Quo Vadis USA? – Der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

"Migration in the Americas – Children on the Move"

April 28, 2023

Soledad Álvarez-Velasco, University of Illinois Chicago

Anja Schüler: Hello, and welcome to a new edition of the HCA podcast, coming to you from the University of Heidelberg; my name is Anja Schüler. Unaccompanied migrant children from Central and South America are coming to the United States in record numbers – mostly driven by economic desperation, made worse by the pandemic. In the last two years, 250,000 children have crossed the Mexican border into the United States, and only a third of them reunite with their parents. A majority of them are sent to other relatives, acquaintances, or even strangers. Many of them end up in grueling jobs that ignore child labor laws, a situation that has recently attracted immense media attention. Joining me on this episode of the HCA podcast to talk about the shifting dynamics of child migration in the Americas is Soledad Álvarenz Velasco. She is a social anthropologist and human geographer who focuses on the relationship between mobility, undocumented migration, border regimes, and the formation of migratory corridors across the Americas. Until recently, she was my colleague here at the University of Heidelberg, where she held a position as an assistant professor at the Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies. She has since moved on to a position at the University of Illinois Chicago, where she is an assistant professor in the Latin-American and Latino Studies Program and the Department of Anthropology. Today, Soledad Álvarez Velasco joins us from the windy city to talk about children migrating in the Americas. Welcome to the HCA Podcast.

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: Thank you so much for your introduction. It's great to be back again with you in Heidelberg. I'm so delighted to be part of your podcast series, and a huge greeting to my former colleagues. It's a pleasure to be here.

Anja Schüler: Great to have you back, if only virtually. When we look at the migration experiences of children and adolescents, we are really looking at a number of different settings, starting with their home community – migration affects them there, for example, when their mother or father or both go north. What happens to children when their parents migrate?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: That's a very important question. We have to understand and do a bit of history here: The migration of children and adolescents across the Americas, on the one hand, is not a new phenomenon. Now, we just see it much more in the media. Yet we have to know that since at least the 1990s, children have not only been moving but also been affected by the departure of their fathers in the first place but also of their mothers. So, child migration should be seen as a historical pattern and also in hand with the feminization of migration. In so far as women started

to depart from their home country, migrant children also started to follow them. Those are two big elements to take into account.

Another element that I always like to raise when we are trying to unpack the complexities of child migration is that in the past decade, since 2000, not even a decade, since 2014, the continent has witnessed an incessant migrant crisis, a migrant crisis with the face of children. 2014, 2018, 2019, and 2021, and now we are witnessing another one – it is not an extraordinary event. It is an ongoing situation that has a historical link and that has to be understood as part of the history of the complexities of the Americas. Given this introduction by you to the audience, what happens with children when they stay back home? That's a very complex question because, for them, the absence of their parents, mother, father, or both is represented in their bodies, emotions, memories, feelings, and everyday lives. This is something that they will recall forever, and this is something that they learn to deal with. They learn to grow up; they learn to go on every single day and moment without the physical presence of their parents. They also learn to be part of transnational families; they have the ability to adapt to other forms of being raised.

Also, we should understand that fathers, but especially mothers, when they leave, are able to recreate transnational maternities, mostly through digitalized spaces – through Zoom calls, WhatsApp calls, and letters. They manage incredibly to be present in their everyday lives. So, of course, there's a deficit in the physical care of those families; that's a fact. Yet mothers, fathers, and children invent a way to be part of transnational families. Also, when they stay back home, for instance, in the Quadroon Andes, which is the region that I explore the most, caretakers come to the forefront. Caretakers are *abuelas*, grandmothers; it could be grandmothers, mostly they are, but also other women, mostly women, who take part in this global care, a transnational system that appears and is built around these children. This means that families shift on the one hand, care shifts on the other, and migrant children and their families are able enough to reconfigure their ties and to reconfigure the ways in which they are together. That would be a successful example, but there are many cases, and this is something that I've experienced in my own fieldwork, that many children become orphans because they sometimes lose their mother and father because they die while they are trying to cross such a complex journey across the Americas, especially when they are trying to traverse the Mexico – U.S. corridor. So, they lose their parents, and then we have another level of complexity, which means learning to live without them and to be orphans as a direct effect of the border regime that has been externalized across the Americas.

Anja Schüler: So, let's maybe turn to another setting in this process because, of course, children and adolescents also become migrants themselves, alone or with their families as they go north. How does that affect their lives?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: Children who are growing up in transnational families learn very early in their lives that migrating will be a life option, and this is true especially in regions that are deeply affected by poverty, inequality, and violence. I'm talking here not only of the Ecuadorian Andes but the Americas in general, especially Central America. Most of them, while they grow up, are either waiting to be brought to their families – this is under unregularized schemes of family unification, meaning with *coyotes*, or they decide to leave their places and move. This is especially the case for Central American migrants who are able, due to the neighborhood of the U.S. with Central America, to leave on their own and traverse borders. Others will wait until they turn eighteen or a bit more than eighteen to decide to leave and traverse. If we are talking about or focusing on the Andean Region, we are talking here about traversing around seven borders, seven nations without documentation, and via unregularized rules.

I think when we want to deal with this complex phenomenon of child migration, we have to understand that they face the same risks and violence that adults do, but with the difference that they are children. Children on the move, in many cases, go without any legal protection and social protection. Yet what they have is their creativity to group, their creativity to take part in other families that are on the move, for example, to join the migrant caravans, as many Central American minors did in 2018 and 2019, and to try to arrive at their northern destination, the U.S., to finally reunite with their families. Again, this would be a successful story. But there are many stories, as we know, in which children are not able to reach that destination, and they stay on route. Many of them stay in Mexico, they stay in public shelters, waiting until they can be reconnected with families in the U.S. Also, there are many children and adolescents, especially those on the route, who get detained and deported. I've worked with Ecuadorian migrants, for example Jonathan, who is part of one of the projects, *movimiento*. He told me his story: He was detained in Nicaragua while he was on route to reunite with his family when he was only eleven. So, as you can see, they are facing, in their bodies and emotions and memories, the same experience as adults are having. The huge alert is for states: What are regional states doing? What are their policies? Are they doing something? This is something that we have been witnessing for at least three decades, and it is getting increasingly complex and violent.

Anja Schüler: And once they get to the United States, that doesn't necessarily mean a success story. Once they are there, what happens to these adolescent migrants? They are often faced with a setting where everything, including the language, is alien. How do they cope with that?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: I will start by saying that children and adolescents are incredibly resourceful and incredibly creative. The way in which they are able to enter into such an alien culture so fast; they learn the language, if they get to reunite with their families, they are the ones that become their translators, they are the ones that are able to go to school and easily learn English and easily the code in such different spaces and landscapes as urban cities as large as Chicago or New York. Imagine that

they are moving from, most of the time, rural indigenous communities in the Andes or in Central America, and they might not have been in the capital cities of their countries. And then they end up in New York and have to relearn how to dwell there – and they do so. They teach us as researchers their incredible capacity to reinvent their lives and to adapt faster than their parents.

Also, migrant children face, again, the same huge barriers that does not only entail linguistic and cultural elements but legal elements. They are undocumented children when they get to the U.S. It doesn't mean that if you traverse the border, that you are in detention and that you get out and you're able to reunite with your family – it doesn't mean at all that they get proper documentation, that they are regularized under the system. That's not the case; they get confined into the undocumented world, which means that if they turn eighteen years old, they can be detained and deported anytime. So, it means that they are limited in many of their possibilities of being a full citizen. It means that they are not able to deploy all of their rights, and this has been the case for Dreamers. I am sure you are acquainted with that, and the audience is acquainted with Dreamers. They have been struggling since at least 2010 to be properly recognized as citizens because they arrived in this country as children, they grew up here, and they have not yet access to full citizenship. They created a movement, a very powerful social movement, "Undocumented, Unafraid and Unapologetic," that has been challenging the US restrictive migratory system in order to get documentation to get full citizenship.

Anja Schüler: Are there any signs that the Biden administration is moving forward on that?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: No, there's no sign for that, no sign at all. Oh my God, it is an urgency that this country needs to reform its immigration law. The last time that the immigration law was reformed was in 1986, under the Reagan administration – under a Republican administration. With that administration, one of the most important processes was that undocumented migrants were able to get papers and were able to regularize. Hence, regular unification processes with families and children took place. This is not the same moment; historically, there are many barriers. You were asking what happens with children once they arrive in the U.S.; first they have to face documentation, then they have to survive. This is especially the case of adolescents, between twelve and seventeen years old. A couple of months ago, in February, the *New York Times* published very detailed research about how migrant children alone are exploited under the most brutal ways of work, including in factories of really well-known products like cornflakes, like *Cheetos*, like *Fruit of the Loom* – they are working there and fit into the same idea of the description in London in the nineteenth century when children were working under horrible conditions. This is happening here – we need to see all of this because this is happening right now.

Anja Schüler: To explain for the audience: maybe that's often happening because they're not reuniting with their families, but they're reuniting with so-called sponsors

who treat them like indentured servants, who tell them they have a debt to pay off, and that they now need to go on the night shift in the poultry factory.

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: Correct. Another piece of the complexity of child migration, once they arrive in the U.S., is that if the migratory authority does not find any family with whom they can be redirected, they stay in the detention centers. Children are detained and then also have to face court hearings on their own and have the same legal procedures as adult undocumented migrants are facing in this country. This means that the complex legal process needs to be faced, and it needs to be fixed. It is not possible that children are detained, have to go to hearings, and can be deported too. So, what you can see across the Americas is, and this is a reflection that I push my students to do, that all of the states across the Americas, except the United States, have signed the Convention for the Rights of the Child. They all have signed and supposedly changed the old national legal frameworks to provide a guarantee and a restrictive guarantee to children's rights. This is not the case – the convention is a dead letter now – we are not seeing any advance in that convention. On the other hand, it is a time, due to the complexities of our present, that transnational legislations are created that can be put into place not only nationally speaking but especially in these complex transnational corridors in which it is not only one country or one national state that is involved, but many. Currently, those states are not taking responsibility: the duty to protect rights – we have a gap there. We have a grey zone in which the violations of rights, in this case, the violations of children's rights, are taking place each day.

Anja Schüler: You have already mentioned in that context your new website, "Children On the Move," and I would like to talk about it for a minute here. It's a website about the lives and experiences of migrant children and adolescents in the Americas. It has been recently launched, and you are one of the coordinators of a transnational research network that is behind this website. This network unites researchers from a number of disciplines. Who are your collaborators in this project, and how did it come together?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: This is a nice question because we got together under the name of *Collective Infancia.* We are a group of anthropologists, geographers, educators, photographers, and artists who have been working on child migration for at least the past decade, with different cases of child migration. For example, children and adolescents who accompany their mothers seeking sanctuary in New York, Central American children and adolescents who were part of the migrant caravans, or children who were traversing the Columbian or Venezuelan border. Or Brazilian children who had migrated to the United States, or children who were born in the United States but were taken back to Mexico, and now the reverse migration takes place, as for them, the foreign country is Mexico, not the United States. So, our idea is a digital humanities project to create a sort of "Collage Mosaic," as we say, of voices of children on the move with an explicit intention to unsettle an adult-centric approach because, usually, we have been speaking for children as if children don't

have voices, thoughts, reflections, compassions, imaginaries, understandings and, especially, incredible knowledge. The knowledge that they have amassed, because they grew up amid migration, is incredibly large, and we wanted to showcase their creativity and decided to get together, especially because the moment we got together was 2013 – the first crisis of migrant children arriving at the border. When President Obama started to say that this is the first moment in the history of migrations that we see that migrant children arrive here – again, that's not the case. We have been seeing this for the past decades. We wanted to provoke a dialogue with them for them, and we invented this proposal, and we dealt with different spaces across the Americas. We used playful methodologies; this meant using drawings, playing with them, being with them, and walking with them.

In my case, I also research what is happening in this amazingly strong relationship of care and love between the children that have been left and their caretakers. So, this is a digital humanities project – we got a grant from the National Geographic Society. They have a line of grants precisely to produce projects like this, and I think that it's a resourceful space, especially for teaching because this allows students to understand that it's not only one experience located in one country, but this is something that is happening across our continent as an effect of diverse complexities. But I guess that the most interesting piece is reading their testimonials, listening to their voices, and understanding, through their knowledge, the incredible comprehension that they have about migration.

Anja Schüler: You just said looking at the migration experience of children is adding a perspective to research. Would you say that our research about migration in the Americas adequately represents children's experience in adolescence, or is it not well represented?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: Now, again, going back to this spectacular and immediate crisis, the crisis that I was telling you about before has called the attention of researchers, to the public agenda, to the media. But I would say that most of them tend to reproduce an adult perspective about migration. If you look at a press report, you will see that normally it's the voice of the adult that is present there, but never the voice of the children or adolescents, let alone understanding the gender differences, sex, gender orientations, the differences if they come from different ethical race representations. So, there's a diversity worldwide that is normally not explicitly addressed. I think that now we have the opportunity to break that strict thinking, unsettling this adult perspective and put in the forefront the voices of children. I think that something that has recently happened connects with our previous question about the movement of undocumented Dreamers in the United States, which is that those former children who are adolescents to young adults are able to express their voices through books, essays, poetry, and even through documentaries. This teaches us about how their experience was and how their embodied experience felt. So, we have a lot to learn from that, and I think there is an emergent field here. And we need to learn

how to recreate playful research methods, which is not easy, especially within academia, where we are so rigid.

Anja Schüler: I was going to ask you about that because I have taken a look at the website – it's fascinating, it's beautifully done, and it displays so many different sources that you've mentioned. I mean, we have stories; we have pictures. Tell us a little bit about your sources and your methods, and has this work maybe also resulted in changing your own research methods or refining them?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: Working with children means devoting time because you have to be with them, play with them, and draw with them. It's their time – they want the time; that marks the pace of research, not the other way around. So, you need to be patient and learn that any script that you had should be put aside – that has been the teaching for me. Sometimes, I arrived back to the place where I was sheltering after doing field work within indigenous communities, as in Southern Ecuador, and was a bit frustrated because I wasn't able to conduct as many interviews as I wanted or wasn't able to do this and that. But once I went back to my findings, I started to understand that we are not dealing with the same kind of research here. We have to understand their voices, in their voices, we need to pause in their testimonials. We need to be much more silent to understand what they are trying to tell us. Also, being with them means exploring what they like to do. For example, Evageli Mateo likes to play football, so we were playing football, and while playing football, we talked about his dad's migration and how his dad was present, even though he was physically absent because he called him from New York. To him, this small and poor location in Ecuador to be with them every day after school or, for example, when they told me that he knows that his dad is coming very soon. The way in which he expresses time, space, and geographies and their imaginations is the way in which he is reinventing the time-space experience produced by migration. So it means learning a lot, and I would say that the teaching of this project was also that we needed to be together as researchers, sharing the difficulties that we had faced, the challenges that we had because, for all of them, it was difficult to research with children, also because we have a lot of ethical considerations – you have to be incredibly responsible and careful with their voices and with their testimonies and with their lives and emotions. You know you are opening a box where it's not so easy to navigate because it's their lives.

Anja Schüler: So, before we wrap this up, let me ask you one last thing about this very interdisciplinary project. You already mentioned that you're working with researchers from many different disciplines. What do you learn from each other?

Soledad Àlvarez Velasco: We learned that to research the world of children, we needed to activate our own internal child, and that was a very nice experience because we all, when we were already creating and crafting the digital site, understood that, while we were listening to their experiences, those experiences, in a way, woke up experiences that we had had. So that's a way in which you get much closer to understanding the emotions, to understand the experiences, the imaginations of

children. It's by letting ourselves wake up and being much more of a child than an adult researcher, which was nice. I think that that was our intention to be captured on that website, which, as you said, is a website that intends to be on the move, intends to be playful, and also intends to understand that children, with their imagination, with their creativity, with their powerful way of understanding what does it mean to be a migrant child in this present they are resisting. They are resisting diverse forms of oppression, poverty, violence, and all the other complexities that we see every day.

Anja Schüler: Thank you so much. I can only say that *InfantsinMovimento.org* is a fascinating website. You can spend a lot of time there, I think because it's so well done, it tells these fascinating, moving and also sometimes very disturbing stories. So, thank you, Soledad Álvarez Velasco, for this wonderful conversation, for being on our podcast today, and for telling us about your work on child migration in the Americas. I know I am repeating myself, but if you want to know more about this topic, visit *InfantsinMoviment.org*. Thank you again, Soledad! Greetings go out to Chicago. You have been listening to the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. My name is Anja Schüler. Our show was produced at the University of Heidelberg with support from the Jacob Gould- Schurman Foundation. As always, I would like to thank Élena Brandao-Mecker for her technical support, and I would like to thank you for listening. We will be back next month with a new episode, so stay tuned, and please stay healthy.