

ADA TRILLO



LA CARAVANA DEL DIABLO

Featuring photography and text by Ada Trillo
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Photographs © 2020, Ada Trillo

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Front Cover: Ada Trillo, "On My Way To America"
Digital photograph courtesy the artist

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photographs from this series were taken in 2020 • images and text courtesy Ada Trillo

FOREWORD

By Alyssa L. Provencio, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Central Oklahoma

The often proudly-made claim that the United States is a nation founded by immigrants glosses over the white supremacy and racism interwoven in our history and embedded in our policies. When the Constitution was first written, our nation's founders never defined the term "citizen" and said almost nothing about immigration. The first codified law addressing immigration, the Naturalization Act of 1790, specified that naturalization was available to any "free, white person," thus prohibiting indentured servants, slaves, and most women from becoming citizens. The blatant exclusion of Black and other non-White residents, as well as the omission of Native Americans, laid the groundwork for the discriminative policies to come.

In the late 1800s, prohibitive practices continued with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers' immigration, fearing they were taking jobs from citizens. The rise of Catholic and Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and the Great Depression prompted additional anti-immigrant sentiments in the early 1900s. In response, Congress passed the National Origins Act of 1924, which established a quota system to limit the number of people allowed to enter the country. The time's economic troubles also led to the beginning of anti-Mexican and Latino attitudes with public campaigns such as "Real Jobs for Real Americans," directed by President Herbert Hoover. In the 1930s, as part of the Mexican Repatriation, state and local governments across the nation forcibly deported between 400,000 and 2 million Mexican immigrants and United States citizens of Mexican descent. A similar mass deportation measure was inflicted on Filipino communities in 1935.

In Central and South America, Central Intelligence Agency-backed coups and corporate plundering of natural resources beginning in the early 1900s have led to the poverty and violence that drives migrants to our borders today. From arranging a coup d'état ousting a democratically-elected President in favor of a 40-year military dictatorship in Guatemala to supporting Pinochet's regime of censorship, torture, and murder in Chile, the United States can be directly implicated in the corruption and instability that still exists in many Latin American countries.

Over the past four years, Donald Trump used his Presidency to continue the campaign against Black,

Indigenous, and people of color like many before him. Our 45th President used words like criminal, alien, predator, and invasion on Twitter and in official White House statements to disparage those who dared to seek a better life for themselves in the United States. This rhetoric also spurred support of his infamous border wall (which also happened to be quite profitable for some Trump-devoted government contractors) and National Guard deployments, furthering his alarm-raising agenda. On August 3, 2019, a white nationalist opened fire in an El Paso Wal-Mart, citing "the Hispanic invasion of Texas" as his motive. There is a clear link between Trump's words and his supporters' actions. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's data shows a rise in hate crimes over the past four years in areas where he won the 2016 election by larger margins.

As support of Trump's racist positions grew, he began turning them into policy. Two of the most controversial and inhumane policies implemented by the Trump administration are known colloquially as the "zero tolerance" policy and the "remain in Mexico" policy. The first mandated the arrest of anyone crossing the border, particularly the southern border, unlawfully. This directive ultimately led to the separation of over 2,500 children from their families. Despite knowing their own inability to reunify families and the cruelty that victims of the policy faced, the Trump administration continued expanding the zero-tolerance practices. It was not until after judicial interference and political pressure mounted, including intervention by over fifty CEOs of prominent American companies, that it was rolled back during June 2018. Notwithstanding, separations continued well into 2019, and the Administration's incompetence has prevented many families' reunification as of this writing.

Ada Trillo's work captures las caravanas, caravans that started in Central America with migrants escaping

"In her photographs, Ms. Trillo shows us the faces and the experiences of the people who risked everything they knew by taking a chance on the promise that our nation once gave to those fleeing persecution."

dire circumstances, such as extortion, death threats, and sexual violence in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. In his attempt to stop these caravans, President Trump strong-armed Mexico and Central American countries into helping to prevent asylum seekers from reaching the U.S. border by threatening to cut aid and impose tariffs. In the summer of 2018, to deter asylum-seekers further, the Department of Justice went against precedent, implementing a policy that would deny protection based on gender-based or gang-based violence. That fall, Trump proclaimed that asylum would not be granted to any person entering the United States outside a port of entry. In the winter of the same year, the Department of Homeland Security announced that migrants with asylum claims would be released to Mexico to wait for their hearings, making the barriers to achieving asylum almost insurmountable. In early 2020, the Migrant Protection Protocols, or "the remain in Mexico" program, was further hindered by the onset of the novel Corona Virus pandemic, which halted all border traffic, effectively stranding migrants in ill-prepared border camps run by local gangs.

Despite the harrowing circumstances – a journey of harassment, brutality, detention, and deportation – many were (and are) not deterred. The resilience, strength, and determination of these asylum-seekers are not the qualities that Trump and his supporters want us to see in those asking for protection by our country. In her photographs, Ms. Trillo shows us the faces and the experiences of the people who risked everything they knew by taking a chance on the promise that our nation once gave to those fleeing persecution.

I grew up in a family that looks like a diversity campaign cast—my primos, especially. We are Afro-Latina and Jewish, dark-skinned and light-skinned. Some are bilingual; some of us are not, despite our best attempts. We can trace our ancestral roots to Indigenous lands once held by the Spanish but now known as Texas and Northern Mexico. Our familial homeland straddles an imaginary border imposed on the people who lived there by the wars and treaties of the 1840s and 50s. This imaginary border determines whether a person is born a citizen of this country or not. This border, which used to be freely traveled after the Treaty of Hidalgo, has caused some in my family to contend with the worry of deportation – of a parent, of a friend, of a lover. In the 1960s and 70s, my grandmother worked as a community advocate for undocumented workers who crossed that border, using her Spanglish to help newcomers navigate our nation's complicated immigration system. My story, and my family's story, is an American story. Ultimately, it is an immigration story, which has spanned generations

on both sides of a border – a border that can determine a person's fate.

Ada Trillo's exhibition allows us to see ourselves in the eyes of her subjects. She reminds those who have forgotten their own family's immigration stories about what it means to choose an alternate path, no matter the difficulties. She challenges us to move beyond the other, the alien, and instead see people – people who want a chance to live freely, without fear.

PREFACE

By Veronica Cianfano, MFA., Curator of Galleries and Collections, University of Central Oklahoma

Mediated images such as those we see on television and on our news-feeds have contributed to changing popular opinion and subsequently to policy reform since the advent of mass media. Historical shifts in public opinion conjure images from the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Dust Bowl. The most impactful photographs from these moments in history are those that have focused on the human element, reminding us that real people pay the price of policies and rhetoric. Ada Trillo's exhibition of photographs taken during the migrant caravans' trek toward the Mexico/US border shines a light on those most directly affected by political discourse, the asylum seekers – reminding us of our responsibility to uphold and defend our shared humanity.

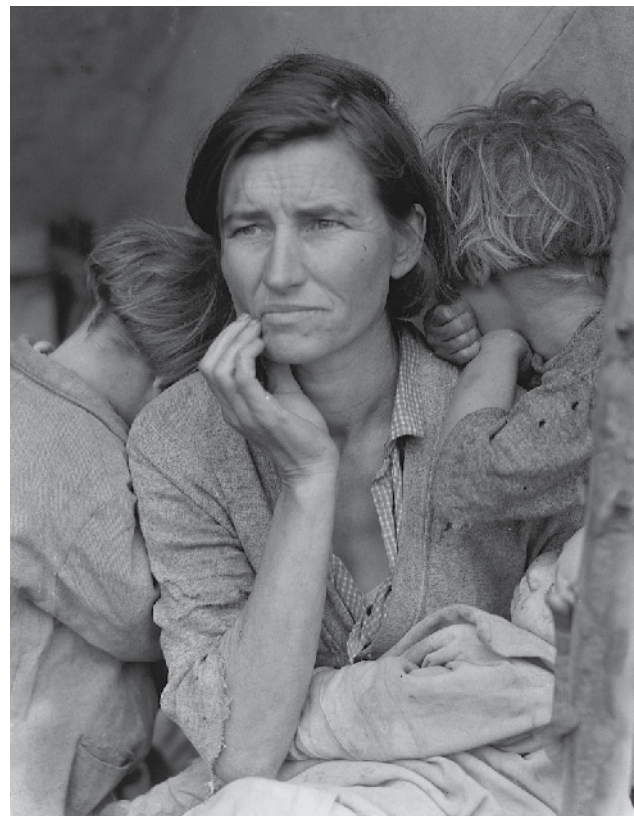
Dorothea Lange famously photographed migrant farmers in 1936 working as a photographer for the Resettlement Administration (later known as the Farm Security Administration). Her iconic photograph of Florence Thompson with her three children, known as Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California lives on in our collective memories as a symbol of post-depression America. Her portrait of a poor migrant family helped garner support for Roosevelt's then controversial (some accused him of socialism) "New Deal" to provide aid to the poor.

"We know she is worried about her child by the lines on her face and her body language. We know this truth in our bones just by virtue of being human."

Lange felt photographers had a duty to represent reality because visual media can too easily serve to seduce viewers into an idealized version of reality thus paralyzing us from social change.

Ada Trillo's photo-documentation of the caravans in Central America and Mexico present us with a similar opportunity to affect change. It is my view that Trillo's photographs are on par with those of Lange both in their formal qualities and in their historical importance/potential to ignite social change. Trillo and Lange both create intimate moments with their subjects in similar ways: the subject is closer to eye-level with the camera which means that the photographer is in the situation with the person being photographed, they aren't above them literally or figuratively; the person photographed is given importance over the situation or environment because they take up more space within the composition; finally, and perhaps most importantly, we see that the subject trusts the photographer. We can see through body language (eye contact, relaxed shoulders, a hand gesture, etc.) that in an act of ultimate generosity to us/the viewer, this person has allowed the photographer to capture them in a vulnerable, unposed state in an image that will live on longer than themselves. This trust between photographer and subject is essential in translating an intimate, earnest moment to the viewer. The viewer can look into the eyes of a mother. We know she is worried about her child by the lines on her face and her body language. We know this truth in our bones just by virtue of being human. Suddenly, we see only our shared humanity. Here is the power of the image.

Common mediated images of the migrant caravans are typically taken from afar and from above. The people in the photographs do not have discernable features; they do not appear to have individual agency, and they are visually swallowed by their surroundings. These formal choices focus on the situation rather than the effect of the situation on the individual, and helps perpetuate the shallow narrative of the caravans being a singular, faceless, mass of people. These types of images compile to form a one-sided view that aid in dehumanizing Latin American and Latinx people which primes us for dangerous apathy. Trillo's photographs do the important work of honoring the humanity of each person represented and creating space for us to shift focus from viewing asylum seekers as an anonymous mass to viewing them as human beings, in all their complex and beautiful totality, deserving of their basic human rights.



Lange, D., photographer. (1936) *Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.* United States Nipomo San Luis Obispo County California Nipomo, 1936. March. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762891/>.



Trillo, A., photographer. (2018) *Maria y Su Hijo.* Mother of seven children. Tapachula, Mexico, 2018. [Photograph] courtesy the artist.

INTRODUCTION

By Ada Trillo, Artist and Documentary Photographer

I was born in El Paso, Texas but I was raised in Juarez, Mexico. As a teenager, I traveled back and forth between the two cities so I could attend school in the states. Witnessing life on the border as a young adult had a strong influence on my worldview and art practice. After years of working as a painter, I picked up a camera and started making pictures.

For the past four years I've been documenting the journeys immigrants take to reach the Mexico/U.S. border. I've photographed aboard the infamous La Bestia, a dangerous journey by freight train that migrants from Mexico and Central America ride every year to reach the border. Gangs follow the train with the sole purpose of kidnapping, robbing and raping the defenseless migrants on board. It's estimated that eighty percent of passengers are subjected to violence while hundreds have died.

While the media often covers what is happening at the border, they all too often overlook the individual trials, struggles, and humanity of those seeking to escape violence in pursuit of a better life. Spending countless days and nights living alongside those I photograph, I hope to present an honest, unadulterated view of migrant life. It's critical to unveil individual journeys and explore the reasons why people were forced to leave their home.

In 2018, I flew to Chiapas to join La Caravana as it took its first steps into Mexican territory. The members of the caravan sought safety in numbers as they traveled over 1,800 miles to reach Tijuana. In order to cover such a distance, migrants traveled light, relying on donations and shelters for the food, water, clothing and medicine they desperately needed. In November 2018, approximately 7,000 migrants reached the end of their journey as they arrived in Tijuana. Most were housed at the Benito Juarez shelter, a converted outdoor sports arena which was later closed for unsanitary conditions. Migrants were met by angry locals who attacked them and aid groups such as the Red Cross.

From 2017 to 2019, I returned to my hometown of Ciudad Juárez to document the struggles of asylum seekers directly affected by Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' policy. A glimpse into the besieged hopes, harsh uncertainties, and blunt realities – but also the enduring dignity – of mainly Central American asylum-seekers forced into a cruel and dangerous waiting game by the 'Remain in Mexico' policy. I documented the daily

life of those who sought refuge at Casa del Migrant, a Catholic-run migrant shelter in Juárez.

In January of 2020, I met up with a massive migrant caravan from Honduras fleeing violence and poor economic conditions. We traveled for 8 days from San Pedro Sula through Guatemala and into Mexico. People slept outside and went days without food. Finally the caravan crossed the Suchiate River into Mexico but was met by the recently established Guardia Nacional composed of former Federal, Military and Naval Police.

Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has historically called for safe passage for migrants, but when U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to impose tariffs, Mexico reversed its policy and deployed soldiers to keep Central American migrants from entering Mexico.

Trump has effectively barred asylum seekers from entering the U.S. by threatening to impose tariffs and cut foreign aid to Central American countries. The human cost of Trump's political agenda is denying people their fundamental human rights. For many asylum seekers, deportation will result in living a life of extortion, impoverishment and even death. The full effect of Trump's xenophobic policies toward immigrants and asylum seekers will no doubt be felt for generations to come.

"Spending countless days and nights living alongside those I photograph, I hope to present an honest, unadulterated view of migrant life. It's critical to unveil individual journeys and explore the reasons why people were forced to leave their home."



Carlos
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"



Kevin by the Wall
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
28" X 17.5"

My goal with these photographs is to document the plight and resilience of the refugees and migrants I met in Chiapas.

I want to expose the truth about who they are, the injustices they suffer, and all they have to offer both the United States and the world at large.

Seeking Asylum
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"





Buses to the Border
Navojoa, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"

In October 2018, over 4,000 migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador gathered at Mexico's southern border. Their hope was that strength in numbers would protect them against the dangers ahead.



Maria y Su Hijo
Tapachula, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"

Donald Trump jumped at the opportunity to promote his brand of anti-immigrant politics by declaring a "National Emergency."

Reinforcing the Wall
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
52" X 36.5"

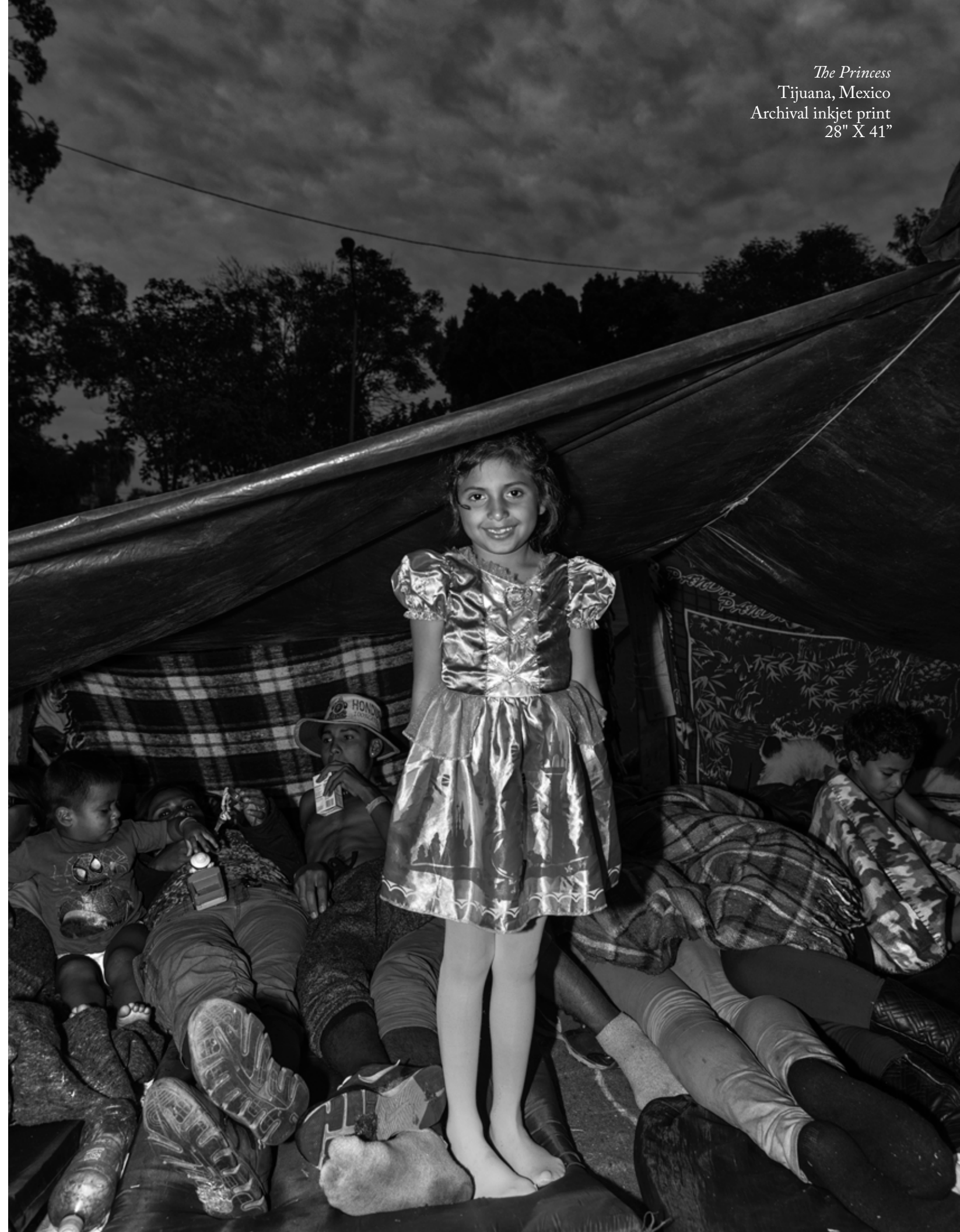




Laura and Her Daughter
Chiapas, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"

He sent troops to the US border and threatened to cut humanitarian aid to Central America. As the situation between the Caravan and Mexican officials grew tense, I flew to Tapachula, Chiapas, near the Mexico-Guatemala border. The people I met were not the criminals depicted by Donald Trump. They were parents, students, and children with hopes and aspirations of living lives free of fear.

The Princess
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
28" X 41"





Maria Fernanda
Chiapas, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"

Many were fleeing extortion and death threats from gangs. Some clever young women had disguised themselves as men in order to avoid harassment along the way. Others were disabled and especially vulnerable to the dangerous journey north.



Concencion
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
28" X 41"



La Boda
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
28" X 41"



Ana at the Benito Juarez Shelter
Tijuana, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"

Many everyday people throughout Mexico showed compassion and solidarity with the Caravan by giving food, shelter and fresh clothes to those making the journey.



Crossing the Suchiate River
Guatemala-Mexico border
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"



Almost There
Guatemala
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"

Chelita clings to her mother amidst the chaos of migrants waiting to be admitted into Mexico. After days of waiting at the border Julio César Sánchez, the Director General of Special Affairs for the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Government of Mexico, appeared as a representative of the Mexican Government and began allowing families to enter in small groups, after making ambiguous promises that didn't apply to all members of the caravan. He never said what would happen to the families or where they would be taken.



Tear Gassed
Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"

Upon arriving at the Mexican/Guatemalan border, roughly 800 migrants managed to cross onto Mexican soil and walk several miles to Frontera Hidalgo. It was here that hundreds of troops descended upon the caravan and forcibly herded many onto buses with the use of tear gas and riot shields. Women and children were caught in the chaos, many suffering chemical burns and other serious injuries.



Whatever it Takes
Guatemala-Mexico Border
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"

Mexico closed its doors to migrants at the El Ceibo border on January 20, 2020. This frame captures an unaccompanied minor trying to cross illegally under the gate.



On My Way to America
Guatemala
Archival inkjet print
41" X 28"

One member of the migrant caravan carries a United States flag to demonstrate his enthusiasm to become an American citizen. When conditions in your homeland are so dangerous that you are willing to pick up a new flag and start a new life in a country you don't know, it produces a mixture of desperation and hope that won't be dissuaded by tear gas and riot shields.



Families Stay Together
Hondoras
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"



Barbed Wire Fences
Guatemala
Archival inkjet print
30" X 24"

Upon their arrival at the Border, the migrants were met with barbed wire fences, blocking their passage. José, 6 years old, is waiting patiently at 3 a.m. to start his journey across the border via the Suchiate River.

Ada Trillo is a Philadelphia-based photographer, native to the Juarez-El Paso binational metroplex. In her work, she focuses on borders of inclusion and exclusion as they are experienced through people in forced prostitution; climate and violence-related international migration; and long-standing borders of race and class. Through the elements of documentary and fine art photography, Trillo lays bare our common humanity and dignity and brings attention to the impact borders have on exploited and marginalized people by amplifying their voices. Trillo's work is in the permanent collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She is the recipient of the Female In Focus 2020 best series award, and was recently featured in The Guardian, Vogue, and Mother Jones, among other publications. She has also been awarded The Me & Eve Grant with the Center of Photographic Arts in Santa Fe and received First Place in Editorial with the Tokyo International Foto Awards. Trillo has exhibited both nationally and internationally in NYC, Philadelphia, Luxembourg, England, Italy, and Germany. She holds degrees from the Istituto Marangoni in Milan and Drexel University in Philadelphia.



AdaTrillo.com

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