Butterfly Crossings

Traversing Boundaries of Space and Species in North America

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Abstract Migration is a bedrock reality of earthly life. This truth invites us to imagine the span of the Americas beginning not with borders and walls but instead with movement beyond them. What might our continents and countries begin to look and feel like if we acknowledged the necessity of these crossings, the kinship and well-being that movement sustains? The essay explores these questions through a series of meditations on the monarch butterfly, a creature that has become in recent years the symbol of a more expansive vision of North American belonging. Anand Pandian describes affinities for the butterfly articulated and expressed by artists, migrant rights activists, butterfly enthusiasts, and migrants themselves, in the United States and in Mexico. In the company of migrants, both human and lepidopteran, Pandian explores an alternative vision of collective life beyond national walls and borders. With the lifeways of the monarch butterfly, the most crucial lesson has to do with the relationships that propel movement across borders, the ties that draw together those within and those without. A society of rigid walls and borders may seek to repudiate their reality, or their necessity. And yet these relationships remain at work in our world of pervasive motion and migration, binding our fates together with living beings and distant places far beyond the span of the lines we draw.

Keywords migration, butterflies, species, borders, kinship, art, activism, aspiration

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.
—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

The yellow square was styled like a road sign, warning that something unusual would be coming up. Not a pedestrian, or a curved or slippery road, but instead a butterfly. The bold black lines composing the form at its heart suggested a monarch butterfly, an idea borne out by the orange and yellow hues of its wings. But there was something else

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Figure 1. "Butterfly Crossing. Migration is Natural" sign. Photograph by Thomas Hawk. Reproduced under CC BY-NC 2.0 license.

visible in the patterning: a human face outlined within the wings on either side, drawn in the manner of a Mayan figure.[1] "Butterfly crossing," the sign declared (fig. 1). And yet the crossing signaled in the design was much more than a traversal of space. The artwork gestured toward a passage between human and lepidopteran creatures, as if the one could only find its meaning and fulfillment in the other.

In recent years the monarch butterfly has become a ubiquitous symbol in the immigrant rights movements of the United States. Attend a rally for undocumented migrants to the United States in San Diego, Washington, DC, or any other US city and you're bound to see countless people with paper wings on their backs, daubed with the monarch's telltale markings in orange and black (fig. 2). Monarchs were painted all over the "Undocubus" that undocumented students, day laborers, and domestic workers took across the country in 2012 for the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Charlotte, North Carolina. Spilling out of the bus in T-shirts printed with yet more butterflies, these activists risked arrest and deportation in civil disobedience actions that echoed the freedom rides of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s.

"The monarch butterfly has patterns of migration that go from Mexico through the United States, to Canada and back," Favianna Rodriguez, an Oakland-based artist who

1. McCaughan, "'We Didn't Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us.'"

Figure 2. Participants wearing monarch butterfly wings at a rally in Washington, DC. Photograph by the author.

nurtured this symbolism has observed. "It really symbolizes the natural way in which living creatures move and migrate in cycles. They go in certain seasons, and they return in others, very similar to what workers do," coming and going for each agricultural harvest. One night during the DNC that year Rodriguez led a crew of guerrilla artists through the streets of Charlotte, plastering those "Butterfly Crossing" signs that she had designed onto scattered walls and street corners, each capped with the slogan and lesson "Migration is natural."[2]

Such gestures remind us that migration is a bedrock reality of earthly life, whether human or otherwise. They ask us to pay heed to the "knots of connection" that "produce a sense of relatedness between human and nonhuman animals," as Radhika Govindrajan has put it.[3] And they invite us to imagine the span of the Americas beginning not with borders and walls but instead with movement beyond them. "If crossings function as contemporary sites of enchantment, then they might play a role in cultivating an

2. https://archive.culturestrike.org/migration-is-beautiful/. See also Cruz, "Teddy Cruz and Favianna Rodriguez."

3. Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, 3.

ethical sensibility," Jane Bennett writes. "Their magic might generate what might be called presumptive generosity toward the animals, vegetables, and minerals within one's field of encounter."[4]

Traversing a series of such encounters, this essay explores the force of that *might*. For there remains wonder in such crossings, the chance of being moved by the reality of moving beyond. What might our continents and countries begin to look and feel like if we acknowledged the necessity of these crossings, the kinship and well-being that movement sustains?[5] The story I recount here is a personal one, anchored in experiences that I've pursued as a child of immigrants and a father of brown children growing up in the United States, as well as my work as an anthropologist. But this too is a kind of crossing that we might acknowledge, such passage between the personal and the official, a reality for so many of us whose lives have demanded a dwelling in crossroads.

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One could hardly imagine a more suitable ambassador for these endeavors than the monarch butterfly, *Danaus plexippus*. These are creatures that weigh less than one gram, that is, less than a paperclip, a raisin, or a dollar bill. And yet their life cycle takes them on journeys that can span most the length of North America, from as far north as the Maritime provinces of eastern Canada to the highlands of southern Mexico, where those who survive this epic journey will winter. The monarch is "such a fragile, wind-tossed scrap of life," the Canadian zoologist Fred Urquhart noted, one that somehow manages to "find its way . . . across prairies, deserts, mountain valleys, even cities."[6] For these delicate beings that dot the margins of so much of the continent's landscapes, crossing vast distances is quite simply a way of life.

Where the monarchs of the eastern United States and Canada went each winter remained a mystery to scientists until the 1970s. Small creatures ever fluttering, falling into throngs of dozens or swarms of many thousands, gliding upward on thermals to take currents of air as high as a quarter-mile above ground; imagine trying to track an individual itinerary. Fred Urquhart and his wife Norah devoted the better part of their lives to resolving this mystery. They developed a technique to tag butterflies with small, lightweight stickers, enlisting thousands of volunteers in scattered places to tag, release, and track the monarchs they found—a pioneering movement in citizen science.

The winter destination of the eastern monarchs remained elusive until one fateful January in 1975, when the Urquharts received a phone call from two of their volunteers

4. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 30.

5. Comparisons between the travails of human and lepidopteran migrants reveal "ethics and ecosophies related to monarch migration patterns" that rely on "an association between extended and shared precarious conditions for humans and nonhumans," Columba Gonzalez-Duarte argues. Her forthcoming book on cultures and histories of the monarch butterfly will have much more to say on the complex dimensions of interspecies affinity. Gonzalez-Duarte, "The Dearest Butterfly," 48, 50.

6. Urquhart, "Found at Last," 173.

in Mexico, Catalina Aguado and Ken Brugger. An isolated grove in the Sierra Madre mountains, more than 10,000 feet above sea level, was encrusted with these butterflies. "I gazed in amazement at the sight," Fred Urquhart wrote with wonder for *National Geographic* the following year, when he and Norah trekked themselves to that mountaintop, known as Cerro Pelón. "Butterflies—millions upon millions of monarch butterflies! They clung in tightly packed masses in every branch and trunk of the tall, gray-green *oyamel* trees. They swirled through the air like autumn leaves and carpeted the ground in their flaming myriads on this Mexican mountainside."[7]

Millions of North Americans were eventually swept into the naturalist movement that the Urquharts inspired, a wave of monarch enthusiasm that touched down in countless places.[8] One of them was the school where both of my children went to elementary school in Baltimore, Maryland. Since the late 1970s Park School kindergarten classes have held a monarch butterfly festival each fall. Children search the fields nearby for caterpillars, raise them in class, and release the butterflies that emerge from each chrysalis. "GON tO MEXicO" went the note that my son fixed onto one empty case in 2014. He was a butterfly that year in the outdoor play staged by the children and teachers together, as was my daughter a few years later, in a woodland drama that began and ended with the children singing of the flight that the butterflies would make toward their "mountain home" to the distant south.

At home all of us knew the words of those songs by heart. We'd planted milkweed in our garden and in our nearby park in Baltimore, served up birthday cake decorated with a monarch drawing, worked on a butterfly costume for Halloween, spoken with our children on countless occasions about this mountain home of the butterflies they'd learned so much about. But it wasn't easy to imagine this flight, the many miles and the millions in company. Then in January 2019, a couple of months after my daughter's kindergarten festival, we had the privilege of going there ourselves, to the place where scientists had first made the connection between the monarchs of the United States and Canada, and their Mexican refuge.

Catalina Aguado had appeared on the cover of the *National Geographic* issue that announced the discovery of the monarchs on Cerro Pelón in 1976; still, as an avid naturalist, she was ambivalent about the news. "I wish everyone in the world had my eyes right now to see what I'm seeing and feel what I'm feeling," she later recalled, about the sensation of being engulfed by those butterflies. But, she had also lamented, "now there will be hordes of people here, and they'll destroy everything."[9]

In the years that followed, the forests that hosted the monarch colonies were declared a protected reserve, and made off-limits to the local people who had long depended on them for their livelihood. At the same time, in an irony seen most everywhere that nature tourism takes hold, the region became a magnet for tourists from

7. Urquhart, "Found at Last," 161.

8. Gustafsson et al., "The Monarch Butterfly Through Time and Space."

9. Smith-Rodgers, "Maiden of the Monarchs."

distant places, a development that made it possible for my family to see these sites firsthand as monarch enthusiasts visiting from the United States.

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The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve lies along the boundary between the states of Michoacán and Mexico, one hundred miles northwest of Mexico City. For much of the twentieth century, mountain forests and other lands in the region had been managed collectively as communal properties, in the form of *ejidos* claimed by mestizo communities or *comunidades* held by Indigenous communities. Local access to these forest commons was curtailed with the Mexican government's establishment of a monarch butterfly reserve here in 1980, and then the designation of a UNESCO-sponsored biosphere reserve in the early 2000s. Logging was prohibited, and unofficial presence in the forests was redefined as "trespassing," especially during the winter butterfly season.[10] As Columba Gonzalez-Duarte has written, such restrictive strategies transform conservation areas into "dreamlands for elite consumption."[11]

Cerro Pelón is located in the southern reaches of the biosphere reserve. The entrance to the sanctuary here lies within the pueblo of Macheros, one of five villages that make up the Ejido el Capulín. Murals on the walls of the sanctuary's visitor center depict some of this history and its legacies: the stacks of lumber brought down from the mountains by railway and pack animal in past decades, the stables where these animals were corralled here in Macheros, the church of San Isidro de Labrador that remains at the center of the small settlement of four hundred people. On another wall of the visitor center is a hand-painted map of North America with no borders to delineate, just three national flags that overlap and blend into each other. In 2014, the monarch butterfly was adopted as a symbol for the North American Free Trade Agreement and its promise of transnational cooperation. In places like Macheros, however, the agreement was a dire blow to the local economy, flooding the area with cheap corn from the United States, stealing the market away from local farmers and driving labor outmigration.

We saw monarchs flutter now and then down the narrow roads snaking through the pueblo when we were there in 2019. The squawk of chickens echoed through the air, as did the clamor of an occasional motorbike or chainsaw. As with many other places in Mexico, the United States felt both very close and very far from here. I met people who had been deported from the United States, and others who said they'd never been and had no intention to go. Some had work permits to travel north once or twice a year for field labor — planting onions, harvesting blueberries, tending to sweet potatoes — while others told me they were thinking of going but without a plan in mind. One young man I met was weighing all these options. He said he hoped to make it soon to Phoenix if he could.

10. Gonzalez-Duarte, "Butterflies, Organized Crime, and 'Sad Trees.'"
11. Gonzalez-Duarte, "Butterflies, Organized Crime, and 'Sad Trees,'" 4.

We stayed at a bed and breakfast established on the land of one of the pueblo's families. Joel Moreno and some of his brothers had spent many years working in the United States, in landscaping and other trades. Joel opened the lodge in Macheros with his wife Ellen Sharp, an American anthropologist, with tourist revenue becoming a substantial source of income for dozens of local people in the months when the butterflies were here. Otherwise, they explained, many households had few options other than illegal logging in the nearby mountains. A few years ago, with this problem in mind, Joel and Ellen started a non-profit organization called *Butterflies and Their People*, training local men and women to work as arborists in the nearby forest, a paid alternative to logging. Joel's own father Melquiades had been employed here as a forest ranger by the state of Mexico for more than thirty years, and when he retired, he had ceded the responsibility to Joel's brother Pato.

Visitors from elsewhere who stayed at the lodge had often grown up with the chance to nurture a love of butterflies, tagging and releasing monarchs from distant places as my own children had done in school. "In contrast, in the communities around the reserve," as Sharp has written, "people live too close to the bone for the luxury of citizen science."[12] Those who found employment as forest stewards, she has argued, had the chance to develop a different perspective on the butterflies and their environment, although the international monarch conservation establishment has made little room for the insights that arise from such everyday encounters in Mexico between butterflies and rural people.

"Sometimes the monarchs land on us to warm themselves up," Pato Moreno recounted in a photo essay he contributed to the *Journey North* wildlife migration blog in 2021.[13] The trove of butterfly photos and videos that Pato has posted online reveals a keen sensitivity for monarch lifeways and small moments of beauty in the forest, bringing him tens of thousands of followers on Facebook. "You go into the forest and see the trees and you think of them as friends who are part of you," Pato observed in an oral history project on the experience of local forest rangers co-written by Ellen Sharp and Will Wright. "Then to see a tree that is cut down is very difficult, and it's sad seeing the forest cut down."[14]

Growing up, his brother Joel told me, their grandfather used to advise them not to harm the butterflies, for they were the souls of the dead, spirits of the ancestors who returned each year for the Day of the Dead. No one knew where they came from, only that they always did. The idea implies that it is here that these creatures truly belong, rather than the fields and meadows they traverse for most of their lives in the distant north.

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12. Sharp, "Who Gets to Be a Citizen-Scientist?"
13. Moreno, "Taking Care of Cerro Pelon's Forest."
14. Sharp and Wright, "'We Were in Love with the Forest,'" 12.

The summit of Cerro Pelón soars more than 3000 feet above the hillside village of Macheros, slung onto a slope of the Sierra Madre Occidental. Paths up the mountain are steep and demanding; we took horses, guided by men from the pueblo. We passed through mixed forests of oak and other broadleaf trees, boles carpeted with moss and creepers. Now and then, in the stands of pine, you would see half a plastic bottle fixed below a gash in a tree trunk, collecting the resin that slowly seeped out, attesting to the other ways that people sought a living here. Amid this verdant mass of montane vegetation the monarchs sought out the *oyamel* fir, *Abies religiosa*, a native conifer found in isolated groves in the higher reaches of the forest.

It was a good season for butterflies when we visited in January 2019, maybe thrice as many as the year before. As we ascended the mountain we found more and more of them gliding along the trails. On clear and cloudless days like this one the monarchs drift widely, seeking out patches of sunshine and warmth. We came across a clearing where thousands flitted overhead, arcing toward the ground to drink from the dew, from the nectar of the wildflowers. It was a moment for slack-jawed wonder. "I've never seen so many butterflies," my son blurted out, watching them pass overhead.

Look to the sky and you'd see them come down like autumn leaves, flecks of orange and yellow drifting from the branches in the distance, bright spots of color run through with darker veins. The analogy made sense until you noticed that it didn't quite work, for they were doing more than falling to the ground, instead making slight turns and pirouettes to remain in the air.

All of us kept fumbling for words to make sense of what we saw, this vision of an entire world alight with fiery sparks, the fullness of a landscape come alive with butterflies. "It's like a highway, they're zooming past me," my son marveled. One of the guides from Macheros straddled the path and closed his eyes, holding both his arms outstretched as if to welcome whatever might pass his way. "They come like a river," he mused. I couldn't help but think about xenophobic tropes of anti-immigrant sentiment we'd been hearing in the United States, about the "floods" of migrants pouring into that country. Here, they truly flowed through the air around us.

"I hope one lands on my finger," my daughter said, gingerly holding out a hand. Just about six at the time, she'd been a little uneasy at first about the clouds of butterflies swooping around us—these were, after all, swarms of insects, however elegant the patterns on their wings might be. But it helped to focus on individual creatures, to look more closely at the ones that were resting, the markings on their wings, the shape of the proboscis, the small parts that might have gone missing during their arduous journey here (fig. 3). We walked carefully through the clearing for some time, trying not to step on any butterflies underfoot. You could feel them in the air around us, the susurration of countless wings thrumming through the sunshine.

We climbed for another hour by horseback, then hiked the final length to the firs where the monarchs clustered. "I'm tired from the walk," my daughter complained. I tried some parental banter. "We're almost there. See the butterflies here? Think about

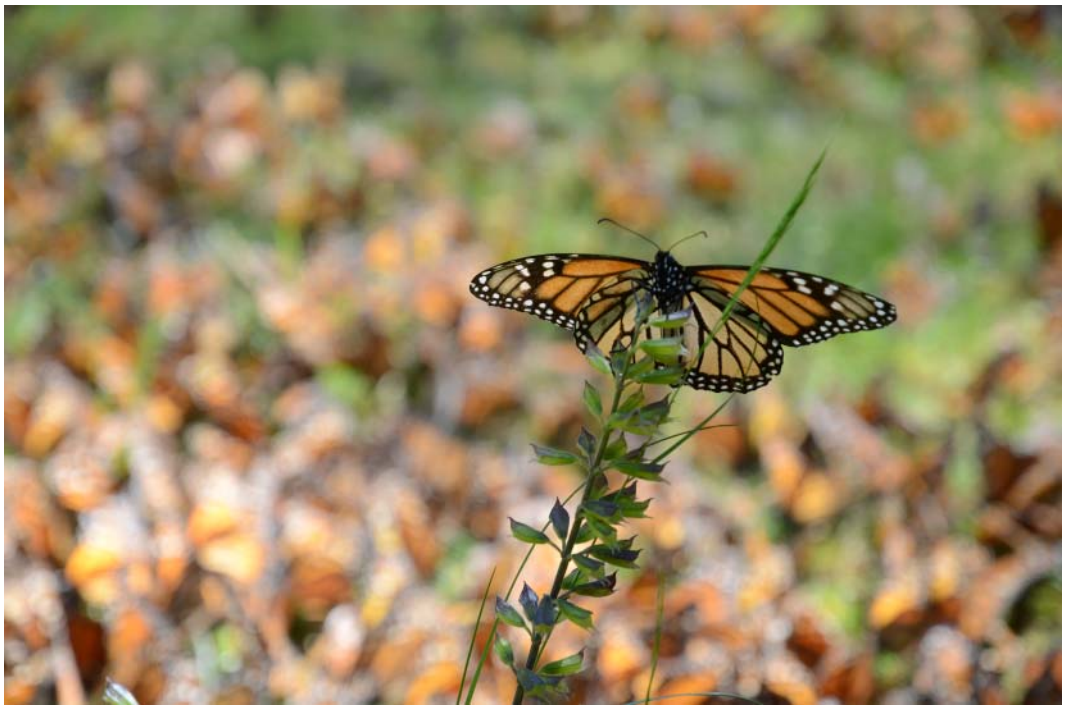

Figure 3. An individual butterfly among the thousands. Photograph by the author.

how far they came. They came thousands of miles to get here. They didn't ride horses, they didn't take an airplane, nobody gave them a lift, they came here on their own." My daughter fixed me a look when I said all this, weary of the wonder she was being asked to feel. "You saying that just makes me more tired."

Up ahead was the heart of the colony. It isn't easy to describe how the branches of the *oyamel* trees looked overhead, hanging low with these heaping clumps of insects. You could say they looked like dark bunches of grapes, the thousands of butterflies clustered onto each branch. Look more closely then and you would see the sharp lines of their wings, like orange crystals pulsing atop the bristly green needles. Now and then when the wind picked up, the trees would creak and groan with the load they carried. At times, the guide said, the wood just snaps from the weight of the butterflies.

Here we were at last, in the mountain home of the monarchs. My son and daughter speculated about whether any of the butterflies released by her kindergarten class had made it here. The journey was fraught with so much uncertainty; the kids knew how hard it would be to say. The dirt at our feet was littered with dead and dying butterflies, and the children were obsessively drawn to those still twitching and skipping from the ground. "Is it gonna die?" they asked. You could feel it, the exhausting burden of getting here, surviving.

I talked for a while with the forest ranger posted to the site. He too had worked for a couple of years in the United States, at a metal fabrication workshop in Wisconsin. "Too cold," he said, shivering at the thought of it. We stood together, gazing at the butterflies swarming above us, marveling at the idea of such tiny creatures coming so far.

"*Indocumentado*, without papers," I quipped.

"Pffft, without visas," he added with a laugh, gesturing with his hand to show how easily they'd sailed across that distant border.

* * *

Monarchs are celebrated for their migration. But it isn't simply how far they go, year after year; there's also the astonishing fact of their convergence, their ability to find each other at a time when national borders govern the movement of individual human bodies so forcefully, disrupting family ties and relationships. While the core area of the monarch butterfly reserve in southern Mexico spans about 52 square miles, the butterflies congregate in just a few tiny patches within this span. In the winter of 2018–19 researchers identified fourteen colonies of monarch butterflies occupying a total area of just 6 hectares.[15] It was in these minuscule tracts that butterflies ranging over nearly 2 million square miles of North America would gather, rest, and breed—as many as three hundred million butterflies that season.[16]

Biologists have yet to establish how these small creatures find their way to these spots, given the profound distances they must traverse. No one monarch makes its way to Mexico more than once in its life, and several generations pass, in fact, in the slow transit northward once again, meaning that each butterfly that lands in Mexico is many generations removed from those that had been here before. Monarchs carry a compound called magnetite in their bodies, and some scientists have suggested that they orient themselves and plot a direction in relation to the earth's magnetic field.[17] The puzzle remains unresolved, an occasion for avid speculation. "There is a dust that falls from the scales on their wings," our driver assured me, arguing that it was this substance that guided the butterflies here, that passed on knowledge of this place between generations.

Roberto and I were crouching over a small rivulet when he said this, watching monarchs flit down to alight on rocks and branches beside the water. We were in the Sierra Chincua sanctuary, another crucial gathering ground for the butterflies about twenty miles north of Macheros, near the historic mining town of Angangueo. The American Smelting and Refining Company mined silver and lead here for many decades of the twentieth century, until the mines were nationalized by Mexico after a catastrophic accident in 1953. A Mexican mining concern is planning now to reopen the mines, a possibility that greatly alarms monarch enthusiasts, for two of their most significant refuges—El Rosario and Sierra Chincua—are in forests on the periphery of the town.

15. Rendón-Salinas et al., "Superficie forestal ocupada."
16. Agrawal, "Monarch Population Size."
17. Agrawal, *Monarchs and Milkweed*, 189–92.

Roberto had driven us here in a white sedan he had recently purchased. A man of compact height and pleasant demeanor, for the last several years he'd been traveling back and forth to a small town in central Wisconsin where he worked as a farm laborer, looking after sweet potatoes. He would leave by bus each April, return for a few weeks each August, then leave again for Wisconsin where he would work through December. He and his wife had two daughters, one just nine months old. The baby had a serious problem with one of her legs and likely needed surgery. It would be some time before Roberto could pass up this difficult labor itinerary, leaving his family, year after year, in order to ensure their care.

We learned from Roberto that he was also a *cantante*, a singer, as we took the narrow, winding road down the mountainside from Macheros. He picked up his phone to pull up YouTube, which I did for him so that he could keep his hands on the steering wheel. It turned out that he was the lead singer of a *banda* musical ensemble; they'd made several albums, and they would tour whenever he came back to Mexico. The videos they had posted online were slick, professional productions, shot in fancy locales and edited with dramatic verve, with Roberto alternatively crooning on a stage with his band members or playing a role in the stories these songs told of amorous betrayals and clandestine romance.

You could find him in an opulent hotel suite with a beautiful young woman, with a goblet of wine at an elegant restaurant, lounging with children in the living room of a palatial home. We were astounded by these spectacles, having driven right past the modest house and fields his family shared. When I praised the fine look he sported in the videos—always in gleaming shoes, finely tailored shirts and slacks—Roberto shrugged and grinned. I couldn't square it. Behind the wheel of the sedan, he was wearing jeans and a Buffalo Bills sweatshirt. Perhaps the only clue to his other life was the cowlick curling atop his head, some small marker of a clandestine defiance. "You are my secret adventure," went the refrain to one of the songs, and the line stayed with us all day as we traveled to Sierra Chincua.

"We all have fantasies and dreams," Roberto later said on our way back from the reserve, "that's what it means to be a human being." I couldn't help but think about the American dream, *el sueño americano*, as Roberto put it, an aspiration that he, like so many others in Mexico, knew well. Far more important to him, however, was what he called the Mexican dream, *el sueño mexicano*. This dream, he said, "would be to live in Mexico and have enough work to survive, enough to live well with your family. Not to go to the United States: that's my Mexican dream, to have a good job here. But this would be a fantasy. This is why we leave."

That year in Wisconsin, Roberto would earn $13 an hour, 25 cents more than the year before. And until he headed north that April, he would seek work here however he could. His phone started to ring, in fact, just as our conversation began to dive more deeply into these philosophical matters of dream and aspiration. He apologized for taking the call—it was another small chance at work—before dropping us off on one of the

Figure 4. Mural in Angangueo, Mexico. Photograph by the author.

cobbled roads that snake through Angangueo. Painted onto the wall of a nearby playground was a cluster of monarch butterflies, flitting around the image of a young girl (fig. 4). There were long red ribbons that dangled from her pigtails, and a pair of wings in orange and black, sprouting from her back.

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I began thinking in earnest about the boundaries that frame the United States in the fall of 2016. My own parents emigrated to the United States from India in 1972, and my siblings and I were born and raised in this country. For us, as for countless other immigrant families, this was home. And yet, with the 2016 presidential campaign, the question of whether we truly belonged here snapped into sharper focus than at any other moment in my lifetime. Again and again, people we knew—my own father too—were accosted by a stranger with that taunt, *Go back to your own country*. The idea of the border wall was an embodiment of this harsh nativist politics, and I began pursuing ethnographic fieldwork around the United States to try to understand why this idea appealed to so many Americans.[18]

18. Pandian, "Look Around You."

At the migrant rights rallies I attended, meanwhile, I was struck by the way that activists had mobilized the image of the butterfly as a powerful rejoinder, conjuring a more expansive and generous picture of American belonging. They struggled against a politics of exclusion that had deepened and intensified over many years. "They call us dreamers but we're the ones who don't sleep," the sign held by one migrant rights organizer I met at a 2017 rally in Washington, DC, declared. She talked about the terror of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on the many local farms in the region where undocumented migrants worked. "There's no rest. You don't know what's going to happen. How can you sleep?"

The border between the United States and Mexico begins in the west as a towering row of high steel posts, sunk into the waters of the Pacific Ocean. This place, where San Diego County meets Tijuana, is still known as Friendship Park, inaugurated by First Lady Pat Nixon in 1971. At the time no more than a wire fence divided the countries here, and families and friends would gather together on both sides for reunions, church services, even yoga.[19] The wire fence later gave way to a high steel mesh barrier, then a second, parallel set of bars on the US side. Eventually, people were allowed into the no man's land between these two fences for just a few hours each weekend day, to approach the mesh and greet their loved ones as best they could.

Beside me on the US side of the border one Sunday morning in 2017 was a young woman who had lived in the United States for most of her life. She'd brought her newborn daughter, dressed with a pink bow and polka-dot onesie, to meet the child's grandfather, a man stuck on the other side. José Marquéz had lived with his wife and children in the United States for eighteen years, until he was deported in 2002. Each month he came to Friendship Park to see what he could of his Mexican-American family.[20]

Looking into Tijuana, you could hardly make out the elderly man through the dense latticework of the barrier. Still, the sound of his guitar carried through the bars as he serenaded his newborn granddaughter in Spanish: *Aunque digas que me odias* . . . "Although you tell me that you hate me / I know this can't be true / It's the look on your face that says it / You're still crying for me." He was singing to the child across the fence. And yet it seemed that in singing of a real need that was nevertheless disavowed, he was also speaking to the country that kept them apart.

Later that afternoon, on the Mexican side of Friendship Park, I met a young man who had grown up on the outskirts of Phoenix. His parents had brought him from Mexico to Arizona when he was two months old. Then, when he was sixteen, a white kid working at the same pizzeria called him in to Homeland Security as an illegal alien. They were in love with the same girl, it turned out, and deportation was one way to resolve the impasse. Carlos was looking now at those same high steel bars, contemplating a crossing.

19. Archibold, "U.S.-Mexico Border Fence Will Split Friendship Park."

20. *New York Times*, "A Song of Love and Longing."

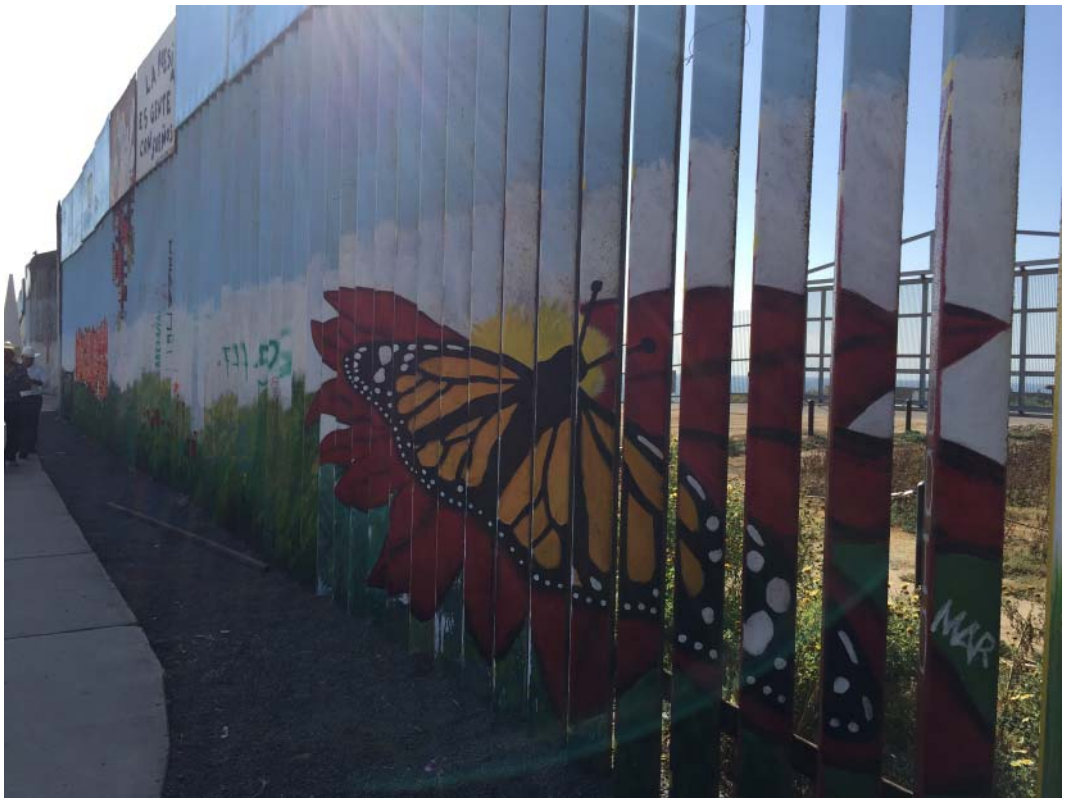

Figure 5. Mural in Tijuana, Mexico. Photograph by the author.

The bars themselves, on the border fence, look very different depending on whether you stand on the American or the Mexican side. In the United States what you see is a stark and imposing barrier, something that looms like a penitentiary stronghold. But in Tijuana the same steel posts are a riot of color and words, painted by muralists and laced with messages of both frustration and aspiration, the testimony of those exiled from the United States and others seeking to kindle the imagination. The bars fade at times into a semblance of blue skies and verdant shrubs, as if you could see the landscape on the other side, as if the "Binational Garden" truly does spill across the divide and toward the horizon beyond.

The border fence is built as a series of vertical lines of steel. But because these bars are triangular in form, they allow for visual tricks. Walk east along the border—again, on the Mexican side—and you'll see a flag that combines the American stars and stripes with the Mexican motif of green, white, and red. But then circle back and walk west along the same fencing, and what you'll see instead is an image painted in strips onto a different face of these triangular bars, one that reveals a giant monarch butterfly perched upon bright red petals (fig. 5). It's almost as though this flitting creature is a rejoinder to these weighty posts planted into the earth, a living reminder that things will move no matter how much we fix them in place.

So much of the alarm over trespassed borders, Toni Morrison has observed, ensues from "an uneasy relationship with our own foreignness, our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging."[21] Can we learn again to live with a greater sense of mutual implication, to tend to such awareness as the foundation of our social lives? Completely open borders are a difficult proposition, both politically and socially. But so much seems to turn on the nature of those edges between the familiar and the foreign, on the possibility of conceiving these boundaries as porous thresholds, rather than hard divides.

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People dream of butterflies, yes. But do butterflies dream? Entomologists still know so little about the sleep of insects, let alone the more tenuous states of consciousness they may drift into. The monarchs wintering in Mexico fall into a lengthy state of quiescence, a "reproductive torpor," as the renowned monarch biologist Lincoln Brower has put it, that allows them to survive for months on accumulated fat and occasional sips of water. The canopy of the *oyamel* firs serves as a "blanket" to protect from rain, heat, and cold, Brower writes. And the trunks where they cluster are like "hot water bottles" under that insulating cover, radiating enough heat at night to prevent the butterflies from freezing.[22] Blanket, bottle, and bed: these may be human accessories, of little concern to an arthropod. Still, there is no doubt that what monarchs make here is something of a home.

It may not be very comforting to imagine home from the perspective of an insect. If anything, the places where they teem—ants and bees, roaches and grubs—come to mind as allegories of mindless work or dank decay, not as refuges from the troubles of the world. In fact, if insects surface in the thought of home, they do so, for the most part, as evidence of infestation.[23] And yet we share this world and continent alike with them. It is worth pausing, for this reason, to think more about what refuge might look and feel like for bugs like butterflies, what accounts for the well-being that they, like we, seek.

If there is one thing that stands out about the forest groves that comprise the mountain home of the monarch butterflies in the Mexican Sierra Madre, it is the absence of walls. Yet there are other necessary structures of support. In the heights of the *oyamel* firs, boles, branches, and the bodies of other butterflies serve to brace and protect. When monarchs cluster like this, by the millions, they make a more livable microclimate for each other, one with fewer fluctuations of heat and cold, one to safeguard the life-giving resource of humidity. These refuges afford safety and security by putting each butterfly in the company of others, rather than by ensuring the absence of

21. Morrison, *Origin of Others*, 94–95.

22. Williams and Brower, "Microclimatic Protection of Overwintering Monarchs."

23. Raffles, *Insectopedia*.

those others. There is shelter and protection in this company. These colonies seem less to occupy a sprawling interior bedroom than a grand arboreal porch, a city of migrants in the heights.

It remains to be seen how durable these living arrangements will be. The monarchs of North America have seen a steep decline in numbers over time. Logging in the monarch butterfly reserve has accelerated during these two years of the coronavirus pandemic, as sanctuaries have closed to visitors and the international tourist economy has crashed.[24] A leading environmental activist and a tour guide were found dead near the El Rosario sanctuary just a few days apart in 2020, their violent demise possibly linked to powerful cartels operating in the region—the North American drug trade and the booming export market for avocados from the region have fueled both violence and deforestation.[25] Climate change will also pose a serious problem in the long run: the climatic zone most hospitable to the *oyamel* firs is slowly moving as the atmosphere warms, and some scientists speculate that by the end of this century, these trees will only be found beyond the present boundaries of the reserve.

These boundaries remind us that the mountain refuge of the monarchs is a space without walls in only one specific sense. The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve was established with a conservation model that relies on border security and spatial restriction, securing a habitat for wildlife alone in a manner analogous to the nationalist politics that define particular countries as the proper homeland of certain people but not others. These exclusionary policies have had much to do with the violence and other serious challenges that the reserve has faced, as Columba Gonzalez-Duarte observes: "By converting a commons that was governed through communal institutions into a protected area free of people, the policy ironically created a situation that was less able to protect humans, oyamel trees, and butterflies."[26] The best hope for these forests may lie, as Gonzalez-Duarte and Manuel Ureste suggest, in the Indigenous communities that have mobilized locally to defend them in the name of mutual necessity.[27]

In the United States and Canada, meanwhile, the butterflies face other grave concerns. Monarch caterpillars are truly border creatures by nature, relying on the milkweeds found on the edges of agricultural fields, roads, and pastures for their sustenance and survival. Among our industrial crops, like the maize and soybeans that carpet the Midwest, milkweeds are unneeded and unheeded, plants out of place, weeds. In the last few decades, chemical herbicides have largely eliminated milkweeds from vast tracts of land. Chemical pesticides also attack caterpillars directly. And the disappearance of wildflowers from human landscapes makes it more difficult for butterflies to gather the nectar that fuels their transnational flights.[28]

24. Fagin, "How the amazing monarch butterfly migrants became refugees."
25. Bremner, "Did Avocado Cartels Kill the Butterfly King?"
26. Gonzalez-Duarte, "Butterflies, Organized Crime, and 'Sad Trees,'" 3.
27. Gonzalez-Duarte and Ureste, "Indigenous Communities in Mexico Take Up Arms."
28. Malcolm, "Anthropogenic Impacts on Mortality."

In all these ways the monarchs are also victims of our society's intolerance for those who don't properly belong, lives dismissed as useless and out of place. Their fate reminds us that a world of stark lines between inside and out is a toxic one, especially for those caught in between. For these migratory butterflies, as for the human migrants they are often taken to symbolize, it is misleading to speak of borders as somehow simply closed, or to imagine them as open instead. When life depends on movement across boundaries, such movement is inevitable. The question is whether these boundaries are arranged in a manner hospitable to this need.

With the lifeways of the monarch butterfly, the most crucial lesson has to do with the relationships that propel movement across borders, the ties that draw together those within and those without. A society of walls may seek to repudiate their reality, or their necessity. And yet these relationships remain at work in our world of pervasive motion and migration, binding our fates together—whether we know it or not, like it or not—with living beings and distant places far beyond the span of the lines we draw. These are ties that demand acknowledgment. They are relations that deserve care. And they can teach us something essential about the difficult task of taking down the walls we've raised.

Walls between those at home, and the others who remain in search of one; between those within a sheltering cocoon, and the others who walk exposed beyond them; between those who tend with care to their own, and the others left to forage as best they can: there is much to learn in following the threads of these many relations between inside and out, the debts to a world beyond that limn every construction of a world within. For we cannot live without those beings and elements we might like to ignore, those we fear and want to wall out: the people who build our homes and grow our food, the things let seep into the water we drink, the heat building up in the air we breathe. Like it or not, our fates are bound up with all such things.

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