art of self-preservation, and the art of vigilance. It illustrates that migrants acquire knowledge of these techniques from their own experiences or from those of other migrants. Migrants train themselves to become resilient and resourceful. Yet, as the chapter maintains, these techniques cannot guarantee that migrants’ mobility will not be disrupted. Migrants’ journeys consist of intersecting and interchangeable patterns of mobility and immobility, and the two may co-exist: migrants continue to plan and prepare for their journeys while remaining (at least temporarily) immobilized.

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, Central American migrants travelling through Mexico experience precarity in different places in the transnational space that includes the Northern Triangle, Mexico, and the United States, and the precarity migrants encounter in Mexico influences their mobility. In particular, perceptions of risks, based on the information migrants receive from others or obtain through their encounters with dangers, and fear are important determinants of mobility and immobility. This chapter explores the flip side of these subjective perceptions of precarity by turning attention to migrants’ techniques of self-making or the ways migrants train themselves to avoid the risks of violence and/or become resilient. We will illustrate the various ways in which they employ their agency to secure their movement towards the desired destination. Finally, in the last section of the chapter we question the dichotomy between mobility and immobility.

Techniques of the Self

We follow Burkitt (2002) in defining technologies or techniques of the self as a form of “practical action accompanied by practical reason, which aims to instill in the body certain habitual actions – either moral virtues (that is, right ways of acting in a situation) or technical skills” (224). Researchers have documented various techniques that unauthorized migrants use to avoid deportation or to secure jobs (Apostolidis, 2010; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010; Harrison and Lloyd, 2012; Núñez and Heyman, 2007). Migrants interviewed by Apostolidis (2010), for instance, talk about certain strategies they employ to overcome their internal weaknesses and to resist pain, fear, and hardship during the border-crossing journeys. They also narrate stories of how they employ skills to stay hidden and avoid being detected by immigration authorities; deceive polleros or others who try to deceive or rob them; and ‘pass’ as United States citizens in front of immigration authorities (67). By engaging in these strategies, migrants do not only manage to cross the border and remain in the United States, but they also instill faith in themselves as agents who have at least some control over their lives. As Apostolidis observes, “[a]gainst an inescapable backdrop of indeterminacy and, to some extent, fearful contingency, such techniques of the self gave these immigrant workers ways to elude