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## **ABSTRACT**

Every year, hundreds of thousands of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua risk their lives traveling to and toward the U.S. Long before reaching the U.S.-Mexico border, however, they travel thousands of miles across Central America and Mexico, often stopping off in migrant shelters scattered along the way. Whether travelling by foot or riding atop large freight trains known as “the Beast,” migrants spend weeks, months, and even years in transit, navigating a dense landscape of hardening borders and immigration enforcement in Mexico and the U.S. while encountering incredible dangers along the way, such as assault, extortion, kidnapping, robbery, and murder. This dissertation argues that migration journeys and the places between origin and destination are now key to making sense of the migration process and of migrants’ experiences with displacement, governance, mobility, and violence, as these dynamics increasingly play out in such spaces and as migrants spend more time in transit. Previous journalistic and scholarly accounts of these journeys have typically been framed around tragedy and violence, diminishing migrants’ agency and reducing them to individuals incapable of experiencing anything but tragedy and violence. Deviating from these accounts, this dissertation examines violence and insecurity along migrants’ journeys, as well as their resiliency and resourcefulness, to show that there is much more to migration journeys and to thereby shed light on forms of agency, resistance, and meaning-making that emerge in and through the act of transit. In doing so, it attempts to humanize migrants and to recognize the complexity of their journeys, thus adding depth and nuance to understandings of migrants and of the migration process often rendered lifeless, overly-simplistic, and one-dimensional by journalists and scholars alike.

**BEING IN TRANSIT: LIFE, DEATH, AND THE POLITICS OF MIGRANT  
JOURNEYS FROM CENTRAL AMERICA TO THE UNITED STATES**

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
CNDH	<i>Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos</i> (Mexican National Human Rights Commission)
COMAR	<i>Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados</i> (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance)
DEA	U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DHHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
EU	European Union
FBI	U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INM	<i>Instituto Nacional de Migración</i> (Mexican National Institute of Migration)
INS	U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service
IIRIRA	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act
MPP	Migration Protection Protocols
MS-13	<i>La Mara Salvatrucha</i>
SEGOB	<i>Secretaría de Gobernación</i> (Mexican Secretariat of the Interior)
USBP	U.S. Border Patrol
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

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## CHAPTER 1 – Setting Off on the Migrant Trail

### Origins, August 2016

The dusty, unpaved road in front of the migrant shelter was swallowed by darkness. As the yellow motorcycle taxi sped away, I approached the wrought iron gate with my belongings. Located along a rural stretch of the migrant trail in Oaxaca, Mexico, the shelter sat on a small dirt lot with a cinderblock building in the middle. Outside the building, dozens of migrants rested on foam sleeping pads, staring at an old, flashing television in front of them. Long wooden sticks held up ragged tarps above them to provide cover from the summer rain. In the back of the lot, an open fire flickered, throwing shadows against the cement wall behind it. As I entered through the gate, everyone turned away from the television to look up at me. I set my possessions down and began speaking with Víctor.<sup>1</sup> Sitting on broken folding chairs held together by metal wires, we conversed quietly. Víctor was from Honduras. He had escaped from the infamous street gang, *La Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13), after they threatened to kill him and his family. Setting off from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to seek protection in Mexico and eventually the U.S., Víctor had lived in the shelter for two months, working as a day laborer in the nearby mango fields. He hoped to save enough money to smuggle himself across Mexico to Houston, Texas, where his sister and cousin had lived for the past eight years. I asked him when he would be able to continue his journey. “Only God knows,” he replied, smiling.

Moving through the open courtyard toward the harsh, fluorescent light spilling out of the cinderblock building, I overheard a muffled conversation between three young men. “Did you hear? They found two bodies by the railroad tracks today... Salvadorans.” “No shit!” one of the men responded. “Yeah, both of them were dumped, shot in the head. They took everything,” he

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<sup>1</sup> All names, as well as some locations, in this dissertation have been changed to pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. In most cases, quotations have been translated from Spanish to English.

motioned as if to shoot one of the other men who sipped coffee out of a white Styrofoam cup.

“Was it a gang?” one of them asked. “It had to be,” another responded. “No, no, I think it was the ranchers this time,” the third man said. “They’ll kill you for no goddamned reason.”

As I reached the building’s doorway, a stray dog scurried past me with a bone hanging out of its mouth. A group of young children ran after it, chasing the dog into the street. The building contained two small rooms blanketed in dust, with a number of extension cords snaking along the concrete floor. Connecting them was a narrow hallway with a plastic storage shelf holding heaping bags of rice, black beans, and pasta. I entered one of the rooms and made brief introductions with Diego and Leticia, two members of the shelter staff. After sitting down, they continued their conversation with Ana, an older migrant wearing a tattered sling around her right arm, improvised out of an old, yellowed t-shirt. Red abrasions peaked out from the medical gauze wrapped around her hand and wrist. Travelling alone, Ana was assaulted a few miles away from the shelter while crossing under an elevated railroad track. Today was Ana’s sixth day in transit, after having left her abusive husband in Guatemala City, Guatemala. Upon arriving at the shelter, she refused to visit the medical clinic in the neighboring town, fearful that the staff might report her to immigration authorities. Instead, Ana wanted to leave immediately for Mexico City, where her two sons were waiting for her. Diego and Leticia pleaded with her not to travel so late in the evening, especially after what had happened. Following a long period of silence, Ana finally agreed to stay one more night in the shelter and to resume her journey the next morning.

In the distance, a train horn sounded, echoing off the cement walls that enclosed the dirt lot. “The Beast!” everyone ritually shouted in unison. Pouring out into the street, we watched as the freight cars slowed to a plodding crawl in the darkness. Catching my gaze, Armando introduced himself to me. “Three years ago, you could ride that train straight to the border,” he said. “And now,” I asked him, “what happened?” Armando smiled, “Well, either the immigration officials catch

you, or the gangs kill you... Sometimes, it's both." He laughed, shrugging to himself. "But some of us still try riding the train—it's certainly better than walking!" He turned toward the shelter, shuffling back as the rest of the group continued to stare at the freight train passing us by in the distance.

### **Being in Transit: An Overview**

These vignettes from one of my first nights at a migrant shelter in southern Mexico represent a wide range of events and experiences that permeate the lives of Central American migrants in transit.<sup>2</sup> Every year, hundreds of thousands of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua risk their lives traveling to and toward the U.S. (Masferrer, Giorguli-Saucedo, & García-Guerrero 2019; Massey, Durand, & Pren 2014). Long before reaching the U.S.-Mexico border, they travel thousands of miles across Central America and Mexico, often stopping off in migrant shelters scattered along the way. Whether travelling by foot or riding atop large freight trains known as "the Beast,"<sup>3</sup> migrants spend weeks, months, and even years in transit and navigate a dense landscape of hardening borders and immigration enforcement in Mexico and the U.S. while encountering incredible dangers, such as assault, extortion, kidnapping, robbery, and murder. Environmental hazards and injuries sustained on the migrant trail, including animal bites, dehydration, heat stroke, and hypothermia, are also common.

Despite these risks, migration from Central America has grown in recent years, evidenced by the "surge" of families and individuals who arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border along the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas beginning in Summer 2014 (see Shear & Peters 2014). As many of these

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the term *migrant* in this dissertation is meant to be all-encompassing, including immigrants, asylum-seekers, and other categories used to describe people on the move.

<sup>3</sup> While many migrants no longer use these freight trains to travel north due to Mexican enforcement efforts, some, especially those who cannot afford other means of travel, still do (see also Chapter 4).

arriving migrants voluntarily turned themselves over to immigration authorities to claim asylum, the Obama administration was quick to declare “an urgent humanitarian situation” and “crisis on the border,” requesting more than \$3.7 billion to expand detention facilities, increase surveillance efforts, and hire additional Border Patrol agents (USBP) and immigration judges (Shear & Peters 2014; Rose 2019). This emphasis on immigration enforcement, rather than on aid or assistance, exposed not only the federal governments’ inability to respond to the sudden increase in migration but also its unwillingness to accommodate these asylum-seekers, as the majority of migrants were apprehended, detained, and eventually deported (Preston & Archibold 2014). Whereas during the late-twentieth century, migration to the U.S. was largely undertaken by single men from Mexico seeking economic opportunities, contemporary migration to the U.S. is now characterized by women, children, and families escaping violence and existential threats in Central America (see Massey 2020).

Less than four years later in 2018, another so-called “crisis” erupted at the U.S.-Mexico border as a large “caravan” of migrants set off from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in hopes of reaching the U.S. (see CNBC News 2018). For years, advocacy groups had organized similar caravans to protect migrants as they travelled north; however, in 2018, the event kicked off a media frenzy, igniting public debate over asylum and international migration in the U.S. (e.g., Agren & Holpuch 2018; Semple 2018a). The Trump administration described the movement of people from Central America as a “national emergency” and an “invasion,” mobilizing thousands of military troops at the U.S.-Mexico border to intercept them (Shear & Gibbons-Neff 2018). Trekking across Mexico on foot, the caravan travelled approximately 3,000 miles before reaching their destination in Tijuana, Mexico, where they were placed in temporary encampments and shelters along the border. Many migrants in the caravan eventually returned home or settled in Mexico, while others waited weeks and months to claim asylum in the U.S. (Alvarez 2019). By the end of 2018, the Trump

administration had announced the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP), or “Remain in Mexico” program, effectively sealing off the U.S.-Mexico border from Central American migrants and asylum-seekers alike (see Tackett et al. 2018).

Collectively, these events reflect profound shifts in the landscape of international migration across Central and North America. For much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Mexico served as the primary place of origin for migration from Latin America to the U.S. (Durand, Massey, & Zenteno 2001; Massey & Pren 2012).<sup>4</sup> In recent years, however, rates of migration from Mexico have fallen to historic lows while out-migration from Central America—prompted, in part, by entrenched poverty and violence after decades of civil war and U.S. foreign intervention—has risen to unprecedented highs (Massey, Durand, & Pren 2014). Migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the area otherwise known as the “Northern Triangle,” now represents the leading source of Latinx migration to the U.S. (Masferrer, Giorguli-Saucedo, & García-Guerrero 2019). With this shift, the space extending from Central America to the U.S.-Mexico border and into the U.S. has become a continuous “migration region” (Jonas & Rodríguez 2014), where migrants take passage across Central America and Mexico as they travel to and toward the U.S.

In the wake of these developments, Mexico and the U.S. have worked tirelessly to restrict migration from Central America, implementing punitive immigration policies aimed at impeding, incapacitating, and policing migrants. The U.S., for example, has steadily fortified and militarized its southern border (Andreas 2009; Jones 2011; 2012), while extending the reach of immigration enforcement and surveillance far into the U.S. interior and fusing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with city, county, and state police departments (Coleman 2009; Menjívar 2014). Meanwhile, a growing, robust, and fully private industry of migrant detention has emerged to satisfy

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<sup>4</sup> As of 2017, for example, Mexican immigrants represented more than a quarter of *all* U.S. immigrants (Radford 2019).

the U.S. federal government's appetite for holding and incarcerating migrants (García Hernández 2019; Loyd & Mountz 2018; Macías-Rojas 2016).

In Mexico, efforts to constrain migration from Central America have included a series of high-profile operations culminating in *Programa Frontera Sur*, a far-reaching plan authorized in 2014 by then-president Enrique Peña Nieto. Under the new strategy, and bolstered by the U.S., Mexico fortified its own southern border with Guatemala and deployed hundreds of immigration agents to the south alongside blockades, checkpoints, and patrols, converting this region into an expansive dragnet and enforcement operation targeting Central American migrants (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015). More recently, Mexico has acquiesced to the Trump administration's draconian approach to immigration and asylum policy, consenting to MPP while bending under pressure to arrest and deport more Central Americans (see Kahn 2020). Amid these policies, migration from Central America has become increasingly prolonged, fragmented, and dangerous, as migrants are forced to undertake alternative routes and clandestine modes of transportation that expose them to danger and risk while isolating them from aid, medical assistance, and legal protection. The act of international migration, once accomplished in a matter of days (see Hage 2005), now stretches into weeks, months, and years, with some never reaching their desired destinations at all.

Within migration studies, scholars have sought to better understand Central American migration for some time. For example, there is a long literature that examines sending conditions throughout Central America, detailing migrants' complex reasons for leaving home to escape poverty, violence, political unrest, and war (e.g., Abrego 2019; Castillo 1994; García 2006; Garni 2010; Jones 1989; Morrison & May 1994; Sandoval-García 2017). Similarly, a large body of work in migration studies explores immigration policies and settlement experiences in the U.S., including Central American migrants' encounters with the U.S.-Mexico border, immigration enforcement, and interior policing (e.g., Menjívar 2011; Menjívar & Abrego 2012; Provine 2013; Ridgley 2008; Riva

2017). Other studies have incorporated insights provided by the “transnational turn” to document flows and linkages across Central America and the U.S. (see Faist 2000; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc 1995), such as cross-border family dynamics (e.g., Coutin 2007; 2008; Menjívar 2012; Rodríguez & Hagan 2004) and the transnational reverberations of deportation and return (e.g., Golash Boza 2015; Hagan, Eschbach, & Rodríguez 2008; Zilberg 2011).

As Central American migration has become increasingly difficult and precarious, with the journey itself spanning weeks, months, and even years, the spaces of transit and the places *between* origin and destination have become more important to understanding international migration largely because migrants spend more time in them. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that migration journeys and the sometimes-indefinite act of transit are now key to making sense of the migration process itself and of migrants’ experiences with displacement, governance, mobility, and violence. From an analytical perspective that centers the spaces and times of the migrant journey itself, how migrants adapt to, contest, and navigate global dynamics of displacement and mobility on the ground can be elucidated. As Zilberg explains (2011, p. 3), “Globalization is better characterized by a dialectic of mobility and immobility.” In this way, attention to migration journeys and to the act of transit provides insights into globalization by highlighting how the interplay between state borders, immigration enforcement, and transnational flows of people unfolds across Central and North America.

Insights in these unfoldings are especially important now, as the world witnesses the highest levels of migration and movement on record (International Organization for Migration 2019) and as the freedom of this movement is increasingly constrained and restricted worldwide (Collyer 2007; 2010; Schapendonk & Steel 2014)—whether migrants travel across the Mediterranean Sea to reach the European Union (EU) or overland from Central and South America toward the U.S. As this dissertation shows, these protracted journeys alter the ways international migration unfolds and



takes shape across local, national, and global scales, no longer a simple transition between two places with clear-cut experiences of arrival, departure, return, and settlement that were once assumed by migration theories (see Bretell & Hollifield 2000; Portes 1997). Ultimately, to study these transit migrations, both *what* migration scholars look for and *where* they look change considerably, and the spaces *between* origin and destination become integral to understanding international migration and migrants' experiences. This dissertation shows what we gain in our understandings of international migration and other dynamics when we make these analytic and empirical shifts.

What, though, does it mean to focus on migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination? Only recently, in the aftermath of several national “crises” in the U.S., from migrant “caravans” travelling across Mexico to children crowded into cages and detention centers, have journalists and scholars in North America paid significant attention to migration journeys from Central America.<sup>5</sup> Media and news reports documenting migrants' perilous journeys now proliferate, abounding with stories of desperate migrants trekking through Mexico, vulnerable families stranded along the U.S.-Mexico border, and unimaginable violence suffered by migrants at the hands of cartels and smugglers (e.g., Ahmed 2016; Burnett 2019; Semple 2018b; 2019). Narratives that are less sympathetic, driven by anti-immigrant sentiment and moral panics over migration from Central America, are also common (see Bischoff, Falk, & Kafehsy 2010; Farris & Silber Mohamed 2018). Likewise, the scholarly literature on migration journeys from Central America is dominated by analyses and descriptions of violence, from migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., de León 2015; Doty 2011) to rape and sexual abuse suffered by women in transit (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; Vogt 2018). While these depictions of Central American migration are accurate reflections of reality for many migrants, as I argue in this dissertation, there is *much more* to migrants' journeys and

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<sup>5</sup> In Latin America, Central American migration has long been a topic of study for scholars (e.g., Baires Martínez 1984; Mosquera Aguilar 1988; Pacheco 1993; Vargas et al. 1995).

their everyday lives in transit than these stories allow, and that “much more” matters in reclaiming and restoring migrants’ humanity beyond victimhood.

These news reports and academic studies of the spectacular violence associated with Central American migration normalize such representations and, in the process, create static, fixed understandings of migrants themselves. Tragic displays of assault, kidnapping, robbery, and murder—so often repeated—not only diminish migrants’ agency, suggesting that these individuals passively accept this violence, but also reduce them to “journalistic commodities,” abstract subjects of fetish and spectacle (Klinenberg 2001). Consequently, the act of migration appears oversimplified as a relatively straightforward process, and migrants become less than fully human, incapable of experiencing anything but tragedy and violence and, thus, denied the right to a “complex life” (Ortner 1995). Deviating from these accounts and narratives, this dissertation certainly examines violence and insecurity along migrants’ journeys but also *centers and analyzes* their resiliency and resourcefulness to shed light on forms of agency and resistance that emerge *in* and *through* the act of transit and, in some cases, experiences with violence itself. In doing so, the following chapters highlight both the presence *and absence* of migrants’ agency and resiliency in transit, elucidating the coexistence of life and death, movement and immobility, only visible through a perspective that centers on the spaces of migration journeys, as defined by migrants themselves.

To develop these arguments, this dissertation draws from ten months of ethnographic fieldwork completed between 2016 and 2018 in migrant shelters across Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. Working and volunteering in these shelters, I conducted in-depth participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and mental mapping, recording over 4,000 hours of participant observation and sixty-five semi-structured interviews with Central American migrants, care workers, and key staff in shelters. These data were supplemented by conversations, informal discussions, and everyday interactions with migrants, which were recorded through fieldnotes and field diaries at the end of

each day. I use these data and methods, detailed in more depth below, to examine the sites and spaces between origin and destination, while highlighting violence, insecurity, resiliency, and resourcefulness. I do so with the goal of humanizing migrants and acknowledging the complexities of their journeys. If we are to fully understand migrants' experiences and the realities of contemporary migration, itself, I argue, in an effort to transform the material conditions of mobility and movement across Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., such recognition of complexity and migrants' humanity is necessary in reclaiming and (re)valuing their lives. As Butler explains (2008, p. 1), "Specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living."<sup>6</sup> Thus, in recognizing the complexity of migrants' journeys and their humanity, this dissertation aims to render Central American migrants as fully living and alive.

Following these main arguments, this chapter proceeds by detailing this dissertation's contributions to geography and migration studies, before moving on to discuss key terms that are mobilized throughout subsequent chapters. The second section describes my approach to fieldwork in greater depth, outlining the research sites and methods utilized during this project. Finally, the last section provides summaries and chapter outlines for the remainder of this dissertation.

### ***Toward a Geography of Migrant Journeys***

In the chapters that follow, I explore various aspects of everyday life *and death* along the migrant trail. By focusing on migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination, I aim to further a more nuanced and robust understanding of Central American migration in three ways. First, by investigating multiple sites and spaces throughout Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., this dissertation challenges the transit migration literature (e.g., Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012;

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<sup>6</sup> Butler (2004; 2008) describes these lives as "ungrievable," explaining that "Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living other than life...sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost" (2008, p. 15).

Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008), expanding its geographical focus beyond the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994) of individual “third countries” located in and around Europe to more fully account for what is increasingly a truly global pattern of transit migration. In the same way that Syrian refugees’ journeys and experiences are not shaped solely by Turkey’s national borders and the immigration and asylum policies within them, Central American migrants’ journeys and experiences transcend the borders of their home countries, Mexico, and, in “successful” cases, the U.S. Thus, our studies of migrants’ experiences and migration journeys must do the same and follow, rather than nationally bound, these transit migrations.

Second, this dissertation adds to the small but growing literature around migration journeys and migrants’ (im)mobility (BenEzer & Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018b; Brigden & Mainwaring 2016) by detailing new developments in Central American migration, including *Programa Frontera Sur* and a suite of exclusionary policies under the Trump administration. The reverberations of these events are difficult to overstate, as they continue to transform the geographies of migration in Central and North America in profound ways and, thereby, reconfigure how displacement, governance, mobility, and violence play out on the ground. In documenting these developments, I extend the study of migration journeys into the Trump era, as the fieldwork on which most existing research on migration journeys in Central and North America is based concluded by 2014. This dissertation also expands the geographic scale and scope of this body of work on migration journeys in Central and North America, nearly all of which typically ends *at or before* the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., Brigden 2015; 2018a; 2018b; Vogt 2016; 2018). By detailing migrants’ experiences across Mexico and into and *within* the U.S., this dissertation shows how migrants’ prolonged journeys continue even when they have reached their “destinations,” in detention centers, immigration courtrooms, and shelters. Focusing on the migrant journey even after the “final” border has been crossed and migrants reach

the U.S., I argue, provides a more accurate representation of migration journeys and of migrants' experiences on the move.

Finally, this dissertation makes two contributions toward the study of geographies of international migration. Overall, geographers have largely overlooked migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination (c.f., Collyer 2007; 2010; Schapendonk 2012; Schapendonk & Steel 2014). In political geography, for example, much attention has centered on borders, immigration enforcement, and the geopolitics of (in)security (e.g., Amoore 2006; Coleman 2009; 2012; Jones 2012; 2016; Mountz & Hiemstra 2014). As these scholars argue, bordering practices and immigration enforcement increasingly take place *away* from the state's territorial edges, allowing the exercise of sovereignty to extend far beyond the political lines of maps (Johnson et al. 2011; Parker & Vaughn-Williams 2009). Echoing Balibar's (2002) declaration that "the border is everywhere," this work shows how borders and boundaries are now enacted, materialized, and performed in a variety of ways (Agnew 2008; Paasi 2009; 2012; Parker & Vaughn-Williams 2009). In the U.S., the diffusion of border practices has entailed opposite, yet compatible, strategies. On the one hand, bordering and immigration enforcement have turned inward through policies, such as 287(g) and Secure Communities, which redistribute immigration authority to city, county, and state officials within the U.S., thereby bringing the border to bear on local communities of color scattered throughout the U.S. (Coleman 2009; Menjivar 2014; Walker & Leitner 2011). Likewise, new forms of technology, including the collection of biometric and online data, have been key in expanding policing and surveillance efforts into the public and private spaces of everyday life (Amoore 2006; 2009).

On the other hand, bordering and immigration enforcement have expanded outward, not only through regionally shared databases and a "global surveillance assemblage" that stretches across continents (Sparke 2006; Murakami Wood 2013) but also in extraterritorial spaces that include maritime interdiction (Walters 2008) and offshore detention facilities situated on the peripheries of

U.S. territory, which work to confine, detain, and remove migrants from a distance (Lloyd & Mountz 2018; Mountz 2011; 2017). Together, these tandem processes of extending the border *within* and *beyond* have rendered migrants incredibly vulnerable, whether living inside or attempting to enter the U.S. (e.g., Coleman 2008; 2009; Coleman & Kocher 2011; Hiemstra 2013; 2019; Jones 2016).

While these studies have been instrumental in deepening geographical understandings of bordering and immigration enforcement and their deleterious effects on migrants' lives, as this dissertation shows, the expansion of bordering and immigration enforcement has continued to "ripple out" (Jones 2012) from the territorial edges of the U.S. in ways geographers have yet to explore. For example, under the Trump administration, bordering and immigration enforcement have extended deeper into states such as Mexico and Guatemala, epitomized through recent policies such as MPP and Safe Third Country agreements, and utilized Mexican and Guatemalan territory to control migration from afar. Moreover, through *Programa Frontera Sur*, Mexico has worked to expand its own bordering and immigration enforcement within its national boundaries, leading some scholars to declare that the U.S. has now "outsourced" much of its efforts to restrict migration from Central America (Goodman 2017). This dissertation examines these additional contexts of bordering and immigration enforcement to better understand the shifting geographies of migration control and the far-reaching effects on migrants' lives *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. (see also Walker 2018a; 2018b).

In cultural geography, studies of international migration have traditionally spanned a wide range of topics (see Blunt 2007; King 2012), especially citizenship and belonging (Ehrkamp & Leitner 2006; Gilmartin 2008; Ho 2006; 2008), diaspora (Mavroudi 2007; Ní Laoire 2003), and transnational life (Dunn 2010; Ley 2004; Yeoh & Ramdas 2014). More recently, however, cultural geographers have introduced emotion and affect into the literature on migration (e.g., Christou 2011; Faier 2009; 2013; Kobayashi, Preston, & Murnaghan 2011; Pratt 2012). Drawing from the larger

body of associated work in geography (Davidson & Milligan 2004; Davidson, Bondi, & Smith 2005; Thrift 2004; 2008), these studies emphasize the importance of emotion and affect in better understanding “the embodied and emplaced nature of migrants” (Dunn 2010, p. 1) and show how experiences of migration are bound up with radical changes in migrants’ sense of self and emotional and affective life (Batnitzky & McDowell 2011; Munt 2011; Pratt 2012). Mar (2005), for example, investigates how hope, as a complex emotional and affective structure, pushes and pulls migrants to pursue migration to distant places. Other studies have explored how migrants utilize emotions to maintain intimate connections to “home” (Conradson & McKay 2007; Waite & Cook 2011; Walsh 2012), or detailed the ways that comfort, desire, and love are implicated in migratory decisions (Gorman-Murray 2009; Mai & King 2009). In places of destination, this work has shown, emotion and affect shape migrants’ experiences with settlement and reception. For instance, powerful imaginaries of “boat people” and “illegal maritime arrivals” in Australia and Canada have played on citizens’ anxieties, concerns, and fears to attenuate public opinion over “illegal immigration” (Mountz 2010; Tazreiter 2015). Taken together, this literature demonstrates that emotion and affect are integral to migrants’ experiences, outcomes, and pathways, deepening understandings of larger processes related to migration by focusing on the intimate and everyday (Ley 2004; Ho & Hatfield 2011).

These insights resonate with work in feminist geopolitics, which centers attention on the “everyday and embodied sites and discourses through which transnational economic and political relations are forged and contested” (Williams & Massaro 2013, p. 751). Feminist geopolitics has long emphasized the connections between the global and the intimate, encouraging scholars to consider the lived realities and everyday experiences of larger processes as they unfold on the ground (Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004). As Pain and Staeheli explain (2014), the emotional, affective, and intimate dimensions of everyday life are inseparable from (geo)politics, which are reproduced and

contested at the global scale, as well as through the embodied sites of everyday life. Building on this observation, many scholars have examined how violence and (in)security are interwoven across scales, as political relations play out through global and national arenas and at the site of the body (Fluri 2009; 2011; Pain 2015). Similar studies of migration have shown how fear and vulnerability are central to modern bordering practices and immigration enforcement, as migrants become targets of bureaucratic violence, criminalization, and structural racism (Martin 2011; 2012; Williams & Boyce 2013; see also Hyndman 2012). By centering the embodied and everyday, feminist geopolitics has provided key insights into the inner workings of governance, law, and (geo)politics, detailing how these processes, although often conceived through global and national orders, shape and are themselves shaped by local levels and bodily scales.

Looking toward the spaces between, this dissertation utilizes feminist geopolitics (Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Williams & Massaro 2013) to explore the wide-ranging effects and outcomes of immigration and asylum policy on migrant lives, thereby bridging the local, national, and global to better understand processes such as borders, immigration enforcement, and transnational flows of people across Central and North America. In all these ways, this dissertation shows that spaces and times of transit and the places *between* origin and destination are ever more important to understanding international migration itself, in the process, emphasizing the forms of agency and resistance that emerge *in* and *through* the act of transit.

Beyond these wider contributions, this dissertation offers three interventions into the specific literature on migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination, as I discuss at greater length in Chapter 3. Within this work, migration scholars have engaged with a handful of terms to better understand contemporary migration patterns, including transit migration (Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008), migrants' mobility (Basok et al. 2015; Schapendonk 2012; Schapendonk & Steel 2014), and the notion of journeys themselves (BenEzer &



Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018b; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016).<sup>7</sup> While collectively, these frameworks have detailed various aspects of migration journeys and the dynamics of mobility, movement, and transit that accompany them, as I argue in subsequent chapters, these literatures fall short of capturing the complex empirical realities of migrants' journeys and their experiences on the move. Because transit migration, mobility, and the notion of journeys are foundational to the contributions of this dissertation and the chapters that follow, they merit brief attention here. I begin with transit migration.

The term “transit migration” first emerged among policymakers and public officials during the 1990s but was quickly adopted by scholars studying migration within and around Europe (see Düvell 2012). From its use as a term to describe how migrants travel across countries *between* places of origin and destination and often wait in these places before moving onward (Içduygu 2000; Papadopoulou 2004) to the more broadly defined “*situation* [emphasis mine] between emigration and settlement” (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008, 4), scholars have used “transit migration” to highlight the “stretching out” of migration journeys across countries *between* departure and arrival and the ambiguities and difficulties migrants experience within these places, including uncertainty over whether they will ever “arrive” at their envisioned destinations (Collyer 2007; 2010; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012). This work encourages scholars to look *beyond* previous dichotomies of departure and arrival, emigration and settlement, and sending and receiving (see Collyer & de Haas 2012).

This dissertation draws from the literature on transit migration to center attention on migration journeys and the spaces *between* origin and destination. Yet, it also expands this concept's narrow geographical focus, which, as I show in Chapter 3, functions as a “territorial trap” of sorts (Agnew 1994). In other words, despite the literature's emphasis on “transit,” implying movement

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<sup>7</sup> Additional work has implicitly investigated limited parts of migrants' journeys through the lens of asylum (Davies, Isakjee, & Dhesi 2017; Hyndman & Giles 2011), borders (de Léon 2015; Jones 2016; Nevins 2007; 2008), and migration more broadly (Coutin 2005; 2007; Hagan 2008).

across space and time, most work focuses on a territorially bound, often nationally defined space. As this dissertation argues, however, migrants' journeys frequently span *manifold* sites and spaces that transcend *multiple* international borders, countries, and continents. When considered together, these overlapping domains, as well as migrants' experiences within and across them, provide a more comprehensive understanding of transit migration that accounts for the empirical reality that migration takes place across more than one "transit" country. More broadly, in nearly three decades of use, the concept of transit migration has remained tightly wedded to case studies in and around Europe, leaving migration journeys and the act of transit *elsewhere* largely unaddressed (c.f., Basok et al. 2015; Bruzzone 2016; Missbach 2015). Through its examination of migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination in Central and North America, this dissertation extends the geographic lens of transit migration beyond Europe and includes multiple sites and spaces throughout Central America, Mexico, and the U.S.

Migration scholars have also borrowed from the mobilities paradigm, which focuses on the movement of ideas, objects, and people (see Sheller & Urry 2006), to better understand migrants' journeys and experiences "on the move" (Basok et al. 2015; Schapendonk 2012; Schapendonk & Steel 2014). As mobilities scholars have argued, movement and the ways in which it is controlled reflect and reinforce power relations in the wider world, revealing larger structures that allow *some* people to travel freely while slowing or stopping others altogether (Adey 2006; Cresswell 2006; 2010; see also Massey 2003). In the context of migration journeys, (im)mobility has been key to developing the notion of "journeying" itself. Mainwaring and Brigden (2016), for instance, conceive of journeys as extended processes of (im)mobility that cannot be reduced to a period of time, phase of migration, or discrete space between origin and destination. In contrast to the literature on "transit migration," which implicitly studies journeys through the act of transit in individual countries, they define journeys as "an experience with indeterminate beginnings and ends, [which] transcends easy

conceptual borders, as journeys before migration, journeys from countries of origin through countries of transit to destination, as well as deportation journeys” (Mainwaring & Brigden 2016, p. 244). This framework of journeys has been utilized by other scholars, though few in number, to study migration and the spaces between origin and destination across Central and North America (Brigden 2015; 2018a; 2018b; Soto 2016; Vogt 2016; 2018). Yet, this literature remains limited due in part to the rapidly shifting landscape of migration in Central and North America and, like studies of transit migration, its tendency to fall into the territorial trap by focusing almost solely on Mexico as a place of transit, rather than on the journey itself.

In this dissertation, my approach to Central American migrants’ journeys most closely follows the definition laid out by Mainwaring and Brigden (2016), as well as scholars’ subsequent work on the topic (Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2016; 2018), of migration journeys as experiences that transcend multiple borders with indeterminate beginnings and ends. However, using this work as a departure point, I move beyond it in two ways. Foremost, it is difficult to overstate the importance of *Programa Frontera Sur* in shaping migrants’ everyday lives. In the wake of its implementation, much has changed concerning Central American migration: rates of deportation in Mexico have skyrocketed (Fredrick 2018; Isacson et al. 2015); the Mexico-Guatemala border has become increasingly fortified and militarized (Walker 2018a; 2018b); migration routes have shifted dramatically (Castillo 2016); and cooperation between Mexican and U.S. immigration enforcement has grown considerably (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015; Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). More importantly, exploitation of and violence against migrants have increased precipitously. Between 2009 and 2015, one out of every four migrants reported being victims of physical violence along their journeys (Leyva-Flores 2019). As of 2017, this number had risen to two out of every three migrants (Medecins Sans Frontières 2017). While scholars studying migration journeys in Central and North America have engaged *Programa Frontera Sur* (Brigden 2018a; 2018b; Vogt 2016; 2018), much of this

research was conducted *before* its implementation in 2014. Put simply, these studies rely on older data that no longer accurately capture the dynamics migrants face as they move between and within Central and North America. Thus, drawing from fieldwork and research completed between 2016 and 2018, this dissertation tracks many of the far-reaching consequences *after Programa Frontera Sur took effect*, which compounded the already-difficult and precarious journeys migrants frequently undertook. In the chapters that follow, I document *Programa Frontera Sur's* widespread repercussions for Central American migration, exploring how this policy affected migrants' journeys and everyday lives in transit through their own words.

It is also difficult to overstate the importance of Donald Trump's presidency for Central American migration. As I argue throughout this dissertation, his election fundamentally transformed fieldwork and research, as well as migrants' journeys to and toward the U.S. (see also Kocher 2019; Schmidt 2019). In detailing the chaotic and shifting landscape of (im)migration under the Trump administration, I show how the transnational reverberations of Trump's approach to U.S. immigration and asylum policy have been pernicious and widespread, extending deep into Central America and Mexico. In particular, my discussion of migrants' journeys and experiences in transit reflects both *pre* and *post*-Trump moments, as his campaign and election played out *in real time* during my fieldwork across Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. Accordingly, this dissertation provides a detailed examination into the early architecture of the administration's policies and their consequences, including family separation, MPP, and Safe Third Country agreements, thereby extending studies of migration journeys into the Trump era.

I also attempt to move beyond existing work on migration journeys in Central and North America (Brigden 2015; 2018a; 2018b; Soto 2016; Vogt 2016; 2018) by including migrants' experiences *within* the U.S. Even after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, this dissertation argues, Central American migrants experience prolonged journeys and insecurity, which often involve

incarceration in detention centers, judicial scrutiny in immigration courts, and a rapidly shifting landscape of immigration and refugee policy under the Trump administration. Yet, few scholars have considered these aspects of immigration enforcement as integral parts of transit and migration journeys from Central America (c.f., Brigden & Mainwaring 2016; Walters 2016). While the literature on U.S. immigration enforcement, including detention, deportation, and policing, understandably begins *during* or *after* migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., Coleman 2007a; Coleman & Kocher 2011; Martin 2012a; 2012b; Williams 2017), work on migration journeys has typically ended *at* or *before* that same border (e.g., Brigden 2018; Vogt 2018), falling into the territorial trap and excluding migrants' experiences within the U.S. from their larger journeys. Drawing from the literature on U.S. immigration enforcement, especially detention, deportation, and immigration law (e.g., Burridge & Gill 2017; Conlon & Hiemstra 2017; Kocher 2019; Moran et al. 2013), this dissertation connects insights from migrants' encounters along their journeys in Central America and Mexico with their experiences in the U.S., revealing *how* and *where* migration journeys take place. It does this to better recognize migration journeys' full geographic extent, which span the U.S.-Mexico and extend deep into the U.S. interior and are saturated by *additional* forms of exclusion, insecurity, and violence, particularly under the Trump administration.

Following these works, this dissertation explores the everyday, intimate, and lived experiences of Central American migrants en route to better understand the transnational effects and outcomes of immigration and asylum policy on migrants' lives and bodies and on migration to and toward the U.S. In doing so, it sheds light not only on insecurity and violence but also on forms of resiliency and resourcefulness, attention to which, I contend, humanizes migrants by recognizing their right to a complex life (see Ortner 1995). As this approach shows, the interplay between migrants and the global processes that shape their journeys have far-reaching consequences that leave physical and emotional traces on migrants and long-lasting impressions on the surrounding

environment, transforming economic, social, and political geographies along the way. Critical attention to this interplay, I argue, provides insights into not only new patterns of migration and the ways they play out across Central and North America but also into the complexity of migrants' everyday experiences in the hope of rendering migrants as alive, fully human, and living. I now turn to consider this dissertation's methodology and research sites.

### **Research Sites, Methodology, and Other Considerations**

How does one study migrants' journeys and the spaces between origin and destination? This dissertation's overarching aim was twofold: (1) to examine the geopolitics of migration and its role in shaping migrants' journeys from Central America to the U.S., including the ways migrants negotiated international borders, security, and immigration enforcement, and (2) to explore how migrants' intimate experiences with these facets of migration shaped their sense of self. While my initial plan to conduct this research was carefully structured in advance, the reality of my work as it played out on the ground was much different. Upon entering the field, I crossed into an unfamiliar world—one where I encountered unsparing violence, government corruption, human trafficking, and organized crime. My efforts were also complicated by the chaos and uncertainty of shelters, where crises were common and a variety of individuals—from migrants to care workers to smugglers—freely came and went. Accordingly, much of my approach to conducting this research developed along the way and evolved in situ. This iterative process led to many fruitful missteps, miscalculations, and “methodological failures” (Rose 1997) over the course of this project, as I discuss further in Chapter 2. Here, I mainly discuss my research sites, methodology, and approach to undertaking fieldwork, returning to the ethical and political ramifications of this work in the next chapter.

Studying migrant journeys from Central America posed a number of difficulties throughout my research. Foremost among these was working with a fluid and mobile population. In the past

decade, several scholars have discussed the methodological issues of conducting research with subjects on the move (Amelina & Faist 2012; Buscher, Urry, & Witchger 2010; Merriman 2013). As D'Andrea, Ciolfi, and Gray (2011) explain, studying mobile subjects requires rethinking traditional methodological approaches, which are typically grounded in one static location. This reexamination of methods has been especially true in migration studies, where work has recognized the multiply situated and cross-border experiences of migrant lives (see Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc 1995). In this project's early stages, I envisioned conducting a mobile ethnography, travelling alongside Central American migrants as they migrated northward. Such plans, however, were quickly abandoned due to concerns over ethics and safety. As I detail throughout this dissertation, migrant journeys are saturated with brutality, exploitation, and violence, making a mobile ethnography not only risky and unfeasible but also problematic, highlighting the differences in mobility, privilege, and power between participants and me. Instead, I turned to a multi-sited ethnography in migrant shelters throughout the U.S. and Mexico. My choice to engage in multi-sited research reflects scholars' early calls to take seriously the challenges of performing research on mobile, transnational subjects (Fitzgerald 2006; Pratt & Yeoh's 2003). In migration studies, researchers have often employed multi-sited ethnographies to capture the movement, flows, and diasporic nature of transnational migration (Coleman & Hellermann 2011; Falzon 2009). My fieldwork, thus, centered on two shelters located more than 1,000 miles apart from one another: one in Chahuities, Oaxaca, and another in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>8</sup> Additional fieldwork was completed in shelters in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, located approximately 100 miles northwest of Chahuities, and McAllen, Texas, situated along the U.S.-Mexico border (Figures 1 and 2).

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<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of anonymity, I have chosen not to include the specific names of shelters in which I worked.



Figure 1, Research Sites, Mexico

Chahuities is a small rural town in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. The shelter, which has since closed,<sup>9</sup> was opened in 2014 with funding from a local Catholic priest. Positioned along a stretch of the migrant route known locally as the “gateway to Hell” (see Chaca 2015), the shelter was founded to provide much-needed assistance to migrants, who—after the passage of *Programa Frontera Sur* (Chapter 4)—encountered increasingly risky and dangerous conditions along their journeys. Modest in its purpose and construction, the shelter was designed as a point of transition between Arriaga, Chiapas (to the immediate south), and Ixtepec, Oaxaca (to the northwest), two key

<sup>9</sup> The shelter was permanently closed in July 2017 after tensions over immigration rose to a tipping point throughout the community. Plans for the shelter’s relocation failed, and as of this writing (July 2020), there has been no additional progress.



sites along the migrant trail where larger, more established shelters are located. This corridor of shelters functioned as a network in which migrants quickly passed from one shelter to the other, attempting to avoid the rampant exploitation and violence that had emerged throughout the area. The shelter in Chahuities was well connected to the shelter in Ixtepec, which is one of the largest and best-known in Mexico, and both were funded primarily through the same religious group and worked in tandem. Migrants often arrived in Chahuities only to be escorted northward to the shelter in Ixtepec, which was able to provide more space, resources, and attention. During fieldwork, I frequently shuttled alongside migrants moving between the two shelters, accompanying them on their short journey from Chahuities to Ixtepec, while working in both shelters.

The Mexican state of Oaxaca is particularly important for migration (see Cornelius et al. 2009; Fitzgerald, Hernández-Díaz, & Keyes 2013; Stephen 2007). Long before it was a place of transit for Central American migrants, Oaxaca represented a considerable sending region for Mexican immigrants to the U.S. (Cornelius et al. 2009; Stephen 2007).<sup>10</sup> Historically, it has been one of Mexico's most impoverished states, devastated by years of government neglect, chronic marginalization, and neoliberal restructuring (Martin 2005). Scholars have long remarked that these conditions have created a "culture of migration" in Oaxaca, where many people grow up expecting to leave (Cohen 2004; Fitzgerald, Hernández-Díaz, & Keyes 2013). This stream of migration from Oaxaca to the U.S., however, has tapered significantly in recent years, reflecting a broader decline in outmigration across Mexico (Massey, Durand, & Pren 2014). Oaxaca, and southern Mexico more broadly, is now primarily a space of transit and increasingly, a destination for Central American migrants (Carte 2014, 2017; García 2006).

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<sup>10</sup> For much of the twentieth century, other Mexican states such as Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas served as the primary places of origin for Mexican migrants entering the U.S. (see Suro 2005).



Figure 2, *Research Sites, U.S.*

In the U.S., my research took place in shelters in San Antonio and McAllen, Texas. The San Antonio shelter, hereafter referred to as *Casa*, was opened in 2015 by a local law firm specializing in immigration and refugee advocacy. Over the past two decades, San Antonio has increasingly become a site of transit for migrants released from detention centers just south of the city. As I explain in Chapter 6, the peculiar geography of immigration and immigrant detention in south Texas often funneled detained migrants northward in paradoxical fashion, away from the U.S.-Mexico border and toward San Antonio and beyond. *Casa* provided key services for these migrants, who were frequently released from detention centers and transported into the city without resources or further information about their legal status. I also conducted research at a temporary shelter sited in a

Catholic church in McAllen, Texas, near both the U.S.-Mexico border and a number of immigrant detention centers scattered along the border.

Catholicism and religion were prominent throughout fieldwork and loomed large in the everyday lives of migrants. During interviews and casual conversations, participants frequently referenced “God” and divine will in relation to their journeys. Many migrants carried religious objects, including pocket-sized bibles, crucifixes, prayer cards, and Rosary beads. As migration scholars have noted, faith and spirituality are central to the migration process, influencing migration decisions, preparations for the journey, and community formation in places of destination (e.g., Durand & Massey 1995; Ebaugh & Saltzman Chafetz 2002; Hagan 2006; 2008). Religious practices were especially evident in shelters across Mexico and the U.S., which were funded primarily by Catholic institutions and served as important places of faith and worship. Here, migrants attended formal ceremonies, celebrated religious holidays, and prayed together. In Chahuities, for example, biblical passages were often read out loud by migrants before they went to sleep. On special occasions, migrants who served as pastors in their places of origin delivered sermons and led migrant in collective prayer. Religion, thus, was an important part of fieldwork and appears frequently in the chapters that follow, interwoven through migrants’ testimonies, experiences, and everyday lives in shelters.

Shelters were especially productive field sites in which to study migrant journeys and a mobile population. They acted as “moorings” (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry 2006) for migrants in transit—sites where migrants temporarily paused before continuing their journeys northward. While some migrants stayed for short periods of time—a few hours or days, others remained in shelters for weeks or months. Accordingly, shelters provided not only access to mobile subjects, who were temporarily stopped, but also intimate snapshots of migrants’ experiences on the move, as they arrived and departed from the shelter to resume their journeys.

Despite these advantages, my research in shelters was, at times, exceptionally challenging and chaotic. Due to the quick turnover of migrants, I frequently had only hours or days to interview them. Often, I would grow close to individuals only to see them leave the following day. Other times, migrants would simply disappear from the shelter after we spoke, leaving without sharing their intentions with other staff. This tension between the fleetingness and intensity of these relationships was prominent in shelters and throughout fieldwork, where migrants continuously balanced intimacy and social life with the demands of survival (see also Vogt 2018). As such, the ephemeral nature of these connections obstructed my ability to cultivate trust and rapport with participants over long periods of time. The lack of private spaces available to interview participants in and alongside shelters' everyday disorder only compounded these issues. Many interviews were hindered by interlopers, noise, and other daily interruptions. While shelters were largely characterized by boredom and monotony, they were also subject to moments of chaos: an abrupt medical emergency, a physical altercation between migrants, an exploding cistern, and a midnight raid by local police. Because of these problems, I quickly turned to late-night and early-morning interviews, where I could take advantage of the relative calm and quiet. Over time, I learned to navigate these complications and moments of disarray as I became more familiar with life's everyday rhythms in shelters. My approach to conducting research, therefore, was highly adaptive and flexible, often evolving on the fly while reflecting the chaos and disorder associated with shelters and migrants' journeys.

It was also emotionally difficult to build relationships with individuals who were uncertain of their fate upon departing the shelter. The weight of migrants' journeys often hung over them as they arrived at shelters exhausted and sometimes injured, and saying thank you or goodbye after an interview was also recognition that we would likely never cross paths again. Over the course of fieldwork, however, I grew close to many participants, keeping in touch with them long after they

left the shelter. Much of my own experience in shelters was, therefore, saturated by anxiety, unease, and apprehension, as I worried about participants' safety and wellbeing during the remainder of their journeys. This emotional labor was a key part of this research (McQueeney & Lavelle 2017) and, as I explain in Chapter 2, generated some of this project's most powerful and enduring insights.

Shelters were also spaces of violent, illicit, and clandestine activity. Two months after I entered the field, a group of armed men from the *Sinaloa Cartel* walked into an affiliated shelter in Sonora, Mexico, and threatened to behead migrants and staff.<sup>11</sup> While the shelters I worked in never received such direct threats, violence was never far away, especially during my time in Mexico. In Chahuities, bodies were frequently discovered outside town, smugglers and drug dealers from local gangs socialized in the street, and government corruption loomed large. A number of scholars have reflected on working in violent or dangerous situations, which demand caution, pragmatism, and careful scrutiny (Siriam et al. 2009; Kovats-Bernat 2002; Woon 2013). Others have discussed the implications and necessary compromises of undertaking fieldwork in "closed contexts," or spaces characterized as illiberal, authoritarian, or coercive (Belcher & Martin 2013; Koch 2013). In the field, I took specific measures to minimize risks associated with these conditions. For example, I avoided asking participants about organized crime and corruption and never travelled outside the shelters alone. Even now, I struggle in writing about these risks as they never appeared serious at the time, only becoming clear after I left the field. Instead, the majority of my experience in shelters was marked by naivety and calmness, if not boredom.

I was not immune, however, to dangerous situations in the field. In both Mexico and the U.S., I encountered verbal threats, intimidation, and deception. I often grappled with the personal

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<sup>11</sup> One of many cartels discussed in this dissertation, the *Sinaloa Cartel* is one of Mexico's most influential and well-organized drug trafficking and crime syndicates. They have controlled large swaths of Mexican territory, particularly in the northwest, since the 1980s, and control human smuggling and migration industries throughout the area (see Grillo 2012; Hernández 2013).

challenges of balancing work and safety, trading journalistic descriptions from the frontlines of migrant journeys for a more sustained and in-depth analysis of migration and mobility from within the conventional spaces of shelters. While some journalists and scholars have risked their own lives travelling alongside migrants (e.g., de León 2015; Martínez 2014), I was neither willing nor able. Still, relatively safe shelters were prone to moments of profound insecurity. One morning in Chahuities, a man bearing several MS-13 tattoos on his head and neck walked into the shelter, claiming that he was a migrant. Sitting with him over breakfast, we discussed his journey from El Salvador and newborn daughter. He explained how he became involved with MS-13 as a teenager in the streets of San Salvador but had recently reformed after the birth of his daughter, turning to evangelical Christianity and becoming a preacher. An hour later, he disappeared, and we shortly discovered that earlier in the morning, he had murdered two migrants outside town because of a gang-related dispute. Such events often hung over my research—a reminder of my own insecurity and of the everyday brutality and violence migrants encounter along their journeys northward.

More importantly, as “illegal” in both Mexico and the U.S., Central American migrants embodied what Coutin (2005) refers to as “clandestinity,” a state of being that is hidden, yet known, which positions migrants both inside and outside legal jurisdictions. This “liminal” status is characterized by insecurity and vulnerability, where migrants are mostly bereft of rights and protection (see Agamben 1998; De Genova 2004; 2005). Thus, I took several precautions to ensure confidentiality and migrants’ safety. I did not collect any identifying information during fieldwork. Interviews were conducted in private, unless participants requested otherwise, and data were kept in a locked filing cabinet or uploaded to a password-protected computer. The photographs I took in the field never featured migrants’ faces or other visual identifiers. In addition, I chose not to share personal information revealed during interviews with other migrants or shelter staff. These practices, however, were often at odds with the shelters, which required migrants to provide intake

information, including full name, nationality and home town, emergency contacts, and a photograph.<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this research, I never used these data. Finally, participants' names, as well as some locations, have been left anonymous or represented with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Over the course of fieldwork, I acted as a shelter volunteer in Mexico and the U.S., allowing me to examine the complex dynamics of migrant journeys at and from multiple points. As a volunteer, I was tasked with a variety of jobs: processing humanitarian visas, escorting migrants from shelter to shelter, and receiving asylum-seekers upon their release from detention. I was also responsible for shelter upkeep and other daily tasks like assisting care workers and staff with cleaning and maintenance, paperwork, and initial intake. During my spare time, I shared meals with migrants, accompanied them to local markets, and played soccer alongside them in the evenings. This ethnographic engagement was nearly immersive, as I lived and worked at shelters throughout my research. In Chahuities, for example, I lived and worked at the shelter for five months—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with few breaks away from shelter life. This period of time offered a detailed and intimate sense of migrants' experiences along their journeys, interpreted from my own position as a foreigner, male, and American. As Watson (1999, p. 4) explains, in the field “we use ourselves and our own personal experiences as primary research tools.” Accordingly, much of the analysis presented in this dissertation relies on my own reading of these intimate and everyday experiences of life in shelters—living, working, and volunteering alongside migrants in transit.

Recently, however, the practice of volunteering has been the subject of much scholarly debate. From volunteering as a tool of neoliberal governance (Baillie Smith & Laurie 2011; Rosol 2012) to its perpetuation of a “popular humanitarian gaze” (Mostafanezhad 2014), the practice of

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<sup>12</sup> Many shelters require this information, which is standard and shared with other organizations to help identify migrants who are killed or who disappear on their journeys.

volunteering is never straightforward or apolitical. As this work demonstrates, volunteering is *always* complicated and politically charged. Nonetheless, few scholars have critically engaged with volunteering as an explicit research practice (c.f., Goerisch 2017; Mills 2013). For researchers, volunteering may provide access to populations, unique insights into everyday experiences, and opportunities to develop rapport with participants. Yet, it can also lead to difficulties, blurring the boundaries between researcher and volunteer and complicating understandings of reciprocity and positionality in the field (de Laine 2000; Goerisch 2017). In my role as researcher and volunteer, I struggled to negotiate many of these dilemmas. For example, I often occupied positions as both an insider and an outsider, I distrusted the efficacy of my volunteer work, and I grappled with my positionality as a white, male researcher (and volunteer) from the U.S. As I demonstrate later in Chapter 2, these dynamics were integral in shaping the relationships and interactions that unfolded between participants and me in the field.

Researchers, however, do not always hold so much power as we assume (Swanson 2007). Amid the chaos and disorder of my research, I relied on shelter staff and migrants to help me navigate fieldwork. Because of my inexperience and lack of knowledge around smuggling, violence, and related topics, I was often portrayed as ignorant and naïve by participants, especially in Mexico. In the field, I became the subject of many jokes, from shelter staff who teased me about my pale skin and frequent sunburns to migrants ironically calling me *Catracho*.<sup>13</sup> Following Emmerson (2016), I embraced these gestures through a comedic approach, employing self-deprecation, joking, and laughter to negotiate my privilege and power in the field (see Chapter 5). Such tactics, in fact, eventually developed into a key aspect of the research process and an important tool to reflect on my positionality. Moreover, my legitimacy and authority as a researcher fluctuated between social contexts and participants. At times, I was perceived as an insider, “expert,” and volunteer—

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<sup>13</sup> In Spanish, *Catracho* is slang, used to refer to a person from Honduras.



integrated as a key part of the shelter staff. Other times, I was seen as an outsider, “*gringo*,” and foreigner—a stranger disconnected from the everyday realities of migrant journeys. My positionality, thus, was never exclusively one or the other but somewhere between these poles (Mullings 1999; Sherif 2001).

While this research took place primarily in Chahuities, I also made frequent trips to Ixtepec, Oaxaca, as well as to Arriaga and Tapachula, Chiapas, and Guatemala. In addition to participant observation and volunteer responsibilities, I completed approximately thirty semi-structured interviews with Central American migrants and shelter staff in Mexico. Interviews were loosely structured around key themes and recorded only when explicit permission was given. Frequently, these semi-structured interviews gave way to informal conversations, as well as to lengthy discussions that transpired over shared meals, evening walks, and other activities. In many interviews, I used mental mapping and blank maps of Mexico and Central America as visual cues, encouraging participants to draw their journeys from Central America to Chahuities. As many scholars have noted (Boschmann & Cubbon 2014; Jung 2014), mental maps are important visual tools that often reveal intimate viewpoints, perceptions, and spatial narratives. Migrants were asked to highlight significant spatial aspects of their journeys using these mental maps and to identify dangerous areas, safe locations, and sites where major events occurred by pointing to them on the map. Mental mapping, therefore, provided key insights into migrants’ embodied perceptions and experiences in transit, as I analyzed not only the areas and locations they pointed out but also how they described them to me.

The second research phase occurred directly after the first, over an additional five-month period in south Texas, from January to May 2017. There, I worked and volunteered at *Casa* while living nearby. This phase was not nearly so immersive as my research in southern Mexico, primarily because I was unable to live at the shelter, due to space constraints. Instead, I worked regular hours

in mornings and afternoons throughout the day and missed much of the everyday ethnographic activity that made my research in Mexico so rich. In San Antonio, I conducted approximately twenty-five semi-structured interviews with migrants and shelter staff alongside recording detailed notes and observations in my volunteer role. I also made three two-week excursions to McAllen, Texas, where I completed ten additional interviews and observations in a Catholic church and temporary shelter near the U.S.-Mexico border. Much like my research in Mexico, in Texas, I relied on in-depth participant observation and mental mapping to supplement interviews. Ideally, this project would have interviewed the same participants during both phases of fieldwork in Mexico and Texas. Unfortunately, locating the same participants was not feasible, due to the fragmented and lengthy nature of migrant journeys (see Chapter 3).

These two primary phases of fieldwork were supplemented by a short period of follow-up research in south Texas in June 2018. Here, I completed additional observations and informal interviews with key staff at *Casa* in San Antonio, Texas. This supplemental research allowed me to gather further information on migrants' experiences in the U.S., filling in gaps from previous fieldwork and examining the broader consequences of Trump's presidential election and administrative approach to border security and immigration enforcement. In what follows, I draw from these experiences to examine migration journeys and the sites and spaces between origin and destination, focusing on Central American migrants' resiliency and resourcefulness amid a shifting landscape of exclusion and (in)security in Mexico and the U.S. My hope in doing so is to both humanize migrants and recognize the complexity of their journeys, thereby adding depth and nuance to people and a process often rendered lifeless, overly-simplistic, and one-dimensional by journalists and scholars alike. To conclude this chapter, I now turn to provide chapter outlines for the remainder of this dissertation.

## Chapter Outlines

To develop these ideas, this dissertation proceeds in the following way. **Chapter Two** aims to make sense of the chaotic “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) of fieldwork and research by addressing a series of methodological issues and questions that arose over the course of this project. In an effort to deepen understandings of power, positionality, and the politics of conducting research, it argues that the irregular, unexpected, and uncomfortable aspects of fieldwork can provide valuable lessons and tools for scholars grappling with ethical dilemmas in the field. The chapter begins by examining the transnational reverberations of Trump’s presidential campaign and election, which reshaped not only the expectations and methods used for this project but also the interactions and relationships that unfolded between participants and me in the field. These exchanges, which were initially uncomfortable, ultimately provided key opportunities to dialogue with participants about power and positionality. Then, the chapter moves on to explore how I became traumatized by experiences during fieldwork, as I suffered from anxiety, disturbing recollections, and nightmares during and after research. Drawing from Gordon’s notion of “haunting” (2008; 2011), I consider the ways in which these experiences disrupted the spatiality and temporality of where and when my research occurred, pointing to ethical and moral responsibilities between researchers and participants. Together, these sections demonstrate how irregular, unexpected, and uncomfortable experiences in the field generate new understandings of ethical dilemmas and the politics of undertaking research.

**Chapter Three** outlines this dissertation’s conceptual underpinnings by exploring how the spaces between origin and destination, as well as migrants’ experiences within them, have been analyzed in migration studies. Working through the literatures on transit migration (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008), the mobilities paradigm (Faist 2013; Sheller & Urry 2006), and migration journeys (e.g., Brigden 2018; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Vogt 2018), it explores how concepts such as “journeys,” “mobility,” and “transit” have been

developed and employed by scholars. As this chapter argues, despite growing attention to the spatial and temporal dimensions of migration journeys, scholarly work has been constrained by “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002) and the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994). I make this critique not only to highlight shortcomings with existing literatures on migration journeys but also to outline my own understandings of “journeys,” “mobility,” and “transit,” thereby laying the conceptual foundations for the remainder of this dissertation, which aims to escape the pitfalls of “methodological nationalism” and the “territorial trap” by detailing migrants’ experiences *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S.

In **Chapter Four**, I use Mbembe’s (2003; 2019) concept of “necropolitics” to examine the connections between “politics as the work of death” (Mbembe 2003, p. 16) and Central American migrants’ experiences crossing Mexico. Working in two interrelated parts, the chapter begins by tracing the evolution of immigration enforcement, (in)security, and violence over the twenty-first century to show how migration across Mexico has become increasingly deadly and violent, as migrants confront a vast, necropolitical landscape characterized by the perpetual threat of death. From there, the chapter explores how migrants willingly accept death and violence as a key tactic and crossing strategy, describing themselves through interviews and testimony as being “already dead.” It is through this act of fatalism and self-recognition as “already dead,” I argue, that migrants utilize death as a source of determination and resiliency, (re)deploying the very same necropolitical conditions meant to deter them to arrive at their destinations. In doing so, I demonstrate that while necropolitics may center on death and violence, there is also life *within death*, as migrants find unexpected ways of enduring and living on in the face of immense adversity.

Focusing on ordinary and routine practices along the migrant trail, **Chapter Five** investigates the obscured and overlooked dimensions of migrants’ lives in transit to reveal new forms of agency, resistance, and meaning-making. It focuses, in particular, on two unexpected

themes that emerged through fieldwork: first, migrants' use of humor and second, their attachments to basic, transportation infrastructure. In doing so, this chapter highlights the importance of both looking beyond well-worn narratives of violence and insecurity sited along borders and taking migrants' stories seriously and remaining open to unexpected findings in the field. To develop these ideas, the chapter first examines migrants' use of humor as an everyday form of agency and resistance through which they ridiculed immigration enforcement and officials while simultaneously creating a shared sense of solidarity, as they joined together in making light of their "illegality" and immobility in transit. The chapter then describes the key role of basic, transportation infrastructure in migration journeys by detailing how migrants forged intimate and powerful connections to mundane, ordinary sites like bridges and railways. As I demonstrate, migrants utilized bridges and railways to narrate and make sense of their journeys by anchoring key experiences to them in transit, ultimately elucidating how this infrastructure shaped migrants' mobility and movement.

**Chapter Six** examines the politics of U.S. border and immigration enforcement by placing detention, deportation, and policing within the larger context of migration journeys across Central America and Mexico. As it shows, even after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, migrants experienced prolonged journeys and immense insecurity in the U.S., which, for many, included incarceration in detention centers, recurring appearances in immigration courts, and a shifting landscape of immigration and asylum policy. Despite a robust geographic literature on these enforcement mechanisms (e.g., Burridge & Gill 2017; Conlon & Hiemstra 2017; Kocher 2019; Moran et al. 2013), few scholars have considered migrants' experiences in the U.S. as integral parts of their journeys (c.f., Brigden & Mainwaring 2016; Walters 2016). Responding to this omission, this chapter first details the evolution of U.S. immigration and asylum policy over three decades to explain how the Trump administration embraced a politics of both continuation and disruption that resulted in chaos and confusion along the U.S.-Mexico border and within the U.S. interior. From there, it explores the

paradoxical spatial and temporal logics of family detention and deportation in south Texas through the lens of a “detention corridor,” showing how migrants are funneled deeper into U.S. territory for extended time periods, even as deportation and removal proceedings work to expel them from the interior. Ultimately, this chapter reveals the cumulative effects of immigration enforcement along migrants’ journeys, which operate not as bifurcated halves separated by the U.S.-Mexico border but as overlapping experiences that extend across Central America, Mexico, *and* the U.S., and that are suffused with exclusion and insecurity along the way.

Finally, **Chapter Seven**, the dissertation’s conclusion, returns to the significance of migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination, especially during the Trump administration. It begins with an analysis of those “left behind,” Central American migrants who “fail” to reach their destinations in the U.S. and, therefore, never “arrive.” These migrants and their experiences, I contend, are left out from work that focuses only on spaces of origin and destination (e.g., García 2006; Garni 2010; Menjívar 2011; Menjívar & Abrego 2012). Looking to those spaces between and to migrants caught within them, I explore the connections between recent immigration policy and mortality, showing how exclusion increasingly operates *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., often with fatal consequences. I do so by analyzing asylum politics under the Trump administration and officials’ use of “metering,” a policy that has culminated in the deaths of countless numbers of asylum-seekers who were disappeared and/or killed in Mexico after being turned away at the U.S.-Mexico border (see Trovall 2019). Drawing from the disappearances and (presumed) deaths of two migrants, I detail how metering and later policies under the Trump administration represent an expanding geography of exclusion, insecurity, and violence located at the territorial edges of U.S. and beyond. It is within this context, I conclude, that the arc and trajectories of migration journeys, as well as the spaces between origin and destination, are increasingly

important as they shed light on the life-and-death consequences, intimate experiences, and politics of international migration as it unfolds across Central and North America.

## CHAPTER 2 – Ethnography in Transit

### Introduction

Research does not always go as planned. Even with extensive arrangements and meticulous preparation, it is difficult to anticipate the twists and turns of conducting research. At the beginning of this project, I labored over its proposal, scrambled to find appropriate funding, developed a wide range of field contacts, booked travel plans early, and eventually arrived in Mexico ready to complete fieldwork. Yet, I was also well aware that I should remain vigilant, expecting the unexpected while maintaining flexibility in the field. As Hays-Mitchell explains (2001, p. 314), “Try as we may, we can neither plan for every eventuality nor insulate ourselves from the events that envelop us in the field.” Accordingly, she outlines four cornerstones of conducting reflexive and responsible research: “regrouping, reflecting, accepting mistakes, and modifying plans” (Hays-Mitchell 2001, p. 317). Flexibility, thus, is key to accommodating and adapting to the chaotic “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005, p. 140) of that moment when fluid trajectories of people and things collide to meet in place during fieldwork and research.

This chapter aims to make sense of the chaotic “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) of fieldwork and research. In what follows, I reflect on the irregular and unexpected aspects of research, as well as the challenges of carrying out ethnographic fieldwork with migrants in transit. In doing so, I address new methodological issues and questions that arose over the course of this project. Feminist geographers have long urged scholars to carefully consider questions of epistemology and methods (e.g., McDowell 1992; Moss 1993; Nast 1994). As Sharp explains (2005, p. 305), research concerns not only the ways in which data are collected but also how researchers act “ethically, politically, and emotionally” during the process. By developing critical concepts such as positionality and reflexivity (McDowell 1992; England 1994; Rose 1997), this body of work challenges fixed notions of objectivity and neutral scientific knowledge, showing that research is



always political, partial, and situated (Haraway 1988), deeply embedded within the multiple fields of power and privilege that researchers occupy (Katz 1994).

Within the literature on power, ethics, and the politics of undertaking research (see Billo & Hiemstra 2013; Moss & Al-Hindi 2007), feminist geographers have acknowledged the complex, disorganized, and untidy parts of undertaking fieldwork (e.g., Dyck 2002; Katz 1994; Parr 2001). Writing against positivist underpinnings that downplay the imperfections of research, these scholars demonstrate that “messiness” is intrinsic to the research process, replete with chaos, disorder, and failure (Billo & Hiemstra 2013; Frazier 2019; Hiemstra & Billo 2017; Horton 2008). Billo and Hiemstra (2013), for example, describe their frustrations and methodological missteps when beginning their doctoral fieldwork, utilizing these mistakes afterward to reflect on the disjuncture between expectations and reality that were set during preparations and encouraging others to accept the deficiencies and shortcomings of the research process. Similarly, Harrowell, Davies, and Disney (2018, 236) contend that scholars should embrace, rather than deny, failures in the field as a “powerfully productive element of geographic field work” (see also Halberstam 2011), which ultimately, they argue, improves research practices and outcomes in key ways. As this work collectively shows, chaos, disorder, and failure often generate new understandings, lessons, and tools related to fieldwork, research, and knowledge production, even as these methodological missteps are denied or downplayed by many scholars.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the irregular and unexpected aspects of fieldwork made their ways deep into the center of my research focusing, in particular, on two key events: first, the 2016 presidential campaign and election of Trump and its wider reverberations on this project and, second, my encounters with haunting and trauma shortly after completing fieldwork. I argue that irregular, unexpected, and uncomfortable experiences such as these not only deepen understandings of power, politics, and positionality in the field but also provide lessons and tools for scholars

grappling with the ethical dilemmas of undertaking research. The first section begins by demonstrating how Trump's campaign and election dramatically reshaped not only the nature of my research but also the relationships and interactions that unfolded in the field, as participants increasingly greeted me with hesitancy and skepticism. These exchanges, which were initially uncomfortable, ultimately led to constructive dialogue with participants about the research process, and I present them here as a way forward for other migration scholars who contend with anti-immigrant sentiment and rising populism in the field.

Following this discussion of positionality, the second section details how Trump's campaign and election transformed my expectations for this project and the methods I utilized during fieldwork. As I show, my work in the field was characterized by chaos and disorder as the Trump administration's executive orders of 2017 played out on the ground in real time. Accordingly, I was forced to rethink this project's goals and objectives and the methods I sought to utilize in the field, moving my research toward a timely study of immigration and asylum policy informed by detailed observations and fieldnotes rather than an analysis of the emotional and affective dimensions of migrant journeys, and key themes around identity, place-making, and belonging.

Finally, the third section explores how I became traumatized by fieldwork. Shortly after returning from the field, I suffered from anxiety, disturbing recollections, and nightmares as distant people, places, and events resurfaced in my everyday life. Drawing from Gordon's (2008; 2011) concept of "haunting," I suggest that these experiences were different from researcher *trauma*, understood here as researchers' response to engaging with or witnessing traumatic events and as a result, experiencing anxiety and/or distress (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong 2008). Instead, I demonstrate how haunting disrupted both the spatiality and temporality of fieldwork, producing a need or sense of "something-to-be-done" (Gordon 2008; 2011) about the conditions I encountered through research. Together, these sections demonstrate the generative potential of irregular,

unexpected, and uncomfortable experiences in the field, adding to previous studies of fieldwork's "messiness" (e.g., Billo & Hiemstra 2013; Harrowell, Davies, & Disney 2018; Hiemstra & Billo 2017), with implications for better understanding the power, politics, and ethics of conducting research.

### **Studying Migration in the Time of Trump**

In August 2016, I entered the field as Trump's presidential campaign reached its peak. From pledges to "build the wall" to verbal attacks on Latinx immigrants, Trump's campaign mobilized widespread racial anxieties, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Months earlier, in Summer 2015, he had characterized migrants as "criminals and rapists," promised mass deportations, and suggested that "tremendous infectious disease" was pouring across the U.S.-Mexico border (see Bump 2015). These events and his subsequent election in November 2016 reverberated sharply throughout shelters in both Mexico and the U.S., dramatically transforming my fieldwork. This section examines the chaotic aftereffects of Trump's campaign and election on my research, focusing on two dynamics that played out in the field: first, the relationships and interactions between participants and me and second, my expectations for this research project and methods used during fieldwork. As I show, my identity as a white, male academic from the U.S. in the field became increasingly prominent through Trump's campaign and election. This attention to my position as an American researcher, while initially uncomfortable, allowed me to engage participants in conversations around power and privilege, and highlight the multiple and dynamic nature of positionality in the field, especially when identity and positionality are foregrounded by formal politics taking place outside the researcher's control.

In this chapter, I approach positionality as a concept that addresses how embodied aspects of identity, such as race, class, gender, and nationality, among other markers, place researchers and

participants into particular social contexts (England 1994), fundamentally shaping the exercise and outcomes of conducting research (e.g., Crossa 2012; Fisher 2015; Hopkins 2009). As Skelton (2001, p. 89) explains, the concept of positionality entails:

Things like our 'race' and gender... but also our class experiences, our levels of education, our sexuality, our age, our ableness... All of these things have a bearing upon who we are, how our identities are formed and how we do our research. We are not neutral, scientific observers, untouched by the emotional and political contexts where we do our research.

Feminist geographers, in particular, have been vital in considering the roles of power and positionality in fieldwork (McDowell 1992; Rose 1997; England 1994; Katz 1994; Nast 1994; Mullings 1999). From carrying out fieldwork to interpreting data to drafting the final text, positionality and the researcher's biography wield considerable influence over the research process and outcome. Accordingly, geographers have advocated for scrutiny and self-reflexivity as key research practices, emphasizing the researcher's social location and its wide-ranging effects (Bondi 2003; England 1994; McDowell 1992). Such attention to the complexities and workings of positionality has been integral to exposing both power asymmetries in the field and the unequal relationships between researchers and participants, making positionality and its careful consideration important research tools in geography.

Rarely, however, are understandings of power and positionality straightforward. As many studies have noted, the practice of interrogating positionality is complicated, constrained by the messiness and partiality of knowledge (Rose 1997; Kobayashi 2003). Other scholars have shown how identities are constantly produced and maintained, making positionality subject to both the people and places where research is conducted (Chacko 2004). For example, Bachmann (2010) explores how sudden and dramatic changes after Kenya's election impacted both the researcher's positionality and the broader process of conducting research itself. Likewise, Mukherjee (2017) examines how shifting positionalities of various actors in India's software industry created tension

and uncertainty during fieldwork. These studies highlight the messy and multiple *positionalities* among both researchers and participants (Billo & Hiemstra 2013), both of whom can be positioned simultaneously as inside, outside, and in-between various hierarchies that are always unstable and shifting (Mullings 1999). Such insights have been crucial in understanding not only how power is distributed in the field but also how researchers and participants are embedded within larger social, cultural, and political dynamics which explicitly shape the process of research itself.

The relationship between researchers and the wider context in which fieldwork is carried out is particularly important. As recent work has demonstrated, wider geopolitical circumstances often complicate researchers' positionalities and interactions in the field (Benwell 2014; Mukherjee 2017). Schenk (2013), for instance, shows how an overlapping backdrop of international humanitarianism and Islamic values in post-disaster Indonesia resulted in antagonistic encounters between them and their participants. Despite attention to the intersection of positionality and geopolitics, few scholars have explicitly considered the role of *formal politics*—that is, the politics of formal government and its institutions (Painter & Jeffrey 2009)—in shaping researchers' positionalities. This section details how Trump's presidential campaign and election transformed the relationships and interactions between participants and me while I worked in migrant shelters throughout Mexico and contributes to wider understandings of power and positionality in international fieldwork and its ethical implications for researchers and participants in politically sensitive contexts, particularly amid growing anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and populism worldwide

### ***Power and Positionality in the Field***

Three months after I began fieldwork in Chahuities, Mexico, Dani, an older man from Nicaragua, joined a small group of migrants and me at an old plastic folding table where we were playing dominoes. It was my first prolonged encounter with Dani after I had completed his intake

information a few days before. During one of the rounds, Dani peered at me from across the table and asked, “Why are you here, *gringo?*,” voicing his displeasure over my presence. The other migrants looked up from their hands in surprise. Smiling through my discomfort at Dani’s outward hostility, I explained that I was a researcher from the U.S. there to study migrant journeys and to volunteer in the shelter for a few months. Another migrant chimed in shortly after I finished, “He’s not a *gringo*, and he’s here to help.” Dani shook his head in a slow subtle motion. “Why?” he uttered rhetorically, turning to face me. “Do you think you’re going to change something? Obama and now Trump? Your government, it’s all the same—he’s even worse!” Dani shook his head again, looking me in the eye, before firmly setting his next domino down on the table in front of me.

Uncomfortable and confrontational exchanges such as the one above occurred frequently over the course of fieldwork, especially in the months preceding Trump’s election in November 2016. From dismissive comments directed toward me in the streets to questions about Trump’s proposed policies, the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and election weighed heavily on my research, reshaping my positionality and the ways I was perceived by participants. During the early stages of fieldwork, my identity as a white, male researcher was prominent but minimized by my role as a volunteer in the shelter and my ability to speak fluent, colloquial Spanish. While I was recognized as a foreigner, I was also tentatively accepted and regarded as an important member of the shelter staff, and migrants frequently turned to me to share intimate information, ask for favors, or gossip. As Trump’s campaign gained momentum, however, I was greeted with increasing hesitancy and skepticism by those very same migrants. In the incident above, Dani referred to me as a “*gringo*,” a complicated word used across Latin America to designate someone as foreign and English-speaking, often pejoratively (see Weiss 1993). More importantly, Dani positioned my identity as a white foreigner intimately linked to and responsible for the U.S. government and Trump, declaring that it was “your [my] government.” He questioned my fieldwork’s benefits and efficacy by rhetorically

asking why I was there and doubted if my work would change anything. In this example, my identity and positionality embodied the broader, formal politics playing out in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. As migrants considered the global implications of Trump's campaign and election, I was no longer accepted or regarded as a key member of the shelter staff but, instead, seen as an outsider and foreigner representing U.S. politics and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Likewise, Dani's own identity and positionality were reconfigured by Trump's campaign. As Mukherjee (2017) has argued, positionalities of both researcher and participant are simultaneously constructed in relation to one another. While my position as a foreign researcher and an American was prominent, so, too, was Dani's identity as a migrant from Nicaragua and Central America, a region that has endured U.S. foreign intervention and its negative effects for some time (see Chapter 4). Trump's campaign, characterized by anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia, amplified these aspects of our identities and positionalities, linking formal politics and the global geopolitical context to the intimate spaces where my research was carried out. Incidents like the one above became increasingly common, and as the 2016 campaign and election intensified further, my position as an *American* researcher became more complex and more visible.

Another day, a group of migrants and I turned on the dusty television in the shelter's common area to watch the morning news over breakfast, which had become a common routine among us in previous weeks. As the program cycled through recent headlines, a box flashed across the screen summarizing Trump's statements and policy stance on immigration. "Why do they want to deport all of us?" one migrant turned to ask me. While we had conversed about immigration policy in the weeks before, I was never asked to explain why Trump's position on immigration was so popular. Searching for an explanation, I hesitated, "I don't know... because... they don't understand..." "You don't know?" another migrant interrupted. "You live there! So, why do you want to deport us?" I struggled to respond, surprised by the accusation that it was me who wanted

to deport migrants. I attempted to explain that there were many people in the U.S.— myself included—who felt differently about immigration policy and deportation. It hardly seemed to matter.

Much like my exchange with Dani, the conversation above centered on my identity as an American and, thus, my link to or complicity with the broader politics of the U.S. presidential campaign. In this example, the group of migrants linked my national identity to immigration policy and deportation by inferring that because I lived in the U.S., I would know why “we” Americans supported such policies. More significantly, the migrants first referred to an anonymous “they” in their question but, after my response, used the collective “you,” grouping me with others who endorsed Trump’s position on immigration and deportation. By the end of our exchange, one of the migrants had suggested that it was me individually who wanted to deport them, distilling what Trump hoped would be a *national* policy of reducing immigration to the U.S. into my *personal* attitudes toward migrants. Here again, my national identity and positionality as an American researcher, as well as those of participants as Central American migrants, were explicitly interpreted through formal politics, a direct reflection of the unfolding U.S. presidential campaign.

By the time Trump was elected in November 2016, my identity and positionality as an American researcher were even more visible than they had been in previous months, dramatically transforming my relationships and interactions with participants. With Trump’s election, migrants’ interpretations of my positionality permanently shifted, and I became associated with the contentious politics, anti-immigrant sentiment, and xenophobia playing out across the U.S. More than ever, I was met with accusations, hesitancy, and skepticism. As Mullings explains (1999), identity and positionality involve a constant shifting of the multiple axes upon which they are constituted, and many of the follow-up interviews I conducted after Trump’s election echoed this shift. For example, shortly after arriving at the shelter, I grew close to Luis, a young man from



Honduras. Over the course of several interviews and informal conversations, Luis shared intimate details from his experiences, and in our free time, we often discussed my project while joking about U.S. politics and the presidential campaign. In a follow-up interview after Trump's election, however, Luis confronted me about the results. "I can't believe he won—how did that happen? Why did you elect him?" he asked assertively. I shrugged with little to say, noting that many were surprised by Trump's victory. Luis became unusually agitated. "So, what's the point of this interview?" he declared rhetorically, "It doesn't matter now." Surprised by the sudden change in his demeanor, I sat there silently, grappling with what to say next.

The exchange between Luis and me highlighted a key shift in the ways I was perceived by participants in the field before and after the presidential election. While before, Luis and I were able to playfully trade jokes about U.S. politics and the ongoing campaign, the election became an important point of contention after Trump's victory. In his response, Luis expressed frustration and disbelief, grouping me with other Americans who had voted for Trump. As Luis contemplated the election results and its wide-ranging consequences, he became skeptical of my project and the interview. Thus, the U.S. presidential campaign and election reshaped my relationships and interactions with participants in the field, foregrounding aspects of our positionalities that were previously minimized or tentatively negotiated without conflict.

Although unexpected and uncomfortable, such confrontations with research participants became crucial to fieldwork, providing key opportunities to discuss my power and positionality with them and to better understand the reverberations of Trump's campaign and election for migrants in transit. Primarily, I utilized migrants' accusations, hesitancy, and skepticism as invitations to converse about the limitations and partial nature of my own research (see England 1994). For example, a few days after my initial exchange with Dani, we met in the kitchen to prepare lunch for the shelter. Cutting vegetables, he again enquired about my research. "How long will you stay here

with us?” he asked quietly. “Five months in total,” I responded, attempting to hide my anxiety over another potential confrontation. “Hopefully that’s longer than I’ll be here!” he exclaimed as we started to laugh. He continued, “Why are you interested in migration? What do you hope to learn here?” I went on to explain the details of my project to Dani and the personal reasons behind my interest in studying migration. Among other things, I had grown up in a predominately Latinx immigrant community near Los Angeles, California, volunteered with immigrant rights organizations for several years, and had long been interested in migration and human rights. In particular, though, I emphasized my research’s limitations and partiality. For example, we debated why I, as someone who had enjoyed a relatively privileged life, could never fully understand his or other migrants’ experiences. We discussed the politics of my presence in the shelter as a white, male researcher from the U.S. Lastly, I told him that I was unsure if my work would provide any meaningful benefits to him or others, especially in the context of growing anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and populism in the U.S. “Probably not,” he said with a wry smile, “but you can try.”

The initial confrontation between Dani and me that occurred days earlier provided an important opportunity to discuss power and positionality. Acknowledging Dani’s earlier hesitancy and skepticism in the context of the U.S. presidential campaign and election, we engaged in an exchange regarding the nature and politics of my research. In the dialogue above, we conversed about significant ethical issues inherent to fieldwork, including the situated and partial nature of my perspective, the politics of my positionality in the field, and flawed notions of reciprocity. In this way, our discussion represented a dialogical process, a means of collectively negotiating ethics in the field (Kindon & Latham 2002). As England (1994) notes, it is important to be open and honest with participants about the limitations of research, as well as about our own biographies. Thus, the dialogue between Dani and me was a moment in which we navigated our positionalities and the ethics of fieldwork through informal and candid discussion (Dempsey 2018). This navigated process

is not to say that my research suddenly became a participatory or collaborative project (Pain 2004; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby 2008), nor is it to suggest that reflexivity and self-reflection resulted in complete transparency (see Rose 1997; Kobayashi 2003). Rather, research was simply more open and negotiated than before, imperfect, imbued with my own biography, and overdetermined by the broader political climate in which it transpired.

Over time, conversations like the one with Dani occurred regularly with participants, especially during interviews. Late one evening, for example, I sat down with Jazmin, a young woman from Honduras, to talk about her journey. After asking about the conditions of her neighborhood in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, she enquired in return, “You’re American—from the land of Trump?” “Yes,” I responded tentatively, worried about what she would say next. “But not yet, at least officially. Not until January,” I said jokingly, telling her that Trump had been elected but not yet inaugurated. “I better hurry, then! I only have a few more weeks,” she exclaimed as we both laughed. “So, how did you end up over here, at this shelter?” she asked me. I described how I arrived at the shelter serendipitously after failing to secure access at other shelters and connecting with another volunteer in a nearby city. In a few months, I explained, I would continue working in shelters across south Texas, near the U.S.-Mexico border. Jazmin interjected, “But why here? Why do you want to live here and do this, especially now, with everything going on over there in the U.S.?” I composed my thoughts before attempting to respond. Soon, we were discussing the motivations behind my project, in particular, my previous experiences living and working in Mexico, immigration politics in the U.S., and the long-term trajectory of my research. At every turn, Jazmin continued to ask, “Why?,” urging me to reflect back on my rationale. As the discussion eventually tapered off, I looked down at my watch to see that nearly two hours had passed. I thanked Jazmin for her time, and she smiled, casually shaking her head up and down. “Of course, this was so interesting,” she said laughing and walked off.

In this example, a brief exchange about the U.S. presidential election led to a sustained dialogue around research and positionality. Initially, I had expected to ask Jazmin a number of questions about her journey from Honduras; however, our discussion deviated from an interview's conventional standards, extending into the intimate motivations and stimulus behind my project. Rather than me asking her questions, it was Jazmin, instead, who posed questions to me. Whereas I was there to learn about migrants' origin stories as a migration scholar, they, too, were interested in mine. Her enquiry was purposefully reflexive, encouraging me to ponder the personal desires and rationales embedded in my project. While this was not the interview I had intended to complete with Jazmin, it was helpful, forcing me to examine the ethical aspects of my research in the midst of conducting an interview. In place of gathering information about Jazmin's journey from Honduras, I was left to ponder the motivations and rationale behind my ongoing project.

Our conversation was also dialogical, an opportunity to discuss and collectively navigate our positionalities in the field, particularly mine as an American researcher. Migrants' hesitancy and skepticism provided important opportunities to converse with them about the ethical dilemmas of research, opening fieldwork to a more negotiated process that attempted to be honest with participants about the limitations of research and my own biography. This strategy was key to producing a more inclusive and flexible approach throughout fieldwork, attuned to power asymmetries in the field and in U.S. formal politics, and allowed me to adapt to and navigate the difficult and uncomfortable circumstances generated through Trump's campaign and election.

These strategies and tools hopefully provide a way forward for other migration scholars working amid difficult and uncomfortable circumstances, especially as anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and populism proliferate worldwide (Brubaker 2017; Meseguer & Kemmerling 2018). Given the ways that global developments complicate the relationships and interactions that unfold between researchers and participants within migration studies, this section's discussion of formal

politics and positionality may be useful as a template for others navigating similar issues in the field. The next section considers the ways in which these events also transformed my research project itself, which was reshuffled in the wake of Trump's inauguration and his administration's sweeping actions on immigration.

### **Reorienting Fieldwork**

In early January 2017, I returned from Mexico and travelled to south Texas to begin the second phase of fieldwork at *Casa* in San Antonio. As I adapted to my new surroundings, Trump was inaugurated as president, and a few days later, his administration issued two of three executive orders on immigration.<sup>14</sup> From granting additional powers to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to building the so-called deportation force that Trump promised during his campaign, the administration utilized these executive actions to institute swift changes to U.S. immigration policy. While the Trump administration's efforts were by no means new (e.g., Golash-Boza 2017; Street, Zepeda-Millán, & Jones-Correa 2015), they signaled a widening scope and rapid intensification of immigration enforcement in the U.S. (Chapter 6). ICE agents were no longer restricted to prioritizing the deportation of "criminals," Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials were encouraged to pursue expedited removal to bypass immigration courts, and the administration introduced new plans to hire an additional 15,000 immigration agents (Executive Order 13767 2017; Executive Order 13768 2017).

These developments dramatically reshaped my work in the field, ushering in a period of immense chaos and disorder, which was particularly evident at *Casa*, where these executive orders

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<sup>14</sup> These included Executive Order 13767 (2017), calling for a "physical wall" to be built along the U.S.-Mexico border and an additional 5,000 CBP agents; Executive Order 13768 (2017), which withheld government funding from "sanctuary cities" and eliminated federal priorities for deportations; and Executive Order 13769 (2017), which lowered the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. while suspending refugee entry from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen, later known as the "Muslim ban."

sent immediate shockwaves throughout the organization. An excerpt from my fieldnotes in the aftermath of that particular day:

This afternoon, Trump issued two executive orders on immigration. There is now absolute chaos here in the shelter: staff and migrants sobbing together in the hallway; an emergency meeting called between key personnel; lawyers and paralegals arriving from the main office; a cacophony of phones ringing, email notifications, impassioned conversations, etc. It is complete mayhem and the organization, as well as myself, are scrambling to make sense of everything. I can't help but wonder what the long-term effects of the executive orders will mean—for immigration in the U.S. but also for my project more broadly. (Fieldnotes, January 25, 2017)

Such chaos and disorder never truly subsided over the course of fieldwork in Texas. While I reflect more on migration's shifting geography under the Trump administration in Chapter 6, these events immediately impacted fieldwork in a number of ways. In particular, the executive orders reoriented both my approach in the field and the immediate trajectory of my research, quickly transforming my expectations for this project and the methods I utilized during fieldwork.

Foremost, Trump's executive orders reshaped my approach to conducting research in the field. In Mexico, my work was balanced between participant observation, recorded in fieldnotes and field diaries, and semi-structured interviews. These methods were supplemented by informal conversations and lengthy discussions with migrants, which often yielded rich, ethnographic detail about their experiences in transit. In particular, I focused on the emotional and affective dimensions of migrant journeys, paying close attention to topics such as identity, place-making, and belonging. Immigration and refugee policy were important to this research, but ancillary—a background and scaffolding with which I could frame the detailed narratives and intimate accounts of migration I was collecting in the field. Trump's election and his administration's actions, however, shifted this balance.

As the executive orders were announced, fewer migrants arrived at *Casa*, slowing from a steady stream to a standstill. Weeks before Trump's inauguration, *Casa* regularly hosted dozens of migrants each day. By the time I arrived in late January, however, the number had decreased to just a

few, if any at all. This decline was due, in part, to the interaction between already-diminishing rates of migration from Central America and the administration's new approach to security and immigration enforcement, which included using expedited removal, turning migrants away at the border, and holding families in detention for longer periods of time. Accordingly, there were fewer migrants to interview in the midst of these changes, and I was increasingly forced to rely on detailed observations and fieldnotes, especially to make sense of the rapid transformations to U.S. immigration policy. While I continued to interview migrants whenever possible, the majority of my work became immersed in understanding the administration's approach to immigration enforcement and the wider consequences for migration in south Texas. In the absence of interviews, I analyzed news stories and policy documents, including the executive orders themselves, DHS memoranda, and other internal reports. I also attended policy briefings and advocacy meetings at the legal organization's main office, splitting my time between *Casa* and the larger organization to which it was connected. My efforts resulted in a detailed understanding of the executive orders, as well as the ways these actions played out on the ground, in real time. Put simply, I was in the right place at the right time to observe Trump's executive orders and their reverberations across south Texas. This project, therefore, gradually incorporated an explicit emphasis on immigration and refugee policy under the Trump administration, reshaping my approach to research in the field.

Trump's inauguration and executive actions also reshaped the expectations and methods devised for this project. My fieldwork initially intended to capture the continuous length of migrant journeys by working in two key locations along the migrant route—in southern Mexico, near the beginning of these journeys, and along the U.S-Mexico border, toward their end. While I was unable to interview the same participants during both phases of fieldwork, these locations would be

interlinked, two snapshots of migration in one larger journey.<sup>15</sup> The Trump administration's executive orders, however, temporally bifurcated fieldwork, creating a pre-Trump period of research in Mexico and a post-Trump period in Texas. Participants interviewed in Texas encountered a *much* different set of conditions on their journeys than did those previously interviewed in Mexico. This dissertation, then, is both partial and incomplete, bound by the contemporary and political realities of migration that played out in the field. It is also double, in a sense, capturing the moments before and after the early days of "Trump's America."

Moreover, my turn to examining immigration and refugee policy under the Trump administration, particularly the executive orders, produced an intimate, ground-level account of these rapid changes in the field, in many ways mirroring policy ethnography (Dubois 2009; 2015). Policy ethnographies enable nuanced and grounded analysis of abstract policy, including its implementation by various actors, and its wider social, cultural, and political effects (Mosse 2011). Drawing from this approach, this dissertation analyzes the Trump administration's approach to U.S. immigration policy; however, it relies heavily on description over analysis to do so. As these executive actions unfolded during fieldwork I struggled to make sense of these chaotic and rapid transformations in the field. Accordingly, description and explanation became key in outlining these new developments and conveying the Trump administration's approach to immigration enforcement and the changing landscape of migration in the U.S. (Chapter 6).

In all these ways, then, Trump's election and presidency dramatically reshaped my fieldwork, making their ways deep into the center of this project, both in terms of both my positionality and the ways my identity was perceived by migrants and the expectations for and methods used during this project. I now turn to explore the irregular and unexpected consequences of fieldwork and how

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<sup>15</sup> This logic, however, was admittedly flawed. As migration scholars have noted, migration journeys often escape any sense of continuity or linear order (see Collyer & de Haas 2012; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016).



I became haunted shortly after returning home, drawing from Gordon's development of "haunting" (2008; 2011) to center its importance as a reflexive device related to but separate from trauma. In doing so, I explain how haunting deepens understandings of power, positionality, and the politics of fieldwork and focus attention on researchers' ethical and moral responsibilities within and beyond the field.

### **Haunting, Trauma, and Spectral Geographies of Fieldwork**

A dream from last night: I was working in a shelter along the U.S.-Mexico border somewhere in Arizona. Jorge, the young man from Honduras who I met in Mexico had just arrived after making his way across the border. As he walked through the front doors of the shelter, I looked into his eyes and couldn't believe it was him—that he was really there. He had made it, and we somehow found each other on the other side. Slowly, he stumbled toward me, tired and injured. We embraced and tears flowing from my eyes. Suddenly, I woke up—the sheets drenched in sweat, out of breath, and still crying. (Field diaries, May 18, 2017)

For nearly ten months, I lived and worked in shelters throughout Mexico and south Texas, attempting to better understand migrant journeys by examining their intimate experiences in transit and the ways they negotiated international borders, security, and immigration enforcement. During my time in shelters, migrants often became victim to unsparing acts of violence, including extortion, robbery, kidnapping, and sexual assault, among other forms of abuse. Accordingly, this research was not only difficult but also traumatic, as I witnessed the immediate and long-term aftermaths of these events, listening to migrants' testimony and experiences firsthand through interviews, observations, and informal discussions. At times, I was directly involved in these incidents, personally administering first aid and providing care to migrants as they arrived with panic, fatigue, and various

injuries. Throughout fieldwork, I became traumatized by these encounters,<sup>16</sup> and after returning from Mexico and Texas, I suffered from anxiety, disturbing recollections, and dreams, such as the one described above. Vivid memories of people, places, and events resurfaced long after I returned home, hanging over my everyday life.

Traumatic experiences during research are now a key topic of concern among scholars (e.g., Connolly & Reilly 2007; Kiyimba & O'Reilly 2016). As these studies indicate, trauma is a central part of researchers' emotional encounters in the field, especially when working in violent, dangerous, or sensitive contexts (see Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). Trauma is often a contagious experience for researchers, who are deeply affected by witnessing distressing events or listening to participants' difficult retellings in the field (Coddington 2017; Dominey-Howes 2015; Ratnam 2019).

Geographers, in particular, have explored the emotional and affective consequences of studying traumatic subjects (e.g., Drozdewski & Dominey-Howes 2015; Gillespie & Lopez 2019). Such studies have emphasized trauma's spatial implications, which shape not only researchers' interactions with participants but also their intimate connections to space and place (Calgaro 2015; Coddington 2017). Others have linked grief and trauma to key methodological concepts such as reflexivity and positionality, pointing to concerns over self-care and the ethics of undertaking fieldwork (Drozdewski 2015; Mitchell-Eaton 2019). Collectively, then, scholars have recognized that trauma is not only a recurring consequence of conducting research in difficult situations but also an integral element of the process itself. In what follows, I explore how I became *haunted* by my encounters in the field, focusing on these experiences not as individualized stories or "confessional tales" of

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<sup>16</sup> Here, I use the term "trauma" to refer to my own emotional and psychological reactions to difficult events and experiences that unfolded during fieldwork. This "vicarious traumatization" is understood as "the response of those persons who have witnessed, been subject to explicit knowledge of or, had the responsibility to intervene in a seriously distressing or tragic event" (Lerias & Byrne 2003, p. 130). While the literature around vicarious trauma avoids clinical definitions, symptoms often include reexperiencing the event, emotional and behavioral avoidance, increased anxiety, and impairment of optimal levels of functioning (Eriksen & Ditrich 2015). Such symptoms may compound or contribute to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Lerias & Byrne 2003).

trauma in the field (see McQueeney & Lavelle 2017) but as ways to develop haunting as a political and reflexive device related to but separate from trauma. Within the literature identifying trauma as integral to the research process, there is something missing—in particular, recognition of trauma’s generative potential to raise questions of accountability and researcher responsibility when conducting fieldwork.

To make this argument, I utilize Gordon’s concept of “haunting” (2008; 2011), which describes the latent yet powerful effects of previous events, where “organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life” (Gordon 2008, p. 19). According to Gordon, social violence in the past is never left behind but instead, always present, threatening to reemerge as apparitions in daily life. Haunting describes the appearance of these apparitions, where harm inflicted or loss sustained by social violence makes itself known, demanding attention. In other words, haunting are moments when “that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (Gordon 2008, p. 8).

Within geography, a growing interest in the notion of haunting has resulted in a small but growing literature on spectral geographies (e.g., Maddern & Adey 2008; McCormack 2010; Wylie 2007). Drawing from “spectro-politics” (Derrida 1994), these studies stress the importance of investigating how particular sites, practices, and events unsettle the relationship between presence and absence. Spectrality highlights how spaces and places become haunted by history, as past and present collide in unexpected and unsettling ways. Here, haunting serves as a key analytic in examining how the past continues to shape the present, for example, through instances of state-sanctioned colonial violence (Coddington 2011), orientalism (Jansson 2007), or the remnants of Cold War ideologies (Hamidi 2009). As Gordon argues (2011, p. 2), however, haunting is also distinctive for producing a “something-to-be-done,” an urgent sense of political change and

motivation that demands alternatives to injustice. In this way, haunting is related to trauma but different from it, in that haunting elicits the desire to eliminate the conditions that produced it (and trauma) in the first place. Orr (2016), for example, engages with trauma as a method, asking how its transmission and performance are incorporated into the production of knowledge. This element of haunting, I suggest, is integral to the research process itself, as researchers experience and witness violence in the field, thereby provoking a “something-to-be-done.” Ultimately, I suggest, attention to haunting and its emphasis on “something-to-be-done” deepens understandings of power, positionality, and the ethics of conducting research.

### *Haunting and Trauma*

Throughout fieldwork, my experiences in Mexico were overwhelmingly monotonous, and the time I spent in shelters was often characterized by periods of intense boredom. Mundane activities such as resting, sleeping, and idling around shelters were common. Migrants frequently turned to dominoes, television, and casual conversation as popular forms of entertainment. For vast stretches of time, shelters were still and empty, as migrants laid quietly by themselves or left to work as day laborers in the mango fields and construction sites nearby. These moments of calmness and tranquility, however, were punctuated by brutality and violence. Migrants routinely entered shelters with grave injuries and serious illnesses: lacerations from machetes, dehydration, broken bones from baseball bats, and heatstroke. In Chahuities, there were few medical supplies and no health professionals available, and the nearest hospital was more than forty-five minutes away. Complicating matters further, migrants were often reluctant to seek medical attention outside shelters for fear of being detained or deported by immigration authorities. On one occasion, a young woman in the shelter became violently ill and refused to seek medical assistance. When her condition worsened, she allowed me to escort her to the nearest hospital, where she was quickly admitted. Hours later, a

nurse threatened to restrain her and call the police after concluding that the young woman was a migrant and would not be able to pay for the treatment she received. Panicked and afraid, the young woman pulled out her IV and attempted to escape from the hospital through a second-story window, before she was finally sedated by medical staff and reassured that she would not be arrested or deported.

Because of events like this one, many migrants were reluctant to leave the security of shelters behind, and as such, I was often the only person available to provide medical attention and care for migrants who arrived with injuries or illnesses. Over the course of fieldwork, I did not receive any training in first aid and had no previous background or experience in this area. The lack of medical supplies and other resources only compounded this lack of knowledge and experience. Accordingly, I was forced to rely on spontaneity and improvisation, turning to other migrants, poorly connected internet, and everyday items for appropriate solutions. Three weeks after I arrived in Chahuities, for example, two men and two young women stumbled into the shelter with lacerations and broken bones sustained after being robbed and assaulted outside town. While attending to their injuries, I quickly ran out of bandages and gauze. After desperately searching through cabinets and shelves, I was forced to use old t-shirts as wound dressings and a makeshift sling. Incidents like this one were not only common but expected, and I was unprepared to cope with these circumstances, especially toward the beginning of fieldwork. Writing in my field diaries a month after working at the shelter, I noted:

I have no idea what I'm doing here. I'm neither a doctor nor a therapist, and in reality, I'm probably the last thing these people actually need. Shockingly, I seem to be one of the only people around to help—there are three of us here and dozens of migrants that arrive each day. Perhaps more disturbing, though, is how regular and normalized violence has become to me. I rarely even think about it during the day anymore, and only at night—right now by myself—does it finally sink in. What is it going to be like after four more months of this? Can I hold on long enough to find out? (Field Diaries, September 29, 2016)

Research in this environment was incredibly difficult at times, physically exhausting and emotionally taxing in ways for which I was thoroughly unprepared. Thus, I turned to fieldnotes and field diaries as methods to record my struggles with grief and trauma during research (see Punch 2012). In particular, I utilized fieldnotes to describe and document difficult experiences in the field, while using field diaries to supplement and reflect on these events in greater detail and to write through my anxiety, sadness, and guilt. Entries were recorded after interviews and traumatic events, as well as each night after I withdrew from the public spaces of shelters to sleep.

During fieldwork, I also documented stories that appeared in sensational news reports: an account of a husband and wife's kidnapping, narratives of sexual assault and domestic abuse, and horrific descriptions of cartel violence. Migrants' testimony of these events was particularly distressing, and many interviews, discussions, and conversations were difficult for both migrants and me. Participants often shared vivid details and graphic descriptions of violence with me, recounting intimate stories of their experiences in transit. Interviews were visceral, moving, and deeply unsettling, suffused with grief, trauma, and anger. As Caruth (1995, p. 10) explains, trauma is a repeated suffering and a reexperiencing of the event itself, challenging both the victim and the witness who participate in its reproduction and transmission. In the process, the witness is traumatized through the act of listening (see Coddington 2017). Even after leaving fieldwork behind, it became impossible to escape the experiences that took place there, as my encounters in shelters continued to haunt me long after I left them behind.

Late one evening in Mexico, for example, I sat down to conduct an interview with Walter, a precocious young man travelling alone from El Salvador. In the shelter, Walter was audacious, self-assured, and overtly masculine. His assertive, wry humor made him popular with other migrants, and he was well known for his sardonic quips and commentary. Because of this reputation, I was unsure how Walter would respond to an interview. He had approached me earlier that afternoon, requesting

that we speak only after others had fallen asleep. As the conversation progressed and our exchanges deepened, Walter suddenly began to weep, unexpectedly conveying intimate details of his life to me. He described how his cousin had died in his arms, bleeding out into the street where he was shot in Sonsonate, El Salvador. He explained how difficult it was to leave his mother and risk his life crossing Mexico. Staring down at the concrete floor that stretched out in front of us, he recounted how he was beaten with a baseball bat and robbed on an empty bridge a few miles outside town. Throughout our exchange, I was struck by the detail and intensity of Walter's account, which stood apart from our public interactions together. As the interview drew to a close, I collapsed into tears alongside him, unable to maintain my composure in light of what he had told me. For several minutes, we sat together in silence before thanking each other and, finally, parted ways. This exchange with Walter was difficult to forget, and during the remainder of our time together, we became close friends, keeping in touch long after he left the shelter.

Nearly six months after I returned home from fieldwork, I was walking among a crowd of strangers in New York City. I had not heard from Walter in several weeks, and I became increasingly anxious over his health and wellbeing. In our last conversation, he mentioned that he had arrived in Monterrey, a busy industrial center and commercial hub in northern Mexico. Here, migrants are especially vulnerable as they become entangled in Mexico's ongoing drug war, caught between government security forces and emboldened cartels who routinely target migrants (see Chapter 4; Villareal 2015). As I emerged from the stairs of a New York subway tunnel, I saw Walter drifting in the crowd ahead of me. My heart began to race as I walked faster, trying to catch up with him. Breaking into a near sprint, I was able to halve the distance between us. He rounded a corner, but as soon as I emerged from the adjoining street, he had disappeared into the crowd. Catching my breath, I stood there motionless in the rain, beads of sweat rolling off my forehead. The panic subsided, and immediately, I knew Walter was never *really* there. I had only imagined that it was him.

Incidents like this one occurred frequently after I returned home from fieldwork. Anxiety, disturbing recollections, and nightmares saturated my everyday life, interfering with work, leisure, and my relationships with others. Panic attacks and hallucinations, like the one above, were especially common, as I struggled to separate “truth” from illusion. Whether in public or at home, research followed me everywhere. The traumatic episodes I experienced often centered on individuals I met during my time in the field, from migrants such as Walter to other volunteers and shelter staff. Other times, episodes centered on specific places and events. For example, I repeatedly experienced vivid flashbacks, where I became paralyzed by disturbing memories from the field: the bare, concrete space where I lived and conducted many difficult and traumatic interviews; the moment when Paula, an older woman, arrived at the shelter in a torn dress with a compound fracture in her arm; and the shelter’s outdoor kitchen, where I befriended a large, malnourished street dog begging for food scraps. These flashbacks and the accompanying paralysis struck during the most mundane parts of everyday life. Reflecting on these occurrences in my field diaries one evening, I wrote:

Yesterday, in a hardware store, I saw the same fans we used in the shelter—the ones we would tie to the end of the bunk beds to ward off mosquitos and keep ourselves cool at night. I was immediately transported back to that concrete room where I stayed. I recalled all of the small details, seeing everything as it was in its right place. In that moment, I felt as if I was actually there and soon, I remembered things I didn’t really want to remember—traumatizing emergencies, difficult portions of interviews, and so on. (Field Diaries, July 2, 2016)

These experiences and the painful presence of people, places, and events from fieldwork continued to resurface long after I returned home—reminders that I was haunted by my encounters in the field and experiences which quickly consumed my everyday life.

Crucially, haunting unsettled the spatiality of fieldwork, disrupting where my research occurred. The anxiety, recollections, and nightmares I experienced after completing fieldwork were reminders that the field is always active and unbounded, stretching far beyond the artificial borders



researchers impose upon it (Driver 2000; Katz 1994). In the examples above, events that had long passed in shelters across Mexico resurfaced after I returned home to New York, and apparitions like Walter and other disturbing memories from the field unexpectedly appeared in New York City. These presences, even if they were imagined, pierced the presumed boundaries between fieldwork “out there” and the taken-for-granted reality of “here,” collapsing these places into a single, haunted space. Suddenly, Walter was in New York City, and the hardware store became my room in southern Mexico. During these moments, I contemplated how Walter was not *really* safe in New York City, immune from the risky and dangerous conditions of his journey as I imagined, but rather, still subject to brutality, exploitation, and violence as he travelled north. Similarly, during vivid flashbacks of the bare, concrete space where I lived and conducted interviews, I was forced to reflect on participants’ difficult and traumatic descriptions, which were still, always ongoing. Research became inescapable, extending beyond the enclosed spaces of my field sites to ensnare all aspects of everyday life. Through haunting, “there” became “here,” and spatial distinctions between the field and home increasingly collapsed.

Haunting also unsettled the temporality of fieldwork and conventional order of past and present, as former people, places, and events reappeared weeks, months, and years later. These apparitions were not simply memories or traumatic recollections but deeply powerful episodes that folded space and time. Moments of panic, unease, and mental distress occurred suddenly, “erupting” into everyday life (see Mountz 2017). The “past” quickly became the “present,” as I was forced to recall and remember previous details from fieldwork, such as the malnourished street dog or concrete room where I stayed. Emerging in the context of mundane, everyday life, these moments were jarring, laying bare the differences between my experiences in shelters and in New York City. Haunting, thus, disrupted where and when my research occurred, making my research materialize

everywhere—in my dreams, on the strangers’ faces, and in the banal spaces of daily life—long after I had returned home.

Throughout these traumatic episodes, I often reflected on my positionality and the broader politics of conducting research, as my experiences with haunting were accompanied by a sense of guilt. While I enjoyed the privilege of leaving violence behind, many participants did not. In the moments of panic, unease, and mental distress, I was forced to contend with my own accountability toward participants and uncertainty over why I completed fieldwork in the first place. What was the purpose of conducting this research? What violence was perpetrated through observations, interviews, and informal conversations, through asking participants to relive their trauma by “repeating” their suffering and “reexperiencing” the event itself (Caruth 1995, p. 10)? How could I grapple with the distressing contrasts between my life in New York City and that of those I left behind? How would this work improve the lives of participants and others, if at all? These persisting questions underpinned my experiences with haunting, exposing my power, privilege, and positionality as I contemplated my role as researcher and volunteer, participants’ (im)mobility in comparison to my own, and my (in)ability to help eliminate the violence so common along the migrant trail.

More importantly, haunting left me with an overwhelming sense of injustice. As Derrida (1994, p. xix) explains, “If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts... which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of justice. No justice... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility.” In this way, haunting is distinct from trauma because it produces a “something-to-be-done” (Gordon 2008; 2011). It is concerned with equity and justice, or in other words, the “requirements or dimensions of individual, social, and political movement or change” (Gordon 2011, p. 3). In my experiences with haunting, I wanted justice—to eliminate the conditions that

exposed Jorge, Walter, Paula, and others to a life subject to unthinkable brutality, exploitation, and violence without consequences or repercussions. How should I help? How would I ensure participants' safety and well-being during and after research? What could I do to transform the material conditions that produced participants' suffering and trauma in the first place? Through these questions, I continued to search for justice, despite finding little within the confines of this dissertation, my career, or the academy.

As this discussion shows, trauma is central to the process of conducting research, especially in difficult and emotionally challenging contexts, and I suspect that many scholars are traumatized by fieldwork. But while related to trauma, haunting is different in that it produces a prevailing concern for justice that is absent from many discussions of researcher trauma (e.g., Connolly & Reilly 2007; Kiyimba & O'Reilly 2016). Echoing Derrida, I was, and remain, haunted out of a concern for justice, an accountability to the people and places encountered during fieldwork. I am not alone, and geographers, as well as other scholars, have long considered the possibilities of "activist" and "action-oriented" research (e.g., Kitchin & Hubbard 1999; Pain 2003; Ward 2007; Wright 2008). As part of this work, haunting exposes our power, privilege, and positionality, demanding attention and "acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities" (Gordon 2008, p. 8). Its accompanying sense of injustice points to researchers' ethical and moral responsibilities as we participate in and witness inequality and injustice, reminding us that the past is never left behind but instead, always present. Such ethical and moral dilemmas are not easily resolved, and in concluding this section, I am not able to provide straightforward answers other than to encourage scholars to acknowledge and act on haunting's "something-to-be-done."<sup>17</sup> In the

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<sup>17</sup> As Marx (1978, p. 145) famously explained, "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

process, this responsibility to act, whether it is through teaching, scholarship, service, or something else, might hopefully become a part of research itself.

## **Conclusions**

Carrying out ethnographic fieldwork with migrants in transit posed a number of significant challenges. As this chapter has shown, the irregular and unexpected aspects of fieldwork worked their ways deep into this project's center. This chapter focused on two key events that impacted both fieldwork and me in uncomfortable, yet important, ways. First, Trump's presidential campaign and election reshaped my positionality and the ways I was perceived by migrants, prompting uncomfortable but productive confrontations with participants. Trump's election and early presidency also transformed the broader structure of this research, reworking my approach in the field and the larger trajectory of this project. Second, shortly after returning from fieldwork, I began suffering from anxiety, disturbing recollections, and nightmares. Drawing from Gordon's use of haunting (2008; 2011), this chapter has explored how distant people, places, and events erupted into everyday life, disrupting where and when my research occurred.

Crucially, these experiences forced me to consider my own accountability toward participants and uncertainty regarding the benefits of fieldwork, leaving me with an overwhelming sense of injustice and a "something-to-be-done" that I encourage others to acknowledge and act on. This chapter, thus, extends discussions on the "messiness" of fieldwork (e.g., Billo & Hiemstra 2013; Harrowell, Davies, & Disney 2018; Hiemstra & Billo 2017) and demonstrates the generative potential of irregular, unexpected, and uncomfortable experiences in the field, by providing new lessons and tools related to fieldwork, research, and knowledge production.

Following this discussion of the methodological underpinnings of this dissertation, the next chapter turns to its conceptual foundations. Drawing from the literatures on transit migration and

migration journeys, I show how the spaces between origin and destination, as well as migrants' experiences within them, have been analyzed by scholars over time. I do so not only to highlight shortcomings within these literatures but also to outline my own understandings of migrants' journeys and their experiences in transit. As such, the next chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for the remainder of this dissertation.

### CHAPTER 3 – Theorizing Journeys and Transit

The journey toward you Lord, is life.  
To set off is to die a little.  
To arrive is never to arrive, until one is at rest with you.  
You, Lord, experienced migration.  
You brought it upon all men who know what it is to live,  
Who seek passage to the gates of heaven.  
You drove Abraham from his land, father of all believers.  
You shall remember the paths leading to you, the prophets and the apostles  
You yourself became a migrant from heaven to earth.  
- Migrants' Prayer<sup>18</sup>

#### Introduction

For Central American migrants, the act of transit has become increasingly prolonged, fragmented, and dangerous, spanning weeks, months, and sometimes years. In addition to navigating physical barriers, immigration checkpoints, and surveillance, migrants must evade cartels, local gangs, and corrupt officials. Setting off from Carmen Xhán at Mexico's southern border to McAllen, Texas, one of the shortest and most popular migration routes, migrants travel well over 1,000 miles, not counting their journeys to Mexico's southern border itself. The terrain they cover is difficult, spanning deserts, jungles, and mountains. Violence is routine, and through the production of "illegality" (De Genova 2004; 2005), undocumented migrants are continuously marginalized and vulnerable (see Chapter 4). On their journeys, migrants move quickly and slowly; forward and backward; together and alone. Sometimes, they do not move at all, becoming stationary and stuck in place over long time periods. As this dissertation shows, these movements and the spaces and places that shape and are shaped by them are key to understanding contemporary migration, revealing, as they do, migrants' exclusion and insecurity but also forms of agency and resistance.

Despite the growing scholarly attention given to "transit migration" (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008) and, more recently, to "migration

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<sup>18</sup> This prayer, handwritten on a folded piece of paper, was given to me by a migrant in McAllen, Texas.

journeys” (e.g., BenEzer & Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018b; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Vogt 2018), the literatures on both topics, I argue, fall short in detailing the complexity and dynamism of migrants’ journeys. As this chapter demonstrates, both literatures fall victim to “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002) and the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994), locating their analyses solely within the boundaries of individual states. In other words, while scholars have purported to analyze the act of migration across space and time, most studies on migrant travels are bounded within isolated countries such as Turkey and Morocco in the literature on “transit migration” (e.g., Baldwin-Edwards 2006; Fargues 2009) and Mexico in studies of “migration journeys” (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018). Later in this dissertation (Chapters 6 and 7), I show that by limiting analyses of migration journeys to the borders of isolated states, scholars overlook the empirical realities of migration and migrants’ complex experiences *on the move*, as they contend with border and immigration enforcement *across* multiple borders, countries, and continents. Here, I detail these shortcomings and outline my own understandings of migration journeys that draw from grounded observations and migrants’ experiences in transit, as narrated by migrants themselves.

To develop these ideas, I begin by reviewing work on “transit migration,” drawing attention to the ways this term has been conceptually operationalized in the migration literature and highlighting both its contributions and its limitations. Next, I situate a newer body of work on “migration journeys” which has extended the transit-migration literature’s insights in key ways. As I demonstrate, however, both literatures depend on methodological nationalism and the territorial trap, which the remainder of this dissertation aims to escape by centering migrants’ experiences *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. In the last section, I lay out three key themes related to migrants’ experiences in transit to develop the concept of journeys further: ambiguity, diversity, and dynamism.

## **Migration, Mobility, Journeys, and Transit**

### ***Transit Migration***

The term “transit migration” first emerged in Europe during the 1990s, as policymakers and public officials in the European Union (EU) expressed concerns over changing migration patterns from non-EU countries (see Düvell 2012). This so-called “new migration” in Europe linked geopolitical events, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and opening of Eastern Europe’s borders, to anticipated flows of migrants travelling from post-Soviet states to Western Europe (see King 1993; Koser & Lutz 1999). From ministerial conferences on the subject to policy memos warning of its strategic importance, the phrase “transit migration” appeared frequently throughout the early 1990s in European public discourse (Düvell 2012). Despite the term’s widespread use, no standard definition was developed, leaving disagreement over what transit migration actually meant. One of the earliest descriptions, provided by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, identified transit migration as the act of migration through one country with the intention of reaching a second country or region as the place of final destination (1993, p. 7). In the organization’s annual report, for example, officials described how “the Chinese have established functioning illegal networks” in the Czech Republic in the hopes of smuggling themselves into “the West” (1993, p. 8). Other public officials defined transit migration as “a short-term temporary stay of a migrant on his/her way from a country of origin to a country of destination,” while still others used the term to demarcate a particular type of migrant who “enter[s] the territory of a state in order to travel on to another,” a definitions that would eventually take hold in related scholarship (see Düvell 2012, p. 417).

By the mid-1990s, however, European governmental organizations and politicians were mobilizing fears of transit migration, speaking of “mass movements” and the “invasion” of EU



member states by large numbers of “unauthorized” migrants travelling across Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa (see de Haas 2008; Hess 2012). Over time, and in this way, transit migration became equated with “illegal” immigration and illicit activities in these places. For example, various European agencies emphasized transit migration’s “illicit nature” and “elaborate criminal organization,” designating it as the flow of “irregular and illegal migrants from the Third World and from East European countries... by means that are partially, if not fully, illegal” (Düvell 2012, p. 417). Talk of transit migration, it seemed, was now everywhere in Europe, and eventually, a range of migration scholars adopted the term, regardless of its politicized connotation and racialized undertones that alluded to “mass migrations” and “invasions” of foreigners linked to criminal activity.

Initially, scholars used transit migration to refer to a specific category of migrants who traversed multiple countries between places of origin and destination, particularly in the context of increasing global mobility and new border and immigration enforcement implemented throughout Europe (Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012). In early studies, the term “transit migration” was simply defined as migrants travelling through one country with the intention of moving onward (Içduygu 2000; Papadopoulou 2004), thereby creating the category of “transit migrants” that echoed earlier definitions among policymakers and public officials (see Düvell 2012). Accordingly, much of this work focused on what was seen as a distinct type of “transit migrant” waiting in “third countries” at the fringes of Europe to make their way—“illegally” or “irregularly”—toward the EU (Baldwin-Edwards 2006; Içduygu & Toktas 2002). Most of this early work depicted transit migration as a linear, predetermined trip from the peripheries of Eastern Europe and North Africa to the EU core (Baldwin-Edwards 2006; Jandl 2007). This static understanding of migration, however, was reevaluated years later, as other scholars pointed to the complexity of migrants’ intentions and

mobility along journeys characterized by diverse flows, multi-directionality, and uncertainty (see Schapendonk 2012; Wissink, Düvell, & van Eerdewijk 2013).

In light of these criticisms, scholars reworked the term transit migration. Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, for instance, redefined it as “the situation between emigration and settlement that is characterized by indefinite migrant stay, legal or illegal, and may or may not develop into further migration” (2008, p. 4). Here, the concept implied a waiting period and dynamic phase of the migration *process*, rather than a discrete *category* of migrants. Successive studies subsequently examined this active process between emigration and settlement, exploring how gender, nationality, and race, as well as border and immigration enforcement, affected migrants’ experiences along the way, as the time spent in “transit countries” lengthened and migrant precarity and vulnerability increased (Brekke & Brochmann 2015; Stock 2012, Suter 2012). Additional work investigated transit’s spatial and temporal dimensions, showing how countries between origin and destination became key in shaping the production of migrants’ illegality and immobility en route to Europe (Bredeloup 2012; Oelgemöller 2011). From this perspective, work on transit migration reflected the “stretching out” of migrants’ journeys across countries between origin and destination and the fractured processes of movement and mobility that accompanied them (Collyer 2007; 2010). Together, these studies problematized understandings of migration that were limited to the dichotomies of sending and receiving contexts, push and pull factors, and places of emigration and settlement (see Collyer & de Haas 2012). In place of these fixed binaries, studies of transit migration encouraged scholars to look between these sites and spaces and to focus on migrants’ legal ambiguity, marginalization, uncertainty, and other conditions and experiences forged in and through the act of transit.

Even with these updates and reworkings, the literature on transit migration remains deeply problematic. While scholars attempted to critically incorporate the term into the migration literature (e.g., Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008; Oelgemöller 2011; Wissink, Düvell, & van Eerdewijk 2013),

EU policymakers and public officials repeatedly employed transit migration as a political rationale for expanded border security and immigration enforcement (Düvell 2012).<sup>19</sup> This politicization of transit migration led many scholars to argue that the term's continued use only strengthened EU efforts to fortify Europe and normalized transit migration as a category and phenomenon worthy of state intervention (Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Oelgemöller 2011). Furthermore, the definition of transit migration itself was still unclear. In some studies, it was used to describe a narrow and static category of migrants (e.g., Fargues 2009) while in others, it was left ambiguous, open, and undefined (see Düvell 2012; Schapendonk 2012). Utilized in these ways throughout the literature, the concept of transit migration, Collyer and his coauthors argued, could not adequately represent migrants' diverse experiences on the move, composed of mixed motivations and dynamic intentions that changed over the course of their journeys (Collyer & de Haas 2012; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012). Still others argued that the concept of transit migration was neither new nor novel and, instead, represented a fabricated political construction that enabled border and immigration enforcement in and beyond Europe (Bredeloup 2012; Oelgemöller 2011).

Most importantly, the literature on transit migration was limited by its geography and Eurocentrism. Nearly all studies explicitly concerned with the phenomenon centered in and around the EU, leaving the act of transit migration elsewhere unaddressed (c.f., Basok et al. 2015; Bruzzone 2016). In addition, most of the literature was rife with methodological nationalism, placing transit migration within a handful of individual "third countries" outside the EU, rather than including the multiple spaces of movement and stasis that spanned international borders, countries, and continents. Many studies, for instance, analyzed transit migration within singular national contexts,

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<sup>19</sup> For some time, European lawmakers had mobilized fears of criminal activity and "illegal" immigration to justify border security and immigration enforcement along the EU's periphery, culminating in the rise of "fortress" Europe (see Carr 2012; Follis 2012). EU member states, thus, quickly introduced transit migration into this lexicon as an additional rationale.

such as Morocco (Baldwin-Edwards 2006; Stock 2012) and Turkey (Içduygu 2000; Içduygu & Toktas 2002; Suter 2012; Wissink et al. 2013), despite migrants' experiences both within and *beyond* those countries.

This work also spuriously implied that migrants settling or travelling along Europe's fringes were ultimately headed toward the EU, reinforcing the notion that migration was linear and static, with fixed starting and end points and a structured in-between phase. For example, scholars often labeled countries like Morocco and Turkey as "transit hubs," treating these places as mere through spaces that migrants traversed (Içduygu 2000; Wissink et al. 2013), with some going so far as to describe migrants in these spaces as "Europe's transit migrants" (Paynter 2018). Thus, while the literature on transit migration provided important insights into contemporary migration, these studies were hindered by the same determinism and dichotomized limitations of sending and receiving contexts, push and pull factors, and places of emigration and settlement (Collyer & de Haas 2012; Schapendonk 2012). For these reasons, scholars increasingly turned to examine migrants' movements through the lens of mobility and immobility to better understand the politics and processes involved with transit. This literature, though conceptually related to studies of transit migration, employs the term "migration journeys" to examine migrants' experiences between places of origin and destination.

### ***Migrants' (Im)Mobilities and Migration Journeys***

Spanning the humanities and social sciences, the "mobilities paradigm" gave renewed attention to various forms of mobility and immobility in everyday life (see Sheller & Urry 2006). According to mobilities scholars, conventional research had been "a-mobile" for too long, ignoring or trivializing processes of movement (Sheller & Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007). This new approach, instead, stressed mobility's importance as a "central fact of modern or postmodern life" (Cresswell

2011, p. 551) and examined how circulation, travel, and other mechanisms of movement constituted key economic, political, and social relations. In practice, the concept of mobilities encompassed both global movements of ideas, objects, and people and local practices of daily movement and transportation (see Hannam, Sheller, & Urry 2006; Urry 2007). Crucially, however, the mobilities paradigm also acknowledged the *lack* of global and daily movements, especially among people in precarious or vulnerable circumstances (see Faist 2013). As these scholars recognized, mobility was a resource to which not everyone had access, and in this way, mobility and control over mobility reflected and reinforced power in the wider world (Skeggs 2004, p. 49; see also Cresswell 2006; 2010). As such, the mobilities paradigm explored how the politics and practices around mobility also created rest, settlement, stillness, and stasis (Bissell & Fuller 2011; Cresswell 2012) and how the speed of some came at the stasis of others. For example, open borders encouraging mobility within the EU depended on limiting mobility at external borders outside the EU (see Balibar 2004; Carr 2012). Mobility and immobility, therefore, were seen as co-constitutive, revealing key operations of power that allowed some ideas, objects, and people to move freely while slowing or stopping others (Adey 2006; Cresswell 2006; 2010).

Following these insights, the mobilities paradigm has been applied to a range of topics within migration studies (Faist 2013; Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013), including (im)mobilities of asylum and refuge (Gill 2009; Mason 2011), international borders (Amoore 2006; Muller 2010; Richardson 2013), and migrant detention (Moran, Gill, & Conlon 2013; Mountz et al. 2013; Turnbull 2016). Increasingly, however, mobility and immobility have been used by scholars to develop novel understandings of migration journeys and new experiences forged in and through the act of transit. A number of scholars, for instance, have integrated mobility and immobility into studies of migration to rethink previous definitions of transit migration (Collyer & de Haas 2012; Schapendonk 2012; Missbach 2015). In particular, this work has highlighted the central position of

global migration controls in shaping migrants' mobility and immobility in transit, from slowing Central American migrants' progression through Mexico via immigration checkpoints and state surveillance to diverting flows of North Africans away from Europe by externalizing borders in the EU (Basok et al. 2015; Schapendonk & Steel 2014). Drawing from migrants' experiences with these controls, Schapendonk (2012, p. 579) employs mobilities to redefine transit migration as a "phase of experienced immobility in a process of movement in a specific migratory direction." Others have sought to eliminate the term "transit migration" altogether, privileging mobility and immobility, or to replace it with concepts like "precarious transit zones," which purport to better grasp the complexity, diversity, and unsteadiness of migrants' mobility and immobility on the move (see Basok et al. 2015; Bredeloup 2012; Hess 2012). Taken together, these studies expand original definitions of transit migration by drawing attention to dynamic and fractured processes of *both* mobility *and* immobility experienced en route.

More recently, scholars have placed mobility, immobility, and transit within the larger context of "migration journeys" (BenEzer & Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018). Here, the act of transit is subsumed under the wide notion of journeys, which have been conceived broadly as experiences that transcend multiple borders with indeterminate beginnings and ends and encompass travel across places of origin, destination, and transit in ambiguous and unpredictable ways (Mainwaring & Brigden 2016, p. 244). Conceptually, these journeys complicate traditional understandings of emigration, settlement, and transit, and recognize that migration and movement can be circular, multi-directional, repetitive, and temporary.<sup>20</sup> Attention to these interconnected practices have been key in theorizing contemporary migration as an extended process of mobility and immobility that cannot be reduced to a set time period or a simple space between departure and

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<sup>20</sup> To be sure, scholars have long criticized traditional understandings of migration that depict migrants' experiences as finite, linear, closed, completed, and so on (e.g., Ho 2008; Ley & Kobayashi 2005).

arrival. By centering migration journeys, scholars demonstrate how acts of transit exceed spatial and temporal constraints and involve complex narratives of movement and travel that sometimes never end (Innes 2015; Kaytaz 2016).

Drawing from this understanding of journeys, a handful of scholars have engaged conceptually and empirically with journeys and the act of transit in new ways to better understand contemporary migration. Brigden (2018b), for example, utilizes the terms “route terrain” and “migrant flow” to explore both transit’s material infrastructure, including objects, places, and things, and the people and practices engaged in facilitating or limiting movement across Mexico. These expansive, overlapping facets of transit, she argues, constitute key aspects of migration journeys from Central America, transforming migrants and the geography of migration along the way. Other scholars have emphasized the role of embodiment and intimacy to investigate transit as a set of wide-ranging experiences that are constantly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the journey (Brigden & Mainwaring 2016; Fontanari 2019; Vogt 2016).<sup>21</sup> For instance, Vogt (2018) examines the “lived realities of transit” to document not only precarity and violence but also intimate relationships between migrants and others associated with the act of transit, as migrants draw from these relationships to challenge and outmaneuver border and immigration enforcement along their journeys in Central America and Mexico. As BenEzer & Zetter explain (2015, p. 314), by centering the lived experiences of migration journeys, studies can “shed light on the social and individual processes of identity formation, adjustment and transition, and settlement and integration.”

Therefore, the small but growing literature on migration journeys has provided theoretical depth and nuance to understandings of transit, defining it as an extended set of lived experiences and processes

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<sup>21</sup> Much of this work is indebted to insights provided by feminist geopolitics, which has long studied the embodied and everyday sites where political relations are forged and contested (see Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Williams & Massaro 2013).

related to migrants' (im)mobility and transcending spatial and temporal constraints, as well as discrete categories, of migration and movement.

Yet, this budding literature on migration journeys also suffers from methodological nationalism and the territorial trap (e.g., BenEzer & Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2013; 2018). Both Brigden (2018b) and Vogt (2018), for instance, provide pathbreaking studies of Central American migrants in transit, utilizing ethnographic methods to analyze journeys across Mexico and examining a range of topics, including gender, intimacy, mobility, and violence. Their analyses of these subjects, however, never move beyond Mexico as the “container” through which migrants’ experiences unfold. Both works begin at the Mexico-Guatemala border and end at or before the U.S.-Mexico border, leaving migrants’ experiences in the spaces before and beyond out of their larger journeys. As I demonstrate in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, these encounters and spaces in the U.S. are fundamental parts of migrants’ experiences, as are the experiences and spaces of migrants’ travel *up to* Mexico’s southern border. How, then, does this dissertation conceive of journeys and transit?

### **On the Ground and In Transit**

Building on the insights provided by literatures on transit migration and migration journeys, this dissertation conceives of migrants’ journeys as a complex webs of intimate experiences and dynamic processes of mobility and immobility that stretch across borders, countries, and continents. Journeys cut across space and time, blurring the boundaries between arrival, departure, return, and settlement. As such, migrants’ journeys shape not only the lives of those involved, including migrants, smugglers, care workers, officials, but also the spaces and places along the way, from cities and towns to highways and train depots; from remote footpaths worn into deserts and jungles to detention centers and shelters scattered across Central and North America. My use of the term “migration journeys” in this dissertation stems from grounded observations and time spent



alongside migrants and shelter staff in Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. and unfolding across international borders, cities, towns, and deep within the interiors of these countries. Over time, I interacted with a variety of groups and individuals involved with journeys, including migrants and shelter staff but also care workers, gang members, immigration officials, local residents, police, and smugglers. In this section, I provide a short overview of my engagement with migration journeys and transit in the field to identify three characteristics of migrants' experiences on the move: ambiguity, diversity, and dynamism. These three concepts provide a scaffolding for understanding migration journeys and for the remainder of this dissertation.

First and foremost, migration journeys were ambiguous.<sup>22</sup> It was often unclear when and where migrants' journeys ended, if at all. Throughout fieldwork, migrants commonly set off with no destination or little idea of where to go—only a sense of where and what they were leaving. For these individuals, their journeys involved moving between some places and settling in others, only to leave again in the near future. Luis, for example, had taken a combination of passenger buses and taxis from El Salvador to Guatemala. He was born in Nicaragua but had been living in San Salvador, El Salvador's capital, for nearly two years. After crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border, he planned to continue on foot before he could stop somewhere in Mexico to find a temporary job. Speaking with him one day in the shelter in Chahuities, I asked him where he was ultimately headed. "I'm not sure," he responded. "Maybe Texas or Florida," two destinations that would require radically different routes to reach.

It was also unclear when and where migrants' journeys began, as migrants themselves frequently skipped over their experiences travelling across Central America and began their migration stories when they reached Mexico (see Chapter 5). Throughout interviews, migrants

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<sup>22</sup> Other scholars have also discussed migration as an ambiguous process, for example, through governance (Ilcan, Rygiel, & Baban 2018), legality (Kubal 2013), and migrants' mobility (Mainwaring & Brigden 2016).

narrated their journeys as if they started at the Mexico-Guatemala border, ignoring events and experiences that took place in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. These omissions were striking, given longstanding debates within migration studies concerning *when* the act of migration actually begins (see Bretell & Hollifield 2000; Massey, Durand, & Malone 2005; Portes 1997). For many migrants, it seemed, their journeys began the moment they crossed into Mexico, as evidenced by dozens of interviews, conversations, and discussions in which migrants separated their “travels” in Central America from their “journeys” in Mexico. This style of narration, I suspect, reflects the contemporary realities of migration across Mexico and the U.S., where migrants not only encounter violence and insecurity from a range of sources but also come to recognize themselves as routine targets of cartels, gangs, corrupt officials, and immigration enforcement (see Chapter 4). It also, however, draws attention to the ways migration scholars have yet to engage with migration journeys as defined by migrants’ themselves, which are typically assumed to begin once migrants set off home (see BenEzer & Zetter 2015; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016).

Migration journeys were ambiguous as well because of migrants’ erratic and haphazard movements. At times, migrants travelled toward the U.S. while at others, they became temporarily stuck in place for weeks and months, working as day laborers or waiting to regularize their legal status in Mexico. At other times, migrants travelled south, retracing their steps to reunite with companions or voluntarily return home. In rare instances, migrants would ask me to deliberately call immigration authorities for them to be picked up for self-deportation. When I asked why they wanted to be arrested instead of leaving on their own volition, many told me it was safer to be deported than to travel all the way home alone.

Migration journeys’ ambiguity was compounded by migrants’ legal status, as they periodically slipped between “legal” and “illegal.” In travelling across multiple legal jurisdictions, migrants slid in and out of legal status (see Coutin 2005). This precarious condition, or “semi-legality” (Kubal 2013;

see also Ngai 2004), meant that migrants were frequently “authorized” and “unauthorized,” “legal” and “illegal,” “regular” and “irregular.” As a volunteer in Mexico, I frequently escorted migrants on passenger buses as they moved from shelter to shelter, helping them gather the necessary documents and paperwork required to obtain a humanitarian visa. During these trips, their legal status was never clear, since they were technically travelling undocumented but were doing so for the purposes—and often in the process—of obtaining documentation. Migrants were usually allowed to pass through Mexican checkpoints, cities, and towns without incident. On one occasion, however, I was accompanying a young woman from Guatemala when she was arrested and detained by immigration authorities. Her name, listed on her birth certificate, was Yessica, but the name written on her visa had been misspelled “Yesica,” thereby invalidating her “semi-legal” status. Nearly a week passed before we were able to have her released from the detention facility.

Second, migration journeys were diverse, experienced differently by diverse groups of people and often playing out along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality. Most migrants with whom I spoke with told me they were from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, while others had travelled from as far away as Ethiopia and Cameroon.<sup>23</sup> For some migrants, it was their first time leaving home. The majority, however, had attempted to migrate to Mexico or the U.S. at least once before. With regard to gender, inside the shelter’s walls, men typically outnumbered women, who usually reported feeling uncomfortable and unsafe while in Mexico. In shelters, men were usually kept outdoors while women were provided with a small, but separate, dormitory inside. Over the course of many conversations, I learned that women often employed different strategies to avoid gendered forms of violence, for example, travelling back and forth between shelters—rather than continue their journeys north—to carefully select companions and gather knowledge about the

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<sup>23</sup> Recently, migration from Africa across Central America and Mexico has increased precipitously. In 2019, for example, the number of African migrants traveling across Mexico toward the U.S. more than doubled (see Solis 2019).

safest routes before setting off again. Later in this dissertation (Chapter 6), I examine the gendered dimensions of family detention in south Texas, which underscores the significance in taking gender seriously along the migrant trail.

Class also loomed large. In the U.S., the asylum-seekers I met had paid thousands of dollars to be smuggled across Mexico in cargo vans or the cabins of tractor trailers while migrants in Mexico were usually forced to travel by foot or train. Throughout fieldwork, migrants who could not afford smugglers were typically left behind, spending significantly more time along the migrant trail and in shelters, and, therefore, more vulnerable to deportation, detention, and acts of violence. While many of these migrants planned to use smugglers once they reached the U.S.-Mexico border, they were forced to navigate across Mexico alone, without the help of guides or smugglers. For these reasons, migrants often worked as day laborers or in other informal positions to save money, further extending their journeys across space and time.

Finally, journeys were dynamic. Migrants' aspirations, desires, strategies, and intentions changed over the course of their travels. Aldo, for example, was from a small indigenous village in Honduras. Travelling with three other friends, they were on their way to Guadalajara, Mexico, where they intended to try out for a professional soccer club. Weeks later, I helped Aldo and one of his friends claim asylum in Mexico after they were attacked in Oaxaca. By then, the other two friends had decided to return to Honduras, explaining to me that "it just wasn't worth it anymore" and leaving Aldo and his other friend behind. Some migrants set out with specific plans to claim asylum in Mexico or the U.S., while many others applied for humanitarian visas only after they fell victim to crime and violence. Most migrants, however, had no plans at all, assuming that without smugglers in Mexico, they would eventually find ways of slipping across the U.S.-Mexico border undetected. Lara, for instance, told me she planned to apply for asylum in Mexico. If she was denied, she would travel

to the U.S. Lara, however, had already received a humanitarian visa in Mexico allowing her to return to Honduras to see her family one last time before reentering Mexico to claim asylum.

Likewise, due to the proliferation of border and immigration enforcement in Mexico and the U.S., the act and experience of transit changed rapidly. Sometimes, migrants settled temporarily or permanently between trips across Central America and Mexico to rest and recuperate after being victimized by cartels and gangs. Other migrants were suddenly forced into circuitous and serpentine routes because of deportation or the need to return home. One man from Honduras explained to me that he was attempting his fifth crossing of Mexico, having been deported four times over a period of seven months. I would see him pass through the shelter in Chahuities an additional three times before I left. Even after migrants “arrived” in the U.S., their journeys continued to change rapidly as they confronted detention, deportation, and policing at the U.S.-Mexico border and deep within the U.S. interior under the Trump administration’s imperatives (see Chapter 6).

These journeys were also dynamic in transforming spaces and places along the way. Bus stations became receiving centers for asylum-seekers, as mothers and children were discharged from family detention in south Texas. Under the paradoxical practices of detention and deportation, San Antonio, Texas, was transformed into a hub of sending and temporary settlement, as migrant families were sent off to distant places across the U.S. to await immigration court dates scheduled years in advance (see Chapter 6). Cities and towns in Mexico became host to vast networks of clandestine economies and underground activities, facilitating and fostering movement across Mexico and into the U.S. Mundane sites of transportation infrastructure, such as bridges, railways, and roads, scattered across Mexico and the U.S. became powerful locations through which migrants anchored their experiences and memories along the migrant trail (see Chapter 5).

In all these ways, then, migration journeys were ambiguous, diverse, and dynamic—three characteristics and dimensions of transit that are integral to migration journeys and present

throughout this dissertation. Conceived in this way, migration journeys are more than a “through space” in an individual “transit country” between departure and arrival or origin and destination, as suggested by the literature on transit migration (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008). Likewise, migration journeys do not *only* unfold within the “container” of Mexico but spill out across Central America, Mexico, and the U.S.—sometimes repeatedly (e.g., Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2013; 2018). For the purposes of this dissertation, migration journeys are conceived as a complex set of intimate experiences and active processes of (im)mobility that are ongoing and ever present, cutting across multiple borders, countries, and continents in ambiguous, diverse, and dynamic ways.

## **Conclusions**

Drawing from the literatures on transit migration, the mobilities paradigm, and migration journeys, this chapter has foregrounded journeys as a key concept in migration studies employed and developed by scholars in a variety of ways. Building on these studies, I have theorized journeys as experiences and dynamic processes of mobility and immobility which shape not only the lives of those involved in migration but also the spaces and places along the way, spanning multiple borders, countries, and continents. While much attention in migration studies has been given to the spaces between origin and destination by the literatures on transit migration (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008) and migration journeys (e.g., BenEzer & Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Vogt 2018), both bodies of work fall victim to methodological nationalism and the territorial trap, as they primarily focus on isolated instances of journeys within “transit countries” or the “container” of Mexico. In doing so, these studies overlook encounters and experiences elsewhere, as migration journeys spill out across Central and North America.

This chapter has also detailed my engagement and work with migrants on the move across Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. to show how journeys are ambiguous, diverse, and dynamic, thereby laying the scaffolding for the remainder of this dissertation. In the following chapters, I draw from migrants' journeys, movements, and acts of transit to better understand contemporary migration from Central America to and toward the U.S. and to shed light on new spaces of migrant exclusion and insecurity, as well as complex forms of agency and resistance.

## CHAPTER 4 – “A Graveyard for Migrants”: Crossing Mexico

### Introduction

Bryan waited for me near the shelter’s entrance. As he approached, I nodded my head, holding out a fresh cup of coffee from the bodega across the street. “Are you ready?” I asked quietly. “Yeah, let’s go,” he replied, taking the Styrofoam cup from my left hand. Carefully, we made our way into the shelter’s courtyard, stepping around the dark silhouettes of bodies sleeping on the ground. A small strip of moonlight illuminated the concrete path in front of us. Bryan followed me into the small, cinderblock building ahead, and gently, I ushered him toward my room. “In here,” I muttered, lifting the torn bedsheet that served as a makeshift door. I sat down and set my coffee on the cement floor as a single, fluorescent lightbulb buzzed to life in the background. Bryan seated himself and edged further back into his chair, which creaked from decades of use. “Well, where should I start? What do you want to know?” he asked. “Let’s start at the beginning,” I instructed, slowly sipping my coffee. “Why did you leave Honduras? How did you get here... and what happened to you along the way?”

“I left home almost five months ago—after my older brother died,” Bryan said, almost casually. He described how his brother joined the 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang, also known as *Barrio 18*, after he was deported from the U.S. Bryan enlisted alongside him, and late one evening, they were confronted by a rival gang outside a local restaurant. “They attacked us from behind,” he explained. “I was stabbed twice in the stomach and my brother three times in the chest.” Bryan lifted his t-shirt, revealing two wide puncture wounds near his side, healed over with pink scar tissue. “I was lucky, but my brother... he wasn’t. He died in the hospital,” he stammered. “I’m sorry,” I replied slowly, breaking the collective silence that fell over both of us. Bryan reached for his coffee before continuing, shifting in his seat, “When I got out of the hospital, I felt so stupid. It was time for me to grow up. I decided to quit the gang—so, afterward, it wasn’t safe for me to stay in Honduras anymore. Finally, after some time, I thought to myself, I should leave for the U.S.”



Travelling alone, Bryan took a series of passenger buses across El Salvador and Guatemala, before entering Mexico on foot. In Oaxaca, along a remote stretch of highway, he was stopped by two federal police officers, who demanded \$100 in cash. “They were going to deport me, and I couldn’t to go back [to Honduras], so I paid them immediately. I didn’t want any trouble,” Bryan recounted to me. As he got up to leave, one of the officers noticed a small, gold cross hanging around his neck. “They asked me for the necklace, but I couldn’t give it to them... It was my brother’s,” he said, shaking his head at me. “It was all I had left.” The officers became enraged and threatened to kill him, insisting that they would bury his body along with “the others.” “Out here, no one notices when migrants disappear,” Bryan explained as we locked eyes. Forced onto his knees, he was held at gunpoint by one of the officers while the other stood behind him, shaking him down. Reluctantly, he surrendered the necklace along with the rest of his money, hidden in the sole of his shoe. “I was sure I was going to die,” he said before pausing. “You know, Mexico is a graveyard for migrants... Here, we’re already dead.”

### ***The Necropolitics of Migration***

For Central American migrants, the act of crossing Mexico has become increasingly deadly and violent. In addition to navigating new, restrictive immigration controls throughout Mexico, migrants must also evade cartels, local gangs, and corrupt officials. From extortion and robbery to kidnapping and sexual assault, many migrants fall victim to unsparing acts of violence. According to a 2017 survey by the international humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders, more than two-thirds of migrants reported being victims of physical violence along their journeys through Mexico (Medecins Sans Frontières 2017). Death, disappearances, and murder are also common. In 2010, the bodies of seventy-two migrants from Central and South America were found buried in mass graves in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas (see Booth 2010). Two years later, forty-nine victims were

discovered on the side of a highway outside Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, their bodies mutilated beyond recognition (see Miroff 2012). More broadly, over 250,000 people have died in Mexico since the government declared war on drugs in 2006, many of them killed as a result of “collateral damage” between organized crime and state security forces (de Córdoba & Montes 2018). As of 2019, the total number of disappeared<sup>24</sup> in Mexico surpassed 40,000—the true number of missing people likely much higher (Murray 2019). It is within this context, I suggest, that the threshold between life and death has become key to understanding migrants’ experiences and the ways they collectively navigate the ubiquity of violence along the migrant trail in Central and North America.

For some time, scholars have utilized concepts around life and death to examine the politics of migration and its governance worldwide (e.g., de León 2015; Heller & Pezzani 2017; Nevins 2007; 2008). Much of this work has centered on the role of “biopolitics” in controlling, monitoring, and regulating migration (e.g., Amoore 2006; Bailey 2013; Tazzioli 2019; Vaughan-Williams 2015). According to Foucault (1978; 2003; 2007), biopolitics refers to modern practices of governance, where power is no longer derived through the constant threat of death but through the management of *living* populations. Biopolitics, Foucault wrote (1978, p. 140), is composed of “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations.” From this perspective, the central concern for modern governments is the administration and reproduction of life, rather than the propagation or meting out of death, as power is conceived through the right to “make live and let die” (Foucault 2003, p. 241; see also 2007).

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<sup>24</sup> The term “disappeared” refers to the *desaparacidos*, victims who are forcibly “disappeared” by others. In Latin America, the disappeared refers to victims who are abducted, killed, and/or tortured, their whereabouts unknown. During the Cold War, this practice was widely implemented by state security forces in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala (see Arditti 1999; Ensalaco 2000; Weld 2014). More recently, Mexico has emerged as a “ground zero” for the disappeared, as organized crime and state security forces wage indiscriminate war against one another, frequently claiming the lives of civilians and migrants (see Emmerson 2019; Valencia 2018; Wright 2018).

In the context of migration, the state's concern over managing and preserving life is evident through state practices associated with borders and citizenship (Salter 2006; 2008; Sparke 2006; Vaughan-Williams 2010), humanitarianism (Williams 2015), surveillance (Amoore 2006; Topak 2014), and a host of other technologies employed to control and direct flows of people from both within and beyond territorial boundaries. Amoore and Hall (2009), for example, explain how border screenings utilize technology to "digitally dissect" bodies, creating, classifying, and organizing individuals into discrete categories of "risk" to determine who is allowed to cross and who is not. Thus, through biopolitics, power is wielded to "qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor" (Foucault 1978, p. 144). What, then, of the morbid displays and spectacle of violence so ubiquitous in Central American migration? What is the relationship between life and death along the migrant trail? If the imperative of modern governance is to "make live and let die," how do we make sense of migrants' experiences in transit, defined more by the promulgation of death than by the facilitation of life?

For Mbembe (2003; 2019), answers to these questions lie in the concept of "necropolitics." Drawing from Agamben's (1998) notion of "bare life," where individuals are wholly stripped of rights yet subject to the law and exposed to death at all times, even as they are not worth killing or sacrificing, necropolitics describes "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (Mbembe 2003, p. 14). For Mbembe, biopolitics, as a concept, is insufficient in explaining how death and violence continue to prevail as central techniques of modern governance. Instead, he argues, it is the relationship *between* politics and death that offers purchase on contemporary forms of brutality, exploitation, and violence (Mbembe 1992). Necropolitics, thus, is defined by the "subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003, p. 39). Conceived in this way, power emerges through the capacity to "make die and let live," in a reverse of Foucault's phrasing, and to decide who is disposable and who is not (Mbembe 2003,

p. 27). Necropolitics, however, does not *always* involve the outright death or killing of individuals deemed “disposable.” Through the lens of the slave plantation, Mbembe (2003, p. 21) explores how bodies were kept alive in a “state of injury,” a permanent condition defined by cruelty and suffering (see also Patterson 1982). As a form of value and “property,” the enslaved were spared from immediate death and, instead, subject to branding, whipping, and other methods of gradual wounding that instilled fear and terror. This violence and the perpetual threat of death represented a formidable technology used to achieve control and domination over individuals, leaving only a “life-in-death” behind (see Cacho 2012; Holland 2000; Patterson 1982). Ultimately, Mbembe argues (2003, p. 40), these practices of necropolitics culminate in the production of “*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”

Yet, within necropolitics, biopolitics remains salient and operates alongside it, as *some* lives, particularly those deemed “eligible,” are maintained and preserved by the state while others are sanctioned to die (see Foucault 2003). This calculus often turns on racialization and the creation of subjects that appear “dead-to-others,” rendering certain populations *ineligible* for personhood (Cacho 2012; Holland 2000).<sup>25</sup> Categorized as “undeserving,” these subjects, such as gang members, suspected terrorists, and undocumented immigrants, are excluded from the law’s protection yet subject to its discipline, punishment, and regulation (Cacho 2012). According to Foucault (2003, p. 228), this form of active exclusion signifies the “condition for the acceptability of putting to death,” which mobilizes the production of difference and racial hierarchies to decide who is human and who

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<sup>25</sup> This process, in part, is otherwise known as “social death” (see Cacho 2012; Patterson 1982).

is inhuman (see also Gilmore 2002).<sup>26</sup> In the process, states exercise *both* biopower *and* necropower over individuals, where some lives are preserved and managed while others are designated to die. These connections between biopower and necropower are especially evident through U.S. immigration enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border, where migrant life—often racialized and held as “criminal” (see Provine & Doty 2011)—is managed and minimally cared for by the state, but only under the perpetual threat of death (Castro 2015; Williams 2015).<sup>27</sup>

As Mbembe (2003, p. 31) makes clear, however, the exercise of violence and the right to kill are “no longer the sole monopoly of states.” In the absence of a singular, cohesive power, power itself is now diffuse and fragmented, extending across a patchwork of complex, overlapping, and incomplete claims to authority (Mbembe 2000; 2003). Accordingly, necropolitics is constituted through a wide range of actors and institutions, including but not limited to the state, and gives rise to a “heteronomous organization of territorial rights and claims” that obscures distinctions between formal and informal political realms, internal and external organizations, and state and non-state actors (Mbembe 2003, p. 32). While seemingly diverse, these varying sources of necropolitical violence converge in the creation of “obscene and grotesque” (Mbembe 1992, p. 3) conditions where, according to Mbembe (2019, p. 38), life becomes “merely death’s medium.”

With this concept of necropolitics in mind, migration scholars have emphasized the importance of death and violence in understanding migration and its management through contemporary forms of governance (e.g., Davies, Isakjee, & Dhesi 2017; de León 2015; Rosas 2006b). Much of this work has centered on necropolitics’ ability to inflict bodily harm and human

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<sup>26</sup> Agamben (1998) describes the ancient figure of Roman law “*homo sacer*” through the notion of “bare life,” a condition through which an individual is stripped of political status and excluded from legal protection. Reduced to pure, biological life, this individual is both unprotected by law and may be killed at any time. However, in contrast to Foucault (2003) and Mbembe (2003; 2019), the individual’s life holds no meaning and, as such, is no longer worth putting to death.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Border Patrol, for example, routinely destroys supplies, such as food and water containers, left for migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border (see Carroll 2018).

suffering as a means of coercion and control (see Montenegro, Pujol, & Possoco 2017). Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi (2017), for instance, examine the EU's neglected refugee camps as evidence of necropolitical violence, where policymakers' deliberate inaction and political indifference have culminated in squalid living conditions that prevent migrants from seeking asylum or moving onward. Other scholars have focused on the deadly and violent effects of immigration policies along national borders, showing how contemporary governance utilizes environmental hazards and difficult terrain to deter migrants through potential death and injury (de León 2015; Heller & Pezzani 2017; Lo Presti 2019). In the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, for example, policies like Prevention Through Deterrence funnel migrants into treacherous areas of the Sonoran Desert (see de León 2015; Dunn 2009; Nevins 2010), where they risk dehydration and heat exposure (Cornelius 2001). Echoing Mbembe (2003), Lo Presti (2019) describes these spaces as "death-worlds" through which migrants navigate an increasingly narrow threshold between life and death. Collectively, this work demonstrates that necropolitics is key to migration governance, producing deadly and violent conditions that expose migrants to bodily harm, cruelty, and suffering.

In the literature on Central American migration, such deadly and violent conditions have been well documented (e.g., Brigden 2018a; de León 2015; Swanson & Torres 2016; Vogt 2013; 2018). As Vogt (2013) explains, migration journeys across Mexico provide key sites from which to study violence and its manifestation in local settings. Accordingly, scholars have examined various instances of violence along the migrant trail, including abuse and gendered violence against women (Angulo-Pasel 2018; Brigden 2018a; Vogt 2018; Wright 2011), exploitation through smuggling and trafficking (Alvarez 2020; Vogt 2013; 2016), kidnapping (Slack 2016; Wright 2018), and migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border (de León 2015; Doty 2011; Rosas 2006a; 2006b). Underscoring the ubiquity of death and violence in Central American migration, this work points to the "material destruction of human bodies" (Mbembe 2003, p. 14) and myriad forms of bodily harm and suffering

migrants endure in transit. By only discussing the existence of death and violence and the ways they are perpetrated against migrants, however, this literature portrays migrants as merely passive subjects.

While such findings have been integral in understanding how and where violence takes place, few scholars have considered how migrants themselves interpret and navigate necropolitics on the ground. An exception is Brigden's work (2018a; 2018b), which shows how migrants do not passively accept death and violence along their journeys. Instead, she argues, migrants manipulate self-presentation and the performance of their identities to enable and protect their mobility in transit. Likewise, Vogt (2018) explores how intimacy in transit fosters close relationships between migrants and the strangers who facilitate their journeys and serve as figures of care and protection on the migrant trail. Though limited in number, these studies are important in helping elucidate the ways migrants actively resist death and violence by drawing from improvisation and social capital while crossing Mexico. How, though, do we make sense of migrants' experiences in which, like Bryan, they appear to *accept* death?

This chapter examines this question, building on the work of scholars like Brigden (2018a; 2018b) and Vogt (2018) to demonstrate that in addition to actively resisting death and violence, migrants also willingly *accept* both realities as a key tactic and crossing strategy. As I show, death and violence often serve as sources of determination and resiliency for migrants, who utilize the very same tactics meant to deter them from migrating to endure, undertake, and prepare for their journeys. Even as migrants are subjected to assault, extortion, kidnapping, robbery, and murder, they remake and struggle against these abject conditions by accepting them, whereby they describe themselves as being "already dead."

This form of fatalism (*fatalismo*), the belief that individuals do not have control over their own futures, is widespread in Latin America (see Pew Hispanic Center 2005). As Martín-Baró (1994,

p. 210) explains, fatalism in Latin America is “a way for people to make sense of a world they have found closed and beyond their control: it is an attitude caused and continually reinforced by the oppressive functioning of overall social structures.” Fatalism, however, is frequently described as passive and submissive, where individuals submit to an inevitable fate (Blanco & Díaz 2007; Martín-Baró 1994; Watkins & Shulman 2008). In contrast, I suggest in this chapter that migrants’ acceptance of death and violence represents an act of agency and defiance, as they remake and utilize necropolitical conditions to arrive at their destinations.<sup>28</sup>

To develop these arguments, this chapter examines the connections between necropolitics (Mbembe 2003; 2019) and migrants’ experiences crossing Mexico in which they encounter a vast, necropolitical landscape of brutality, exploitation, and violence (see also Emmerson 2019; Valencia 2018; Wright 2011; 2018). Tracing the evolution of immigration enforcement, (in)security, and violence throughout the country, I show how and why migration across Mexico has become increasingly deadly and violent, as migrants grapple with the ever-present threat of death. However, in contrast to the literature on migration, necropolitics, and violence outlined above (e.g., Davies, Isakjee, & Dhesi 2017; de León 2015; Doty 2011; Swanson & Torres 2016), I consider the ways migrants actively utilize necropolitics as a source of determination and resiliency to arrive at their destinations. Looking toward the spaces between origin and destination, I examine how migrants themselves make sense of “obscene and grotesque” (Mbembe 1992, p. 3) conditions in transit, where death and violence are key to understanding not only their experiences but also the tactics and strategies they use to complete their journeys and through which they describe themselves as being

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<sup>28</sup> Fatalism and a “jovial” familiarity with death are deeply embedded within Mexico’s political history and national identity (see Lomnitz 2005), evidenced by the popular holiday *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) and celebrated folk saint Our Lady of the Holy Death (*Nuestra Señora de la Santa Muerte*). While this intimacy with death is present throughout Central America, especially amid the region’s history with civil wars and political upheaval (e.g., Afflito 2000; Arnson 2000; Schroeder 2000), its cultural and political connotations are much different—often characterized as a somber reflection of reality for many Central Americans and a tragic conclusion to decades of foreign intervention and structural violence (see Martínez 2016). Thus, the ways Central American migrants mobilize fatalism and death is distinct from the Mexican context.



“already dead.” It is through this act of seeing themselves as “already dead,” I argue, that migrants remake necropolitics into a source of determination and resiliency, utilizing the threat of death as a way enduring and living on amid abject conditions.

Structurally, this chapter works in two interrelated parts. The first details how border and immigration enforcement, (in)security, and violence have evolved in Mexico through several key policies, including *Plan Sur*, the War on Drugs and Mérida Initiative, and *Programa Frontera Sur*. As this section shows, for nearly two decades, Mexico and the U.S. have partnered to expand policing and immigration control at the Mexico-Guatemala border and within the Mexican interior.

Mobilizing a powerful discourse and imagery of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime flowing from Central and South America, Mexican and U.S. officials have created a diffuse borderlands in southern Mexico, where checkpoints, blockades, and patrols aimed at Central American migrants extend from the Mexico-Guatemala border to Oaxaca and Veracruz (see Figures 3). These policies have been overwhelmingly adverse for migrants, for whom the act of crossing Mexico has become increasingly deadly and violent, in many ways reflecting Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics and “death-worlds” (2003; 2019).<sup>29</sup>

Building upon this backdrop, the second section explores how migrants collectively navigate and make sense of these abject conditions, describing themselves as being “already dead” while in transit. As I demonstrate, migrants actively mobilize fatalism to prepare for the journey ahead, drawing from the threat of brutality, exploitation, and violence as sources of determination and resiliency. Through these two sections, this chapter shows that while necropolitics may center on death and violence, there is life *within death*, as migrants find ways of enduring and living on in the face of immense adversity. This mobilization of life within death should encourage scholars to

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<sup>29</sup> Scholars have also studied Mexico’s necropolitics through analyses of gender (Wright 2011), global capitalism (Valencia 2018), governance (González Rodríguez 2014), and vigilantism (Emmerson 2019).

rethink the power and politics of violence in Central American migration and to recognize migrants not as passive victims of this violence but, instead, as active subjects who redeploy necropolitics as a method of survival.

### **Migration, (In)Security, and America’s “Third Border”**

From the political independence of both countries to the late-twentieth century, the boundary between Mexico and Guatemala was indeterminate and porous.<sup>30</sup> For generations, migrants from Central America and Mexico traveled freely across the border, maintaining important social, cultural, and economic ties (Galemba 2018; Hernández Castillo 2001; Nolan-Ferrell 2012). During the Cold War, however, this region was permanently transformed as thousands of Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans crossed into Mexico, fleeing civil war and political upheaval (Coutin 2007; 2016; García 2006; Jonas & Rodríguez 2014). From 1954 to 1996, death squads, revolutions, and military coups, often instigated by the U.S., ravaged Central America (see Grandin 2006; Rabe 2012). In Guatemala, violence began after a U.S.-sponsored military coup toppled the democratically elected government in 1954, leading to decades of repressive military rule and a “scorched earth” counterinsurgency plan (Gleijeses 1991; Sanford 2003; Wilkinson 2002). Likewise, civil war in El Salvador beginning in 1979 between guerilla groups and a military-led government—again, supported by the U.S.—resulted in death squads, massacres, and the recruitment of child soldiers (Ching 2016; Danner 1993). Events in Nicaragua were no different, as counterrevolutionary forces trained and armed by the U.S., known as Contras, waged indiscriminate war against civilians and the government throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Kinzer 2007). More than 250,000 people died across Central America, and over a million were displaced throughout these conflicts in what is referred to

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<sup>30</sup> For an in-depth overview of the Mexico-Guatemala border and its historical development over time, see Galemba (2018).

as the “Cold War’s last killing fields” (Grandin 2004). Many displaced Central Americans sought refuge in Mexico, the U.S., and Canada. Obtaining asylum, however, was difficult, as they encountered restrictive immigration and asylum policies across North America (García 2006). While the majority eventually returned home, the initial exodus worked to solidify the Mexico-Guatemala border’s significance and visibility, especially for Mexican and U.S. officials who recognized its strategic importance in controlling migration. In the aftermath of these conflicts, the Mexico-Guatemala border became central to Mexican immigration policy, especially as neoliberalism took root in the form of structural adjustments programs, free trade agreements, dollarization, and other policies, exacerbating economic inequalities and leading to further outmigration from Central America (Brown & Cloke 2005; Moodie 2006; 2010; O’Neill & Thomas 2011).

Responding to this migration, in 2001 (before the September 11, 2001 attacks), Mexico announced *Plan Sur*, a new comprehensive enforcement program located along the Mexico-Guatemala border. Under mounting pressure from the U.S. government to curtail Central American migration, Mexico increased inspection activities and deployed military personnel to its southern border (Andersson 2005; Ogren 2007; Solís 2007). The program installed frequent patrols and established interior checkpoints along high-traffic corridors in border states like Chiapas, Tabasco, and Veracruz. Drawing from U.S. financial support, the initiative authorized the construction of staffed kiosks and barriers along Mexico’s remote jungle frontier (Hagen 2006; 2008). It also expanded detention and deportation, introducing new policies that streamlined removal of undocumented migrants through ports of entry into Guatemala, regardless of their nationality (Ogren 2007). Importantly, *Plan Sur* required collaboration and the coordinated efforts of Mexican federal, state, and municipal agencies, whose work was previously separate, including the National Institute of Migration (INM), Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB), and Office of the Attorney General (Hagen 2006; 2008; Ogren 2007). Whereas before, Mexican agencies pursued border and

immigration enforcement separately, through haphazard and disorganized attempts, *Plan Sur* ensured a smooth and seamless operation. The program ultimately signaled a new era of border and immigration enforcement in Mexico, which until then, had been largely absent from the federal government's approach to immigration. Under *Plan Sur*, Central American migrants were now subject to policing, detention, and deportation throughout Mexico.

From the beginning, Mexican and U.S. officials framed *Plan Sur* around a security threat posed by the flow of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime from Central and South America (Ogren 2007; Solís 2007). By 2001, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration had identified the Mexico-Guatemala border as a strategic site of cooperation and national security, labeling it “America’s third border” (Solís 2007). U.S. advisors and policymakers described it as a region in desperate need of state intervention, a “soft underbelly” where “venal criminals alike flood into Chiapas with a view to reaching the U.S.” (Grayson 2006). This rhetoric was echoed by Mexican officials, and speaking in the U.S. months before *Plan Sur* was announced, then President Vicente Fox declared that “The most pressing issue between both countries is drug trafficking... Only by joining forces with strategic coordination [and] sharing information, we can face and defeat this situation” (Sanchez 2001). Among the program’s main objectives were orders to combat smuggling and drug trafficking into North America, and under its implementation, the Mexican government dispatched army and navy troops, who previously focused on organized crime and drug interdiction elsewhere, throughout the region (Ogren 2007). *Plan Sur*, therefore, signified a new approach to border and immigration enforcement in Mexico, one that officials increasingly justified through a discourse of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime and that portended the arrival of Mexico’s War on Drugs and the Mérida Initiative in 2006 and 2007.

### ***Mexico’s War on Drugs and the Mérida Initiative***

On December 11, 2006, newly elected President Felipe Calderón deployed 6,500 Mexican soldiers alongside federal police to the state of Michoacán. Military Humvees, helicopters, and navy gunboats provided support for the mission, as ground troops descended on locations affiliated with drug production, trafficking, and distribution (Enriquez 2006; McKinley 2007). Over the previous decades, Mexico had been consumed by escalating cartel violence and drug-related conflicts (see Boulosa & Wallace 2015; Grillo 2012; Hernández 2013). Addressing the public from a military base nearby, Calderón asserted, “Mexico does not surrender and will not surrender... We will not falter in fighting Mexico’s enemies. We will give no truce or quarter to criminals” (Madrazo Lajous 2016). Soon, this mobilization spread across Mexico, engulfing half a dozen states and much of the active military and police force—7,000 troops occupied the resort town of Acapulco, 3,300 soldiers and federal police flooded into Tijuana, and nearly 6,000 more swept through the Sierra Madre (Boulosa & Wallace 2015; Grillo 2012). Mexico had officially declared war on drugs.

In the following months, Calderón’s offensive resulted in dozens of high-level arrests and record seizures of cash, narcotics, and weapons (González 2009). Buoyed by this success, Mexico and the U.S. promptly announced the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral security cooperation agreement that pledged \$1.4 billion to assist Calderón’s administration in waging its war on drugs (see Ashby 2014; Gallaher 2015; González 2009). Under the three-year initiative, Mexico received military and police training from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as new technology and equipment, including biometric scanners, x-ray machines, transport helicopters, and surveillance aircraft (Grillo 2012). Support also extended to upgrading software systems, government databases, and police registries.<sup>31</sup> The first tranche of money arrived in 2008, as the Bush administration worked to deepen its “shared responsibility” with

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<sup>31</sup> Much of this support was provided by private military and security companies such as DynCorp, Lockheed Martin, Northrup Grumman, and Raytheon, which received lucrative contracts through the initiative (Hobson 2014; Paley 2014).

Mexico in breaking “the power and impunity of drug and criminal organizations” (Ashby 2014; see also Gallaher 2015). Subsequent funding for the program continued under the Obama and Trump administrations, both of which expanded the initiative over time.<sup>32</sup> Mexico and the U.S. were now formally bound in fighting the drug war.

While the Mérida Initiative centered on counternarcotics, it also explicitly addressed border and immigration enforcement, and much of the provisioned U.S. aid was intended for the Mexico-Guatemala border, further incorporating Mexico into U.S. security interests following 9/11 (Ashby 2014; Kovic & Kelly 2017). By 2010, Mexico and the U.S. had attached a key stipulation to the agreement, which announced the creation of a “21<sup>st</sup> century border” aimed at curtailing immigration and cross-border activity in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands (Ashby 2014). In doing so, Mexican and U.S. officials continued to conflate migration with narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime, particularly from Central and South America. For example, shortly after the Mérida Initiative was announced, Mexico’s attorney general visited the Mexico-Guatemala border, asserting that “The illegal flow of people and merchandise that exists and the delinquency it generates demand a strengthened institutional coordination” (Kovic & Kelly 2017). Similarly, in the U.S., the Atlanta DEA chief explained to reporters in 2009 that “The flood of Hispanic immigrants into American communities... helped to provide cover to drug traffickers and distributors” (Arrillaga 2009). Others suggested that members of Al Qaeda and Hezbollah conspired with smugglers to enter the U.S. from Honduras and other countries across Central America (Grayson 2006). Such concerns proliferated in the wake of the Mérida Initiative, culminating in widespread fear of “spillover”

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<sup>32</sup> A significant portion of funding from the initiative was also appropriated for Central America. In 2008, the Obama administration launched the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) as a separate, yet related, program which provided equipment and training to law enforcement and drug interdiction operations across the region (see Meyer & Seelke 2014).

violence (del Bosque 2009) that implicated migrants in the war on drugs and further rationalized Mexican and U.S. intervention to propagate “national security.”

Despite collective efforts under the Mérida Initiative and ongoing drug war, violence continued to escalate in Mexico. Even as Calderón’s government posted record-breaking arrests and drug busts, homicides and kidnappings in Mexico skyrocketed (Watt & Zepeda 2012). Across the country, cartels and security forces battled in the streets, with clashes involving heavy-caliber machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and car bombs (Esposito 2010; Tuckman 2015). In 2010, drug-related murders increased to over 15,000 per year (Grillo 2012). Meanwhile, military and police forces resorted to torture and abuse, employing similar tactics to the cartels and paramilitaries they sought to confront (Grillo 2012; Watt & Zepeda 2012). Calderón funneled more resources into the offensive, bolstered by U.S. support, which included covert operations, military advisors, and unarmed surveillance drones provided by the Bush and Obama administrations (Thompson 2011). By the end of Calderón’s term in 2012, more than 55,000 people had perished in the war on drugs (Grillo 2012), and as of 2018, the death toll—still climbing—topped 250,000 (de Córdoba & Montes 2018).

The effects of the Mérida Initiative and war on drugs transformed the landscape of migration across Mexico in important ways. Foremost, this devastating and ongoing conflict has produced an environment where cartels, drug traffickers, and the state struggle for power, territory, and control, culminating in a violent and sprawling “drug war zone” that impinges on the lives of individuals and communities (Campbell 2009). In this fluid space, insecurity has prevailed, evidenced by regular and spectacular acts of violence, such as the 2008 attacks in Morelia, Michoacán, where bystanders celebrating Independence Day were struck by grenades hurled into a crowd (see Lacey 2008). Clear-cut distinctions between “criminals” and the state have been obscured, as corruption looms large and as violence, perpetrated by cartel members, military, and police alike, permeates

everyday life (see Gibler 2011; Heyman & Campbell 2007).<sup>33</sup> Migrants are especially vulnerable as they traverse this “drug war zone,” subject to collateral and indiscriminate violence as well as to intentional forms of abuse and exploitation. Emboldened by the drug war, cartels routinely target migrants, employing extortion, robbery, and kidnapping to generate profits and expand revenue (Grillo 2012; Wainwright 2016). At one time, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) estimated that nearly 1,600 migrants were kidnapped every month (see Lakhani 2017). Mexico, thus, has come to resemble a vast necropolitical landscape in which “war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other” (Mbembe 2003, p. 24), ensnaring migrants in a war without end where death and violence permeate everyday life.

Furthermore, policies such as the war on drugs and Mérida Initiative have repeatedly legitimized migrants as targets of national security. By continually linking migration from Central and South America to the flow of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime, Mexican and U.S. officials equate migrants with criminals and drug traffickers, thereby justifying “national security” in North America through and on migrant bodies. In testimony before Congress, for example, Indiana Senator Richard Lugar explained that the Mexican and U.S. governments recognized that “Central America is the primary transit point for people and drugs destined for the United States and Mexico from South America” and that this illicit activity “threatened regional stability” (S. Report No. 110-35 2007). Central pillars of the Mérida Initiative, then, included border and immigration enforcement to curtail “the illicit flow of drugs, people, arms, and cash” (Ashby 2014). Accordingly, Central American migrants have been conflated with traffickers, terrorists, and criminals—seen as

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<sup>33</sup> In 2014, for example, a local group of students clashed with military and police during a protest in Iguala, Guerrero. Six people died, forty were wounded, and forty-three students disappeared after they unknowingly commandeered two buses loaded with heroin. Local politicians, government officials, military, federal police, and cartel members have all been implicated in the incident. As of 2019, only two students have been identified and confirmed dead—the other forty-one students are still missing (see Gibler 2017; Hernández 2018).



illegitimate, foreign threats to “regional stability” and, thus, targets of legitimate state intervention (Kovic & Argüelles 2010; Kovic & Kelly 2017). The war on drugs and Mérida Initiative explicitly incorporate these ideas, funneling key resources toward border and immigration enforcement in southern Mexico as a territorial buffer against migration flows and cross-border activity from the south (see also Walker 2015; 2018a). As a result, surveillance and a military presence across southern Mexico have increased dramatically, and migration routes have become highly monitored and policed. Migrants navigate increasingly restrictive immigration controls alongside violence and insecurity generated by the drug war, conditions that would only be compounded under *Programa Frontera Sur*.

### ***Programa Frontera Sur***

While the drug war wore on, in 2013, Mexico again turned its attention to migration from Central America, as migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras left for the U.S. in mounting numbers (Massey et al. 2014; Spörlein 2015). In June of that year, Mexico’s Secretary of the Interior visited the southern border alongside governors from Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco, announcing the formation of a “comprehensive development program” to address “the problem generated by migration” (Peters 2013). Months later, delegates from the INM and Guatemala’s national police met with U.S. DEA and FBI counterparts in the border city of Tapachula to discuss preparations for the program (Hernández 2014). With few details released to the public, Mexico slowly increased the presence of army and navy troops along the Mexico-Guatemala border while President Peña Nieto appointed a so-called “migration czar” to oversee ongoing arrangements (Cárdenas 2013; Torres 2015). These developments indicated that a large, comprehensive program involving the U.S. was beginning to materialize around immigration and the southern border.

Finally, in July 2014, Peña Nieto, accompanied by Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina, formally announced *Programa Frontera Sur*, a far-reaching plan aimed at border security and immigration enforcement in Mexico (see Isacson et al. 2014; 2015; Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). The program centered on two main objectives: first, protecting migrants in transit and second, increasing security at the southern border and along well-established migration routes.<sup>34</sup> Under the new plan, Mexico would improve infrastructure at ports of entry, provide temporary work and visiting permits for migrants, and develop new sources of funding for shelters and medical units (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Speaking before the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants, Peña Nieto assured policymakers that Mexico was, and would always be, a place of “origin, transit, destination, and return for people” (Castillo 2016). While the government rhetorically emphasized human rights and protections for migrants, however, the program was much different in practice, working to rapidly expand policing and immigration control throughout the Mexican interior in unprecedented ways (Olayo-Méndez 2017).

Following the announcement, Peña Nieto dispatched hundreds of INM agents to the south alongside military and federal police. At the Mexico-Guatemala border, Mexico deployed new surveillance equipment and upgraded existing infrastructure at ports of entry (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015). Crucially, however, *Programa Frontera Sur* depended on a *regional* enforcement strategy, with checkpoints and blockades concentrated along “belts of control” that stretched inland from the southern border to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca and Veracruz (Figures 3 and 4), forming

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<sup>34</sup> Generally, there is a lack of transparency surrounding *Programa Frontera Sur*. Beyond its initial announcement and decree establishing a coordinating office, no official documentation exists. This absence of information has been highlighted by Mexico’s Federal Institute for Information Access and Data Protection (IFAI), which in 2014, requested supporting documents from INM regarding the program. INM declared that no such documentation existed (see Poy 2014). Thus, the information presented here is culled from Mexican and U.S. reports, news media, and policy documents.

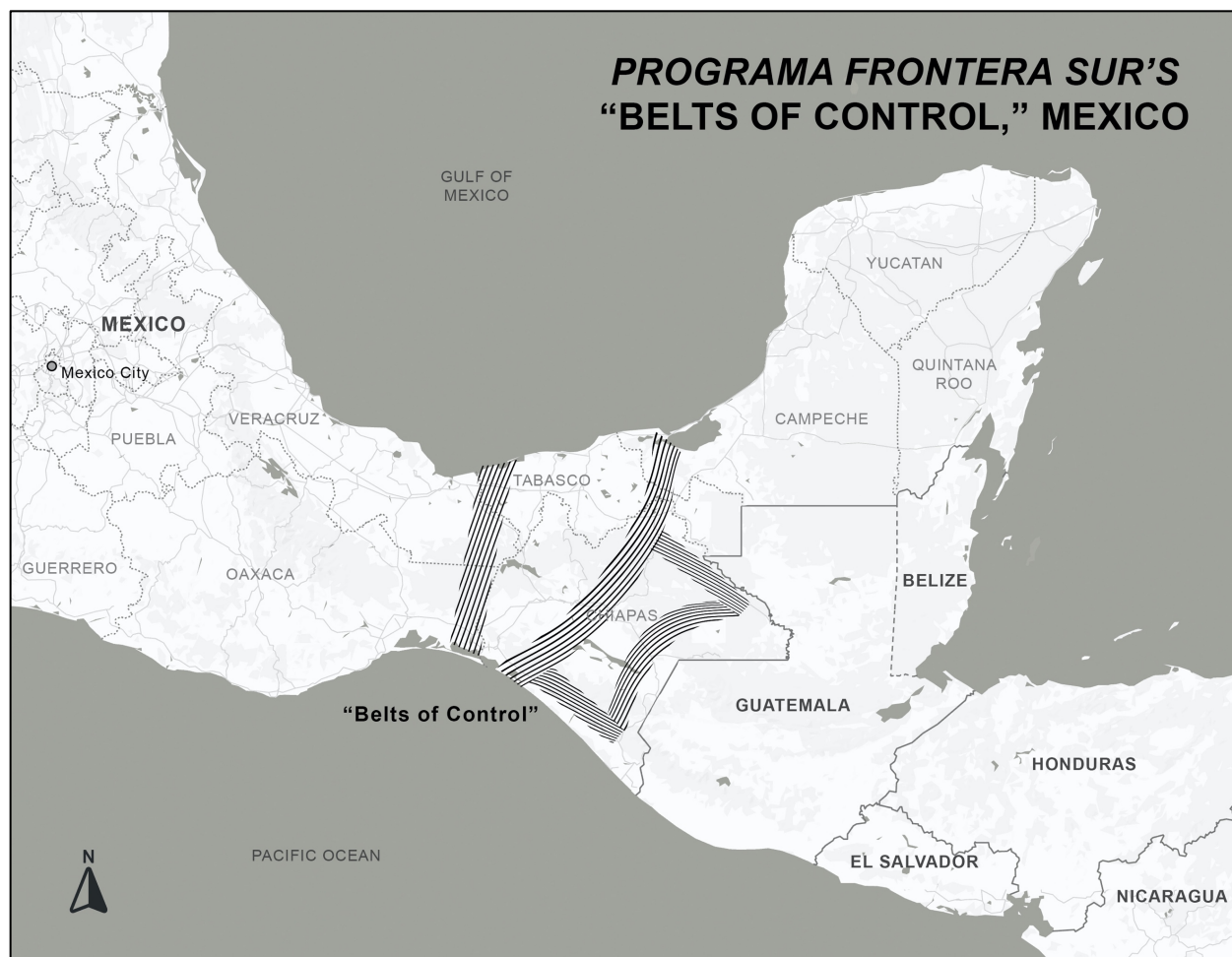


Figure 3, Programa Frontera Sur's "Belts of Control" (Isacson et al. 2014)

a rigid bottleneck for migrants travelling north (Martínez & Castillo 2014).<sup>35</sup> Within each of these “belts,” authorities established frequent patrols and inspections at roads, highways, and train depots, where individuals could be stopped, searched, and interviewed. INM, meanwhile, employed mobile checkpoints and installed new detention facilities across the region as they raided restaurants, hotels, and bus stations (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015). The program also attempted to curtail migrants’ use of freight trains, colloquially known as the Beast, directing INM and federal police to intercept migrants at railroad crossings and ordering conductors to increase speeds in high-traffic areas

<sup>35</sup> The Isthmus of Tehuantepec, located in southern Oaxaca and Veracruz, represents the narrowest distance, approximately 124 miles, between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, forming a natural chokepoint that separates northern Mexico from the south (Figure 4).

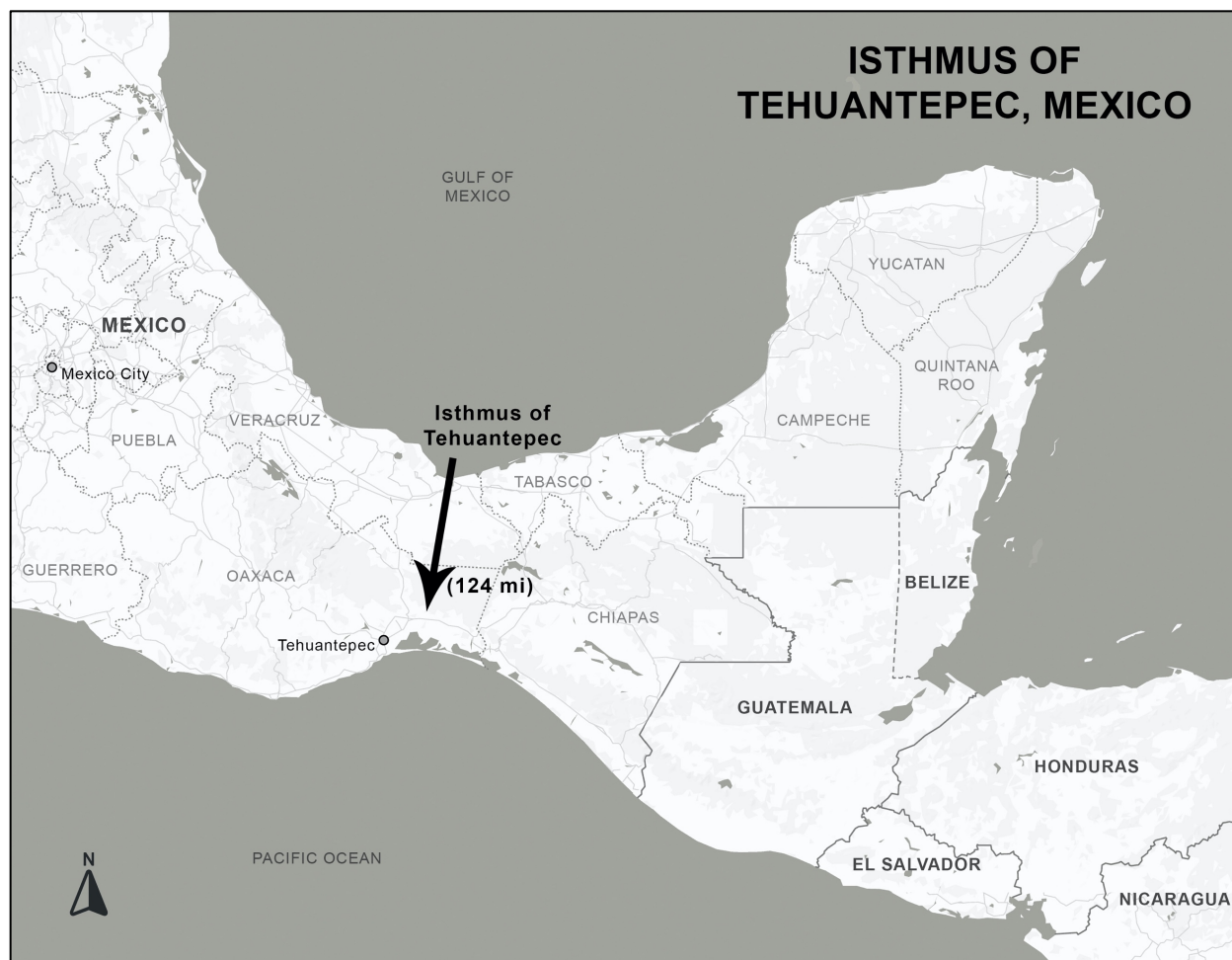


Figure 4, *Isthmus of Tehuantepec*

(Castillo 2016; Pérez Silva 2014). Likewise, rail companies were urged to contract with private security forces and construct physical barriers along railways to further impede migrants from accessing trains (Avendaño 2013). Together, these efforts transformed southern Mexico into an expansive dragnet and enforcement operation that encompassed multiple agencies and hundreds of miles of checkpoints, blockades, and patrols. Through this regional enforcement strategy, the program further partitioned Central, South, and North America by dividing northern Mexico and the U.S. from southern Mexico and other countries to the south.

*Programa Frontera Sur* required close coordination between federal, state, and municipal agencies. Drawing from partnerships developed under *Plan Sur*, Peña Nieto established the Coordinating Office for Comprehensive Attention to Migration at the Southern Border, days after

the program's announcement (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Under the charge of Mexico's Secretary of the Interior, this coordinating body was responsible for organizing operations and ensuring careful collaboration between agencies. While immigration enforcement is entrusted to federal police and INM through Mexican immigration law, *Programa Frontera Sur* involved a wide range of entities responsible for its implementation, from the customs bureau and military to state police, municipal governments, and local administrations (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015). The program also deepened Mexico's sense of "shared responsibility" with the U.S. and others, using the Mérida Initiative to deliver millions of dollars in new equipment, infrastructure, and training (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Mexico received patrol boats, helicopters, observation towers, and scanning equipment, as well as support and advising from CBP, DEA, FBI, and ICE officials (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015). These provisions extended across North and Central America, including additional funding for Belize and Guatemala along Mexico's southern boundary, as well as for El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, among others (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). Guatemala and Mexico also pledged to share migrants' fingerprints and facial characteristics with the U.S. through an integrated biometric database (Isacson et al. 2014). Thus, *Programa Frontera Sur* dramatically expanded policing and immigration control throughout Mexico on an unprecedented scale, entailing restrictive, multi-agency enforcement operations within the interior and a network of transnational support from countries across Central and North America.

In the wake of *Programa Frontera Sur*, apprehensions and deportations among Central Americans have risen sharply (Bonello 2015; Fredrick 2018; Isacson et al. 2015). Following its implementation in 2014, authorities have apprehended hundreds of thousands of migrants across southern Mexico, holding them in detention centers and temporary facilities before they are deported to Guatemala (Fredrick 2018; Isacson et al. 2015). By 2015, rates of deportation in Mexico had nearly doubled over the previous year, and since the program's announcement in 2014, the

Mexican government has removed more than half a million migrants, far exceeding deportation efforts in the U.S. (Bonello 2015; Fredrick 2018). Amid this growing system of policing and immigration control, corruption and abuses against migrants have been widespread, including extortion, sexual assault, and torture committed by military and police (Suárez 2017). Accordingly, migrants have turned to alternative routes and clandestine modes of transportation to evade checkpoints, blockades, and patrols, utilizing remote locations and distant, rugged terrain that isolates migrants from shelters and humanitarian aid (Castillo 2016; Isacson et al. 2015). Routes have become not only longer and more complex but also increasingly dangerous, as migrants are vulnerable to violence and abuse perpetrated by local gangs, cartels, and corrupt officials, as well as environmental hazards such as dehydration, heatstroke, and hypothermia.

Thus, for nearly two decades, Mexico and the U.S. have worked to dramatically expand policing and immigration control through key policies, including *Plan Sur*, the Mérida Initiative, and ultimately, *Programa Frontera Sur*. Framed around a security threat posed by the flow of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime from Central and South America, these policies have divided Central and North America with checkpoints, blockades, and patrols separating Mexico and the U.S. from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and other countries to the south and culminated in an expansive dragnet and enforcement operation aimed at Central American migrants. Within this context, Mexico reflects a vast, necropolitical landscape, where migrants are subject to brutality, exploitation, and violence—a permanent condition of “being in pain” (Mbembe 2003, p. 39). Building upon this backdrop, I now examine how the threat of death and violence, which has proliferated in the wake of such measures, is key to understanding migrants’ experiences as well as the strategies and tactics they use to complete their journeys.

## Migration, Politics, and Living Death

On August 22, 2018, Mexican state and federal police descended on a large, dilapidated house guarded by armed men in rural Chiapas (Davison 2018; Pérez & de Jesús Peters 2018). Inside, authorities discovered 400 kilos of cocaine and twenty-two Central American migrants who had been kidnapped and forcibly restrained, nearly half of them under the age of eighteen. The group of migrants was abducted shortly after crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border, when their captors, posing as guides, suddenly changed course and steered them into a nearby house where they were confined in squalid conditions. After collecting phone numbers of relatives, the kidnappers sent videos to family members, threatening to kill the migrants if a ransom of \$15,000 was not met. Even after receiving most of the ransom, the captors refused to release the migrants, demanding additional payment under the threat of death. The group was held captive for more than three weeks before one migrant was able to escape into the jungle and alert local authorities. In a sweeping, thirty-six-hour search-and-rescue operation led by the attorney general, state and federal police located and eventually freed the group of migrants, after which they were transferred into INM custody and treated for dehydration, respiratory infection, and malnutrition.

Unlike the story above, many migrants who are kidnapped and disappeared in Mexico are never found. Between 2014 and 2018, more than 4,000 migrants went missing or died attempting to reach the U.S. (da Silva 2018). This figure is likely low, as families are often reluctant to report missing relatives who traveled undocumented and bodies are often lost in the desert or surreptitiously disposed of by cartels and gangs. Other forms of violence are equally widespread. Since *Programa Frontera Sur's* implementation in 2014, Mexico's CNDH has recorded thousands of cases of assault, extortion, and robbery, many of these incidents perpetrated by Mexican authorities in remote areas of southern Mexico (Suárez 2017). Surveys conducted by humanitarian organizations suggest that nearly seventy percent of migrants become victims of violence along their journeys and

that one out of every three women is sexually abused in transit (Medecins Sans Frontières 2017). The majority of these cases—more than ninety-nine percent—are never investigated (Suárez 2017). Thus, within this necropolitical landscape, death and violence have become intrinsic to migrants' experiences and ubiquitous along the migrant trail in Mexico.

Yet, while migrants are subjected to death and violence in transit, they are not merely passive subjects, as the literature on Central American migration suggests (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; de León 2015; Swanson & Torres 2016; Slack 2016). Across these studies, death and violence are simply perpetrated against migrants, who are assaulted, disappeared, extorted, and kidnapped. As I show in this section, however, migrants also *actively* utilize the threat of death and violence as a source of determination and resiliency to complete and prepare for their journeys. In particular, I explore how migrants depict and narrate their experiences with necropolitics in transit, where many describe themselves as being “already dead.” This act of fatalism and self-description as “already dead,” I argue, represent a form of *life in death* for migrants—in other words, a way of enduring and living on amid abject conditions. If the tactics of border and immigration enforcement and the (in)security and violence they produce are meant to deter migration across Mexico, many migrants, instead, utilize these very same tactics to motivate their attempts to arrive at their destinations. Ultimately, this section shows, attention to how migrants understand, navigate, and mobilize life in death encourages scholars to rethink the power and politics of death in Central American migration and migrants' subject-positions as passive recipients of violence. Even as migrants are subjected to “obscene and grotesque” (Mbembe 1992, p. 3) conditions along the migrant trail, they find ways of enduring, living, and *continuing to move* in the face of immense adversity.



### *Life in Death*

The bright, afternoon sun glared overhead, reflecting off the shop windows onto the shaded, cement curb where I waited. Edi emerged from the store with a basket full of donated food: four mangos, six chayotes, and nearly a dozen spoiled tomatoes. He tossed the food into the large, plastic sack I held open and quickly returned the basket. “That’s it,” I called out to the other migrants sitting beside me, “there’s no more room in here.” We stood in unison as I hoisted the fifty-pound bag over my shoulder, struggling under its weight. Viscous liquid slowly dripped out of the sack—juices from fruits and vegetables crushed by the heavier items placed on top. “I think we have enough to make stew for everyone,” Joel said as he studied the range of provisions we had collected. “There’s more here than last week,” he continued. “The stalls in the market gave us some beef this time. “Good,” another migrant exclaimed, “I’m tired of eating rice and beans every day.”

Slowly, we made our way back to the shelter. As we approached the railroad tracks, Joel ducked into a small bodega, reemerging with a stack of plastic cups and three-liter bottle of Coca-Cola to share. “It’s hot out here—we should rest for a bit,” he suggested. Carefully setting the bag of food down, I joined the group underneath a nearby tree. “What was your journey here like?” I asked Edi, who had only arrived at the shelter a few days prior. “Difficult,” he responded, setting his cup down before continuing. Edi explained that he and his friend had been deported twice in Tapachula after they were caught at a military checkpoint and later, in an immigration raid at a bus station. On their third attempt crossing through Chiapas, Edi and his friend utilized a remote footpath in the mountains to avoid authorities. They quickly became lost, unable to make sense of the dense, jungle landscape surrounding them. For two days, Edi and his friend were stranded. “We only had two bottles of water and no food. It was so hot, and we had no idea where we were... At night, we were eaten alive by insects,” he recounted, adjusting his worn t-shirt to reveal dozens of bright, red spots scattered across his chest, arms, and neck. “It seemed like the end... I expected us to die out there

from hunger, or something.” Eventually, Edi and his friend were discovered by a local farmer who provided food and water before taking them to the nearest town. There, they were able to rest and recover before resuming their journey. “It was a miracle, thanks to God,” he said. “Wow,” I uttered slowly in disbelief, “that’s incredible.” Edi shrugged at me casually. “We were lucky,” he declared finishing the last drop of soda from his cup. Following a short silence, Joel interjected, pointing his finger toward Edi, “This... this is the life of a migrant. Out here, on the migrant trail (*en el Camino*),<sup>36</sup> you learn that life and death are never far away.”

Throughout our discussions, migrants frequently referenced death and violence to describe and narrate their experiences crossing Mexico. In the exchange detailed above, Edi expected to die after he became stranded in the mountains. Describing the imminent threat of death, he explained that “it seemed like the end,” when he assumed hunger, dehydration, or “something” would take his life. While Edi was surprised to survive, describing the incident as a “miracle,” he also casually shrugged at my disbelief, indicating a fatalistic acceptance of the necropolitical conditions that constituted his journey. More importantly, however, Joel used Edi’s experience to describe migrants’ lives in transit, when, referring to Edi’s near-death encounter, he noted that “*this* is the life of a migrant.” For Joel, the imminent threat of death that Edi experienced was a key part of his and other migrants’ lives, a shared existence where the threshold between life and death was “never far away.” These descriptions of death and violence reflect how Joel, Edi, and other migrants lived in a “state of injury” (Mbembe 2003, 21), a permanent condition defined by the perpetual threat of death. Joel and Edi acknowledged not only the existence of death and violence along their journeys but also their acceptance of these necropolitical conditions—the fatalistic belief that they did not

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<sup>36</sup> When translated to English, the colloquial phrase “*el Camino*”—frequently used by migrants—means “the migrant trail.” The phrase’s direct translation, however, is “the road.”

control their own futures and were, therefore, assured to die through Mexican and U.S. enforcement efforts. In doing so, they drew attention to the imperatives of necropolitics: to *make* die and let live.

Fatalism around death and violence routinely surfaced in interviews with migrants. In my conversations with Alicia, an older woman from Guatemala, she remarked on the importance of death and violence in understanding migrants' experiences and their journeys:

J.P.V.: Has anything surprised you on your journey so far? Is anything different than what you expected?

Alicia: I guess... well, sometimes I'm surprised that I'm still alive.

J.P.V.: Why—what do you mean?

Alicia: Well, outside the shelter, along the way [journey], there's a lot of violence, and many of us end up seriously injured—we all know people who died or disappeared in the past. One day, that could be anyone here. We just don't know, we're always in danger... always. Sometimes, I think about what's happened to me along the way, and, I feel lucky that I made it this far... you know, I could be dead.

Here, Alicia implicitly refers to necropolitics and a permanent “state of injury” (Mbembe 2003, p. 21), declaring that the threat of death and violence was always present. As she explained, migrants frequently died or disappeared in transit and, therefore, were “always in danger.” Crucially, this perpetual threat of death was shared or social, as Alicia used the collective “us” and “we” when referring to herself and other migrants. Alicia's response also indicated a fatalistic acceptance of death and violence when she proclaimed that she was surprised to be alive and just as easily “could be dead,” due to conditions experienced “along the way.” Accordingly, Alicia described herself as being alive but also conceivably dead, drawing attention to the coexistence of both life *and* death. For Alicia, she was simultaneously alive and dead, recognizing her ability to migrate and continue her journey while also acknowledging that at any moment, she could be dead. Thus, it is not just the *threat* of death but also the *state* of being “already dead” that migrants referred to.

As these two exchanges demonstrate, many migrants understood their own lives through death and violence, fatalistically accepting these necropolitical conditions as intrinsic to their experiences and journeys across Mexico. During several conversations, however, migrants actively utilized this dual state of life and death as a source of determination and resiliency, redeploying these deadly and violent conditions to endure, undertake, and prepare for their journeys. Derick, a young migrant fleeing gang violence in Guatemala City, elaborated on this particular use of death:

J.P.V.: How did you prepare for the journey? Tell me what it was like before you left your home.

Derick: Well, to prepare, you need the right mentality—mentally, you know... it's going to be difficult, it's not a game. My cousin... he left a year ago, and he just disappeared here in Mexico. We never heard from him again, nothing. We still haven't found him. You have to be prepared for something like that to happen to you...

J.P.V.: To be kidnapped?

Derick: Yeah, I guess... or killed—I don't know, but you have to be prepared for something like that. It happens all the time.

J.P.V.: So, how do you prepare for that? What do you do—personally?

Derick: Like I said, it's a mentality—you need to expect the worst. Anything could happen... For me, I understand that. I always expect the worst. Look, if I stayed in Guatemala, they would've killed me. Out here, in Mexico, I could also die. For me, there's no difference, either way, I'm dead. Why wouldn't I try [to migrate]?

In this conversation, Derick emphasized the impending expectation of death and violence but also its importance in preparing for his journey. Instead of passively accepting death and violence, he described a “mentality” in which migrants must actively prepare for “the worst” to happen, explaining that death, kidnapping, and other forms of violence happen “all the time.” For Derick, the acceptance of death and violence was a source of determination and resiliency, as he acknowledged that “either way,” he would die, and, therefore, would migrate despite the dangers and hazards along the way. In this way, recognizing himself as dead “either way” represented a tactic

Derick used to prepare and undertake the journey across Mexico. Even as necropolitical conditions abounded, Derick was able to redeploy death and violence as a form of fatalistic determination, perseverance, and resiliency, defying the logics of deterrence and terror upon which border and immigration enforcement depends.<sup>37</sup>

Death as a source of determination and resiliency appeared in other conversations with migrants. During an interview with Isaac, who had undertaken the journey across Mexico multiple times, he highlighted death as mechanism of survival:

J.P.V.: So, what advice would you give other migrants who are just starting their journeys?

Isaac: I don't know... That's difficult... I guess I'd tell them to think very carefully before leaving home. I know it's not easy, but this journey... it kills you slowly. There are times when I feel like I won't survive, like I'll die...

J.P.V.: What do you mean—like you're going to die out there, along the way?

Isaac: No... no, like... this life isn't mine anymore, like I'm destined to die. Out here, if you aren't killed by the gangs or cartels, you die slowly... I guess on the inside. Every day, I wake up and wonder, am I going to live? That's exhausting... and it's best not to think like that, but it's hard not to. If you want to survive, you have to.

Isaac's response drew attention to the ubiquity of death and violence but also its role in survival.

Much like the migrants discussed above, he explained how the perpetual threat of death weighed on his existence, where every day, he woke up to wonder if he was going to live another day. In referencing these difficulties, however, Isaac went on to declare that the acceptance of death was necessary for survival. According to Isaac, to endure and prepare for the difficulties ahead, migrants must embrace a permanent "state of injury." Thus, amid the necropolitical conditions and "death-worlds" intrinsic to migration journeys across Mexico, migrants like Isaac find unexpected ways of

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to note, however, that Derick and others also embody the logics of border and immigration enforcement, as migrants risk their lives to reach Mexico and the U.S., and, thus, substantiate the cruel justifications for inhibiting and impairing their mobility in the first place.

enduring and living on by acknowledging either their likely, or, in some cases, ongoing death (“you die slowly”). This is not to suggest that the acceptance of death and violence is somehow a radical act of resistance. Rather, it is to show that migrants are not passive recipients of violence, who simply experience assault, extortion, robbery, and kidnapping (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; de León 2015; Swanson & Torres 2016; Slack 2016). Instead, migrants are active and resilient, defying (and embodying) the necropolitical logics of border and immigration enforcement by utilizing those very same tactics to prepare for and undertake their journeys—the act which border and immigration enforcement is meant to deter in the first place.

As this section has shown, death and violence are intrinsic not only to migrants’ experiences but also to the strategies and tactics they utilize in transit. Throughout their journeys, migrants collectively described themselves as “already dead”—a fatalistic acceptance of death and violence now ubiquitous along the migrant trail. Instead of passive acceptance of these conditions, as suggested by the lack of studies that consider how migrants interpret and navigate necropolitics on the ground (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; de León 2015; Swanson & Torres 2016; Slack 2016), migrants redeployed and utilized death and violence as a source of determination and resiliency. In this way, there is more to necropolitics than death and violence. Migrants find unexpected ways of enduring and living on—sometimes by claiming to be “already dead”—in the face of immense adversity. Thus, while necropolitics may center on death and violence, there is life *within death*.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has explored the power and politics of life and death for migrants crossing Mexico. For nearly two decades, Mexico and the U.S. have partnered through a range of policies to expand policing and immigration control at the Mexico-Guatemala border and deep within the Mexican interior. Drawing from powerful imagery of narcotics, terrorism, and transnational crime from

Central and South America, Mexican and U.S. officials have implemented an expansive dragnet and enforcement operation aimed at migrants, which has transformed southern Mexico into a vast system of checkpoints, blockades, and patrols separating Mexico and the U.S. from countries to the south. These policies' effects have been overwhelmingly adverse for migrants, and the act of crossing Mexico has become deadly and violent. As a result, these necropolitical aspects of migration have become intrinsic to migrants' experiences in transit.

Although a large body of scholarship has shown how death and violence victimize migrants in various ways (e.g., Brigden 2018a; de León 2015; Swanson & Torres 2016; Vogt 2013; 2018), this chapter has shown that death and violence are also key in understanding the tactics and crossing strategies migrants utilize to survive in transit. In collectively describing themselves as destined to die, lifeless, and “already dead,” migrants generate unexpected sources of determination and resiliency, redeploying necropolitics to prepare for, endure, and survive along their journeys. These insights encourage scholars to rethink the power and politics of death and violence in migration and to approach migrants as more than passive recipients of violence and terror who actively rework necropolitics on the ground as a survival method. While abject conditions under border and immigration enforcement work to reduce migrants to various forms of “bare life” (Agamben 1998) and “the perfect figure of a shadow” (Mbembe 2003, p. 22), migrants, nonetheless, find ways of defying these logics and living on in the face of adversity by redeploying the very same deadly and violent tactics meant to deter them from migrating as sources of determination and resiliency to undertake their journeys.

Following this discussion of necropolitics and migrants' resiliency, the next chapter explores two unexpected themes that emerged through fieldwork, humor and transportation infrastructure. By foregrounding these topics and taking them seriously, however, I demonstrate the importance of

looking beyond well-worn narratives of migration journeys and remaining open to unanticipated findings in the field.



## CHAPTER 5 – Narrating the Journey; Making Sense of Migration

### Introduction

On September 7, 2016, Julio and his brother-in-law set off from El Salvador to reach the U.S. After taking a passenger bus from Sonsonate, El Salvador, to Guatemala City and finally, to the Mexico-Guatemala border, they disembarked with the few possessions they carried with them. Travelling by night, they slipped across the Suchiate River separating Mexico from Guatemala and continued to walk inland, deep into southern Mexico. Days later, after passing through the Mexican state of Chiapas, they arrived at an immigration checkpoint located along the main highway. Julio and his brother-in-law scrambled into the thick scrubland to avoid the officials and, eventually, after running for several hours, came across a long, dilapidated bridge straddling a railroad track. In the middle of crossing the bridge, they were stopped by a group of four men who emerged from the undergrowth, wearing black ski masks and wielding pistols and machetes. The assailants entered on both sides of the bridge, trapping Julio and his brother-in-law in the middle. As they were forced to strip naked and unpack their belongings, Julio clutched a photograph of his seven-year-old daughter tightly in his left hand. When one of the armed assailants ordered him to surrender the item he was holding, he refused, and in an instant, the man standing over him levelled the blunt heel of his machete against Julio's head. As the group of attackers sprinted away, Julio, bleeding from the large wound across the back of his head, stumbled with his brother-in-law toward safety, eventually reaching a shelter a few miles away. There, standing in front of me with his head wrapped in gauze, Julio looked up from the ground and said, "at least she's still with me," referencing the bloody photograph of his daughter he still held in his hand.

Tragic stories of migration journeys, such as Julio's and others included in this dissertation, are not uncommon. Every day, Central American migrants risk their lives travelling to and toward the U.S. Accounts of these harrowing struggles are now widely documented by both journalists and

scholars alike, appearing in novels (e.g., Martínez 2014; Nazario 2007; Regan 2010), news reports (e.g., Ahmed 2016; Lakhani 2017), and scholarly monographs (e.g., Brigden 2018b; de León 2015; Vogt 2018). Across these genres, the stories told are often framed by suffering and tragedy, as migrants fall victim to a wide spectrum of brutality, exploitation, and violence along their journeys. In the scholarly literature, human suffering abounds, evidenced through proliferating studies on gendered and sexual abuse (Angulo-Pasel 2018; Brigden 2018a; Riva 2017), violence against children (Swanson & Torres 2016), and extortion, disappearances, and kidnapping (Slack 2016; Slack & Whiteford 2011). Journalistic descriptions of Central American migration read similarly, detailing migrants' difficulties and hardships while travelling across Mexico (e.g., Martínez 2014; Nazario 2007; Regan 2010). A popular piece in the *New York Times* (Ahmed 2016), for example, describes migrants' experiences as a "desperate trek" through Mexico, where men, women, and children are forced to escape agony at home to seek "life in America." Likewise, Regan's (2010) bestselling novel *The Death of Josseline* sets out to examine the "human tragedy" of migration at the U.S.-Mexico border, beginning with the death of Josseline, a fourteen-year-old girl from El Salvador whose body was discovered alone in the wilderness of the Sonoran Desert.

Based on what I read in these literatures, as I entered the field in August 2016, I, too, expected to uncover similar stories framed by suffering and tragedy and suffused with brutality, exploitation, and violence. While such narratives were not difficult to find and appeared frequently in casual discussions and interviews with migrants (see Chapter 4), I was surprised by the prevalence of *other* everyday experiences that also emerged through my conversations with migrants. In particular, the frequency with which migrants referenced humor and basic, transportation infrastructure<sup>38</sup>—two topics that, while unrelated to each other, both played key roles in migrants'

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<sup>38</sup> By basic transportation infrastructure, I refer to material installations of bridges, canals, railways, tunnels, and roads that overlay the landscape.

stories—was confusing and unexpected. What was I to make of these themes that were so pervasive in my exchanges and interactions with migrants yet entirely absent from the existing literature? How could humor and transportation infrastructure—two seemingly insignificant topics that existing scholarly and journalistic accounts either did not discuss or did not observe—be so important to migrants’ own narrations of their experiences in transit, given the deadly, violent, and necropolitical conditions of migration journeys? How could I incorporate humor and transportation infrastructure as key themes in my analysis and research, and what would they show about migrants’ experiences and journeys from Central America?

This chapter aims to make sense of these questions by investigating humor and transportation infrastructure along the migrant trail as two overlooked, yet crucial, aspects of migrants’ journeys from Central America toward the U.S. As I argue, tragic and violent depictions of Central American migration, such as those detailed above, are accurate reflections of reality for many migrants; however, the visibility of and attention to these stories obscure other everyday experiences which also shape migrants’ lives and their journeys across Central and North America in ways that scholarly and journalistic accounts have yet to engage. Sensational depictions of migration journeys are widespread: migrants riding atop large freight trains; groups of unaccompanied children crowded in detention centers; migrant caravans traversing Mexico; and long queues of asylum-seekers imprisoned at the U.S.-Mexico border. Nevertheless, migration journeys themselves are composed primarily of ordinary, everyday activities and events. From eating, sleeping, and socializing in shelters to riding buses, walking, and working as day laborers, migrants engage in quotidian practices that constitute their everyday lives, even as they migrate, however slowly (see also Ho & Hatfield 2011). The “everydayness” of those actions deemed unremarkable due to their frequency, scope, size, and repetition that marks these practices as banal, mundane, and ordinary (see Lefebvre 1987) but also, I argue, limits migration scholars’ attention to these daily acts that occur between otherwise-

spectacular events such as clandestine border crossings (de León 2015; Doty 2011; Sanchez 2015), detention (Loyd & Mountz 2018; Macías-Rojas 2016; Williams 2017), and deportation (Golash-Boza 2015; Hiemstra 2019).

In calling for more analytic attention to these more mundane aspects of migration journeys, I draw from scholars whose work has shown how understandings of capitalism, geopolitics, globalization, and inequality are deepened by recognizing the ordinary and everyday material conditions and lived realities involved in the production and reproduction of these larger processes and structures across scales (e.g., Flint 2002; Hanson 1992; Katz 2004; Pred 1981; 1996). Lefebvre (1991), for example, foregrounded the quotidian details of lived experience under global capitalism to examine how commodities and mass consumerism had colonized the intimate spaces of everyday life. Similarly, feminist geographers center the routine practices of social reproduction to advance understandings of gender, inequality, labor, and the artificial divisions between home and work, showing how seemingly mundane activities such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare are central to capitalism and the global economy (e.g., Katz 2001; 2004; Mitchell, Marston, & Katz 2004). Citing Lefebvre (2004), Katz explains (2004, p. xi) that it is precisely within the routine practices of daily life that possibilities for other ways of living emerge. Everyday life, therefore, is not only a key arena through which larger processes and structures are produced and reproduced but also a significant terrain of struggle where power is continuously reconfigured (see de Certeau 1984; Scott 1985; 1990). As these works demonstrate, taking everyday life seriously can deliver insights into the ways cultural, economic, political, and social relations are forged and contested on the ground.

Drawing from these insights, this chapter explores migrants' everyday use of humor and their recollections of transportation infrastructure to shed light on forms of agency, resistance, and meaning-making forged in and along the migrant trail. Beginning with humor, it demonstrates that joking and laughter are an important, if overlooked, dimension of migration journeys, utilized by

migrants to make light of their illegality and immobility in transit. Framing these acts of humor as everyday forms of agency and resistance (see Scott 1985; 1990), I argue that joking and laughter work to destabilize political actions and dominant narratives among migrants, as they join together to ridicule immigration enforcement and government officials. In overlooking experiences such as humor, migrants are reduced to caricatured victims who are denied the right to agency and a complex life by journalistic and scholarly accounts of migration (see also Ortner 1995), and migration is depicted as one dimensional, saturated with tragedy, violence, and human suffering. Countering this narrative, this chapter examines the central role of joking and laughter in Central American migration in an effort to reveal forms of agency and resistance and to recognize migrants as multifaceted actors who encounter and participate in a range of experiences—from tragedy and violence to joking and laughter. In drawing attention to migrants' use of jokes and laughter, I join a number of scholars documenting humor's significance throughout Latin America (e.g., Castillo 2018; Goldstein 2013; Poblete & Suárez 2016; Sue & Golash-Boza 2013) and extend this discussion to explore how migrants utilize humor along their journeys from Central America to and toward the U.S.

Similarly, this chapter shows how basic transportation infrastructure are key sites through which migrants make sense of their encounters and experiences in transit. Focusing on bridges and railways, it examines how migrants narrate their journeys with and through transportation infrastructure, as migrants not only anchor key experiences to bridges and railways but are subsequently moved by their emotional and affective attachments to them, modifying their mobility and movement in transit in response. Here, I understand emotions as embodied expressions of feelings that are often articulated and made legible, including anger, anxiety, disgust, fear, grief, happiness, and hope, among others (see Bondi 2005; Davidson & Milligan 2004; Davidson, Bondi, & Smith 2005), and affect as the capacity for a body to affect and to be affected by another bod(ies)

(see Anderson 2006; Thrift 2004).<sup>39</sup> Often described as “non-representational” (Anderson & Harrison 2010; Thrift 2008), affect is marked by “triggers,” “intensities,” “urges,” and “dispositions” (Lorimer 2005, p. 84).

In what follows, I refer to emotional and affective attachments to transportation infrastructure by identifying specific feelings migrants expressed in relation to these installations as well as the more visceral and illegible triggers and intensities migrants gestured toward in narrating their encounters with these pieces of infrastructure. As this discussion demonstrates, migrants chose to narrate important aspects of their journeys through encounters with bridges and railways, highlighting how their experiences are sited in everyday, ordinary spaces. Recent work has drawn attention to so-called “migration infrastructure,” defined as “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang & Lindquist 2014, p. 124). However, while studies of migration infrastructure have focused on migrant brokers and recruitment agencies (Lindquist 2017; Shrestha 2018; Thieme 2017), governance (Chang 2018; Xiang 2017), vehicles (Martin 2011; Walters 2015), and transportation networks (Hirsh 2017), few have engaged with basic physical structures such as bridges, roads, tunnels, and railways traditionally associated with the term “infrastructure” (see Hannam, Sheller, & Urry 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006). By focusing on these ordinary sites and spaces of transportation infrastructure, this chapter highlights key locations and places in migrants’ experiences otherwise overlooked by the existing literature that focuses almost exclusively on spectacular displays of violence and tragedy at international borders and in confrontations with immigration officials (e.g., de León 2015; Doty 2011; Slack 2016).

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<sup>39</sup> While emotion and affect may be distinct, many geographers argue that they are also intimately intertwined and difficult to set apart (e.g., Dawney 2011; Thien 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2006). Dawney (2011, p. 601), for example, describes an “oscillation” between emotion and affect, “a constant feeding back and forward between registers.”

Through a discussion of humor and transportation infrastructure in migrants' narrations of their journeys, this chapter makes two main arguments: First, in directing attention toward sensational depictions of migration journeys, framed by violence and tragedy, scholars have overlooked the ways migrants themselves narrate and make sense of their experiences in transit (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; Ahmed 2016; de León 2015; Semple 2018b; 2019). As this chapter shows, according to migrants' own testimonies, their transit experiences are rooted in the ordinary spaces and mundane activities of everyday life. While international borders, detention centers, and other hyper-visible spaces of violence and insecurity are important, so, too, are bridges, canals, railways, tunnels, and roads that overlay the landscape. By ignoring these sites and spaces, we ignore the material realities and lived experiences of migrants' lives.

Second, this chapter demonstrates the methodological importance of listening to and taking seriously migrants' stories. Upon entering the field, I expected to hear spectacular accounts of death, violence, suffering, and tragedy. While these stories were present throughout my fieldwork, humor and transportation infrastructure also emerged as prominent, if unexpected, themes. By remaining open to unanticipated findings, migration scholars may uncover influential aspects of participants' experiences and better understand how migrants themselves interpret and respond to their experiences in transit. In doing so, we can develop new questions and starting points that allow us to see and engage more than well-worn narratives and to fully examine the intimate, lived experiences and realities of migrants' own narratives and testimony.

## **Spaces of Humor in Migrant Lives**

### ***Theorizing Humor***

For some time, studies throughout the humanities and social sciences have treated humor as an “everyday” act of agency and resistance (e.g., Obrdlik 1942; Powell & Paton 1988; Sharp 1973).

Moving beyond visible historical events such as boycotts, organized rebellions, and revolutions, this work recognizes modest and subtle forms of opposition located “close to the ground, rooted firmly in the homely but meaningful realities of daily experience” (Scott 1985, p. 348; see also de Certeau 1984). According to these scholars, covert, informal, and prosaic actions concerned with immediate gains and self-help constitute a continuous layer of resistance through which struggle against domination takes place (see Hollander & Einwohner 2004; Sivaramakrishnan 2005). Scott (1985, 1990), for example, identified minute acts such as gossip, insult, mockery, and slander as everyday forms of resistance, defined here as “any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims... made on that class by superordinate classes” (1985, p. 290). These actions require little coordination and typically avoid direct confrontation with authority, instead, mobilizing modest and subtle forms of non-compliance and denial to challenge dominant actors and narratives (Scott 1985, p. 29). For Scott (1985; 1990), everyday resistance is characterized less by the specific act and more by its intention to deny or mitigate elite claims. While Scott acknowledged the difficulties in proving intent (1985, p. 290), he also argued that the conscious use of resistance is gathered from the action itself, where subordinate groups and individuals recognize their lesser status and act to refute or diminish the authority of those in power, however isolated or insignificant those efforts might be. In this way, Scott and others argued, everyday resistance is important not because of its ability to transform the structures of domination but because of its consistent and prevalent use by those in subordinate positions.

Following this interpretation of everyday resistance, a growing body of work has looked toward humor as a subversive device (e.g., Carpio 2008; Sørensen 2008; 2016; Weaver 2010). Humor’s seditious potential, these studies show, lies in its ability to call attention to absurdities, contradictions, and incongruities of dominant actors and narratives, exposing them through narrative devices such as irony, parody, ridicule, and satire to challenge authority and undermine



their legitimacy (Hollander & Einwohner 2004). Accordingly, much of the work on humor and resistance has focused on people in precarious circumstances and vulnerable positions, highlighting humor's ability to subtly, and sometimes directly, express defiance and opposition to those in power (e.g., Bryant 2006; Sørensen 2008; Weaver 2010). Carpio (2008, p. 13), for example, examines how Black humor in the U.S., used covertly during the eras of slavery and legally mandated segregation, is now openly mobilized by popular comedians, novelists, and painters to target racial injustices and white supremacy, exposing the “murderous *and* ridiculous effects of slavery in the present.” In doing so, humor can facilitate a wider “culture of resistance” (Sørensen 2008), working to create a sense of group identity and community among those “in” on the joke. Mersal (2011, p. 670), for instance explored how during the Arab Spring, protestors' use of joking, expressed through chants, graffiti, and song, provided a “means of connecting with the undefeated spirit” of resistance unfolding behind the events. Together, these studies demonstrate humor's importance as a mundane but powerful tool that can foster dissent and resistance while growing a sense of community and group solidarity.

Within geography, scholars have become increasingly interested in humor as a form of resistance and a geopolitical device (Fluri & Clark 2019; Ridanpää 2014a; 2014b). Political geographers, in particular, have remarked how humor and caricature-like qualities in cartoons and comic strips make complex and sensitive political issues easier to critique, utilizing techniques such as exaggeration, repetition, and simplification (e.g., Dodds 2010; Hammett & Mather 2011). As Dodds and Kirby (2013) explain, humor is often utilized to encourage debate and interrogate hegemonic understandings of political events. Hammett's work (2010a; 2010b), for example, follows the cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro to detail how popular cartoons reflected and shaped contentious debates around democracy and resistance in contemporary South Africa, using devices such as ridicule to challenge then president Jacob Zuma. Others have analyzed literature and television as

important sources of humor, highlighting the role of absurdity, irony, and satire in delivering political critique (e.g., Dodds & Kirby 2013; Semati 2012; Thorogood 2016). For instance, Stephen Colbert's 2006 comedy routine at the annual White House Correspondents' Association Dinner gained widespread notoriety for mocking George W. Bush by sarcastically lavishing praise on the administration's actions during and after the September 11, 2001 attacks and Hurricane Katrina (Dodds & Kirby 2013). Likewise, Kuus (2008) describes how a popular literary character, Josef Švejk, deployed an exaggerated sense of obedience and self-deprecating humor to ridicule dominant ideologies of bureaucracy and militarism. According to Kuus, it was precisely the character's absurdity and silliness that made its critique against popular ideas so powerful.

Moving beyond cartoons, comic strips, and popular literature, some geographers have integrated the study of humor into analysis of everyday life (e.g., Browne 2016; Emmerson 2016; 2017; Fluri & Clark 2019). Drawing from the literature on emotion and affect (Davidson & Milligan 2004; Davidson et al. 2005; Thrift 2004), this work has stressed humor's emotional and affective capacity to move individuals—both consciously and unconsciously—through joking and laughter. Humor itself, this work shows, relies on emotional and affective dispositions, and the likelihood of a person finding a joke humorous depends on how that person is positioned affectively, emotionally, and politically to the topic being discussed (Dodds & Kirby 2013). For example, Macpherson (2008) theorizes humor, joking, and laughter as consciously employed coping strategies, as well as unconscious elements of everyday life. Laughter, Macpherson explains, is an embodied and instinctual affective phenomenon while joking is associated with cognitive and linguistic processes. While these two aspects of humor are initially set apart, Macpherson shows how they are intimately linked in creating a shared sense of community and place among participants in nursing care homes. Similarly, Dittmer (2013) examines how political humor deployed by college students during a mock simulation of the United Nations created a collective affective orientation, pushing them toward

playful interactions with one another. In this way, humor is articulated through both external expressions of joking and laughter and deeper indications of desires, feelings, and thoughts.

My own analytic approach to humor follows Scott (1985; 1990) and sees humor as an everyday form of agency and resistance used by migrants. Here, I understand agency as an individual's capacity to act in a given context in ways that both shape and are shaped by larger structures and external factors, such as societal norms, geopolitics, and geo-economics (see Flint 2003; Häkli & Kallio 2014; Plummer & Sheppard 2006). As Kuus (2019, p. 169) explains, "To study power is to necessarily study agency as there is not one without the other." When directed at political actions and dominant narratives of illegality and immigration enforcement, and at those in power, such as immigration officials, migrants' use of humor symbolizes a consistent and prevalent act of defiance, dissent, and opposition, however insignificant. Humor's subversive potential, I suggest, lies not only in challenging authority or undermining legitimacy but also in fostering a shared sense of identity and community between and among migrants, where they join together in making light of their shared vulnerability crossing Mexico. In doing so, migrants utilize humor as a coping mechanism and a form of socialization that enable them to continue their journeys despite the omnipresence of policing and immigration enforcement.

### ***Laughing About Illegality and Immobility***

"The train is coming!" someone shouted from across the dusty back lot of the shelter. Everyone stopped what they were doing and sprinted toward the exit, spilling out onto the unpaved road in front of the shelter. Every few days, a large freight train passed through town on its way north toward the U.S.-Mexico border. In the past, migrants frequently rode atop these trains, travelling through Mexico to the U.S. in a matter of days (see Martínez 2014). By the time I arrived in southern Mexico, however, all they could do was stare as the train passed them by, likely headed

through a number of immigration checkpoints to deter passengers from taking it further. Starting in 2016, two years after *Programa Frontera Sur's* passage, immigration officials clamped down on migrants' use of trains, detaining and deporting anyone found riding atop them (see Chapter 4). Standing in front of the shelter, we all looked off into the distance as the red and yellow freight cars slowed to a plodding crawl. As the cloud of dust kicked up by the crowd settled, a group of four young migrants sprinted toward the train, pretending they were going to ride it.

"Wait!" the four of them teased, "Don't leave without us!" they yelled toward the train's conductor. Everyone started to laugh as the four migrants disappeared over the hill by the railroad tracks, knowing they would return once the stunt was over. A minute passed, and everyone waited. Suddenly, the group of four reappeared over the hill screaming "*La migra, la migra!*," pretending to be pursued by immigration officials. "Run, everyone, run!" they shouted in jest as they sprinted toward us. A boom of laughter instantly erupted from the crowd, and moments later, everyone roared in amusement. After a few moments, the laughter slowly dissolved, and smiling, the crowd slowly filed back into the shelter one by one.

The moment of play and laughter described above represents a particular instance of humor that transpired during my research in Mexico. More broadly, it underscores the unexpected presence of humor throughout migrants' experiences in transit. Far from the exception, joking and laughter were common throughout my fieldwork, appearing in mundane conversations, everyday activities, and periods of boredom. Migrants frequently invoked humor to joke and laugh about serious topics. In particular, such humor often centered on two themes: migrants' illegality and immobility. In the example above, the four migrants made light of both their illegality and immobility by pretending to be pursued by INM agents. Migrants who travel undocumented through Mexico are often forced to evade INM agents, by running or hiding, to avoid being detained and deported. By imitating a familiar sequence of events whereby migrants riding atop trains are confronted by INM agents and

must escape, the group of migrants poked fun at their own illegality and immobility, highlighting their vulnerability as undocumented migrants in transit. In doing so, they exercised a subtle form of resistance, subverting INM agents' authority by mocking and ridiculing their actions in front of the crowd. This parody destabilized for migrants, if only momentarily, the political legitimacy of immigration enforcement and INM agents and draws attention to migrants' use of humor as an important, albeit indirect, form of resistance for those operating at the margins.

It is worth noting that the crowd laughed *together*, sharing a playful moment that underscored their *collective* acknowledgement of vulnerability as "illegal." These shared instances of play and laughter contrasted sharply with the more frequent banal and ordinary aspects of life in shelters, which was permeated by boredom and monotony. Mundane activities, such as resting, sleeping, and washing clothes, were done independently, away from other migrants. This isolation was sometimes all-encompassing, as shelters would appear still and empty for long periods of time as migrants slept by themselves or left during the day to earn money as day laborers. In the example above, migrants laughed and made light of their *shared* illegality and immobility in transit. In play and laughter, they joined together over the group of migrants' clever stunt and over being 'in the know' for the joke. Humor thereby represented a shared bond between and among migrants, as they joined together to collectively mock the political actions and dominant narratives surrounding their journeys and shaping their realities. This shared moment of humor drew migrants together, acting as a source of community, where they were able to joke about their vulnerability and cope with the otherwise-deadly and serious conditions experienced during their journeys.

Instances of humor also transpired outside the shelter during otherwise-serious moments.<sup>40</sup>

In my role as a volunteer, I regularly interfaced with INM agents when visiting their offices nearby

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<sup>40</sup> As other scholars have noted, "gallows" humor, which utilizes irony and sarcasm in desperate or hopeless situations, has long been a coping mechanism and form of resistance for those in subordinate positions (see Obrdlik 1942; Stephenson 1951).

to collect and submit paperwork for migrants. Adjacent to these offices was a small, temporary detention facility where migrants awaited deportation. Migrants spent hours in the cramped detention cells before being loaded into passenger vans and deported to Guatemala. One day, as I exited the facility, a familiar voice called out my name. “Hey there!” a migrant shouted from across the courtyard as he pushed his face up against the steel bars of the detention cell. Instantly, I recognized the man—he had stayed in the shelter for several days before apparently being apprehended by INM agents after continuing his journey northward. He was joined by a number of other migrants who somberly looked out from their cell, many of whom I recognized. “What happened?” I asked him as I approached. “They caught me last night! I tried running away, but I was too slow,” he exclaimed with disappointment. We chatted for a few minutes longer, and as I started to walk away, he quipped, “This is what it is... bring me some dominoes, I’m bored. I bet I can beat you from inside this cell..., and I could really go for a sandwich. The food here tastes like shit!” He stuck his tongue out in jest as the other migrants erupted in laughter. “Us, too!” they yelled. Laughing to myself, I said farewell, and we parted ways.

In this example, joking and laughter extended to even the most serious moments, where detained migrants awaited deportation. Despite being apprehended and detained by INM agents, the group of migrants made light of their situation by joking about it. The man’s comments were particularly funny because he described a set of circumstances that were completely incongruous with reality, where bringing him dominoes and a sandwich was impossible. More importantly, his remarks pointed to the imbalance of power by purposefully making demands that were absurd and sarcastic, ordering me—a privileged, American researcher—to bring him—a detained migrant from Central America—items, from behind the bars of his detention cell. This irony was not lost on his companions, who not only laughed alongside him but enthusiastically declared, “Us, too!” Their active participation in the joke marked a sharp contrast with the solemn moment before it, when

they quietly looked out from the cell. Though temporary, the man's joke transformed the character of our conversation, altering the atmosphere and mood around the detention cell. Humor was expressed through laughter and smiles, as well as through the sudden outburst of communication among other migrants that indicated playful interactions with one another. The instance of humor above created a shared space where migrants joined together, joking and laughing about their predicament to cope with adversity and the grave reality of their lives. By making sarcastic demands and mocking the power imbalance, they used humor to create a moment of shared community, collectively acknowledging and making light of their immobility and imprisonment, as well as their illegality and impending deportation.

In many cases, migrants invoked humor to mock the power imbalance associated with illegality, deflecting their status onto others. For example, during my first visit to INM's local office, I was scorned by an immigration official because of my tourist visa. I was told that I could not represent the shelter in any official capacity without a work permit and that I had violated Mexican law by volunteering for months without one. After returning to the shelter later that day, a staff member recounted the story for a group of migrants over dinner. "You better be careful," one of them said to me as we washed our dishes. Teasing me, she continued, "I heard you were almost deported today." Another migrant chimed in, "I guess it's you, not us, that should be careful walking around town here. They're going to send you back to the U.S.!" For the next few days, we all laughed at the absurdity of their jokes, mocking my privilege and position of power in relation to their vulnerable status as undocumented migrants.

Here, migrants deployed humor to temporarily subvert the dynamics of power, diverting attention away from their own illegality onto mine, as I continued to work in Mexico without proper documentation. Drawing from my dispute with the immigration official, however, they mocked my privilege and power as an American researcher from the U.S., which momentarily shifted the

insecurity they experienced as undocumented migrants away from themselves and toward me. Such instances of humor may not have ultimately affected the (geo) political conditions of their journeys, but they represented subtle acts of resistance by challenging dominant narratives and the political legitimacy of immigration enforcement. Migrants exercised a form of agency, albeit indirectly, in redirecting their own externally imposed status, rather than passively accepting it. Alongside the outward expressions of laughter, the enduring joke interrupted the banality of life in shelters by inciting interactions and moments of back-and-forth among migrants that lasted for days. Playing along, I often asked migrants to smuggle me past immigration officials, highlighting my lack of experience and knowledge about the subject. When police vehicles drove by, they acted as if I should run or hide to avoid apprehension. These moments of play created opportunities for migrants to join together to collectively acknowledge and make light of their vulnerability and to cope with the precarious circumstances at hand.

As these examples show, humor often centered on migrants' illegality along their journeys. One morning, a young woman joined a group of migrants and me over breakfast. Approaching the table, she asked the group if there was a bicycle shop in town. Everyone paused, looking up at her inquisitively. Breaking the silence, I muttered, "I think there are a few shops." Another migrant interjected, "Why are you looking for a bicycle shop?" Casually, she declared, "I plan to buy a tricycle and ride the rest of the way to Los Angeles. I'm going to use the highway and ride past the immigration checkpoints, I don't think they'll really be able to catch me." She motioned, as if pedaling on a tricycle, and then waved toward the imaginary INM agents stationed on her left. The group at the table looked at one another in disbelief and, moments later, erupted into roars of laughter. "I can't believe you!" one migrant yelled. The intensity of laughter deepened. "We'll all ride together!" another person shouted through the cacophony of noise.



These moments of joking and laughter hinged not only on migrants' illegality and undocumented status but also on their relative immobility, particularly after *Programa Frontera Sur*. In the example above, the woman implied that she would overcome the problems posed by the multitude of immigration checkpoints and widespread presence of INM agents, using a tricycle to reach the U.S. Through absurdity and sarcasm, she poked fun at her own immobility in the larger context of immigration enforcement and migration from Central America. The woman also mocked INM agents' actions in suggesting that they would not be able to catch her. By proposing an outrageous and implausible plan, she acknowledged her immobility while deriding the political conditions of migrants' journeys. Other migrants took part in the joke, participating in the moment of play and laughter. Just seconds after her remarks, they joined in by laughing and declaring that they could all ride together. The woman's comments, thus, created a humorous moment where migrants bonded over their immobility and undocumented status.

In all these examples, humor was an important, if unexpected, dimension of migration journeys, interwoven through migrants' mundane, everyday experiences with borders, illegality, immobility, migration, and violence. By mocking INM agents and deriding immigration enforcement along their journeys, migrants exercised a subtle but important form of resistance, which destabilized, if only temporarily, the authority and legitimacy of those in power, providing shared spaces in which to cope with the precarious circumstances at hand. Throughout these instances, however, migrants rarely engaged in directly naming actors and institutions such as INM or specific agents, instead referring anonymously to the larger context of illegality, immobility, and immigration enforcement and reflecting their everyday struggles against a Kafkaesque authority that was perceived as omnipresent and unnamed. More importantly, migrants' use of humor created a shared sense and space of community as they collectively and repeatedly joined together to cope with the difficulties of their journeys through joking and laughter. Humor was outwardly emotional,

evidenced through laughter and smiling, and social, as migrants participated in playful interactions and back-and-forth with one another. Together, they poked fun and made light of their journeys, even as the violence and vulnerabilities of that journey loomed large.

Ultimately, these moments of humor provide a counternarrative to overly simplistic descriptions of migration journeys and experiences framed solely through brutality, exploitation, and violence (e.g., Ahmed 2016; de León 2015; Lakhani 2017; Nazario 2007; Regan 2010). Attention to them, I suggest, works to humanize migrants as more than caricatured victims incapable of experiencing anything but tragedy. Migrants' experiences, instead, include a serious sense of humor *alongside* brutality, exploitation, and violence—one that acted as a form of everyday agency and resistance otherwise overlooked by migration scholars.

Following this discussion of humor's role in migrants' everyday lives, the chapter now turns to migrants' emotional and affective connections to transportation infrastructure, revealing the ways that bridges and railways facilitated and shaped migrants' (im)mobility while structuring their experiences along the migrant trail and serving as anchors for long-lasting memories that foreground the geographies of risk and mobility migrants encounter in transit.

### **Migration, Mobility, and Infrastructure**

On their journeys, migrants travel thousands of miles across Central America, Mexico and the U.S. Much of the terrain they cover is notoriously unforgiving, from the infernal Sonoran Desert and dense jungles of Campeche and Chiapas to sprawling urban centers and industrial sites in Mexico City and Monterrey. Cartels, gangs, and corrupt officials are never far away, and within these spaces, the threat of exploitation and violence against migrants is ever present. To avoid these difficult passages, some migrants turn to guides and smugglers to carry them northward, paying thousands of dollars to be hidden away in cargo vans, minibuses, and tractor trailers. Migrants may employ

smugglers for the entire duration of their trip to reduce travel times and exposure to risks or only piecemeal, using them to cross demanding stretches of land like the Sonoran Desert and U.S.-Mexico border. Specialized services for children, the elderly, and pregnant women are also available (see Sanchez 2015). For most migrants, however, the cost of smuggling is prohibitive, and instead, they are forced to travel by bus, taxi, train, and foot (see Chapter 3). These journeys are not only significantly longer, both spatially and temporally, than the journey of those who are smuggled northward but also more dangerous, as exposure to risk is greatly prolonged. In transit, migrants must navigate local terrain dotted with markers and pathways and a vast network of infrastructure, sharing and seeking advice and information about landmarks, routes, and shelters with one another along the way. Travelling individually or in small groups, migrants use footpaths, highways, roads, train depots, and other forms of transportation infrastructure for mobility and navigation. In doing so, they develop emotional and affective attachments to these structures, which they rely on not only to make their way across Central and North America but also to make sense of their encounters with exclusion, insecurity, violence, and hope.

Since the beginning of the mobilities paradigm, discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, scholars have contended that mobility cannot be described without attention to the “infrastructural and institutional moorings” that configure and enable it in the first place (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006). Following these observations, a small but growing literature has emerged to examine how “mundane” and “taken-for-granted” aspects of migration, such as government agencies, social networks, transport systems, and visas, generate and shape migrants’ mobilities (see Lin et al. 2017; Shrestha & Yeoh 2018). This infrastructural approach, albeit defined more broadly than conventional definitions of transportation infrastructure, stresses the need to understand migration as a processual, relational, and quotidian activity operating across a variety of scales (Xiang & Lindquist 2014). Hirsh (2017), for example, explores how low-cost aviation in Southeast Asia has

accelerated cross-border flows of capital and labor, transforming cities like Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur through a growing middle class and a mobile population of migrant workers that service their lifestyles. Other studies have focused on bureaucratic processes and governmental structures that regulate migrants' everyday activities and behaviors, where recruitment and job training are used to shape how migrants conduct themselves at work abroad, as well as when and where they are allowed to migrate (Chang 2018; Xiang 2017). As these works show, migration infrastructures are important "not simply because they are instrumental to coordinating movements, but because they have the power to steer mobilities and variably produce migrant categories" (Lin et al. 2017, p. 168).

This literature, however, has yet to engage with basic physical structures such as bridges, roads, tunnels, and railways traditionally associated with the term "infrastructure" (see Hannam, Sheller, & Urry 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006). Focusing on two of these ordinary sites, bridges and railways, this section explores how migrants used transportation infrastructure to narrate and share key aspects of their journeys, which surfaced as an unexpected, yet pervasive, theme in conversations and interviews. In particular, it demonstrates how bridges and railways not only facilitated migrants' (im)mobility but also came to embody migrants' encounters and experiences with exclusion, insecurity, violence, and hope, in turn moving migrants to modify their mobility and movement in transit. Such insights are important in showing how migrants' experiences are not always sited in the spectacular, visible spaces of border crossings, detention, and deportation but also in the ordinary, everyday installations of transportation infrastructure.

### ***Bridges***

The white pickup truck sped down the highway, far exceeding the speed limit. Inside the truck bed, I held on to my black baseball cap as the dust and wind whipped up around me. "Almost there!" the investigator from the special prosecutor's office yelled, motioning to the small group of migrants

seated on my right.<sup>41</sup> They nodded silently, looking up ahead at the bridge coming into view. The truck bounced over a depression in the road and slowed to pull off onto a dirt trail. Edwin squinted at me in the blinding sunlight. “*La Tembladora*,” he called out, pointing to the immense concrete bridge in front of us. Underneath it was a pair of railroad tracks overspread with thick brush and scattered garbage. One of the other migrants explained to me that the bridge was named after the way it shook when a train passed underneath. We drove another 50 yards before getting out of the pickup truck and walking to the bridge’s entrance. The investigator approached Edwin with a clipboard and some paperwork. “Tell me what happened,” he ordered politely.

“I was walking alone here,” Edwin explained, “until I reached the top of the bridge,” gesturing toward the apex ahead of us. “Then, what happened next?” the investigator asked. Edwin continued, “Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me, and when I looked, I saw a man approaching me with a machete. I turned to run, but I saw two more [men] waiting for me on the other end of the bridge.” The investigator walked forward, tracing the steps Edwin had taken weeks before. “I thought they were going to kill me,” Edwin exclaimed, “but instead, they took everything—even my shoes. They threw me to the ground, kicked me and hit me... One of them had a baseball bat. I was trapped up here alone.” The investigator nodded as Edwin recounted the rest of the incident, common along this part of the migrant trail. He tried to describe the men’s appearances but could not recall all the details. “They could have been ranchers,” Edwin suggested. He was sure that they were from the local community. Looking off into the distance, Edwin appeared unsettled as he held onto the yellow railing in front of him. “It’s okay,” the investigator interrupted, “That’s good enough.” He collected his papers and headed for the white pickup truck. Descending from the

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<sup>41</sup> Since 2008, Mexican officials have opened a number of special prosecutor’s offices in local jurisdictions tasked with investigating crimes against migrants. While the creation of these offices was important in providing access to justice for migrants who are victims of crime in Mexico, several obstacles remain, and most crimes are left uninvestigated or unpunished (see Suárez et al. 2017).

bridge, I wiped the sweat from my brow as the group shared a bottle of water. Eventually, we filed back into the truck and sped off, searching for another overpass where two other migrants were assaulted.

Much to my surprise, bridges, such as *La Tembladora*, were key sites in migrants' journeys northward. Primarily, bridges marked spaces of danger and vulnerability, where migrants were frequently subject to acts of violence, such as assault, extortion, and robbery. In transit, migrants utilized bridges to navigate over drainage canals, busy highways, and railroad tracks. Bridges' physical architecture, however—elevated, with only one entrance and one exit and bounded by railings and a steep drop-off—made them a natural chokepoint for bandits and local gangs, where migrants were easily entrapped. Mexican authorities, including INM agents and federal police, also made use of bridges' physical features to apprehend and in some cases, extort migrants. Typically, assailants waited underneath bridges or hid in thick underbrush nearby before attacking. By entering from both sides of the bridge, groups could ambush and encircle migrants trapped in the middle, shutting them off from escape. In this way, bridges are particularly hazardous for migrants, who are exposed and vulnerable to attack when crossing them, particularly as they travel alone or in small groups.

For this reason, and many others, migrants develop emotional and affective attachments to bridges, anchoring their experiences and encounters with exploitation, violence, and insecurity to them. For Romeo, a young man travelling in a small group from Honduras, bridges were a powerful site through which his precarity and vulnerability as a migrant were evident:

J.P.V.: Can you tell me what it was like after you were assaulted on the bridge? How did you make sense of what had happened?

Romeo: Well, after it happened, I couldn't sleep anymore. I didn't know what to think of it all—I just felt so... wronged... violated... My brother doesn't seem to care anymore, but I can't forget what happened. We lost almost everything.

J.P.V.: I understand—that's terrible. And now, how do you feel about it? Has anything changed?

Romeo: No... I feel sick when I think about that bridge...

J.P.V.: How—what do you mean?

Romeo: I remember everything about it, every detail—the way it looked, how I felt, even the smell. It had just rained, and I could smell the dirt... It's been almost two months now. I remember we just laid there after it happened on the ground, waiting for them to leave. I thought to myself, "God, please help us." I didn't think I could get up. And now, every time I see a bridge like that, I feel sick—sick to my stomach—like, I need to lie down again. You know, this happens to a lot of us out here... Migrants—we disappear, we're robbed, some are even killed. It's terrible, but I guess I'm lucky... They left us alone, and thanks to God, we're still alive.

For Romeo, bridges were evocative of his and other migrants' precarity and vulnerability. In our exchange, he described a strong emotional, if not visceral, connection to the bridge—and to bridges in general, explaining that he remembered "everything about it." Unable to forget what had happened to him there, Romeo mentioned feeling "wronged" and "violated," expressing agony, grief, and loss in relation to his experience. This connection was also affective, triggering him to lose sleep and moving him to remember "every detail" about the bridge, including its appearance, the smell from the rain, and his own feelings during that particular moment, as if he had been instantly transported there again. In recalling this traumatic experience, Romeo became sick to his stomach and needed "lie down" whenever he saw other bridges. In this way, *all* bridges held emotional and affective sway over Romeo, evoking the danger he, as well as other migrants, encountered on their journeys and moving his body to assume the very same position in which he was attacked when he saw bridges. His experience became anchored to the bridge (and all bridges), lingering long after he physically left it behind—although it had been nearly two months since the incident, he could not forget. Through this series of events, bridges marked and embodied precarity, violence, and vulnerability—key experiences in transit—for the rest of Romeo's journey, moving his body toward sickness whenever he encountered bridges.

Many migrants shared similar stories and recollections of bridges, describing their own experiences of extortion and robbery upon crossing them. In anchoring their experiences to bridges, these sites of infrastructure subsequently shaped their mobility and movements in transit. During an interview with Marisol, a mother travelling with her teenage daughter and son from El Salvador, for example, I asked what she would tell other migrants who were just beginning their journey. She paused for a few seconds before explaining, “Well, I’d tell other migrants to avoid bridges. They’re [bandits] always waiting for you there, and once you’re on top, there’s nothing you can do... You can’t escape.” Marisol took a deep breath before continuing, “You know, I tried, but they told me they’d hurt my daughter if I didn’t give them money... I hope that what happened to us would never happen to anyone else, never. I tell everyone I meet around here—those bridges are dangerous... They still give me anxiety.”

In this example, bridges embodied not only migrants’ precarity and vulnerability but also a shift in mobility, in the sense that after her encounter on the bridge, Marisol vowed to avoid other bridges because they rendered migrants immobile and unable to escape. As Marisol described, bridges were “dangerous” places for migrants, where bandits were “always waiting for you” and where escape was impossible once you were on top. After taking a deep breath, she went on to explain that bridges still gave her anxiety, signifying not only an emotional reaction to her traumatizing experience but a powerful attachment that remained with her long after leaving the bridge behind. In this way, bridges functioned as a key site through which Marisol narrated and made sense of her precarity and vulnerability, anchoring her violent experience to bridges which subsequently shaped her future movements. In such instances, much to my surprise, migrants chose to narrate their encounters and experiences with violence and insecurity not by discussing borders or immigration checkpoints but by recalling transportation infrastructure.



Yet, bridges also came to embody hope and refuge for migrants in transit. According to U.S. immigration law, migrants may use designated ports of entry, many of them located along international bridges spanning the U.S.-Mexico border, to claim asylum in the U.S. (Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, 2013).<sup>42</sup> As migrants approach the U.S.-Mexico border in northern Mexico near Texas, many utilize these bridges to (try to) enter U.S. territory to initiate the asylum process. For these migrants, bridges became important points of transition as they left Mexico and entered the U.S.<sup>43</sup> In an interview with Lucia, for example, a young woman from Guatemala who had travelled to Texas, she highlighted bridges' significance as a site of hope and refuge for migrants:

J.P.V.:           And after travelling for so long in Mexico, what did it feel like to reach the [U.S.-Mexico] border?

Lucia:            I was so relieved. I couldn't believe I had made it [smiling and laughing]! It was tremendous. After nearly three months, I was almost there... In the shelter, we could see the lights over the bridge. When I arrived, and I saw them, I just knew everything was going to be okay... I was going to make it.

J.P.V.:            The lights? On what bridge?

Lucia:            In Reynosa! You could see the lights above it—they were so bright, they lit up the sky! When I left Guatemala, a friend told me to look for the bridges along the border. There, I was told I could tell immigration officials my story to receive asylum. After I arrived in Reynosa, I knew the next day I was going to wake up and turn myself in to claim asylum, and that's what I did. And now... I'm safe. I'm finally here in the U.S.

Lucia's response was saturated with relief and respite, drawing attention to the way bridges along the border represented hope and refuge for migrants. In our exchange, she highlighted an emotional

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<sup>42</sup> While the law specifies that migrants are not required to use ports of entry to claim asylum, the Trump administration adopted a different approach. Beginning in 2017, migrants who crossed the border without documentation and requested asylum were immediately denied entry and criminally prosecuted. For those who crossed through designated ports of entry, however, their applications were processed as usual. I discuss the changing political landscape under the Trump administration more in Chapter 6.

<sup>43</sup> The McAllen-Hidalgo International Bridge, which connects McAllen, Texas, and Reynosa, Mexico, and the Veterans International Bridge, which connects Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, are two of the most popular points of entry in Texas for Central American migrants. During fieldwork, most participants utilized one of these bridges to claim asylum. Smaller bridges in rural areas, however, such as the Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán International Bridge, were also widely used.

connection to bridges, explaining she felt “relieved,” “safe,” and that she “was going to make it” when she saw the bridge. This connection was also affective, however, moving her toward playful and spontaneous laughter during the discussion and referencing an indescribable feeling that she “just knew everything was going to be okay.” Referring to a previous conversation with a friend, bridges, as well as the lights above them, embodied not only hope and success for Lucia but also an important symbol of mobility, as she looked for these landmarks to show her where to claim asylum, from the beginning of her journey. In this way, the bridge anchored both hope and refuge for Lucia, and her emotional and affective attachments to bridges guided her mobility before, during, and after she entered the U.S.

Similar attachments to bridges along national borders appeared in other testimonies. During an interview with Josue, a young migrant from El Salvador, he framed his experience crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border and Suchiate River around the bridge and people he encountered there:

J.P.V.: So, how did you cross the border into Mexico?

Josue: By river, in Tecún—you take a raft from one side to the other. There are men who wait [for migrants] under the bridge, and then you pay one of them to take you across.<sup>44</sup>

J.P.V.: And how was that? Was it difficult?

Josue: That [in disbelief]? No, it was very easy—there are never any problems there! The authorities never care. Sometimes, yes, in the city, but not at the bridge. You just pay someone to take you across the river, and that’s it—easy! But when you get to the other side, it’s different... You feel... you feel like a new person...

J.P.V.: How so?

Josue: Well... it’s difficult to explain... For me, I felt like I finally had a chance to live... to escape. When I saw the bridge and all of the other rafts on the river, I knew my journey was about to begin... There, you see all of the

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<sup>44</sup> Tecún Umán, Guatemala, is a small town located across from Hidalgo, Mexico, along the Suchiate River, which marks the Mexico-Guatemala border. Migrants use this crossing to obtain passage into Mexico, traveling by way of river, often under the international bridge. Mexican authorities typically ignore this activity, allowing migrants to freely cross into Mexico.

people under the bridge, the other migrants crossing. I felt confident. This was my opportunity to live again. I knew it would be difficult, but I trusted in God and it was my choice.

Much like Lucia at the U.S.-Mexico border, Josue attached hope and refuge to the international bridge and river at the Mexico-Guatemala border. After witnessing the activity underneath the bridge and other migrants crossing the river, Josue indicated that he felt “confident,” eager, and excited—a chance for him to “live again.” As he explained further, seeing the bridge and rafts signified the beginning of his journey in Mexico and an opportunity to live and “escape” the conditions he fled. For Josue, the bridge marked the start of his journey, despite having already traveled across El Salvador and Guatemala to reach the Mexico-Guatemala border and Suchiate River. Crossing the river allowed him to “feel like a new person” after leaving Central America behind and to possess the mobility “to escape.” Bridges were, thus, powerful anchors for migrants’ hope and refuge in transit that came to embody key aspects of migrants’ journeys and their experiences while shaping their mobility and movements along the way.

In all these ways, migrants in transit developed emotional and affective attachments to bridges, drawing from these sites of infrastructure to narrate and make sense of their journeys. From precarity, vulnerability, and violence to hope and refuge, bridges embodied key feelings and affective intensities that provoked visceral triggers and reactions through migrants’ testimony, serving as anchors and signposts for their experiences in transit. As these various attachments to bridges illustrate, migrants’ experiences with risk and mobility were given meaning and significance along their journeys, not just during spectacular moments of clandestine crossings, detention, or deportation (e.g., de León 2015; Doty 2011; Slack 2016). Having outlined bridges’ significance to migrants’ experiences and their journeys, I now turn to railways.

## ***Railways***

In August 2013, a freight train carrying hundreds of migrants derailed in an isolated area of Tabasco, Mexico, approximately 200 miles from the Mexico-Guatemala border (see Moh 2013; Rueda 2013). Because of the difficult and remote terrain, ambulances were unable to reach the scene, forcing rescue workers to utilize air and boat to evacuate victims. While reports varied, at least six migrants died in the accident, and more than 20 others were seriously injured. Upon derailing, migrants were thrown from the train or pinned underneath its carriages. Images from the wreckage showed twisted metal and fragments of overturned freight cars separated from their bases and wheels. Officials suspected that track theft and poor weather led to the accident, as heavy rains weakened the ground and missing railway spikes contributed to the track's instability. Less than a year later, in April 2014, a group of armed men ambushed a moving freight train in Oaxaca (see Calderón 2014). During the attack, three migrants were shot and killed while another died shortly after jumping from one of the carriages, trying to escape. Three others were injured during the incident as they attempted to flee from the attackers. The names and nationalities of those who died were never discovered, but officials surmised they were likely from Central America. Recounting what happened to police, survivors and witnesses reported that the migrants refused to turn over their belongings, provoking the group of armed men to fire upon them.

The two stories above are not extraordinary. For decades, migrants have utilized large, hazardous freight trains, colloquially known as the Beast, to travel across Mexico (see Martínez 2014). The trains, which extend throughout the Mexican interior, deliver products such as grain and scrap metal north for export. Beginning in the 1980s, many migrants rode atop these trains as they travelled north from Central America (see Boursier 2019), risking mutilation and dismemberment if thrown from the fast-moving cars, as well as other forms of violence from cartels and gangs that controlled the routes. Despite these risks, freight trains were a preferred method of transport for

some migrants, since trains could carry migrants to the U.S.-Mexico border in only a few days. After *Programa Frontera Sur*, however, the Mexican government implemented new measures to deter migrants from boarding the trains, primarily by expanding INM patrols and checkpoints along railways and ordering conductors to increase speeds in high-traffic areas (see Chapter 4). This strategy, while controversial, was largely successful,<sup>45</sup> and migrants are now hesitant to use the trains for fear of death, deportation, and dismemberment.

Amid these changes, railways came to embody exclusion for migrants in transit, as they encountered increasingly restrictive migration controls along their journeys, including border and immigration enforcement and policing. During my interactions with migrants, I was surprised by how frequently railways were referenced. One evening, for example, a group of migrants and I passed over a set of railroad tracks as we walked toward the town's center from the shelter. "Five years ago, I rode that train to the border," one man said to me as he pointed to the tracks running beside him. "Yeah?" I responded, "they tell me it's not so easy anymore." Another migrant behind us started laughing, "Yeah, no shit! I tried to take the Beast a few months ago—they almost arrested me in the same instant that I got on it." The other migrants laughed alongside him. He continued, "Seriously, Mexico is no longer a place for migrants. They don't want us here, and they'll do whatever they can to stop us. This is just one example." Others in the group nodded, looking off somberly at the empty railroad tracks as we continued walking. "And who is 'they'?" I asked. The man responded quickly, "The government, immigration officials, even the Yankees [the U.S.]! My friend told me they're the reason we can't ride the train anymore."

In this exchange, railways provoked a discussion about migratory methods and immigration enforcement in Mexico and the U.S. After walking over the railroad tracks, the group of migrants

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<sup>45</sup> While many migrants no longer use trains as they travel northward, some, especially those who cannot afford other means of travel, still do. These migrants rely on a variety of strategies to avoid injury and immigration authorities, such as intermittently boarding and detraining in specific areas or hiding in spaces below or within freight cars.

described how restrictive migration controls implemented by the Mexican government and other entities curtailed their use of the train, with one man explaining how he was almost arrested immediately upon boarding it. The conversation continued, drawing attention to the ways railroad tracks embodied exclusion for migrants, for whom Mexico was “no longer a place for migrants.” Here, this man’s response was saturated with feelings of abandonment and rejection, noting that “they,” clarified to mean *both* the Mexican and U.S. governments, would do whatever they could to prevent migrants from reaching the U.S. because “they didn’t want” them. Crucially, the mood between migrants and me shifted from a playful interaction, where they joked about the difficulties of migration by exclaiming “no shit” in response to my provocation, to a somber discussion about exclusion and immigration enforcement. As just “one example,” the train and railroad tracks were tied to additional policies and representative of migration controls across Mexico and the U.S. Thus, for these migrants, railways became anchors for their experiences with exclusion, an embodiment of immobility rather than the rapid method of transport they once were, pointing to migrants’ larger experiences with mobility, policing, and a changing landscape of border and immigration enforcement.

Roger, an older man from El Salvador, further reflected on the meaning of railways. During a conversation over coffee and tamales one morning, he remarked, “Nowadays, it’s much harder to get across Mexico... This is my fourth trip to the U.S., and every time, it’s a little harder. I don’t know if I can do it much longer.” As Roger paused to sip his coffee, I asked him how the journey was more difficult, especially compared to his previous trips. After setting his fork and Styrofoam cup down, he went on, “Well, I mean, we can’t use the train anymore, or the buses really... We can’t do that. Look, we have to walk! And if we do use the train, which we used to do, we’re hunted like animals. Now, they try to make it impossible for us... Unfortunately, it works most of the time,” he

said through a defeated-looking smile. Readjusting his worn Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap, he picked up his fork to finish the rest of his tamale.

Here, Roger alluded to similar themes as the group of migrants above. After remarking about the difficulty of migration journeys across Mexico, he used his previous experiences riding the train as a point of reference. Roger's response indicated self-doubt, frustration, and remorse. In his example, railways were a site of exclusion and restriction, which migrants were no longer allowed to use and whose absence made the journey "a little harder." As Roger went on to declare, those that tried to use the train were "hunted like animals," as the Mexican government attempted to "make it impossible" for migrants to travel freely throughout Mexico. Throughout our conversation, Roger's sense of defeat was palpable, even admitting the government's efforts worked "most of the time." For him, railways embodied a dual nature as both an older form of rapid mobility and a more recent exclusion that he and other migrants now encountered along their journeys, a powerful anchor for his previous experiences riding the train north and his contemporary experiences with immobility and immigration enforcement.

Despite railways' significance as sites of exclusion, they also embodied safety and security for migrants. Most, for example, still depended on railways for navigation along their journeys across Mexico. Commonly referred to as *la via* (translated as the route or way), railroad tracks were carefully followed by migrants for direction and navigation. Utilizing a variety of routes, shelters, and train depots throughout Mexico, migrants ate, slept, and socialized in close proximity to railways, relying on them to enable and facilitate their mobility. These connections to railways were apparent during an interview with Arvin, a middle-aged man from Honduras travelling with his cousin and nephew:

J.P.V.:           Tell me how you arrived at the shelter here in Mexico? What routes did you and your group take?

Arvin:            Well, after we crossed the border [Mexico-Guatemala border], we used (*usamos*) the train...

- J.P.V.: The Beast? You rode (*montaste*) the train [in disbelief]?
- Arvin: No, no, we walked. I mean to say we followed (*seguimos*) the railroad tracks!
- J.P.V.: Okay, I see [laughing together]... So, tell me how that works.
- Arvin: Well, after crossing the border, we found a train depot. There, we just started walking, following the route north... almost like a guide, you know? There were always other migrants around, and along the way, a lot of them helped us—some gave us food, others gave us directions—it was kind of like a small community. Eventually, someone told us about the shelter, so we decided to stop here. We knew if we followed the tracks, we would make it. You know, they all run in the same direction.
- J.P.V.: And immigration officials, they don't care? What happens if they see you by the train?
- Arvin: Sometimes... I guess if you ride the train. But generally, no, not by the shelters. As long as you don't get on [the train], you're safe.

For Arvin, railways embodied a sense of safety and security in transit, functioning like a “guide” and pointing Arvin and his group in the right direction as they followed the tracks northward. His response also highlighted how being near the tracks protected migrants from immigration officials, who were primarily concerned with migrants riding *on* the train, not those walking by its tracks. Arvin also noted how the presence of other migrants along the railway, especially those who shared food, directions, and support, created a “small community” which offered an additional sense of social support and protection and ultimately directed the group toward the shelter. Railways, then, became key sites that enabled and facilitated the movements of Arvin and his group through Mexico while providing direction throughout their journey northward.

Other migrants described similar attachments to railways, stating how the tracks provided much-needed assistance and support to those who were most desperate. Gisela, for instance, explained that railways were a “lifeline” for migrants like her in Mexico. “We’re poor,” she told me over lunch, “and we can’t make this trip any other way. The railroad tracks give us a chance; they’re like a lifeline.” “How?” I asked her as she took a large bite of her food. “What do you mean?” Still



chewing, she responded, “Well, for me, I didn’t have many options... I had no money, I had no one to travel with, I didn’t even know where I was going at first... but at the depot, along the tracks, I found a support system. It felt like I finally had a good chance... and eventually, I arrived here [in the shelter] with the others in my group. We didn’t have any problems.”

In addition to providing safety and security, railways offered Gisela a “lifeline,” a crucial opportunity to find assistance and support in transit. In her response, she alluded to feelings of appreciation, hope, and positivity, which did not always surface in my conversations with migrants. With few options, little money, and no travel companions, Gisela described railways as an important “chance” to undertake her journey, finding community, social support, and companionship along their tracks. Railways served as a key anchor for Gisela’s memories and experiences along the migrant trail, becoming the site of recollections of abandonment, as she recalled having no one to travel with, but also fortune and hope, as she described a “support system” and a “chance” to make it to the U.S. Thus, as Gisela explained, for “poor” migrants like her, these trips would not be possible in “any other way,” highlighting railways’ importance not only in facilitating and shaping migration flows but also anchoring memories of key experiences along the way.

Through repeated and routine use, bridges and railways became key sites in migrants’ narrations of their journeys, embodying exclusion, hope, precarity, safety, and vulnerability and anchoring their encounters with mobility, border and immigration enforcement, and violence. Accordingly, migrants developed emotional and affective attachments to these physical structures, which, subsequently shaped their mobility and movements as they avoided bridges, travelled alongside railroad tracks, or used bridges and lights as landmarks for destinations. As such, paying close attention to the roles that transportation infrastructure played in the stories and encounters migrants shared about their journeys highlights key locations and places in migrants’ experiences otherwise overlooked by studies that focus almost exclusively on spectacular displays of violence

and tragedy at international borders and in confrontations with immigration officials (e.g., de León 2015; Doty 2011; Slack 2016). In doing so, this section has shown that well-worn narratives of migration journeys sited in spaces and places along the border do not always reflect the lived realities of migrants' own narratives and testimony, which, instead, are as rooted in the ordinary, unexpected spaces of bridges, canals, railways, tunnels, and roads.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has attempted to make sense of two themes that I did not expect to find when I began this research: migrants' widespread use of humor and transportation infrastructure to narrate and make sense of their journeys. Examining migrants' use of humor illustrated how joking and laughter served as subtle forms of agency and resistance among migrants, as they joined together to mock the authority INM agents and deride narratives surrounding immigration enforcement and policing.

Through this use of humor, migrants created a shared sense of solidarity between and among them, as they collectively made light of their illegality and immobility in transit, thereby providing a coping mechanism and form of socialization that allowed migrants to continue their journeys. Second, this chapter detailed migrants' emotional and affective attachments to basic transportation infrastructure, showing how they utilized structures like bridges and railways to narrate and make sense of their journeys. These sites not only anchored migrants' encounters and experiences but also shaped their mobility, decision-making, and strategies in transit.

More broadly, this chapter highlighted two key insights. First, it has demonstrated how scholars have obscured and overlooked the ways migrants themselves narrate and make sense of their experiences in transit (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; Ahmed 2016; de León 2015; Semple 2018b; 2019). As I have shown, in directing attention exclusively toward sensational depictions of migration journeys, the literatures have ignored the ways that, according to migrants' own testimony,

experiences are also rooted in the ordinary spaces and mundane activities along the migrant trail. While international borders, detention centers, and other hyper-visible spaces of violence and insecurity are important in shaping migrants' experiences (see Chapters 4 and 5), so, too, are instances of humor and bridges, canals, railways, tunnels, and roads that overlay the landscape.

Second, this chapter has shown the methodological importance of listening to and taking seriously migrants' stories. Based on the literatures detailed above, I did not expect to hear widespread use of humor and references to transportation infrastructure, which emerged as prominent themes during fieldwork. By remaining open to these unanticipated findings, I uncovered powerfully influential aspects of participants' experiences that were otherwise obscured or overlooked, suggesting that migration scholars devise new, open questions and starting points that take them away from well-worn narratives. In the process, this chapter better reflects the material realities and lived experiences of migration journeys *as narrated by migrants* themselves.

Yet, the spectacular displays of violence and insecurity along the border and in confrontations with immigration enforcement remain salient. Following this analysis of the mundane and ordinary spaces and activities of migrants' lives, the next chapter examines U.S. immigration enforcement and (in)security by situating these topics within the broader context of migrants' journeys as a whole. As it shows, migrants' journeys continue long after they reach the U.S.-Mexico border, extending weeks, months, and years into detention centers, immigration courtrooms, and shelters.

## CHAPTER 6 – “Gracias a Dios”: The U.S.-Mexico Border and Beyond

### Introduction

The silver cargo van idled in the grocery store parking lot, baking under the bright Texas sun. Ashely looked at me from the van’s front passenger seat. “Are you sure you’re ready for the rest of it? It’s not a pleasant story,” she said as the van’s broken air conditioner rattled over the sound of her voice. Readjusting my position in the driver’s seat, I made myself comfortable, facing toward her. “That’s okay,” I responded, “they rarely are.” Earlier in the day, Ashely had described how she arrived in Monterrey, Mexico, after leaving Guatemala with her youngest daughter, aged twelve. Fleeing an abusive husband involved with MS-13, she paid \$12,000 for her and her daughter to be smuggled across Mexico in the cabin of a tractor-trailer with thirty other migrants. Looking out from the van window, Ashely took a deep breath before resuming her story. “In Monterrey, we were passed off to *Los Zetas*—the cartel—before we could continue. I had to pay them an additional fee for protection; otherwise, they would’ve killed us there.” Ashely explained that the fee was not for protection from others but from the cartel itself and that migrants who refuse to, or could not, pay the fee were usually killed or disappeared.<sup>46</sup>

After leaving Monterrey, Ashely and her daughter were smuggled north to the border city of Nuevo Laredo, stopping off in drop houses provided by cartel members along the way. “It was terrible,” she explained to me. “There were cockroaches and other insects everywhere—the houses were filthy... We always slept on the floor, and you could see the insects crawling around you at night.” Ashely scratched at her arms, shuddering in her seat. She recalled that at times, cartel members would steal their belongings and, during the journey to Nuevo Laredo, took cash, clothing, and jewelry from the migrants. “Sometimes, we overheard them discussing cartel business—how

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<sup>46</sup> In recent years, Mexican and U.S. authorities have uncovered several mass graves, where the remains of hundreds of migrants were buried by cartels (e.g., Miroff and Booth 2011; Tuckman 2011; see also Chapter 4).

they killed someone, where they buried the body, things like that... They spoke about it so casually, as if they were sharing a Coke with their friends. I was terrified that it could've been us next, so I let them take whatever they wanted.”

Eventually, Ashely and her daughter were taken to a remote location near the Rio Grande River separating Mexico and the U.S. “The cartels had bulletproof vests and assault rifles,” she remembered. “We were so frightened, but they promised it was only for our protection... Once we reached the river, they pushed us across on a raft and left us. We got to the other side and immediately started running. I never looked back at them.” Soon after, Ashley and her daughter encountered a group of U.S. Border Patrol agents ahead of them. Worried they would be apprehended, they decided to turn around and quickly crossed the river back into Mexico, where they slept in a nearby drainage canal. “Would you like to know the worst part of all this?” Ashely asked me. I nodded my head silently. “For a moment, I remember thinking that it was all over—there it was, we had finally made it to the U.S... But no, there was still so much left for us to do.”

The morning after, Ashley and her daughter traveled on foot to a port of entry along one of the international bridges spanning Mexico and the U.S., where they attempted to claim asylum. “The immigration officials told us they didn’t have any room, so we had to wait in line. There were so many other people waiting—we had to stay on that bridge for almost three days!” she exclaimed. Finally, Ashley and her daughter were allowed passage into the U.S. and quickly initiated the asylum process. They were immediately separated and confined in temporary holding cells along the U.S.-Mexico border. Two days later, they were moved to a family detention center in Texas, where they waited for more than three weeks before being released and transported to San Antonio under “catch and release,” an unofficial policy—now (mostly) eliminated by the Trump administration—that releases migrants to communities across the U.S. while they await their hearings in immigration courts. With few contacts in the U.S., nowhere to stay, and an immigration court date scheduled two

years in advance due to an ever-expanding case backlog, Ashely and her daughter were left at the bus station in downtown San Antonio by ICE agents. Disoriented and confused, she explained, “I didn’t know where we were or where I was supposed to go, so we just slept there on a bench.” Ultimately, they were discovered by employees at the bus station and welcomed at the nearby shelter, where they stayed for the next three months. “We’re here now,” Ashely said as she nodded to herself, looking out from the passenger window, “thanks to God.”

### ***Extended Journeys***

Even after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, many Central American migrants experience prolonged journeys and immense uncertainty in the U.S. While migrants seeking asylum encounter lengthy bureaucratic processes and periods of stasis, others who remain undocumented face legal jeopardy and severe hazards in transit. In July 2017, for example, nine migrants died from heat exposure and asphyxiation in the back of a tractor-trailer parked outside a shopping center in San Antonio, where they waited to be smuggled deeper into U.S. territory after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border (see Montgomery et al. 2017). For many migrants, extended journeys involve incarceration in detention centers, recurring appearances in immigration courts, and a shifting landscape of immigration and asylum policy in the U.S., especially under the Trump administration.

Given the importance of these growing aspects of immigration enforcement, a robust literature has emerged in geography on migrant detention, deportation, and immigration courts (e.g., Burrige & Gill 2017; Conlon & Hiemstra 2017; Kocher 2019; Moran et al. 2013). Much of this work focuses on the spatial and temporal dynamics of immigration enforcement *during* and *after* migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, scholars have consistently looked toward immigration enforcement and iterations of (in)security and militarization along the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., Ackleson 1999; 2005; Johnson et al. 2011; Jones 2011; 2012). Other scholars have

explored the devolution and localization of immigration enforcement from within the U.S. interior, showing how policing and surveillance have expanded across state, county, and city jurisdictions (e.g., Coleman 2009; 2012). Still others have interrogated the politics and practices of detention and deportation amid a growing “immigration industrial complex” in the U.S. (Doty & Wheatley 2013; Golash-Boza 2009) and detailed how migrants’ experiences in these spaces are saturated with ambiguity, chaos, confusion, and uncertainty (e.g., Hiemstra 2013; 2019; Mountz 2011; Williams 2017). Taken together, these studies document key aspects of immigration enforcement in the U.S. and the ways in which these practices impinge upon migrants’ lives *during* and *after* they cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

Migrants, however, do not merely appear at the U.S.-Mexico border. Joining a growing body of work on migration journeys (e.g., Brigden 2018b; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Vogt 2018), I have shown in previous chapters how Central American migrants spend weeks, months, and sometimes years travelling thousands of miles to reach the U.S. It is curious, then, that these studies of migration journeys do not include migrants’ experiences with immigration enforcement in the U.S. With few exceptions (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016; Walters 2016), scholars of migration journeys do not engage with migrants’ experiences as they unfold in the U.S. and typically end their analyses *at or before* the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018).

What is left, then, are two sets of disconnected findings and insights: On the one hand, a robust literature detailing immigration enforcement and migrants’ experiences *after* migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border and, on the other hand, an emerging body of work on migration journeys that ends *before* migrants reach the U.S.-Mexico border. What these two literatures overlook are the empirical realities of migration and migrants’ experiences as they contend with (in)security and violence *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., evidenced by Ashely’s testimony above, and the ways that for migrants themselves, these encounters with (in)security and violence, as well as

with hope and possibility, constitute *one migration journey*, not two sets of experiences—one before (e.g., Burrige & Gill 2017; Conlon & Hiemstra 2017; Kocher 2019; Moran et al. 2013) and one after (e.g., Brigden 2018b; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Vogt 2018) crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. For this reason, it is necessary to link these two literatures, and their attention to different moments and segments of migrants' overall journeys, if we are to fully understand the realities of contemporary migration for Central American migrants navigating journeys *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S.

Responding to these two siloed bodies of work, this chapter examines the politics of U.S. immigration enforcement and (in)security by situating these topics within the broader context of migrants' journeys documented in previous chapters. In particular, I focus on a rapidly changing landscape of immigration and asylum policy over the last three decades, including recent transformations under the Trump administration, to illustrate how and why migration journeys have gradually extended across space and time. While it is tempting to characterize the Trump administration's approach to immigration and refugee policy as exceptional, in reality, it has employed many of the same tools and tactics as previous administrations. Nevertheless, as I show, the Trump administration's actions have extended migration journeys spatially and temporally, working together and alongside other policies like family detention to create ambiguity, chaos, and uncertainty for migrants.

To develop these ideas, this chapter works in two main parts. The first outlines the geopolitics of immigration enforcement and (in)security at the U.S-Mexico border from the 1990s onward,<sup>47</sup> culminating in Trump's hardline, "zero tolerance" platform. From fortifying the southern border and expanding migrant detention to eliminating asylum protections and intensifying criminal

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<sup>47</sup> As Dunn (2009) explains, the series of high-profile operations along the U.S.-Mexico border in the 1990s, beginning with U.S. Border Patrol's Operation Hold-the-Line, laid the foundations for contemporary U.S. immigration enforcement in the post-9/11 era.



prosecution of migrants, the evolution of recent U.S. immigration and asylum policy helps show how the Trump administration has embraced a politics of both continuation and disruption in relation to recent enforcement efforts that have generated chaos along the U.S.-Mexico border and within the U.S. interior. Following this discussion, the second section explores the spatial, temporal, and gendered practices of family detention and deportation under the Obama and Trump administrations. Here, I trace the emergence of a “detention corridor” in south Texas that, in paradoxical fashion, funnels migrants—mainly women and children—deeper into U.S. territory for extended time periods, even as deportation and removal proceedings work to expel them from the U.S. interior.

Throughout this chapter, I draw from recent developments under the Trump administration and previous policies, such as family detention, to demonstrate how U.S. immigration enforcement and (in)security have extended migration journeys spatially and temporally (see also Brigden & Mainwaring 2016; Hiemstra 2013; 2019; Walters 2016). If Chapters 4 and 5 emphasized forms of agency and resiliency on the migrant trail, this chapter draws attention to the persistence of exclusion and insecurity, where migrants are continually empowered and disempowered along their journeys. Ultimately, by connecting migrants’ experiences from their journeys across Mexico and into the U.S., it highlights the presence *and* absence of agency in migration journeys, when examined in their entirety. In doing so, this chapter shows the *cumulative* effects of border and immigration enforcement in North America, as migrants contend with exclusion, uncertainty, and violence throughout their journeys, effects otherwise obscured by the ways existing research is currently organized around *either* Mexico (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018) or the U.S. (e.g., Coleman 2007a; Coleman & Kocher 2011; Martin 2012a; 2012b; Williams 2017).

### Three Decades of Migration and (In)Security at the U.S.-Mexico Border

While the physical boundary between the U.S. and Mexico has changed dramatically throughout the history of both states, many contemporary policies and practices around the border were established during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>48</sup> As concerns over economic recession, unauthorized migration, and drug trafficking in the U.S. evolved into national public debate about immigration in the late 1980s, the federal government turned its attention to the international boundary with Mexico (Andreas 2009; Purcell & Nevins 2005). By the 1990s, the U.S. federal government had planned a series of high-profile operations to “secure” the U.S.-Mexico border and curb immigration to the U.S. from Latin America, capitalizing on growing racial anxieties and a discourse of chaos and illegality (Ackleson 1999; 2005; Nevins 2008; 2010). In 1993, USBP launched Operation Hold-the-Line, which positioned more than 400 agents directly on the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent unauthorized migrants from crossing along a twenty-mile corridor in El Paso, Texas (see Dunn 2009). The strategy was deemed overwhelmingly successful by policymakers, endorsed by the Clinton administration in 1994, and quickly replicated in other USBP sectors as Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Safeguard in Arizona, and Operation Rio Grande elsewhere in Texas (see Dunn 2009; Nevins 2010).

These tactics represented a significant departure from previous operations, where border agents would position themselves away from the actual border and apprehend migrants *after* they crossed into U.S. territory (Ackleson 2005; Coleman 2007a). In contrast, the new strategy detailed above placed large numbers of agents *directly on* the U.S.-Mexico border to deter migrants from crossing in what eventually became known as “Prevention Through Deterrence” (Dunn 2009). By constructing a large, sophisticated policing apparatus along high-traffic areas of the border, USBP

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<sup>48</sup> For an in-depth overview of the U.S.-Mexico border and its historical development, including earlier policies forged through the Bracero Program, see Andreas (2009) and St. John (2011).

pushed migrants toward remote locations, where crossing would be not only difficult but also hazardous and, therefore, undesirable (see de León 2015).

Alongside this dramatic transformation, the U.S. federal government began investing in new technology, equipment, and USBP personnel (Hernández 2010), while simultaneously funneling surplus military equipment from the Gulf War into border militarization (Rosas 2007). In 1993, the construction of a fifteen-mile border wall was completed in San Diego, California, and additional fencing was soon approved in Arizona and Texas (Jones 2012). As an organization, USBP witnessed unprecedented growth during this time (Hernández 2010). By the turn of this century, its personnel had doubled while its budget had increased almost threefold, shifting most resources toward the U.S.-Mexico border (Ackleson 2005). From policing unauthorized entry to conducting searches and seizures, the organization was newly tasked with far-reaching responsibilities under the banner of national security, even pre-9/11 (Jones 2010; Payan 2006). By 2000, for example, USBP had become the largest federal law enforcement organization in the U.S. (Hernández 2010), increasing its presence at the border and expanding its purview within the interior through new legislation that criminalized undocumented immigration (see Coleman 2007a). USBP also began coordinating closely with other government agencies to undertake sweeping enforcement and policing operations throughout the U.S. interior, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), both of which had grown substantially under the Reagan administration (Coleman 2007b; 2015). Thus, in just a few years, USBP completely revamped its strategy, prompting a new era of immigration enforcement, policing, and national security concentrated along the U.S.-Mexico border and within the U.S. interior (Ackleson 1999; 2005; Nevins 2010).

The effects of USBP's dramatic growth and its new strategy were both pernicious and widespread. There is no evidence to suggest that Prevention Through Deterrence was effective in

limiting undocumented migration to the U.S. (Cornelius & Salehyan 2007). Instead, the spectacle and performance of national security along the U.S.-Mexico border—and within U.S. territory through policing and interior enforcement—allowed authorities to claim success (Ackleson 2005; Andreas 2009). More importantly, the policy resulted in the deaths of thousands of migrants by producing a set of hazardous and violent mechanisms still present along the border today (see Doty 2011; De León 2015; Rosas 2006a). While migrants avoided high-traffic areas of the border under this strategy, they were not deterred altogether, instead choosing remote locations where they could cross (see Cornelius 2001; Orrenius 2004). Drowning, hypothermia, and dehydration became common, as migrants risked their lives crossing the Rio Grande River or traversing the Sonoran Desert to enter the U.S. (de León 2015; Orrenius 2004; Rosas 2006a). Prevention Through Deterrence also gave rise to a robust and incentivized industry of human smuggling and drug trafficking at the border (Andreas 2001), inflating costs and demand for those who could evade the proliferation of new fences and patrols. Relatedly, as the U.S. attempted to curtail immigration from Latin America by “securing” its southern border, migration, especially from Mexico and Central America, became permanent, rather than circular, as migrants increasingly settled in the U.S. to avoid return trips across the now-fortified U.S.-Mexico border (see Massey 2020; Massey et al. 2014). These wide-ranging effects of Prevention Through Deterrence laid the foundation for contemporary U.S. immigration enforcement characterized by deadly, external border controls and aggressive interior policing (Ackleson 2005; Coleman 2007a; 2015).

### ***Migration and (In)Security Post-9/11***

The underlying tools and tactics of U.S. immigration enforcement expanded and intensified after the September 11, 2001 attacks, which marked a key turning point in U.S. political discourse, public discussions, and national security. Post-9/11, national security and immigration enforcement

received renewed attention in the U.S. (see Golash-Boza 2012; Jones 2011). While much of the framework for U.S. immigration enforcement was established during the Bush and Clinton administrations, many of its tools and tactics were not fully deployed or resourced until after 9/11 (Coleman 2007a; 2007b). Following the attacks, however, the Bush administration advanced an aggressive strategy in a global “war on terror” aimed at preemptive action abroad and domestic security at home (see Jones 2011). Mobilizing a popular rhetoric of global threat from foreign “others” and national security, U.S. officials increasingly linked terrorism to international borders and to immigration (Ackleson 2005; Jones 2011; 2012). According to the administration, “evildoers” and future attacks could be prevented through a law-and-order approach of robust security at the border and extensive immigration enforcement within the U.S. interior (Coleman 2007a; Jones 2012). These concerns became imperative to national security and counterterrorism, portrayed as an essential step in protecting U.S. territory and its citizens throughout the “homeland” (see Jones 2012).<sup>49</sup>

Following a 2001 executive order, in 2002, the Homeland Security Act established the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) broadly tasked with “preventing terrorist attacks” within the U.S. Under this order, DHS prioritized securing the border and enforcing immigration law (see Homeland Security Act 2002). To that end, several new agencies were carved or created out of INS and placed under DHS supervision between 2002 and 2005, including U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Homeland Security Act 2002). With sweeping public support and firm Congressional backing, the federal government provided DHS with extensive funding to pursue immigration enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border—under the purview of CBP—as

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<sup>49</sup> Prior to September 11, 2001, the notion of a U.S. “homeland” appeared infrequently in public discourse. Following the attacks, however, the term quickly entered into the everyday lexicon as a powerful spatial metaphor (see Kaplan 2003).

well as within the U.S. interior through detention and deportation—under the purview of ICE (Andreas 2003; Payan 2006). During this period, the government provisioned more than 650 miles of additional fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border and installed cameras, biometric sensors, and surveillance towers to detect unauthorized movement (Jones 2012).

Crucially, however, security and immigration enforcement under DHS, and especially ICE, increasingly expanded away from the U.S.-Mexico border itself and deeper into the U.S. interior (see Coleman 2009; 2015; Winders 2007). This interior expansion signaled a key change in *where* immigration enforcement took place both geographically and institutionally, scattering these tactics throughout the U.S. and across multiple agencies. For example, Section 287(g) of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), passed in 1996, and programs such as Secure Communities were central to the devolution and expansion of post-9/11 interior enforcement (Coleman & Kocher 2011). Adopted after IIRIRA's approval, Section 287(g) delegated federal immigration authority to state and local police agencies by creating new federal-local partnerships (see Coleman 2009; 2012; Wong 2012). Under local agreements with law enforcement, Section 287(g) enabled state, county, and city police to investigate, arrest, and detain immigrants for ICE and federal authorities. Local agencies provided support through two models: a “jail enforcement” model, which authorized police to identify and process individuals who had been arrested for other offenses, and a “task force” model, which permitted officers to investigate and arrest immigrants in public settings through patrols, checkpoints, and other routine duties. While most localities were uninterested in adopting these agreements when they were first allowed in 1996, such agreements were widely embraced after 9/11, especially in southern U.S. states and in counties with large Latinx populations (Coleman 2009; Provine et al. 2016; Winders 2007). Under the Obama administration, however, Section 287(g) was scaled back, and the “task force” model was eliminated after evidence of rampant civil rights abuses and racial profiling (see Hesson 2012).

Likewise, the Secure Communities initiative relied on federal-local partnerships between ICE and local law enforcement agencies (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2009). The program, piloted in 2008 under the Bush administration, required local law enforcement to send biometric data of arrested individuals, including suspects' fingerprints and DNA, to ICE and federal authorities (Chand & Schreckhise 2015; Strunk & Leitner 2013). Sorting by levels of "risk," federal authorities then identified immigrants for deportation, transferring them into ICE custody. Despite widespread implementation under the Obama administration, the program was discontinued in 2014 (see Linthicum 2014), only to be resurrected by the Trump administration in early 2017. Together, Section 287(g) and Secure Communities represented the expansion, devolution, and "localization" of interior immigration enforcement, post-9/11 (Coleman 2009; 2012; Provine et al. 2016; Walker & Leitner 2011). These initiatives eventually culminated in a potent system of policing and immigration control accompanied by the growth of widespread detention and deportation in the U.S.

Much like the evolution of policing at the U.S.-Mexico border, the expansion of detention and deportation can be traced to the 1980s and 1990s, when the federal government passed a suite of laws criminalizing undocumented migration and expanding removal procedures with limited court oversight (Macías-Rojas 2016; Welch 2002).<sup>50</sup> Broadening grounds for criminal removal, these punitive new laws—including the 1990 Immigration Act, 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, and the 1996 IIRIRA—imposed mandatory detention and retroactive deportation for an assortment of low-level crimes, such as petty theft, driving under the influence (DUI), and other minor offenses (Coleman 2007a; Macías-Rojas 2016).<sup>51</sup> These laws also diminished judicial review by eliminating courts' purview over

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<sup>50</sup> For an in-depth overview of migrant detention and deportation's development in the U.S., see Golash-Boza (2015), Hiemstra (2019), and Loyd and Mountz (2018).

<sup>51</sup> Key to this process was expanding the charge of "aggravated felony," which by the 1990s, included bribery, forgery, petty theft, prostitution, shoplifting, and tax evasion (see Coleman 2007a).

policing and immigration enforcement (Coleman & Kocher 2011). For example, in 1996, the federal government instituted expedited removal, a process that fast-tracked deportations and eliminated court hearings for immigrants apprehended within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders (Macías-Rojas 2016). Lawmakers continued to undermine judicial review throughout the 1990s, rendering most deportation cases exempt from court oversight (Welch 2002). As judicial review waned and as immigration law merged with criminal law, detention and deportation grew steadily under the Bush and Clinton administrations (see Macías-Rojas 2016), laying the groundwork for its rapid intensification under the Obama administration.

In 2008, the Obama administration inherited a formidable system of immigration control that was well resourced, legally robust, and generously funded (see Williams 2017). Through a series of carefully calibrated revisions, however, the Obama administration narrowed DHS enforcement priorities and channeled resources toward policing two key groups: recent immigrants who had crossed the border undocumented and individuals who were suspected of committing crimes (Macías-Rojas 2016; Provine et al. 2016). Focusing its efforts, the administration also worked to extend 287(g) agreements and Secure Communities (Provine et al. 2016; Walker & Leitner 2011). As a result, detention and deportation under the Obama administration increased dramatically, setting a record number of formal removals between 2008 and 2012—more than any other previous administration (see Golash-Boza 2017; Marshall 2016).

Alongside the dramatic rise in deportations, the Obama administration vastly expanded family detention (see Martin 2012a; Williams 2017). For decades, the federal government had relied on INS and a growing prison-industrial complex to incarcerate and detain immigrants, including women and children (see Dow 2004; Welch 2002). A series of prominent court cases and legal battles in the 1990s and early 2000s, however, placed restrictions on the detention of children and unaccompanied minors, limiting the amount of time they could spend in facilities while mandating



expeditious release (Martin 2011; 2012a). According to national standards established during this time, children were to be kept in a minimally restrictive setting and provided with access to education, healthcare, and other services. These requirements proved difficult for federal authorities to satisfactorily meet (see Martin 2011; 2012a), hindering efforts to expand family detention capacity and eliminate “catch and release,” an informal practice by which migrants—particularly children, families, and asylum-seekers—were released from custody while they awaited immigration court hearings often scheduled years in advance due to a growing case backlog.

In May 2014, there was only one family detention center in the U.S., but this reality quickly changed when thousands of families from Central America arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border in Summer 2014 (see Preston 2014; Tumulty & Nakamura 2014). Capitalizing on the so-called “crisis,” the Obama administration requested \$3.7 billion in emergency appropriations to expand family detention and other enforcement efforts (see Williams 2017). By August 2014, two new permanent facilities, both privately operated, had opened in south Texas, increasing the total family detention capacity from fewer than 100 beds to well over 3,000 in just three months (Harlan 2016). These events signaled the rising popularity of family detention as an effective exclusionary tool which quickly became a key facet of contemporary immigration control (see Hiemstra 2019; Martin 2012a; 2012b).

The tools, tactics, and geography of immigration control in the U.S. were, thus, reshaped under the Bush and Obama administrations. Since 2001, immigration enforcement has expanded rapidly throughout the U.S. interior, redistributing federal immigration authority to states, counties, and cities and extending policing into local communities. Immigration law simultaneously has become punitive and criminalized, as lawmakers continually broadened the scope of removal procedures and eliminated judicial review of court proceedings. As a result, detention and deportation proliferated in the U.S., ensnaring hundreds of thousands of Latinx immigrants each

year and quickly becoming the centerpiece of post-9/11 immigration enforcement (Brotherton & Kretsedemas 2008; Golash-Boza 2012; 2015; Macías-Rojas 2016). While these policies and tactics continued under the Trump administration, there were also significant changes that generated chaos and confusion along the U.S.-Mexico border and beyond. In response, migrants' journeys increasingly extended into detention centers and immigration courtrooms scattered throughout the U.S., as they confronted new geographies of policing, imprisonment, and deportation on the ground.

### ***The Trump Administration: Continuation, Disruption, and Chaos***

It is tempting to characterize the Trump administration's approach to immigration and asylum law as exceptional due to the overtones of contemporary policies, epitomized by "zero-tolerance" practices and racialized, anti-immigrant rhetoric (see Bump 2015; Klein & Liptak 2018), which suggest sharp differences between the Trump administration and those preceding it. While these differences are significant, the Trump administration has largely extended prior immigration and refugee policies, signaling a *continuation* of previous actions rather than a sharp distinction from them. Yet the Trump administration has also distinguished itself by expanding the scale and severity of immigration enforcement while undermining the asylum process in ways that marked a key shift away from previous administrations. Tracking some of these changes, this section shows how the Trump administration has embraced a politics of both continuation and disruption that has resulted in chaos and confusion along the U.S.-Mexico border and within the U.S. interior. It focuses on two areas of immigration policy under the Trump administration where continuation and disruption were evident: zero-tolerance enforcement practices and the asylum process.

Almost immediately after his inauguration in 2017, Trump and his administration pursued an immigration agenda defined by "zero-tolerance" practices and a hardline, law-and-order approach. Implementing a series of executive orders and departmental memoranda days after Trump's

inauguration (see Chapter 2), the administration sought to broaden and intensify immigration enforcement within the U.S. In particular, Trump issued a pair of executive orders that fulfilled earlier campaign promises to “build the wall” and conduct mass deportations targeting Latinx immigrants. First, the administration directed that a “physical wall” be built along the U.S.-Mexico border that was “secure, contiguous, and impassable” (Executive Order 13767 2017). The order also requested an additional 5,000 CBP agents and the immediate termination of “catch and release.” The second order, titled “Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States,” withheld government funding from “sanctuary cities” and, among other things, eliminated federal priorities for deportations and the removal of specific groups, first instituted by the Obama administration (Executive Order 13768 2017). These executive actions were followed by two internal DHS documents which detailed new enforcement procedures and departmental guidelines, including plans to expand 287(g) agreements and restore the Secure Communities program, as well as to hire an additional 10,000 ICE agents to carry out local operations.

In April 2018, the Trump administration announced an explicit “zero tolerance” policy targeting unauthorized entry along the U.S.-Mexico border (see Gonzales 2018). According to Trump officials, DHS and the Department of Justice would prosecute *anyone* suspected of crossing the southern border undocumented through the criminal justice system rather than in immigration courts. While the Bush and Obama administrations also employed similar tactics under Operation Streamline (see Golash-Boza 2015; 2017), criminal prosecution was typically used sparingly, especially as it applied to asylum-seekers and families. Under the zero tolerance policy, however, the Trump administration adopted criminal prosecution as standard practice, applying it to *all* migrants, including asylum-seekers and parents travelling with children. It is hard to overstate the impact of this decision. Under this new approach, thousands of families, many of them from Central America, became separated at the border under the “family separation policy,” as parents were transferred

into federal custody to be prosecuted while children were turned over to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (see Shapiro and Sharma 2018).

In many ways, however, these executive orders *extended* prior immigration policies. The directive to construct a border wall, for example, only deepened long-term efforts to fortify the U.S.-Mexico border, initiated in the early 1990s and popularized by the Bush administration through the Secure Fence Act of 2006, where nearly 650 miles of fencing was completed along the southern border (see Jones 2012). In addition, orders to expand 287(g) agreements, resurrect Secure Communities, and hire additional CBP and ICE agents continued the ongoing devolution and localization of interior immigration enforcement which proliferated rapidly in the aftermath of 9/11 (see Coleman 2009; 2012; Provine et al. 2016; Walker & Leitner 2011).

Yet there were also significant *differences* between the Trump administration and those preceding it. In particular, the Trump administration dramatically widened the scope and intensity of immigration enforcement. While prior administrations had funneled key resources toward deporting repeat offenders and individuals convicted of serious crimes (see Golash-Boza 2015; 2017), Trump officials targeted *all* immigrants by eliminating federal priorities for deportation and removal. In removing previous guidelines, immigration authorities were no longer required to focus deportation efforts on specific groups. As a result, shortly after the 2017 executive orders were announced, ICE began operating with newfound freedoms, and agents reported feeling “emboldened” and “newly empowered” as they descended on previously restricted locations, such as courtrooms, hospitals, and schools (see Kulish et al. 2017). Immigration arrests rose dramatically while deportations and removals slowly followed (Nixon 2018b). Likewise, the administration’s broad use of criminal prosecution at the U.S.-Mexico border, especially for asylum-seekers and parents travelling with children, represented a sharp break from established practices. In Spring 2018, more than 2,600 children—likely thousands more—were separated from their parents or guardians over a nine-

month period before the administration ended the policy in June 2018, when a federal judge initially ruled it unconstitutional.<sup>52</sup>

Continuation and disruption were also evident in the Trump administration's approach to the asylum process. Shortly after his inauguration, Trump eliminated key asylum protections in an attempt to curtail immigration from Latin America. In Summer 2018, the attorney general's office declared that domestic abuse and gang violence would no longer qualify for asylum under federal law, vacating a 2016 decision by the Department of Justice (see Sacchetti 2018). Months later, Trump formalized plans to bar asylum-seekers from crossing between ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border, asserting that asylum rights would only be granted to those entering through "official" channels (see Aguilar 2018). The administration also expanded the use of "metering," an informal policy that enabled immigration officials to drastically limit the daily number of asylum-seekers entering the U.S. interior (see Chapter 7). While metering was temporarily used by the Obama administration in 2016, Trump officials made regular use of the policy, closing ports of entry to asylum-seekers for lengthy periods of time and restricting the total number of new applicants (see Hennessy-Fiske 2018). These attempts to constrain asylum claims eventually culminated in the 2019 "Migration Protection Protocols" (MPP), which extended metering's effects by forcing asylum-seekers from Central America to remain in Mexico as their cases were adjudicated in U.S. immigration courts (see Tackett et al. 2018).

Through these measures, the Trump administration's approach to immigration enforcement was more punitive than previous administrations and intensified the scale and severity of enforcement. Widespread and regular use of metering at the border, for instance, led to overcrowding and extended delays at ports of entry, where migrants waited for days and weeks

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<sup>52</sup> The total number of separations is unknown. While some assessments have cited approximately 2,600 children separated from their parents or guardians (e.g., Shapiro and Sharma 2018), subsequent reports have noted that the number is likely thousands higher (see Jordan 2019).

before their applications were processed (see Hennessy-Fiske 2018a). Trump officials overturned established practices to introduce new guidelines and rigid criteria to restrict asylum. By excluding victims of domestic abuse and gang violence, the administration narrowed key asylum protections, denying eligibility to previously accepted groups. Similarly, its decision to blockade Central American migrants between ports of entry up-ended longstanding precedent under IIRIRA, which permitted migrants, regardless of origin, to travel along and between ports of entry to claim asylum. Thus, even as it extended previous policies, the Trump administration overturned established practices to undermine asylum and eliminate protections, ultimately affecting who was eligible for asylum and where the process itself took place.

On the ground, these transformations generated immense chaos and confusion. Whereas Chapter 2 discussed the effects of these transformations on my own fieldwork, here, I explore how legal organizations, immigration advocates, and migrants themselves struggled to navigate the administration's rapid changes to immigration and refugee policy, as those changes unfolded. Under the frenetic pace, bureaucratic errors and misinformation were widespread, and several agencies, including the Trump administration's own DHS and DHHS, reported being "unprepared" and "surprised" at many of the changes (see Nixon 2018a). Following the administration's zero tolerance policy, for example, federal agencies were unable to locate and reunite hundreds of separated families, prompting public outrage and political turmoil (Jordan 2019; Shapiro & Sharma 2018). Likewise, in Spring 2018, DHHS reported losing track of nearly 1,500 unaccompanied minors after they left shelters and were placed with sponsors (see Nixon 2018c). Several of the administration's policies were ruled unconstitutional or stalled in federal courts under preliminary injunctions, raising questions about the legality and stability of the administration's new platform. The zero tolerance policy was blocked by federal judges three months after it was announced, forcing the administration and several departments to reverse their plans (see Jordan 2018). Soon after, a

preliminary injunction was issued to restrain Trump officials from blockading migrants between ports of entry (see Levine 2018). Similarly, other proposals, including efforts to withhold funding from sanctuary cities and to eliminate Temporary Protected Status for thousands of immigrants, were ruled unconstitutional (see Paul 2018; Schoichet 2018). This series of legal questions and bureaucratic missteps created instability and uncertainty for advocates, care workers, and migrants as they were forced to navigate a number of crises and policy reversals on the ground.

In south Texas, I witnessed this chaos and confusion firsthand, as the 2017 executive orders and policy changes played out in real time during my fieldwork. At *Casa*, there were emergency meetings with key personnel, lawyers, and community members, who scrambled to make sense of the administration's changes. Volunteers and staff pored over policy documents and internal reports to keep pace with ongoing transformations. Simultaneously, ICE agents entered local hospitals and courtrooms to detain migrants while the early architecture of family separation and MPP materialized along the southern border. Incidents of abuse, racial profiling, and mistaken identities were widespread. One afternoon, for example, the organization with which *Casa* was associated was compelled to intervene after a local high school student was arrested and taken into ICE custody. Within hours, immigration officials announced it was a case of mistaken identity. Days later, a young DACA recipient was detained by ICE agents after he was arrested and charged for marijuana possession.<sup>53</sup> Despite his DACA status granting him legal residency, ICE entered the teenager into deportation proceedings and transported him to the nearest detention center before *Casa* and its larger legal organization interceded. On another occasion, a legal client of the organization disappeared from a county courthouse in downtown San Antonio minutes before his case was

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<sup>53</sup> DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is a U.S. executive order and program that postpones deportation for undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children. Then President Obama signed the executive order in 2012; however, in late 2017, the Trump administration announced plans to eliminate DACA, setting up a series of court cases and legal battles over its future (see Holland 2017; Rose 2018).

scheduled. After two days of searching by staff, the organization finally located him at a detention center in New Mexico, where he had been fast-tracked for removal and scheduled for deportation that afternoon.

These disruptions and the disorder that followed them were reflected in my interactions with shelter staff. Several interviews with advocates and care workers were repeatedly interrupted by breaking news stories or emergencies. During one exchange with a coworker, we were forced to suspend our interview when a migrant wandered away from the shelter. Fearful that they would be intercepted by ICE agents or police, we drove around searching for hours until we found them sitting outside a local fast-food restaurant. Other coworkers assumed I was a legal scholar and, thus, able to make sense of the details and intricacies of new policies. Often, they would frantically approach me, asking if I could interpret or teach them about specific legal procedures or pending case law. Turning them away, I explained that I was just as confused as they were, which persisted long after the executive orders took effect. Several weeks after the executive orders were announced, I wrote in my fieldnotes:

Many of us are still struggling to wrap our heads around the changes at hand. Reading the text of departmental memos and executive orders is insufficient, as there appears to be much more action on the ground than previously thought—preliminary reports of asylum-seekers being arrested, families separated at the border, and so on. Of course, there has also been a steady stream of arrests in nearby communities as immigrants are detained and fast-tracked for deportation. Everything is still so chaotic and despite the hours of unrelenting work, it seems nearly impossible to keep up. (Fieldnotes, February 20, 2017)

Following these executive orders, migrants were blockaded at ports of entry, detained for lengthy time periods, and subject to intense scrutiny by immigration officials. In my conversations with migrants, many drew attention to these changes and the ways in which they prolonged their journeys. For example, Julia, a young woman from Guatemala, explained to me, “I never expected to be detained for so long—almost three weeks... I couldn’t believe it, you know, I’m pregnant! They [immigration officials] never used to do that to us!” “Were you detained here before?” I asked.



“No, no, this is my first time in the U.S., but my girlfriend crossed a few months ago. She spent four days in detention—that was it! When I asked the other women in the facility what was taking so long, they told me it was some sort of new policy. I guess in the past, they wouldn’t hold pregnant women at all.” Here, Julia pointed to the confusion generated by the Trump administration’s policies, expressing bewilderment and disbelief that immigration officials held her in detention for so long, especially because she was pregnant. Comparing her friend’s experience, before the Trump administration, to her own afterward, she noted the disparity between four days and three weeks in detention. Julia was not alone, and months later, ICE formalized this policy through a new directive that “ended the presumption of release for all pregnant detainees” (see Sacchetti 2019), thereby extending these women’s journeys for days, weeks, and months inside detention centers.

Others expressed exhaustion and uncertainty as they grappled with the shifting terrain of immigration enforcement and asylum policy under the Trump administration, particularly in relation to their journeys across Central America and Mexico. “It’s a mess right now, but I didn’t have a choice,” George explained to me. Sitting with this young father and his son in a church cafeteria a few miles north of the border in McAllen, Texas, I asked them what happened. “We came all the way from the other border [Mexico-Guatemala border],” George explained. “I waited for almost two weeks here before they decided to let my son and me through. For days, the officials told us there was no room, and I thought we came all this way for nothing. Then suddenly, we were allowed in. Now, I don’t know what’s going to happen to us... There’s nothing we can really do.” In our conversation, George voiced his frustration with the administration’s policies, referring to metering along the U.S.-Mexico border and the ways it had extended his and his son’s journey. Describing the situation at the border as a “mess” and noting that he was unsure what would happen next, George expressed confusion, uncertainty, and even surprise when he and his son were “suddenly” allowed in weeks later.

Crucially, George's response highlighted the ways in which his experiences at the U.S.-Mexico border and beyond extended his overall journey, indicating that he had travelled "all the way from the other border." When George and his son "arrived," they were made to wait two weeks before finally being allowed to enter the U.S. as asylum-seekers, and during this wait, George thought he and his son had come "all this way for nothing." He drew attention to not only their extended journey, stretching out along the U.S.-Mexico border for lengthy time periods, but also implicitly referenced his experiences beforehand, which, along with the unexpected delays, made him doubt that his efforts were worthwhile and declare that they had come "all this way for nothing." For George, his journey from Guatemala was one continuous, extended experience in which his agency diminished as he traveled north, ultimately noting that "I didn't have a choice... there's nothing we can really do."

Many migrants followed George's lead and viewed their experiences with immigration enforcement and the Trump administration as part of their larger journeys. Giovanni, for instance, had slipped across the U.S.-Mexico border undetected and was one of the few migrants I encountered at *Casa* without documentation. "It's madness right now," he told me as we drove to pick up food for the rest of the shelter. "I can't do anything or go anywhere alone, but I also don't want to be deported. It's not safe." "So, when will you leave for your brother's place in Michigan?" I asked. "I don't know... I'm just tired," he responded. "The journey here wasn't easy, and now, with all that's going on, it's too much. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever be able to leave." For Giovanni, feelings of exclusion, exhaustion, and isolation overlapped with his previous experiences in Central America and Mexico, ultimately diminishing his sense of agency, even after he had supposedly reached his destination of choice (i.e., the U.S.). Referring to the difficulties of "the journey," he explained that he was "tired" and, because of the "madness" generated through the Trump administration's actions, doubted if he would ever be able to leave San Antonio, or even the shelter.

On the one hand, Giovanni had “arrived,” having successfully entered the U.S. On the other hand, he was also stuck in place, his journey paused indefinitely because he could not “do anything.” The anxiety and insecurity Giovanni felt in the U.S. under the Trump administration were compounded by his overall journey, which, along with his precarious position living undocumented in the U.S., made him feel tired and exhausted, as things became “too much” and he began to doubt if he would ever be able to leave the shelter in San Antonio.

The chaos and confusion generated by the Trump administration’s actions, then, overwhelmed advocates, care workers, and migrants alike. While *Casa* was forced to navigate a relentless stream of policy changes and unexpected emergencies such as disappearing legal clients, migrants themselves experienced these transformations in real time, expressing disbelief, fatigue, uncertainty, and a perceived loss of agency with their situations. Many of these migrants had left their homes in Central America *before* Trump’s election and, thus, encountered a legal and political landscape that was unanticipated and unknown.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, these transformations extended migrants’ journeys spatially and temporally, as they were blockaded at ports of entry, like George, or, in Julia’s case, detained for lengthy periods of time. More importantly, however, migrants’ encounters both before and after the U.S.-Mexico border together show both the presence *and absence* of agency and resiliency and shed light on the *cumulative* effects of border and immigration enforcement across North America, providing insights into the ways these enforcement mechanisms operate over space and time. In the instances above, migrants like George and Giovanni spoke of their exhaustion and hopelessness by referencing the difficulties not only of “making it” to the U.S.-Mexico border but also of navigating immigration and asylum policy under the Trump administration. Whereas Chapters 4 and 5 focused on displays of agency, this section has

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<sup>54</sup> As migration scholars have noted, social networks, and the knowledge that travels through them, are key in shaping migrants’ decisions, strategies, and tactics (see Massey, Durand, & Pren 2014). Without full knowledge of the Trump administration’s actions, migrants were forced to navigate the new legal and political landscape alone.

emphasized a perceived *loss* of agency, as George and Giovanni declared that “there was nothing” they could do to control their fates in the U.S. Migrants, thus, encounter empowerment and disempowerment throughout their journeys as they contend with exclusion, uncertainty, and violence in both Mexico and the U.S.—an observation that highlights the importance of looking on *both* sides of the U.S.-Mexico border to fully understand migrants’ experiences. This is not to say that migrants are only empowered in Mexico and, therefore, disempowered in the U.S., but, instead, to suggest that agency is continually reconfigured in transit—a dynamic that underscores the complexity of migrants’ experiences, only visible through examining their journeys before, during, and after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

What, though, did these dynamics look like for migrants—predominately women and children—encountering family detention? While the individuals above navigated chaos and confusion generated by the Trump administration in shelters, many migrants were forced to confront exclusion and insecurity through a sprawling landscape of family detention in south Texas, where mothers and their children were held within a private industry of imprisonment and incarceration that operates through a specific set of spatial, temporal, and gendered practices. How did these migrants make sense of their extended journeys through U.S. immigration enforcement? What effects did exclusion and insecurity have on their experiences and sense of empowerment or disempowerment?

### **Ambiguity and Uncertainty in Family Detention**

In December 2014, one of the largest migrant detention centers in the U.S. opened in Dilley, Texas, located part-way between the U.S.-Mexico border and the city of San Antonio. The South Texas Family Residential Center is sited on a dusty, sunbaked fifty-acre lot adjacent to a busy highway. Fences, floodlights, and surveillance cameras encircle dozens of barracks-like structures connected

by small dirt roads. During my visits there, black-and-white portraits of women and children, many from Central America, were posted in front of their doors for identification. In the courtyard, guards stood next to empty strollers parked along the walkway. Located less than 100 miles east is another family detention facility, Karnes County Residential Center. Here, a simple, brick façade gives way to two-story blocks of cells with railings coated in bright blue paint and red doors. Accompanying a small group of attorneys there one morning, we spoke quietly with women in jeans and sneakers wearing black, electronic GPS monitors strapped to their ankles. Some of them lamented the random inspections, searches, and bed checks at night. Others reported that the lights in their cells never turned off, making it difficult for them to sleep. Outside, basketball courts and new playground equipment surrounded by towering concrete walls laid still and empty. As I exited the facility through a secured area behind a chain-link fence, I noticed a sign above the door that read *bienvenidos*, welcoming families to migrant detention.

For nearly a century, migrants have been subject to imprisonment and incarceration in detention centers scattered across the U.S.<sup>55</sup> Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, however, a suite of new criminal laws and a booming prison-industrial complex led to a permanent upsurge in migrant detention (see Dow 2004; Welch 2002). In 1980, for example, INS detained an average of 4,062 migrants every day. By 2001, the number had grown to approximately 20,000 (Dow 2004; Golash-Boza 2012), and by the end of 2018, the average number of migrants held daily in detention had risen to over 42,000.<sup>56</sup> During the same time, rates of unauthorized entry at the U.S.-Mexico border fell precipitously, reaching historic lows as the numbers of those detained reached unprecedented highs (see Burnett 2017). While the majority of detained migrants have been adults travelling alone,

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<sup>55</sup> For an in-depth overview of migrant detention in the U.S. and its historical development, see Dow (2004), Loyd and Mountz (2018), Welch (2002).

<sup>56</sup> The previous record, reported in 2017, was just over 38,000 (see Sands 2018).

family detention, composed of women and children held together in “family units,” has become increasingly common (see Martin 2011; 2012a; 2012b; Williams 2017).<sup>57</sup>

Within migration studies, a number of scholars have utilized the notion of a corridor to better understand these processes of detention, deportation, and removal (e.g., Coutin 2015; Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015; Hasselberg 2018). In particular, the term “deportation corridor” has been used to describe the various procedures associated with deportation around the world, encompassing “not only the different domains and sites of experience, such as imprisonment, detention, deportation, return, but also the different types of organizations and institutions involved” (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015, p. 553). Crucially, the concept of a deportation corridor connects deportation’s spatial and temporal ordering to migrants’ embodied experiences with it, deepening understandings of how, where, and through which actors and institutions deportation takes place (see Coutin 2015). As a spatial metaphor, corridors evoke images of long, narrow passageways that connect separate, yet related, rooms along a seemingly “unlimited straight line” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 73). Kafka, for instance, repeatedly used corridors to describe long passages lined with unmarked doors, symbolizing a labyrinthine “placeless terrain” through which his characters were forced to traverse (see Rahmani 2015, p. 206–208). Corridors depict enclosure, implicitly directing movement in specific directions through confined spaces that are walled in. Across institutional settings, they are spaces of authority, stasis, and submission, built as waiting rooms and hallways in places like courtrooms, hospitals, or offices, where individuals “wait interminably for the right authorities to come to judgements that never seem to arrive” (see Luckhurst 2019, p. 249). These bureaucratic spaces often appear lifeless, oppressive, and impersonal

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<sup>57</sup> According to DHS, “Family Unit Aliens” are defined as children apprehended with one or more parent or legal guardian (see Lauren 2012b). In practice, however, family detention often only applies to women and children, as men travelling with children are held under separate conditions or released to await court dates.

(see Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015; Luckhurst 2019). Corridors, thus, represent bureaucratic and institutional spaces of waiting where power is exercised and mobility restricted.

These images of corridors resonate with a growing geographic literature that draws attention to the unique spatial and temporal dynamics of detention and deportation (e.g., Hiemstra 2019; Martin & Mitchelson 2009; Mountz & Hiemstra 2014). Many scholars have linked these practices to the ongoing devolution and expansion of immigration enforcement not only within the interior of countries (Coleman & Kocher 2011) but also beyond their territorial boundaries, signifying the extension of state sovereignty and territorial claims (Loyd & Mountz 2018; Mountz 2011; Mountz & Hiemstra 2014). Hiemstra (2013; 2019), for example, maps the “chaotic geographies” of detainees’ transfer paths and their durations to explore how detention and deportation produce migrant insecurity across a range of transnational spaces. Others have examined how detention centers and offshore facilities mark “liminal spaces” where asylum-seekers and migrants are disenfranchised and made to wait for varying lengths of time (Loyd & Mountz 2018; Mountz 2011; Turnbull 2016). In these spaces, it is the unpredictability of time—migrants may be moved, transferred, or released at any time—that creates instability and precarity for migrants, preventing them from making future plans and eliminating perceptions of “stability” in the present (Griffiths 2014). Accordingly, these studies show, migrants’ experiences with detention and deportation are characterized by ambiguity, chaos, confusion, and uncertainty (see Griffiths 2014; Hiemstra 2013; 2019; Mountz 2011).

Building on this body of work, I theorize family detention in south Texas through the lens of a corridor to draw attention to the specific set of spatial, temporal, and gendered practices through which family detention operates. In particular, I trace the emergence of a “*detention corridor*,” conceived as a key part of Drotbohm and Hasselberg’s deportation corridor (2015), to examine the interconnected sites, actors, and institutions explicitly involved with family detention and deportation in south Texas—itsself a key part of many migrants’ experiences with U.S.

immigration enforcement. As this section demonstrates, the detention corridor operates through a seemingly contradictory set of spatial, temporal, and gendered practices, where migrant families—composed primarily of women and children—are funneled *deeper* into U.S. territory for extended periods of time even as they enter deportation and removal proceedings that work to expel them from that same interior. In what follows, I draw from interviews, observations, and personal experiences with attorneys, care workers, migrants, and others connected to family detention, first, to outline the detention corridor’s spatial, temporal, and gendered configuration and second, to analyze migrants’ experiences with it.

### ***The Detention Corridor***

Beginning in 2014, as large numbers of women and children arrived together along the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas, the Obama administration quickly reframed family immigration as an international crisis (see Gambino 2014; Shear & Peters 2014). While some families were apprehended and detained by USBP, many voluntarily turned themselves over to authorities. By early summer, the administration had declared that the increase in migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border was overwhelming federal institutions, exposing the state’s inability to respond to the sudden influx of families. Drawing from a familiar discourse of chaos and crisis (see Mountz & Hiemstra 2014), the Obama administration swiftly requested \$3.7 billion to permanently increase family detention capacity (see Shear & Peters 2014). Within months, the South Texas Family Residential Center, operated by the private company CoreCivic (formerly the Corrections Corporation of America), and the Karnes County Residential Center, operated by the private conglomerate GEO Group, were unveiled in south Texas. Upon opening, these two facilities increased family detention capacity from 100 beds to well over 3,000 (Williams 2017).



The role of private prison companies in expanding family detention is significant. Nearly 97 percent of the bed space and capacity devoted to family detention is privately owned and operated, and since family detention's expansion, corporations such as CoreCivic and GEO Group have reported record profitability (see Martin 2016; Williams 2017). Federal-private partnerships, forged primarily through Intergovernmental Service Agreements and public Requests for Proposals, have been central to establishing new family detention centers (see Martin 2012b; 2016; Williams 2017). This system depends on an intricate network of county and local prisons, government facilities, and private prison companies to process and hold families, as well as other "interlocking" industries enmeshed with private interests, such as policing and deportation (see Mountz et al. 2013). Private contractors are also integral, and family detention relies on a wide range of companies to obtain communication, finance, food, healthcare, transportation, and many other services (Martin 2016). In this way, family detention has played an important role in the growing "immigration industrial complex" (Doty & Wheatley 2013; Golash-Boza 2009), where detention, deportation, and immigration enforcement are increasingly commodified and privatized: as one of these areas intensifies, so too do others (Mountz et al. 2013).

Family detention also depends upon and is productive of gendered and sexualized notions of "family," where women, rather than men, are imprisoned and incarcerated alongside children. As migration scholars have argued, border and immigration enforcement are deeply embedded within racialized, ethnic, classed, and gendered hierarchies (Gorman 2016; Luibheid 2002; 2006; Martin 2012a; 2012b; Segura & Zavella 2007). California's 1994 ballot initiative Proposition 187, for example, mobilized white fears of Latinx women's reproductive capacity to prohibit immigrants from accessing public and social services (Chavez 2007). Similarly, family detention in south Texas is organized through providing "home-like" and "residential" conditions (see Martin 2012b) that rhetorically position heterosexual women as primary caretakers of children and prohibit men from

entering these facilities. Such language, centered around “families” and “home,” plays on traditional notions of social reproduction and the public/private divide (see Katz 2001; 2004; Mitchell, Marston, & Katz 2004), relegating women and children to the confined, private spaces of family detention where parenting and childcare are assumed to be located. As such, women travelling with children are often detained while fathers with children are processed along the U.S.-Mexico border and quickly released. Family detention and the detention corridor, thus, are uniquely gendered, experienced only by women, who are positioned as primary caretakers, and children.<sup>58</sup> Together, these “family units” are subjected to a paradoxical set of spatial and temporal practices, funneling them deeper into U.S. territory even as deportation and removal proceedings work to remove them.

The detention corridor in south Texas begins at the U.S.-Mexico border, where mothers and their children are initially detained and questioned by CBP agents after trekking across Central America and Mexico. While many families voluntarily surrender to immigration authorities at ports of entry or along the border, others are interdicted and arrested by USBP, often with the help of local law enforcement and the National Guard (see Fernandez 2018). Once in custody, families enter the corridor as they are processed and transferred into temporary holding cells, informally called *bieleras* (iceboxes) by migrants due to their cramped conditions and frigid temperatures, along the U.S.-Mexico border. Here, mothers are frequently separated from their children for long periods of time, ranging from hours to several days. One mother I spoke to said she and her two daughters were held apart in these spaces for eight hours. Separately, a young woman reported that she was removed from her son for three days. Within these short-term facilities, there are no beds, and migrants are forced to sleep upright or on concrete floors under mylar blankets. Overcrowding is

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<sup>58</sup> Men, however, are equally subject to detention and deportation’s exclusion and insecurity, albeit through a different set of spatial, temporal, and gendered practices, to which I was not privy in south Texas (see Loyd & Mountz 2018; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Hiemstra 2012; 2019).

common, and access to basic necessities, such as food, medication, and water, is limited (see Riva 2017).

After leaving the *hielera*, migrants travel deeper into the detention corridor. Loaded onto passenger buses and cargo vans, they are transferred to CBP's Central Processing Center, a sprawling, industrial warehouse located in McAllen, Texas, several miles north of the border. Here, they are placed into dozens of rectangular cells separated by tall chain-link fences. Migrants frequently refer to this area as the *perrera* (kennel), after its resemblance to a dog cage or runout. According to migrants I interviewed, so, too, do CBP agents, who often ordered them to "get in the cage or dog kennel." Initially designed to house 1,500 people, the facility now holds up to 2,400 individuals (Hennesey-Fiske 2019). The amount of time migrants spend in the *perrera* varies, and many that I spoke to were held for up to 12 days. CBP provides metal benches, mylar blankets, and sleeping pads for those who want to rest.

Eventually, after an indeterminate amount of days or weeks, families who have claimed asylum are transferred into ICE custody. Mothers and their children are transported on large, often-unmarked, passenger buses and taken still deeper into the detention corridor, traveling along U.S. Route 281 until they arrive at one of two privately owned detention facilities: the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley and the Karnes County Residential Center in Karnes City, both located more than 200 miles from the border where migrants first entered U.S. territory. Stepping off the buses, families are processed, registered, sorted, and finally, placed into family detention. Described by DHS as "campus-like settings" (see Sullivan & Rosenberg 2019), these facilities are surrounded by brick walls, fences, and surveillance cameras. Staff and families wear name tags bearing the logos of CoreCivic and GEO Group, the private companies in charge of these operations. Entrances and exits are secured, and visitors are closely monitored as guards watch nearby. Many mothers I interviewed explained that they were treated well, contrasting their

experiences in family detention with those in the *bielera* or *perrera*. Nevertheless, most described these settings as “jails” and “prison camps.”

After several days, if not weeks, in family detention, mothers are required to complete a credible fear interview, administered by an officer from USCIS. This process involves an intimate retelling of their experiences in the form of “confessional-style” interviews (see Coleman 2008), meant to determine if there is a “credible” fear of persecution or torture if returned to their home country. Beforehand, mothers may receive legal assistance from a variety of non-profit and pro-bono groups, which help them navigate the complex and often-traumatic interview process. Interviews must be scheduled at least one day in advance to provide time for legal consultation; however, most mothers I spoke to did not receive representation. Due to a heavy caseload and constraints over resources, many interviews are conducted by telephone. Those who “fail” may enter an appeals process supervised by an immigration judge, although most are subject to removal. For these families, they are quickly deported by bus or plane, moving hundreds of miles in the opposite direction from which they first travelled, back through the detention corridor, which now is also a *deportation* corridor (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015), that initially brought them into the U.S. interior days, weeks, and months before.

Families who pass the credible fear interview enter standard removal proceedings with their children and are issued a “Notice to Appear” by ICE, charging them with “inadmissibility” or “removability,” where they must plead their case in front of an immigration judge. These court appointments are frequently scheduled years in advance, as a case backlog increasingly mounts. After spending weeks and months in detention, some families are released through bond or parole, often under close supervision and equipped with electronic GPS monitors. Here, they travel still further along the detention corridor as they are transported deeper into the U.S. interior by ICE. Most of these families are left at the downtown bus station in San Antonio, more than 250 miles away and

weeks, if not months, apart from their confinement in the *bieleras* along the U.S.-Mexico border. It is here, in San Antonio, that the detention corridor formally ends—though their journeys are not over. These families remain informally detained as “inadmissible aliens,” subject to removal at any time—as they travel by Greyhound to locations scattered throughout the U.S. to await court dates years into the future. Most of these families will eventually face deportation. In 2018, for example, seventy-two percent of asylum cases from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were dismissed (TRAC 2018), and in 2019, less than a quarter of asylum-seekers were granted asylum or other relief (TRAC 2020).

By the end of the detention corridor, families have encountered a variety of sites, actors, and institutions in south Texas. From ICE agents and USBP officials to bus stations and private prisons, the detention corridor consists of a sprawling bureaucracy enmeshed with private interests and contributing to a robust “immigration industrial complex” (Doty & Wheatley 2013; Golash-Boza 2009) that involves bordering, deportation, policing, and other enforcement mechanisms. More importantly, the detention corridor works through a gendered, paradoxical set of spatial and temporal practices. If detention and deportation work to expel, remove, and return migrants from the U.S. (e.g., Peutz 2006; Walters 2002), the detention corridor in south Texas works in reverse, moving detained women and children, *deeper* into U.S. territory for extended periods of time even as they face deportation and removal proceedings that are likely to move them quickly *out* of U.S. territory at some undetermined point in the future. In the detention corridor, time and space operate contrary to a logic of deportation that emphasizes expulsion, removal, and return. While the outcome of deportation is eventually realized in most cases, it is only achieved *after* migrants have been funneled deeper within the U.S. interior and told to wait within the U.S.

As this contradictory set of spatial and temporal practices are experienced by mothers and their families on the ground, not only are their journeys extended but their sense of agency is also

undermined as they become disillusioned, disoriented, and exhausted. For instance, one morning, Karla and I sat together in the downtown San Antonio bus station as I tried to explain where she was going. Karla and her six-year-old son had been left there hours earlier by ICE agents after they were detained for sixteen days at the South Texas Family Residential Center. The bus ticket, printed in English only, unfurled in front of me and was several pages long, with dozens of stops listed between San Antonio and Arlington, Virginia, where Karla and her son were supposed to stay until their court date thirteen months later. Together, we reviewed the instructions on the ticket, including the time her bus left, when it arrived in Virginia, and where it would stop along the way. “This is useless,” she finally exclaimed to me, “I don’t even know where we are.” Karla and her son had been travelling for five months, setting off from El Salvador before eventually claiming asylum at a port of entry in Roma, Texas, along the U.S.-Mexico border. “So, what happens now—what do we do?” she asked, shuffling through the purple tote bag provided by ICE. Karla handed me a thick envelope filled with paperwork. I examined the documents with her and highlighted the date and time she was ordered to appear in court, describing how the process worked. After their bus arrived, I wished Karla and her son good luck. She thanked me and shrugged. “We’ll see,” Karla said, “It’s not up to me. My sister told me they’ll probably deport us anyway. I don’t even want to imagine going home after all this.”

Exchanges such as this one were common in south Texas. In this exchange, Karla’s reaction to detention and deportation was saturated with ambiguity, uncertainty, and exasperation. After travelling for five months and eventually claiming asylum at the southern U.S. border, Karla and her son were detained. Following the detention corridor, they were moved from Roma to McAllen; then McAllen to Dilley; then Dilley to San Antonio. This trip spanned more than two weeks and over 300 miles. Upon her release, Karla was disoriented, explaining that she did not know where she was and asking, “what happens now—what do we do?” Throughout our interaction, her exasperation was

palpable, shrugging, sighing, and exclaiming that her attempts to understand her situation were “useless.” Crucially, however, Karla conceded that she would ultimately be deported, despite having a court date scheduled thirteen months away, where her status had not yet been decided. Karla’s response highlighted a perceived lack of agency, declaring that the decision was not up to her and that she would be forced to return home “after all this.” In this way, Karla drew attention not only to the ambiguity and uncertainty produced by family detention but also the ways in which these experiences constrained her own sense of agency, implying that in the end, all of her efforts would eventually be useless.

Other women also underscored how ambiguity and uncertainty in family detention diminished their sense of agency. Days after I spoke with Karla, I met Jessica and her daughter at the shelter in San Antonio. They had been apprehended by Border Patrol agents and held in family detention after crossing the southern border. “I didn’t understand,” she explained, “when we arrived [in Mexico] and tried to claim asylum in Reynosa, the officers told us there was no room. We couldn’t turn around, so we crossed the border without them. They caught us, and eventually, we were put in detention... suddenly, we’re here in San Antonio. Why? They’re going to deport us.” Sifting through a torn packet of documents, she continued, “They never told us anything. When we were released, I didn’t know how much time had passed, where we were, or what I was supposed to do. I thought we were still near the border—this is a nightmare.”

Jessica’s response was framed around the ambiguity and uncertainty she experienced, admitting, much like Karla, that she did not know where she and her daughter were or how much time had passed since they had been released from detention. Here, she explained that she thought she was still near the border, revealing her surprise after “suddenly” being transported hundreds of miles north to San Antonio. In her account, Jessica highlighted the detention corridor’s anomalies, noting that she thought was going to be deported and, thus, did not understand why she would be in

San Antonio, inside the U.S., instead of near the border. Jessica also resigned herself to being deported and referenced a perceived lack of agency, rhetorically asking why immigration officials would move her and her daughter to San Antonio if they were only going to deport them later. For Jessica, her experiences with family detention along her journey resembled an inescapable nightmare unfolding in the detention corridor, which she could not fully escape.

As scholars elsewhere have noted, ambiguity and uncertainty are intrinsic to experiences of detention and deportation as calculated effects of disciplinary power which work to produce insecurity for migrants (Hiemstra 2013; Martin 2012a; 2012b; Turnbull 2016). In the responses above, the “nightmarish” effects of family detention created confusion, disorientation, and ultimately, resignation for some migrants. Following the detention corridor, Karla and Jessica were transported hundreds of miles away from the border over an extended time period, arriving at the bus station in San Antonio weeks after they had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. It is not *just* their experiences in family detention, however, that contributed to the “nightmare” both migrants alluded to but *also* their experiences before family detention. In her response, Jessica explained that she attempted to claim asylum in Reynosa, Mexico, and upon being turned away by CBP agents (see Chapter 7), “could not turn back.” Likewise, Karla’s disorientation came after travelling for five months across El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. Thus, while others have referred to the disciplinary power of family detention, it is the *cumulative* effects of it, alongside other enforcement efforts, that work to compound such ambiguity and uncertainty. Recounting their experiences, both Karla and Jessica expressed despair, hopelessness, and resignation, even as their cases had not yet been decided. The insecurity produced through this process constrained these mothers’ understandings of agency, as they conceded that they had little control over their situations and would eventually be deported after travelling thousands of miles across Central America, Mexico, and the detention corridor. Such despair reflects a crude reality for Central American women



travelling with children: On the one hand, if they are deported to Central America, they are unlikely, often unable, to undertake the journey again. On the other hand, if they are released into Mexico, they become stranded with no safety net or social support. This scenario contrasts sharply with the circumstances faced by Mexican migrants, who are subject to exclusion and insecurity through deportation but often able to resume their journeys after removal (see Boehm 2016; Golash-Boza 2015). Deportation's effects on Central American women and their children, therefore, are especially far reaching.

This section has used the lens of a corridor to examine the spatial, temporal, and gendered practices of family detention in south Texas and the ways it extended migrants' journeys and diminished their sense of agency and hope. Detailing the emergence of a detention corridor as part of a much larger deportation corridor (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015) and, ultimately, migrants' journeys, I have shown how family detention operates through a gendered, paradoxical set of spatial, and temporal practices, where migrant women and children are funneled deeper into U.S. territory over prolonged periods of time as their removal proceedings begin. This process, saturated with uncertainty and ambiguity, extends migrant journeys across space and time while constraining migrants' sense of agency. The detention corridor, thus, is useful in grappling with not only the range of sites, actors, and institutions involved in family detention but also the intimate experiences of uncertainty and ambiguity that arise *after* migrants have travelled thousands of miles across Central and North America. In this way, the detention corridor highlights how migrants' journeys continue even after crossing the U.S.-Mexico, as the paradoxical spatial and temporal practices of family detention work to confuse and disorient mothers despite having "successfully" arrived at their destination of choice. It is crucial, then, for scholars of both family detention (e.g., Martin 2011; 2012a; 2012b; Williams 2017) and migration journeys (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt

2018) to recognize that migrants' experiences with border and immigration enforcement do not begin or end at the U.S.-Mexico border.

## **Conclusions**

Even after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, migrants experience extended journeys and immense uncertainty in the U.S. For many, these experiences involve incarceration in detention centers, recurring visits in immigration courts, and a shifting landscape of immigration and asylum policy. These experiences are excluded from existing studies of migration journeys that end their analyses *at* or *before* the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018). This chapter has examined these growing facets of U.S. immigration enforcement, which, as I have shown, have only intensified under the Trump administration. More importantly, it has situated these ongoing developments within the broader context of migrants' journeys to demonstrate how immigration enforcement and (in)security have extended migration journeys spatially and temporally over the last three decades. While it is not surprising that migrants understand their experiences in crossing Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. as part of one continuous journey, scholars of immigration enforcement in the U.S. (e.g., Burridge & Gill 2017; Conlon & Hiemstra 2017; Kocher 2019; Moran et al. 2013) and of migration journeys across Mexico (e.g., Brigden 2018b; Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Vogt 2018) continue to focus only on segments of this overall journey and, thus, miss the ways in which migrants are empowered and disempowered through the cumulative effects of enforcement efforts *across* Mexico and the U.S.

In this chapter, I have focused on two key facets of the U.S. immigration system. First, over the course of three decades, migration and (in)security at the U.S.-Mexico border and beyond have been dramatically transformed, from the extension of law-and-order policing into local communities to the expansion of detention and deportation. While these policies and tactics have continued

under the Trump administration, there have also been significant changes that have generated immense chaos and confusion, lengthening migrant journeys spatially and temporally, as they confront policing, detention, and deportation alongside a newly chaotic landscape of immigration and asylum policy.

Second, I have explored the spatial, temporal, and gendered practices of family detention and deportation in south Texas through the lens of a corridor. Contrary to conventional understandings of deportation, where the practice works to expel, remove, and return migrants from the U.S. (e.g., Peutz 2006; Walters 2002), I have shown how women and their children, in fact, are funneled deeper into U.S. territory for prolonged amounts of time even as removal proceedings begin. In the spaces of the detention corridor, mothers' experiences are saturated with uncertainty and ambiguity, ultimately undermining their sense of agency and hope. Crucially, however, mothers' encounters with family detention are not isolated from their other experiences crossing Central America and Mexico. Attention to family detention's paradoxical practices highlights how migrants' journeys become stretched spatially and temporally across the U.S.-Mexico border, interpreted by many migrants as a loss of agency and a sign of hopelessness after they have otherwise "reached" their destination. Together, these two sections illustrate how migrants navigate exclusion and insecurity after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, as part of their wider journeys across Central American and Mexico. If Chapters 4 and 5 emphasized instances of resiliency among migrants, this chapter has demonstrated how the Trump administration's new imperatives and family detention diminish that same sense of determination and hope. These cumulative effects of border and immigration enforcement across Mexico and the U.S. highlight how migrants are continually empowered and disempowered as they traverse North America. This is not to say that migrants are only empowered in Mexico or disempowered in the U.S. but to draw attention to the ways that migrants' sense of agency is constantly reconfigured throughout their journeys. As I have argued,

these dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment are only visible through a perspective that centers migrants' own understandings of their journeys, rather than relying on bifurcated literatures in which journeys suddenly stop (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018) and/or start (e.g., Coleman 2007a; Coleman & Kocher 2011; Martin 2012a; 2012b; Williams 2017) at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The next chapter extends this discussion of the presence and absence of agency and provides concluding thoughts for this dissertation. Beginning with the most recent developments under the Trump administration, it examines the importance and long-lasting significance of looking between spaces of origin and destination, drawing attention to new forms of exclusion, insecurity, and violence that underscore not only the coexistence of empowerment and disempowerment but also life and death along migrants' journeys from Central America.

## CHAPTER 7 – “Dragged” Across Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico Border

### Coda: Left Behind

In April 2017, Ambar arrived in Reynosa, Mexico, located on the U.S.-Mexico border. Setting off from El Salvador two months earlier, she had travelled across Guatemala and Mexico to reach the U.S., relying on passenger buses, freight trains, and her own feet for transportation. Ambar had fled her home after a local gang threatened to kill her for reporting a double homicide in which the group was involved. Fearing for her life, she planned to claim asylum in the U.S., using an official port of entry at one of the international bridges spanning the U.S.-Mexico border. Upon arriving at the port of entry, however, Ambar was turned away by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents, who proclaimed that the bridge was temporarily closed because there was “no space” for her. She left and returned to Reynosa, on the other side of the border, eventually finding a park to rest in nearby. Texting her cousin Martha later that evening, Ambar explained that she had tried to claim asylum in the U.S. but was denied entry—she would try again early the next day. In the morning, Martha called to check on Ambar but could not reach her. A day later, she called again, but still, there was no response. Over the following months, Martha called and texted her cousin every day, but Ambar was never seen or heard from again.

Since 2016, U.S. immigration officials have denied access to countless numbers of asylum-seekers at ports of entry under the policy known as “metering,” a topic discussed in Chapter 6. The unofficial strategy, introduced under the Obama administration but not widely adopted until 2018 by Trump officials, enables immigration authorities to limit the number of migrants allowed to enter the U.S. interior by authorizing CBP agents to turn asylum-seekers away from the border. When blocked at ports of entry, migrants like Ambar are forced to return to border cities scattered across northern Mexico, where they wait in temporary encampments, shelters, parks, and other public places to claim asylum in the U.S. Stranded in these open spaces for days, weeks, and sometimes

months, migrants are vulnerable to kidnapping, disappearances, and death. To conclude this dissertation, this chapter begins with an analysis of those “left behind” Central American migrants who never fully “arrive” in the U.S. and, therefore, are excluded from work that focuses only on places of origin and destination. Here, I examine how asylum politics and metering at the U.S.-Mexico border culminate in the deaths of countless migrants, who, like Ambar, are disappeared and/or killed in Mexico *after* they were turned away at the U.S.-Mexico border. Looking to these spaces between, the chapter explores the direct linkages between immigration policy and mortality that operate across Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., drawing attention to the ways *both* life *and* death coexist along the migrant trail. To do so, I analyze and reconstruct the events leading up to the disappearances and (presumed) deaths of two migrants, Óscar and Laura. Amid more recent policies such as the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP) and Safe Third Country agreements (see Sieff 2020; Tackett, Dickerson, & Ahmed 2018), these stories take on greater significance, shedding light on a similar suite of new immigration laws under the Trump administration that aim to disenfranchise and exclude migrants from afar, often with fatal consequences for migrants.

In interviews, migrants frequently discussed the fates of family members and friends who, like them, also set off from Central America in hopes of reaching Mexico and the U.S. Some of these family members and friends, however, did not “make it” across Mexico or to the U.S. Similar stories were also shared by those with whom I kept in touch after fieldwork, including care workers, other migrants, and shelter staff. My discussion of Óscar’s and Laura’s experiences and the events leading up to their disappearances relies on firsthand accounts, text messages, and voicemails provided by their families and friends during fieldwork. I suspect that these people shared such intimate information with me for various reasons: to ask for help; to explain the migration process; to make sense of their own experiences; to grieve; and to remember. In the case of Óscar, I worked with his sister and brother-in-law in Texas, learning of his disappearance months after it happened.

Upon meeting Óscar's sister and brother-in-law at the shelter in San Antonio, I was asked to help locate his body, a task which, ultimately, I could not complete. Similarly, I met Laura and the group with which she was travelling at the shelter in Chahuities, Mexico, living and working alongside them for several weeks. After Laura and her group left the shelter, I remained in close communication with one of her friends, hearing about her disappearance as it happened in real time through the mobile phone application WhatsApp, which I used, and continue to use, to stay in touch with participants.

Using this information as evidence in this chapter raises several difficult questions. What are the moral implications and politics of utilizing these firsthand accounts and “data”? What damage or harm is generated by analyzing and retelling these stories here? How does one do justice to participants and their loved ones, especially after they are lost? I am well aware of these issues, as are other scholars (e.g., Mountz et al. 2003; Stevens 2001), and such ethical dilemmas are not easily resolved, haunting me to this very day (see Chapter 2). My hope in recounting these stories, however, is to make public and visible the violence of immigration and asylum law that is often hidden by innocuous language used in statecraft, whether it be thousands of migrants perishing in the Sonoran Desert through the seemingly harmless “Prevention Through Deterrence” (de León 2015; Doty 2011), imprisonment and incarceration in “family residential centers” (Martin 2011; 2012a; Williams 2017), or in this case, the disappearance and death of migrants under “metering.” In each of these cases, violence is obscured through state rhetoric as migrants fall victim to insidious policies euphemized by phrases such as “deterrence” or “residential centers.” With these points in mind, I begin with the origins of metering in the context of U.S. immigration and asylum policy.

### *Asylum, Migration, and Metering*

The practice of metering emerged in late 2016, when large numbers of Haitian migrants arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum (Diaz 2016; Dibble 2016). Following a catastrophic earthquake on the island in 2010, thousands of Haitian citizens were displaced. The majority of them initially sought refuge in Brazil, where they were easily absorbed into a thriving economy, but as the country slipped into recession years later, many Haitian migrants set off toward the U.S., massing along the U.S.-Mexico border (Diaz 2016; Dibble 2016). The Obama administration quickly announced the expansion of enforcement efforts along the southwest border and the resumption of deportations of undocumented Haitians, which Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had suspended following the 2010 earthquake (Semple 2016). More importantly, the Obama administration and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) introduced a new strategy under which CBP agents turned asylum-seekers away at select ports of entry in California, claiming a shortage of holding and processing capacity (CBS News 2016). The policy, now known as metering, denied entry to asylum-seekers and instructed them to return at a later date, often left unspecified. Blocked from entering the U.S., these migrants became stranded in Mexico under forbidding conditions, waiting days without food and shelter in Tijuana and other border cities (Laurent 2017). Eventually, the Obama administration ended its use of metering, as large groups of Haitians settled in Mexico or returned to other places across Central and South America (Fredrick 2019b). While the strategy was temporary, the Obama administration normalized the use of metering, introducing it as an effective deterrent and mode of exclusion that could be regularly utilized along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Under the Trump administration, metering has become widespread, implemented as *modus operandi* along the entire southwest border (see Alderstein 2018; Fredrick 2019b; Hennessy-Fiske 2018). As a key feature of the administration's early immigration platform, DHS closed ports of



entry in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, shutting migrants out for weeks and sometimes months (Alderstein 2018; Hennessy-Fiske 2018). In some places, CBP agents limited the number of asylum applicants to fewer than six individuals per day, despite average queue lengths numbering well over 100 (Ortega 2018). Officials rarely disclosed wait times or when sites would reopen, and with no channels to secure appointments otherwise, metering led to extended delays and overcrowding at several international bridges, where migrants waited for days, weeks, and months before their applications were processed, if at all. Despite these practices along the southwest border, asylum claims among Central Americans continued to grow (Hennessy-Fiske 2018b), as migrants refused to concede to the new policy in the immediate aftermath.

When blocked at ports of entry, asylum-seekers are forced to return to border cities in northern Mexico amid inhospitable conditions. Here, and throughout their journeys, they inhabit abject spaces exemplary of Mbembe's (2003; 2019) "death-worlds" and necropolitics, characterized by a lack of legal rights and protections as well as exposure to brutality, exploitation, and violence (see Chapter 4). Below, I reconstruct the events leading up to the disappearances of two asylum-seekers who were turned away at the U.S.-Mexico border to illustrate how exclusion, marginalization, and death are interwoven throughout migrants' journeys and work across scales in Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. More specifically, this section draws from these cases to demonstrate how metering laid the groundwork for policies such as MPP and Safe Third Country agreements, which, like the EU's Dublin Regulation (see McCloskey 2017), attempt to constrain migrants' mobility by requiring asylum-seekers to remain in the country in which they first enter—invariably Guatemala or Mexico (or in the case of the Dublin Regulation, the first EU member state)—as legal proceedings take place. Taken together, I argue, these efforts represent an expanding geography of exclusion, insecurity, and violence located at the territorial edges of the U.S. and

beyond, drawing attention toward the extended arc and trajectory of migration journeys throughout Central and North America.

### *Óscar and Laura*

In 2017, Óscar was twenty-eight years old. He was from Honduras and had escaped from MS-13 after the gang burned down his family's internet and mobile phone storefront over a local dispute. Fleeing his neighborhood in San Pedro Sula to seek protection in the U.S., Óscar and his family paid \$7,000 for him to be smuggled across Mexico—a large sum of money indicative of his family's relative success as local business owners. Hidden in the back of cargo vans and minibuses, Óscar slowly made his way north, stopping off at drop houses provided along the way. During checkpoints and traffic stops in Mexico, Óscar buried himself under packages, suitcases, and other luggage to avoid detection. When he was discovered by police or immigration authorities, he bribed them with cash, often in \$100 increments. Two weeks after leaving his home, Óscar arrived in Monterrey, an industrial center and commercial hub in northern Mexico. After conferring with family members, he decided to stay and seek asylum there, rather than continue to the U.S. Óscar's sister and brother-in-law, who entered the U.S. a month prior, explained how difficult it was for them to claim asylum under the “new” administration. They had been turned away at the U.S.-Mexico border by Trump officials and had to wait several weeks before they were allowed to enter the U.S. and submit their applications. Accordingly, Óscar chose to remain in Mexico. He parted ways with his smugglers, paying them the remainder of what he owed, and found a local shelter nearby.

In Monterrey, Óscar applied for asylum with help from the shelter, completing the interviews and paperwork necessary to file his application. Weeks later, during a meeting with Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM), however, he encountered difficulties. The officials explained to Óscar that his application appeared suspicious. They claimed that the faded tattoos

across his arms and neck—documented earlier by INM agents through photographs that accompanied his application—were evidence of gang membership in Honduras, and because of their suspicions, the agency denied his application. Óscar pleaded with the officials, asserting that he was not affiliated with a gang but, instead, a victim terrorized in his own neighborhood. If he returned to Honduras, he explained, he would surely be killed. His appeals were of no use, and he was forced to return to the shelter. Fearing deportation, he boarded a passenger bus headed for the U.S.-Mexico border, messaging his sister and brother-in-law that soon, he would be “joining them in *el Norte*.”

On the evening of March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Óscar arrived in Ciudad Miguel Alemán, located across from Roma, Texas. After notifying family members that he had arrived at the U.S-Mexico border and was safe, he reserved a room at a nearby motel. The next day, as he crossed the international bridge to claim asylum in the U.S., a group of CBP agents instructed him to turn around and go elsewhere. Óscar asked the agents if he could return at a later date, but they explained that the bridge was closed indefinitely to asylum-seekers. Confused, he returned to the bus terminal where he arrived the day before. Speaking to his sister and brother-in-law over the phone, they decided that Óscar should travel east to Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville, Texas. They wired him additional money, and he purchased a bus ticket that delivered him there late in the afternoon. Two days later, Óscar called his sister, revealing that he was turned away at the border by CBP agents again. He explained that this time, however, they instructed him to return the following week. Óscar returned to Mexico, seeking refuge at a popular motel that offered low rates for migrants. For five days, Óscar waited in and around the motel until abruptly, he messaged his sister late one night, asking her to wire \$1,000 into his bank account. Óscar had been kidnapped. Within hours, he would be driven to an ATM machine to withdraw the money, in what was described to me as an “express kidnapping.” His family collected the deposit and quickly transferred the cash into his account. In

the morning, Óscar's sister confirmed that the money had been withdrawn, texting him to ensure he was safe. Days and weeks passed with no response. Óscar had disappeared.

Laura was twenty-two years old in 2017. Fleeing an abusive partner associated with the 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang in El Salvador in 2016, she escaped to Guatemala City. Within weeks, however, Laura's partner found her, threatening to kill her if she did not return to El Salvador with him. Laura refused to go and turned to the local police in Guatemala for help. When they declined to become involved, her friend encouraged her to seek asylum in the U.S. Heeding their advice, she left overnight on a passenger bus headed for the Mexico-Guatemala border. Slipping across the border at dawn, she traveled for several days on foot, frequently stopping at shelters along the way. On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Laura and three other migrants were held at gunpoint and robbed along a remote stretch of land in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Pushed onto the ground, they were forced to surrender all their belongings, including backpacks, cash, phones, and shoes. They escaped with only minor injuries, making their way to the shelter where I worked in Chahuities to receive legal and medical assistance. Under Mexico's 2011 revision to its Migration Law, migrants who become victims of crimes may apply to regularize their status by reporting the incident to local prosecutors. In return, they receive a humanitarian visa issued by INM that allows them to legally travel and reside in Mexico for one year. Laura and the others immediately reported the robbery to officials, living at the shelter for several weeks while they waited for their case to be decided.

Nearly two months later, with her newly issued humanitarian visa, Laura traveled to Mexico City, finding work as a waitress in a local restaurant. Speaking over the phone to a friend in Chahuities, she explained that she needed money before continuing her journey northward and wanted to stay in Mexico before trying to claim asylum in the U.S. At the restaurant, however, Laura was overworked, underpaid, and subject to wage theft and sexual harassment. While the humanitarian visa legally permits migrants to work in Mexico, they are rarely provided the

appropriate authorization and documents to do so, leading to low-paid, informal work and exploitation by employers (see Kerwin 2018). After four months of abusive work conditions, she decided to leave Mexico City with a co-worker from the restaurant—another young woman from El Salvador. Laura notified her friend in Chahuities that she was headed to Reynosa, where she planned to claim asylum in Texas, across the U.S.-Mexico border. Her friend objected, arguing that the city was not safe for migrants, especially women, but Laura ignored her advice. On May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, she arrived at the border, checking into a motel in Reynosa. The next day, Laura and her companion travelled to the closest port of entry. Approaching it, they were surprised to see dozens of other migrants and their families waiting in line. Asking others what happened, they learned that the bridge was temporarily closed—CBP agents were no longer accepting new asylum applicants, telling them that the U.S. was “already full.” Laura and her companion were forced to return to Mexico.

In Reynosa, they left their motel for a nearby shelter, attempting to preserve what money they had left. Laura and her companion found the shelter overcrowded, with limited bed space and privacy. Several days later, Laura messaged her friend, explaining that she had grown impatient and was increasingly uncomfortable inside the shelter because there were few women around. She and her companion planned to pay the remainder of their money to a guide, who had approached them on the street and offered to help them across the border. Laura consulted with her family, who worried for her safety crossing the U.S.-Mexico border with a stranger. They warned that the guide might be affiliated with a cartel, leading her into a trap, or that she could drown when swimming across the Rio Grande. While Laura understood the risks involved, she felt as if there was little choice, explaining that she could not return to El Salvador and that her Mexican visa would eventually expire. The next evening, Laura left the shelter. According to the guide, she and her companion would be transported to a drop house near the border, where eventually, they would be

smuggled into the U.S. Laura's last message to her family read, "Leaving now. See you on the other side." Laura and her companion, however, never arrived, disappearing before ever reaching the U.S.

As these two brief accounts show, exclusion and marginalization were present *throughout* Óscar's and Laura's journeys, encompassing a range of places, actors, and institutions spanning Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. Fleeing from Honduras to Mexico, Óscar was denied asylum and threatened with deportation by INM agents. Continuing toward the U.S., he was blocked at multiple ports of entry and eventually, kidnapped and disappeared in Matamoros, Mexico. Laura was ignored by local police in Guatemala, abused in Mexico, and turned away at the U.S.-Mexico border, ultimately disappearing with her companion (presumably) at the hands of their smuggler. Across these spaces, exemplary of "death-worlds" (Mbembe 2003; 2019), both migrants were repeatedly stripped of legal rights and protections yet subject to the law's discipline, punishment, and regulation (Agamben 1998), culminating in their disappearances after they were turned away at the U.S.-Mexico border through metering.

Both cases draw attention to the ways that exclusion and marginalization under the Trump administration operated far away from the U.S. interior. The U.S., for example, has long relied on policies to disenfranchise migrants from afar. From detention facilities located on distant islands (Lloyd & Mountz 2018; Mountz 2011; 2017) to the diversion of migrants into deadly spaces along the U.S.-Mexico border (de León 2015; Nevins 2007; 2008; Rosas 2006a; Slack & Whiteford 2011), such strategies have been utilized to "deter, detain, and deflect" (Mountz 2011) migrants from the fringes of U.S. territory. As many scholars argue, these spaces are "made to kill" (Heller & Pezzani 2017; see also de León 2015; Doty 2011; Rosas 2006a), barring migrants from legal protection while exposing them to deadly conditions. Metering extended this set of exclusionary and violent practices, expanding their reach into border cities across northern Mexico, where migrants like Óscar and Laura are turned away at the border and forced to return to spaces where brutality, exploitation, and

violence against migrants are widespread. Denied entry into the U.S. as asylum-seekers and unable to reside in Mexico as undocumented migrants, they were and often are eventually disappeared and/or killed. Here, Óscar and Laura were subject to a legally produced death, fashioned through both U.S. and Mexican policy and an unforgiving landscape in Mexico.

The disappearances of Óscar and Laura gesture toward the expansion and intensification of these exclusionary practices through more recent policies under the Trump administration, such as MPP and Safe Third Country agreements (see Sieff 2020; Tackett, Dickerson, & Ahmed 2018). This suite of laws has further codified efforts to disenfranchise and exclude migrants at a distance, in the spaces between origin and destination, and requires Central American asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico during legal proceedings and bars them from protection altogether if they pass through another country—inevitably, Guatemala or Mexico—before the U.S. Taken together, these policies signify an ever-expanding geography of exclusion, insecurity, and violence located at the territorial edges of the U.S. and well beyond. It is within this context that journeys and the spaces *between* origin and destination are increasingly important for Central American migrants, shedding light on the consequences, experiences, and politics of their migrations as they spend more time in transit and encounter greater risks. Having never fully “arrived” in the U.S., Óscar and Laura represent countless other migrants who “fail” to reach their destination and are left out of analyses focusing solely on places of origin and destination and on migrants who successfully navigate and complete the journeys from “home” to new host country or destination (e.g., García 2006; Garni 2010; Menjívar 2011; Menjívar & Abrego 2012).

As these cases show, the arc and trajectory of migration journeys provide much in terms of better understanding the experiences and consequences of international migration, where life and death easily coexist *throughout* the migrant trail. It is not *just* that Óscar and Laura were turned away by U.S. officials but *also* that they were disappeared and/or killed in Mexico. Thus, to fully

comprehend the inner workings of migration's governance, law, and (geo)politics, as well as its sometimes-fatal effects on migrant lives, scholars must look *across* the cumulative arc of migration journeys and the act of transit. While Óscar and Laura technically “made it” to the U.S., their experiences and journeys were far from over. As I have shown in previous chapters, migrants demonstrate immense resiliency and resourcefulness along their journeys from Central America. Death, however, continues to loom large in the lives of migrants, some whom arrive at their destinations, and others, like Óscar and Laura, who never do. This narrow threshold between life and death is constitutive of and only visible through the arc and trajectory of migration journeys, through which, in the words of Alicia discussed in Chapter 4, migrants find themselves alive but also conceivably dead. Here, the experiences of migrants like Alicia as being both alive and conceivably dead are rescaled from the local and intimate to the global, as hundreds of thousands of migrants risk their lives travelling from Central America toward the U.S.

Yet, the efficacy and “success” of immigration enforcement and hollowed-out asylum policies, intended to “deter” migrants, are far from guaranteed, and despite a recent expansion of restrictive laws under the Trump administration, migrants continue to travel north (Ainsley 2019; Hennessy-Fiske 2018b), grappling with and trying to avoid the deadly and violent immigration enforcement regime that operates across Mexico and the U.S. Based on both historical and contemporary migration patterns and geographies across Central and North America (see Jonas & Rodríguez 2014; Massey 2020; Massey, Durand, & Pren 2014), I suspect that many migrants will never give up on their hopes of “making it” across Mexico to the U.S. Throughout my fieldwork, migrants repeatedly vocalized their indifference toward the Trump administration, declaring that nothing would stop them from undertaking their journeys. As one migrant explained to me before leaving the shelter in Chahuities, Mexico, “Whatever happens, happens... I don't care if they have to drag my body across Mexico and the border, I'm going north—I'm going to see my daughter.” For



these migrants, life and death are never far apart. To migrate is to both live and to conceivably die. The indifference and fatalism shown toward death is striking, given the violence and terror migrants encounter along their journeys. Yet, as this dissertation has shown, it is also indicative of determination and resiliency, where migrants will continue to travel north even if they must be “dragged” across Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border.

### **Life, Death, and the Politics of Migrant Journeys**

International migration across Central and North America has witnessed a sea change. Over the last decade, rates of migration from Mexico to the U.S. have fallen to historic lows (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera 2012), after representing the primary source of migration from Latin America to the U.S. throughout much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Durand, Massey, & Zenteno 2001; Massey & Pren 2012). Meanwhile, out-migration from Central America has risen to unprecedented highs (Massey, Durand, & Pren 2014), replacing Mexico as the leading source of Latin American migration to the U.S. and transforming the demographics of contemporary migration streams (Masferrer, Giorguli-Saucedo, & García-Guerrero 2019; Massey 2020). Whereas migration to the U.S. was largely undertaken by single men from Mexico seeking economic opportunities abroad, it is now primarily composed of Central American women, children, and families escaping violence after decades of civil war and U.S. foreign intervention (Massey 2020). Mexico and the U.S., however, have met this migration with a range of immigration and asylum policies aimed at punishing and restricting migrants, evidenced through Mexico’s *Programa Frontera Sur* (Isacson et al. 2014; 2015), the devolution and localization of “border” enforcement in the U.S. (Coleman 2009; Menjívar 2014), and a suite of new immigration laws under the Trump administration intended to disenfranchise and exclude migrants across North America.

Scholars have attempted to understand this changing landscape of migration across Central and North America in a variety of ways, examining sending conditions (e.g., Abrego 2019; García 2006; Garni 2010; Sandoval-García 2017), settlement experiences (e.g., Menjívar 2011; Menjívar & Abrego 2012; Riva 2017), and cross-border, transnational connections (e.g., Coutin 2007; Rodríguez & Hagan 2004; Zilberg 2011). As Central American migration becomes prolonged, fragmented, and dangerous, however, migration journeys and the spaces *between* origin and destination are ever more important to understanding international migration, since migrants increasingly spend more time in these places and since their experiences with displacement, governance, mobility, and violence now span multiple borders, countries, and continents. These developments suggest that migration is no longer a simple transition between two places with clear-cut experiences of arrival, departure, return, and settlement for most migrants. For this reason, attention to migration journeys and to the act of transit itself can shed light on the violent interplay between borders, immigration enforcement, and transnational flows of people, as these dynamics unfold at local, national, and global scales, in ways that an analytic focusing on sending communities, destinations, and even transnational or translocal dynamics simply cannot.

This dissertation has examined violence and insecurity, *as well as* resiliency and resourcefulness, along migrants' journeys in an effort to shed light on forms of agency, resistance, and meaning-making that emerge *in* and *through* the act of transit. In doing so, it has highlighted the presence *and absence* of agency and resiliency along the migrant trail, pointing to the concurrence, if not coexistence, of life and death that is only visible through a perspective that examines migration journeys, as narrated and defined by migrants themselves (see Chapters 3 and 5), and that analytically centers the spaces—often the mundane, everyday spaces—between origin and destination. As Edi, a young migrant, explained in Chapter 4, “Out here, on the migrant trail... life and death are never far away.” Thus, in the act of travelling from their homes in Central America to or toward the U.S.,

many migrants are both empowered and disempowered, alive and also in Bryan's words, "already dead." This is not to suggest a binary in which migrants are *either* empowered or disempowered and *either* alive or dead but, rather, to suggest, as I have throughout this dissertation, an oscillation in which migrants are somewhere *between* empowerment and disempowerment, life and death, and, in many cases, conceivably *both*. By examining this threshold between life and death, I have attempted to humanize migrants and to recognize the complexity of their journeys, thereby adding depth and nuance to more recent scholarly and journalistic works dominated by tragedy and violence (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; Ahmed 2016; de León 2015; Semple 2018b; 2019). I have also attempted to demonstrate that there is *much more* to migrants' journeys and their everyday lives in transit than these stories centered on spectacular violence allow, *even* as those spectacular instances of violence, from robbery to sexual assault to death, as well as the mundane, everyday experiences that fill the space and time between these events, continue to shape migrants' attempts to travel north.

Through a series of spatial and empirical discrepancies, the literature on Central American migration has obscured this nuance and complexity, overlooking the ways in which migrants both occupy and move between empowerment and disempowerment, life and death. In Chapters 3, 6, and 7, I explored how previous studies of "transit migration" (e.g., Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008), "migration journeys" (e.g., Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2018b; Vogt 2018), and U.S. immigration enforcement (e.g., Coleman 2009; 2012; Jones 2011; Williams 2017) fall victim to "methodological nationalism" and the "territorial trap" (Agnew 1994), locating their analyses *within* the boundaries of either Mexico or the U.S. and ending *before* or *after* the U.S.-Mexico border. In doing so, I showed, these literatures overlook the realities of migration and migrants' experiences as they contend with (in)security and violence *across* Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. and the ways that for migrants themselves, these encounters with (in)security and violence, as well as with hope and possibility, constitute *one migration journey*, not two sets of experiences—one

before and one after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. By linking these literatures and their attention to different temporal moments and spatial segments of migrants' overall journeys, Chapters 3, 6, and 7 showed the cumulative effects of border and immigration enforcement *across* Mexico and the U.S. In the process, it becomes clearer when and where migrants experience empowerment and disempowerment, inclusion and exclusion, and life and death—whether through Mexico's *Programa Frontera Sur*, the Trump administration's new imperatives, or the “detention corridor” in south Texas, thereby shedding light on the arc of journeys and migrants' complex experiences with them.

In similar fashion, Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated the need to take migrants' experiences seriously and listen to the ways they themselves narrate and make sense of their journeys. Based on what I read in the literatures on Central American migration (e.g., Angulo-Pasel 2018; Ahmed 2016; de León 2015; Semple 2018b; 2019), I expected to see and hear spectacular accounts of death, violence, suffering, and tragedy upon entering the field. While such stories were not difficult to find, I was surprised by the prevalence of *other* everyday experiences and instances of agency that emerged through my conversations and exchanges with migrants. As Chapter 4 illustrated, even amid the necropolitical conditions and “death-worlds” (Mbembe 2003; 2019) intrinsic to migration journeys across Mexico, migrants found unexpected ways of enduring and living on by utilizing the very same deadly and violent tactics of border and immigration enforcement to prepare for and undertake their journeys, showing that migrants are not passive recipients of violence but, instead, active and resilient. Similarly, Chapter 5 highlighted the significance of the mundane and ordinary parts of migration journeys by investigating migrants' use of humor and transportation infrastructure. Whereas many migration scholars begin their analyses by focusing on spectacular and violent events such as clandestine border crossings (e.g., de León 2015; Doty 2011; Sanchez 2015) and detention and deportation (Hiemstra 2019; Loyd & Mountz 2018; Williams 2017), Chapter 5's findings suggest that we should also look toward the everyday spaces of migration journeys, where migrants'

experiences are anchored to bridges, railways, and roads and suffused with brutality, exploitation, and violence *alongside* camaraderie, hope, and humor. Together, these chapters demonstrated the ways migrants' experiences and places along the way, in the spaces between, are overlooked, thereby obfuscating the empirical and material realities of migration journeys. By taking the empirical and material realities of migration journeys seriously, this dissertation has attempted move beyond treating migrants as "journalistic commodities" (Klinenberg 2001) and the act of migration as an oversimplified and relatively straightforward process.

In all of these ways, this dissertation has shown that migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination are now key to making sense of the migration process itself and of migrants' experiences with displacement, governance, mobility, violence, and hope. It has elucidated how migrants adapt to, contest, and navigate global dynamics of displacement and mobility on the ground and highlighted violence and insecurity, *as well as* migrants' resiliency and resourcefulness. This study has done so with the goal of humanizing migrants and acknowledging the complex realities of their journeys from Central America. If we are to transform the material conditions and lived realities of exclusion, insecurity, and violence that operate across Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., then such recognition of this complexity and of migrants' humanity is necessary. As the world witnesses the highest levels of migration and movement on record (International Organization for Migration 2019) and as the freedom of this movement is increasingly constrained and restricted worldwide (Collyer 2007; 2010; Schapendonk & Steel 2014), these spaces between origin and destination become ever more important because a growing number of migrants spend more and more time in them.

Where, then, does one go after drawing these conclusions? There is, of course, much more to be said about migration journeys and migrants' experiences in the spaces between origin and destination, particularly as the landscape of immigration and asylum policy continues to shift so

rapidly. In the context of this work, it has been challenging to consider “new” directions for future research and to decide which project to pursue next. As I explained in Chapter 2, completing fieldwork for this dissertation was not only traumatizing but also “haunting” (Gordon 2008; 2011), as, even now, I struggle to make sense of the ethical and political implications involved with the people, places, and events I (supposedly) left behind. These difficulties of fieldwork and research were compounded by life-long mental health issues, from which I am only beginning to emerge as healthy. For this reason, I have chosen to look elsewhere for new research projects, outside shelters and the immediate spaces between and along migration journeys from Central America.

Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered after “completing” this project. Due to the rapidly shifting terrain of immigration and asylum policy in Mexico and the U.S., the realities of contemporary migration continue to change daily for migrants. What, for example, will happen to Central American asylum-seekers, given the recent and widespread implications of MPP, which requires them to remain in Mexico during legal proceedings in the U.S.? What does the future hold for shelters so vital to migrants’ survival and now scattered across Mexico and the U.S.? Months after completing fieldwork in Chahuities, Mexico, the local mayor, Leobardo Ramos, nicknamed the “Oaxacan Trump” (see Rasgado 2017), drew from populist support and racial anxieties over Central American migration to permanently close the shelter in July 2017. Migrants must now trek over 100 miles through the stretch of land known as “the gateway to Hell” to reach the next shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. What will become of these migrants? How might their experiences with agency, empowerment, life, and death change under these new circumstances? These questions continue to raise concerns regarding the ethics and politics of undertaking this type of research with “vulnerable populations” as an American academic. Will this dissertation, for instance, provide any meaningful benefits for migrants like Óscar, Laura, and Alicia? Drawing from Dani’s sentiment expressed in

Chapter 2, “Probably not, but [we] can try,” pointing to a powerful critique of this work but also an important endorsement of the continued need for it.

Increasingly, Central American migrants are seeking asylum and settling both permanently and temporarily in urban spaces across Mexico. Since 2016, asylum claims among Central Americans in Mexico City, Monterrey, and Tijuana have increased precipitously (see BBC News 2019; Fredrick 2019a). Much of this increase is due to the Trump administration’s efforts to restrict Central American migration to the U.S., which has left migrants isolated and stranded on the fringes of both Mexican and U.S. territories. While some migrants have returned to their places of origin, others have remained in Mexico, settling informally or officially seeking asylum and, thus, transforming these cities into “new immigrant destinations” (Winders 2014). Mexican government officials and local residents, however, have met this new presence of Central Americans with growing anti-immigrant sentiment and rigid immigration enforcement (Fredrick 2019a). In my next project, I will examine these emerging tensions over race and ethnicity, citizenship, and belonging to better understand “new immigrant destinations” in Mexico and the racialized politics of refuge and asylum there. Working with Central American migrants and government officials, I hope to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico City and Monterrey. In doing so, I aim to further studies of migration journeys and the spaces between origin and destination by examining how new patterns of migration and the emerging politics over arrival, settlement, and reception play out in Mexico, which, much like Greece, Italy, and Turkey, was once a place of *emigration* and is now host to both *immigration* and transit.

The connections between this new project and this dissertation are made clear through the lives of migrants such as Víctor from Chapter 1, who, after leaving Honduras in the hope of reaching Houston, Texas, settled, instead, in Monterrey, Mexico. According to Víctor, this was never his plan, and despite living in Monterrey since late 2016, he is determined to *eventually* “make it” to

the U.S., even as he has started a life there with a partner and newborn baby. In my ongoing conversations with Víctor, he still refers to himself as being *in transit*, temporarily stuck along the migrant trail. Thus, for migrants like Víctor, their journeys never *really* end, fluctuating between periods of emigration, settlement, departure, and arrival. How does this constantly deferred arrival change our understandings of the migration process and of “new immigrant destinations,” when such “destinations” are seen as places of transit, even by those migrants settling in them? What does it mean to be part of a growing “underclass of transnational homeless” migrants (Brigden 2016) that complicates traditional notions of citizenship, identity, and (im)mobility? The answers to these questions, I expect, lie somewhere within migrants’ (sometimes-indefinite) journeys and the spaces and places between “origin” and “destination.”



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- . 2017. Crisis, subjectivity, and the polymorphous character of immigrant family detention in the U.S. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5(3), 269–281.
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- . 2011. Necropolitics, narcopolitics, and femicide: Gendered violence on the Mexico-U.S. border. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36(3), 707–731.
- . 2018. Against the evils of democracy: Fighting forced disappearance and neoliberal terror in Mexico. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108(2), 327–336.
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- Zilberg, E. 2011. *Space of detention: The making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. Durham: Duke University Press.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### EDUCATION

#### Ph.D., Geography, 2020

Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Dissertation: *Being in Transit: Life, Death, and the Politics of Migrant Journeys from Central America to the U.S.*

Committee: Jamie Winders (advisor), Natalie Koch, Don Mitchell, Maggie Walker, and Jackie Orr

#### M.A., Geography, 2014

San Diego State University

#### B.A., History, 2012

California State University, Fullerton

### PUBLICATIONS

#### JOURNAL ARTICLES

2020. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.** Studying migration in the time of Trump: Power, positionality, and formal politics in the field. *The Professional Geographer* 72(2), 264–271.

2019. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.** Laughing about it: Emotional and affective spaces of humour in the geopolitics of migration. *Geopolitics* 24(4), 896–915.

2018. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.** Anti-immigrant sentiment, rising populism, and the Oaxacan Trump. *Journal of Latin American Geography* 17(1), 253–256.

#### BOOK CHAPTERS

Forthcoming. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.** Expanding exclusion: Migration, asylum, and transnational death in the U.S. and Mexico. In J. Longazel and M.C. Hallett (eds.), *Dead on arrival: Social autopsies of migrant lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

2019. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.**, and Winders, J. Transit migration, borders, and activism: Understanding the changing geographies and temporalities of international migration. In M. Elman, C. Gerard, G. Golan, and L. Kriesberg (eds.), *Overcoming intractable conflicts: New approaches to constructive transformations* (pp. 287–304). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

#### BOOK REVIEWS

2016. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.** Review of Guatemala-U.S. migration: Transforming regions. By S. Jonas and N. Rodríguez. *International Migration Review* 50(1), e11–e12.

2014. **Van Ramshorst, J.P.** Review of Securing the city: Neoliberalism, space, and insecurity in postwar Guatemala. Edited by K. L. O'Neill and K. Thomas. *Urban Geography* 35(2), 313–314.

### GRANTS and AWARDS

2018 Outstanding Teaching Award, Graduate School, Syracuse University

2017 Summer Research Award, Department of Geography, Syracuse University, \$3,800

2017 Field Study Award, Latin American Specialty Group of the AAG, \$1,000

2016 Maxwell Citizenship Initiative Research Grant, Maxwell School, Syracuse University, \$2,775

2016 Summer Research Grant, Program on Latin America and the Caribbean, Syracuse University, \$1,400

2015 Roscoe-Martin Dissertation Award, Maxwell School, Syracuse University, \$1,000

2014 Citizenship Award, Department of Geography, San Diego State University  
2013 Field Research Grant, Tinker Foundation, \$1,300  
2013 Scholarship for Less Commonly Taught Languages, Welte Institute for Oaxacan Studies, \$3,000  
2013 Field Study Award, Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, \$750  
2013 Alvena Storm Memorial Scholarship, Department of Geography, San Diego State University, \$875  
2012 Outstanding Student Award, Department of History, California State University, Fullerton

## PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

### PAPERS

2020 “Spatializing hierarchy: Security, immigration, and the politics of scale in southern Mexico.” Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the ABS*, Portland, OR, April 1–4.  
2019 “Waiting to live: Migration, asylum, and transnational death in the U.S. and Mexico.” Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the LSA*, Washington, DC, May 30–June 2.  
2018 “The detention corridor: Spatializing migration management and uncertainty in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.” Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the AAG*, New Orleans, LA, April 10–14.  
2017 “Haunting, trauma, and the spectral geographies of fieldwork.” Presented at the *Annual Critical Geography Conference*, Penn State University, State College, PA, October 27–28.  
2017 “Laughing about it: Emotional and affective spaces of humor in the geopolitics of migration.” Presented at the *Annual Emotional Geographies Conference*, Long Beach, CA, June 14–16.  
2017 “La migra, la migral’: Joking and laughter in irregular migration from Central America.” Presented at the *Human Smuggling Workshop*, El Paso, TX, April 6–8.  
2016 “Transit migration, borders, and activism: Understanding the changing geographies and temporalities of international migration.” Presented at the *Transforming Intractable Conflicts Conference*, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, September 23–24.  
2015 “‘To live is to be hunted’: Philip K. Dick, science fiction, and the politics of immigration.” Presented at the *Circuits of Justice Workshop*, Penn State University, State College, PA, November 6–7.  
2015 “Henri Lefebvre and dystopian spaces in science fiction cinema.” Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the AAG*, Chicago, IL, April 22–25.  
2014 “‘I suffer a lot, we all suffer so much’: Transnational contexts of mobility, migration, and connectedness.” Presented at the *Latin American Graduate Organization Conference*, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, February 13–15.

### ORGANIZED PANELS and SESSIONS

2020 “The Mexico-Guatemala border and beyond: Assembling new understandings.” Paper session co-organized at the *Annual Meeting of the ABS*, Portland, OR, April 1–4.  
2019 “Affect(ing) the classroom: Theory and teaching in cultural geography.” Panel session organized at the *Annual Meeting of the AAG*, Washington, DC, April 3–7.  
2018 “Integrating radical scholarship and activism inside the neoliberal university.” Panel session co-organized at the *Annual Meeting of the AAG*, New Orleans, LA, April 10–14.  
2015 “The politics of utopia and dystopia: Exploring geographies of speculative fiction.” Paper session co-organized at the *Annual Meeting of the AAG*, Chicago, IL, April 22–25.

2014 “Supporting women in geography across the sub-disciplines, 2<sup>nd</sup> annual panel.” Panel session co-organized at the *Annual Meeting of the AAG*, Tampa, FL, April 8–12.

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

### COURSES

- 2020, Instructor of Record, **Migration and Mobility**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2019 Instructor of Record, **World Cultures**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2019, 2018 Instructor of Record, **Global Community**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2018, 2017 Graduate Facilitator, **Fulbright Pre-Academic Program**, Syracuse University (graduate)
- 2018 Teaching Assistant, **Human Geography**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2017, 2015 Teaching Assistant, **World Cultures**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2016 Teaching Assistant, **Environment & Society**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2015, 2014 Teaching Assistant, **Global Environmental Change**, Syracuse University (undergraduate)
- 2013, 2012 Teaching Assistant, **Latin America**, San Diego State University (undergraduate)
- 2012 Teaching Assistant, **Geography of Food**, San Diego State University (undergraduate)

### INVITED LECTURES

- 2019 “Transit lives: Identity, belonging, and the politics of migrants’ journeys from Central America to the U.S.” Presented at the Department of Geography, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, November 15.
- 2019 “In-Between places: Migration, identity, and the politics of migrants’ journeys from Central America.” Presented at the Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC) Conversations, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, February 27.
- 2018 “New directions in geopolitics: Rethinking security.” Presented in Political Geography, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, April 26.
- 2017 “Changing experiences of migration in North and Central America.” Presented in World Cultures Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, October 4.
- 2016 “Borders, transit migration, and migrants’ journeys from Central America.” Presented at the RAICES Refugee Advocacy Program, San Antonio, TX, February 18.
- 2016 “En el camino: Nuevos riesgos y derechos en tránsito.” Presented at Centro de Ayuda Humanitaria a Migrantes, Chahuities, OAX, MX, November 19.
- 2015 “Migration, identity, and borders.” Presented in World Cultures, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, October 7.

## DISCIPLINARY SERVICE

### MANUSCRIPT REVIEW

*Emotion, Space and Society*

*Geopolitics*

*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*

*Third World Quarterly*

*University of Bristol Press*

## **UNIVERSITY and DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE**

2015–2016 Graduate Student Representative, Department of Geography, Syracuse University

2014–2016 Member, Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University

2013–2014 Colloquium Representative, Department of Geography, San Diego State University

2013–2014 Vice-President, Supporting Women in Geography, San Diego State University

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

American Association of Geographers (AAG)

Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS)

Conference of Latin American Geography (CLAG)

Latin American Studies Association (LASA)

Law and Society Association (LSA)

## **REFERENCES**

References available upon request