

# Traveling Soles

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Verónica Gabriela Cárdenas



Atkins Library

UNC-Charlotte

January 17—February 25, 2019



*33 Soles visiting the remains of a migrant's unidentified body at the cemetery in Falfurrias, Texas*

## **About the Project**

Verónica Gabriela Cardenas began working on [Traveling Soles](#) in the summer of 2014 when the Humanitarian Respite Center opened in McAllen, TX. She photographed 250 pairs of shoes from the HRC in various places around the Rio Grande Valley. At that point, 250 was the largest number of people to arrive at the center in a single day. In the weeks after Donald Trump was elected in November 2016, that number grew to 433 in a single day.

*Traveling Soles* — The title is a play on words, which could mean “Traveling Soles” or Traveling Souls.”

## About the Artist

Verónica Gabriela Cárdenas is a documentary photography based in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Her work explores issues surrounding migration and has been shown at the United Nations, Long Island City Arts, and the Festival of International Books and Arts among other locations. Publications featuring her work include *TIME*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *El Mundo*. More information is available through the artist's website at [veronicagabriela.com](http://veronicagabriela.com).



*250 soles about to enter the Humanitarian Respite Center at Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, TX*

## Statement from the Artist

Due to the increase of immigrant families arriving at the bus station in McAllen, Texas in the summer of 2014, after being released from the detention center, Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, decided to provide a place where they could eat, shower, and change clothes before continuing their journey and reuniting with family or friends in the United States. Her philosophy is to “restore human dignity.” Some of their clothes and shoes are washed and donated to others. The largest number of immigrants that they had received in one day that year was approximately 250.

*Traveling Soles* is a series that invites the viewer to learn about the story behind some of the shoes that belonged to these immigrants, who crossed borders fleeing from violence. These 250 pairs of shoes represent that largest number of immigrants to arrive at the Humanitarian Respite Center in the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in one day in 2014. At the end of November 2016, after the elections, the largest number of immigrants in one day increased to 433.

These images show where the soles have traveled through, such as the Rio Grande River, the Hidalgo International Bridge, and the Humanitarian Respite Center.



Damaris, Honduran, age 12



*Alondra, Honduran, age 3*



*433 soles entering the United States through the Rio Grande River or "El Río Bravo," as known in México*

## Curator's Statement

Migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States has a long and complicated history. U.S. interventionism, civil wars, infrastructural adjustment programs, land disputes, gang violence, and poverty are among the many reasons that migrants travel north to the United States. Yet, often the choices that people make that lead to their decisions to migrate vary from family to family, village to village, and person to person. This means that those who are interested in migration, and specifically the histories and politics of migration impacting countries like El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico, must listen to the stories of the very people who are leaving places that they once called “home.”

Alongside this need, there is an increasing visibility of politicized narratives that homogenize the experiences of migrants from Central America and Mexico. Such generalizations consider migrants “criminals” or “needy dependents,” which, in effect, erases the legibility of their unique, personal, and deeply intimate stories within our public discourses. The ability for migrants to express their experiences, goals, and life-worlds adds depth and complexity to the reasons that people choose to cross over the Mexico-U.S. border.

Verónica G. Cárdenas, a documentary photographer from the border-town of McAllen, Texas, understands the need for more stories that faithfully depict the lives of migrants, including their aspirations, joys, triumphs, and hardships. For this reason, the UNC Charlotte Atkins Library, the Center for Professional & Applied Ethics, the Chancellor's Diversity Challenge Fund, the Latin American Studies Program, and the Women's and Gender Studies Program agreed to host Cárdenas' photography series *Traveling Soles* in January of 2019. Given the increased visibility of Central American and Mexican migrants in national and international news, including attention to the various migrant caravans arriving at U.S. ports of entry in the latter months of 2018, members of UNC Charlotte believed that more attention and care was needed to demonstrate the complexity of the lives of border crossers.

Cárdenas' series offers brief glimpses into the lives of adults and children who have arrived at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, often after harrowing journeys to finally arrive at this place of refuge. She carefully photographs the shoes that border-crossers have exchanged at the Humanitarian Respite Center, and she

documents the wear that these long journeys have taken. *Traveling Soles*, however, is not simply about the hardships and violence that such journeys often include. Cárdenas also provides brief windows into the narratives of the people who once inhabited the shoes, and she attempts to reconfigure her audience's interests in the specificity and humanity of each "sole"/"soul" who has traversed the border.

As a philosopher, educator, and activist, it was a tremendous honor to bring *Traveling Soles* to UNC Charlotte. I hope that Cárdenas' work has been able to expand the imaginations of students, staff, faculty, and community partners at UNC Charlotte, and that her work has helped us learn how to attend to and care more deeply about the many migrants who make up our Charlotte community and beyond.

**Dr. Andrea J. Pitts, Department of Philosophy**  
**Exhibit Curator**



# Images of Installation





## Event at Atkins Library

### **MEMENTO VIVERE: SHADOW GROUND, AESTHETIC MEMORY, AND THE BORDER**

A PRESENTATION BY DR. MARIANA G. ORTEGA

**JANUARY 24<sup>TH</sup>**  
**2:30 – 4:30PM**

ATKINS LIBRARY HALTON READING ROOM



Presentation by Dr. Mariana Ortega, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Penn State University

January 24, 2019 from 2:30-4:30PM  
Atkins Library Halton Reading Room

In this presentation, Dr. Ortega discusses the production of spaces of mourning in connection to memory practices—not for the dead but for the living. By using the example of the work of Verónica Cárdenas, an artist from the bordertown of McAllen, Texas, specifically her series “Traveling Soles,” a series of photographs about detained undocumented immigrants, including many Central American children, Dr. Ortega calls for aesthetic memory as a way to honor all of those immigrants who have become invisible as humans and hypervisible as “criminals.”

Co-sponsors include The Center for Professional & Applied Ethics, Women's and Gender Studies, Latin American Studies, and the Chancellor's Diversity Challenge Fund

## Presentation Announcement

See video of the presentation at <https://bit.ly/2Zh6lLe>

# MEMENTO VIVERE: SHADOW GROUND, AESTHETIC MEMORY, AND THE BORDER

Join us for a presentation on the linkages between transnational migration and aesthetic memory by Dr. Mariana Ortega, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Penn State University.

In this presentation, Dr. Ortega discusses the production of spaces of mourning in connection to memory practices—not for the dead but for the living. By using the example of the work of Verónica G. Cárdenas, an artist from the bordertown of McAllen, Texas, specifically her series “Traveling Soles,” a series of photographs about detained undocumented immigrants, including many Central American children, Dr. Ortega calls for aesthetic memory as a way to honor all of those immigrants who have become invisible as humans and hypervisible as “criminals.”

Please join us for an afternoon focusing on the linkages between transnational migration and aesthetic memory. The event includes Cárdenas’ “Traveling Soles” exhibit and a small reception before and after the lecture. “Traveling Soles” will be on display in Atkins First Floor Exhibit area from January 21 - February 25.

**JANUARY 24<sup>TH</sup> | 2:30 – 4:30PM**  
ATKINS LIBRARY HALTON READING ROOM

*Sponsored by Atkins Library, The Center for Professional & Applied Ethics, Women's and Gender Studies, Latin American Studies, and the Chancellor's Diversity Challenge Fund*





*Luis, Honduran, age 8*

His mother abandoned him when he was two years old. His father decided to travel to the United States because gangs in Honduras start recruiting boys at the age of ten. (Information from the photographer's website)



*Dacia, Salvadoran, age 7*

Gang members beat her mother while pregnant with her. She was born hydrocephalic and with scoliosis. Her older brother was kidnapped and believed killed. They were kidnapped and tortured by a Mexican drug cartel on their way to the US.



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